



FUSE

Illustration by
Mitz Vah

That Time I Got
Reincarnated
as a SLIME

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 8

FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 8

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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

PROLOGUE

A STATUS
REPORT

PROLOGUE

A STATUS REPORT

“You are quite a spiteful man, Granville. I came very close to dying, I’ll have you know.”

“Don’t be absurd. You fled before you could even get involved, didn’t you?”

“I had no choice. Did my protégé deliver the news to you?”

“More or less, yes...”

“That demon was more of a monster than I ever imagined. The Empire’s regular forces would hardly stand a chance. We would need the most powerful army I know, the Imperial Guard, to defeat him. But enough about that...”

Damrada and Granville were seated facing each other, each sizing up their partner as they calmly chatted. In Damrada’s eyes, their plan had failed. Thus, he felt it prudent to keep his distance from the Rozzo family until the heat died down a little. If their scheme had worked, that would have given them an advantage in the negotiations, but if not, he was likely to face demands he found singularly unreasonable. Right now, he simply wanted to cut his losses and move on.

But things had changed. On his way to Tempest, he had received a magical call, reporting the news to him:

“Hinata is defeated. She and the demon lord Rimuru have agreed to terms.”

Damrada had pictured this happening. But it was still the worst possible outcome imaginable. Hinata’s survival made it harder to do business in the nations where the Western Holy Church held sway. If she had made peace with Rimuru, it was unlikely anyone could rile that demon lord up once again to kill her. Damrada and Granville joined forces on this scheme because they both stood to gain from it, but it was now safe to say the whole thing failed

miserably.

...Although, depending on how you view this, you could call it fortuitous...

Their strategy had failed, but to Damrada, this was at best a glancing blow. It meant losing part of their foundation in the Western Nations, but there were other trade routes. Cerberus was a group as enormous as it was shadowy, operating several different trade organizations as fronts for its activities. Furthermore, Damrada had no personal interest in whether Hinata lived or died. Granville's failure was therefore not all that irritating to him. And thanks to that, Damrada was currently trying to work out his and Granville's future relationship to his advantage. After a hasty change of plans, Damrada had come to meet with Granville once again.

"But what about you, Granville? Were you all bark and no bite? Not only did you fail to take care of Hinata, her connection to Rimuru is even stronger than before..."

Blind to his own involvement in their failed strategy, Damrada moved to criticize Granville instead. But Granville himself was likely expecting as much.

"Yes," Granville replied. "I must admit to that. There will be no rebalancing the scales now. Farmus, for all its history, has fallen, and I imagine a new nation will replace it. It is exactly what Rimuru wanted, and it means your project is in shambles."

He didn't hesitate to agree with Damrada and went on to expound on his own theory before getting right to the point.

Damrada, well aware of the current situation, chose to respond with silence.

"So what will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Rimuru seems to want the Forest of Jura to become the financial center of the world. We of the Rozzos will not stand for that."

"Mmm..."

Damrada coldly calculated how to respond. He had no intention of deliberately getting on the Rozzos' wrong side. As far as he was concerned, if

they could both just put this state of affairs behind them, all was well. And Granville, to his credit, seemed to be of the same mind, going ahead of Damrada and turning his eyes toward the future.

"So what would quarreling with each other accomplish? Now that a fight between the demon lord and Saint Hinata is unlikely to happen, any further public activity would be ill-advised. The same is true for your side, too, is it not?"

Granville seemed to be reading his mind. "Heh-heh. I see there is no outwitting you, my good man. No, there is no point trying to assign blame for this failure. The Five Elders have been more than kind to us up to now, and I know this remains the case. We may not have been able to profit off a potential war, but so be it. As long as we remain alive, other opportunities will come."

"Well said, Sir Damrada. I do appreciate how quickly you understand me. Let us continue to work together to block this new economic threat before it begins!"

It went without saying that Damrada's mission was to protect his interests in the Western Nations. Maribel, Granville's treasure, had predicted that this nation in the Forest of Jura would potentially become a financial juggernaut. If it did, that would inevitably weaken the Rozzo family's influence on the world.

Granville would never allow cracks to open on the system of rule his ancestors spent thousands of years building up. That was why he wanted to interfere with Rimuru, to crush his ambitions—but without his status as part of the Seven Days Clergy, he could no longer use the name of the god Luminus to his advantage. Thus, no matter what it took, he needed support from Cerberus. The other Five Elders—Granville's descendants and comrades—supported him on that, applying pressure to the Council of the West and ensuring that the postwar cleanup over on Farmus took as long as possible. They couldn't stop that country from crowning a new king, but they *could* do whatever it took to delay the inevitable.

The Rozzo family still had a few aces up their sleeve, but it was too premature to use them. Better to take advantage of Cerberus instead, Granville thought.

"Ah, one moment on that..."

But Damrada wasn't ready to agree with him. The Rozzos, and the Five Elders they controlled, were excellent business partners; he truly had no intention of doing away with their relationship. But thinking this meant Damrada was their lapdog would be a mistake. He was a merchant, motivated by money, and he had a flexible mind. Cerberus had grown fabulously rich thanks to the exclusive control it held over trade between the East and West, yes, but the arrival of a new customer to work with was nothing that hurt Cerberus. The Five Elders's loss of influence over the Western Nations was no business of theirs.

"...I truly do desire to maintain friendly relations with you and your family. However, I'm afraid I cannot readily agree to your suggestion. After all, our organization has no reason to be hostile to Rimuru."

"How dare you...!"

"Heh-heh-heh... As you yourself said, now that Hinata knows me, any further activity in the Western Nations is out of the picture. Instead, I will return home and provide you with someone else."

The message Damrada gave was clear. If Granville had eliminated Hinata as promised, he *could* be more active right now...but that hadn't happened.

"..."

"For now, we will continue our transactions as before. As for *this* incident, I suggest that we should just forgive and forget."

Damrada stood up. Granville had misread him, and he could no longer force the point. The Cerberus group had an iron grip on the Eastern Empire's underground. Angering Damrada, one of their bosses, enough to sever their relations for good was too much of a loss for the Rozzos to bear right now.

"...Very well. We will handle it ourselves, then, so I do hope you will at least refrain from interfering in the matter."

"That much goes without saying," Damrada replied with a smile. "Look back at our previous dealings. You are safe trusting us."

With a polite bow, he left the room.

From start to finish, Damrada had been sincere in everything he said. On the

surface, he was the very picture of an honest merchant. But if Hinata had been killed as planned, he would have reached out to Rimuru long ago, pitting the Rozzos against the demon lord and profiting off the eventual clash. But an impartial observer never would have suspected any of that. People called him Damrada the Gold for a reason.

But Granville was a sly old dog himself. He had a (mostly) accurate grip on Damrada's motivations. Yes, he was unlikely to interfere—but he didn't say anything about *not* courting Rimuru. He had told no lies, which was the minimum anyone would want to see from a merchant, but Granville was the leader of a family who ruled over much of the world's business. Damrada's attitude wasn't something he was willing to abide.

"...I detest him so much," Granville whispered, now alone in the room. "He thinks he can take advantage of me? Once this matter is done with, *you're* next."

The humiliation in his eyes darkened into surging rage...

*

"...And that was how things worked out with the Five Elders," Damrada reported to the boy sitting comfortably in a chair.

"Ah. Well, I'm glad matters have been settled with the Rozzos the way you wanted them to. Now we can continue to use them as a point of contact for negotiation."

Damrada was the height of arrogance while dealing with the Rozzos. With this boy, he was far more self-deprecating. It was to be expected. After all, this boy—broadly nodding his approval at Damrada's report—was both his master and the leader of the Cerberus group.

"Quite true. But curse those rats! Pushing a monster like *that* on me without even informing me about it..."

"Ha-ha-ha! That must've been quite an adventure. But at least you were able to step back at the right time."

"Heh. Yes, that was quite a stroke of luck. His name was...Diablo, if I recall. A fearsome demon, one who might even be the equal of Blanc over in the Empire.

Rimuru himself is far from the only threat.”

“Yeah... I got a feeling Rimuru’s gonna grow stronger before we can get ourselves fully back in order.”

“I agree. That demon lord has the uncanniest luck working for him. He’s assembled quite a number of magic-born, and he’s even tamed the Storm Dragon himself...”

“To tell the truth, I think a frontal assault would be a pretty bad idea.”

“I...wouldn’t go so far as to call it unwinnable. But no, I doubt Cerberus would survive when the dust settles.”

“Well, no point fretting about it. We’ve got time to work with. We can think about it.”

“That we can. Things will remain rather chaotic for a while to come. Joining in the fray could burn us badly.”

“Mm-hmm. I used Hinata to get back at ‘em a little, but that sure didn’t work out, huh? It’s too dangerous to make any other moves. Better to lay low for a while.”

The boy smiled, not seeming to care too much. Damrada thought things over as he returned the smile. Then, he seemed to remember something.

“Still,” he glumly stated, “I have to say, the Five Elders were all bark and no bite. Going on about how they would destroy Hinata—and look how *that* worked out, huh? With both surviving, I’m sure they’ll work out their misunderstandings. That could end the whole rift between Tempest and the Holy Church before too long.”

“I thought that would happen,” the boy replied with a chuckle. “Rimuru is too generous to humankind. I didn’t think he had it in him to kill Hinata. I was kind of hoping that generosity would spell his downfall, sooner or later...but perhaps he wasn’t *that* generous.”

“I think the Five Elders were aiming to conspire with Rimuru so they could keep a lid on the Storm Dragon.”

“Well, if *that* was all it took, we wouldn’t have any problems right now. I had

you keep close tabs on them precisely *because* I figured they'd screw it up."

"Ah, I see. But that saved me in the end. If you hadn't contacted me, sir, I would've had to duel Hinata herself in front of Rimuru."

Perhaps, with some more luck, he wouldn't have blown his cover. But he wasn't optimistic about his chances fighting Hinata. He deeply appreciated the boy's advance warning about the danger... Although, of course, the danger only came about because of the boy's orders. If Hinata hadn't been fed false information, Damrada never would've been revealed at all.

Still, this was nothing that troubled Damrada deeply. The orders of the boy who led Cerberus took precedence over everything else. His mission, after all, was no less than to conquer the entire world—a goal Damrada shared. He adored the boy. With him, he felt, this childlike dream of world domination could really happen. That was why he never questioned any of the orders he received.

"If I had lost you," the boy casually said, "my plan would've been sabotaged beyond repair."

"Well," Damrada replied with a bold grin, "at least I managed to escape for you."

One did not become the leader of Cerberus solely through business acumen. It took real talent to make the powers that be in the underground bow to you.

The boy, perhaps knowing this, let a devilish grin creep onto his face. "Ha-ha-ha! But don't go all out or anything, all right? Because *that's* the absolute last resort. So let's just sit and watch a bit. I look forward to seeing how this struggle plays out—especially since there's no *real* power involved."

Going all out, as he put it, meant calling upon every asset Cerberus had on hand. That required bringing the two underbosses not in the room, people directly below the boy himself, into the fold. There would be nothing "covert" about the results. It could lead to a full-blown war that involved all the Western Nations.

Damrada nodded at the boy, knowing that wasn't what he wanted. "In that case," he said, "it might be best for me to return to my native land."

"Yeah, probably. You said she didn't see your face, but this is Hinata we're talking about. She's probably got her sights on you, and that makes open activity difficult. No, better to have someone else step up. Although..."

Damrada knew what the boy was getting at. Cerberus had three underbosses—Damrada and two others—and one of those two was a problem.

"Let's not ask Vega to fill in for you, huh?"

"Very well," a convinced Damrada replied. "In that case, Misha, then?"

"Yeah. Let's go with that."

The bosses were nicknamed the Gold, the Lover, and the Power, the three symbols of a man's greed. Misha, the Lover, was someone you never wanted to let your guard down around, but she at least listened to reason. Vega, the Power, was a handful. He was a living, breathing personification of violence, as his name suggested. Damrada could do nothing to sway his mind; he only listened to direct orders from the boy, who knew that well enough and didn't want Damrada to deal with him.

"That sounds good, sir. So how should we wind down the slave trade I had been working on here?"

"...Oh, right, there was that, wasn't there? The Orthrus Slave Market always was a pain to deal with. Let's shut it down. I never liked slavery anyway."

"Mmm. I have no objections, but are we just going to release all the rare monsters we circulate around Misha's Echidna Club?"

"No, anything designated confidential should be treated the same as always. We still have a link to the Rozzo family; we might as well use it."

"Very well. I'll leave the rest in your capable hands," said Damrada before he took his leave.

The boy closed his eyes, gleefully moving the mental chess pieces around in his brain. Then he heard the tapping of footsteps. His lips curled into a smile as he spoke to the woman behind him, a secretary.

"You were listening, weren't you, Kazalim?"

"I sure was, Boss. Why are you intent on dismantling Orthrus now?"

This was Kazalim, a trusted confidant and adviser to the boy.

“It’s simple. I thought I’d let *him* play the good guy on this.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“Do I really need to say the other one? That slime controls the entire Forest of Jura, from one end to the other. If we go monster hunting in there, we’d get crushed. So why don’t we dissolve Orthrus now while it’d be to our advantage?”

“Yeah... I suppose. We just need to protect our core assets, huh? Like a lizard that’s lost its tail.”

“Right? So can I leave the arrangements to you?”

“Let him play the good guy’... Oh, *him*, you mean? You come up with the most interesting ideas sometimes, Boss. All right. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Kazalim.”

“Of course. Also, not to change the subject, but can you call me Kagali?”

The boy turned toward Kazalim, eyebrows raised. “Oh, you’re finally going through with it?”

“Uh-huh. With Clayman dead, it’s time to step up. Until I have my revenge against Leon, I’m putting the demon lord Kazalim name on ice.”

“Sure thing. In that case, get to work, Kagali.”

“Yes sir.”

They gave each other a glance and grinned—opening the curtain on a new age of chaos.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER
1

RECONCILIATION AND AGREEMENT

CHAPTER 1

RECONCILIATION AND AGREEMENT

Things became much, much harder after all that. Getting everything settled was more exhausting for me than fighting Hinata—a fact I made sure remained a closely guarded secret.

What had happened? Well...

.....

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...

Luminus, the single god worshipped by the Western Holy Church, was none other than the demon lord Valentine. Her real name was Luminus Valentine all along. She had been using a trusted confidant as a standin, giving him her name, Valentine, so he could fully play the part of demon lord in her stead. That, of course, was all in the past, now that Veldora had so breezily blown her cover at the last Walpurgis Council.

The Crusaders, the team of paladin knights led by Hinata, stood in opposition to the demon lord Valentine, which earned the Empire the support of the general public. The entire setup was wholly contrived, something Hinata knew all along—but whatever rational sense the arrangement made, why did she go along with it?

“It was out of my hands,” she said, sighing. “Lady Luminus defeated me when I tried to put a stop to things myself. Not that she was much interested in the people’s support in the first place...”

She must have sensed my skepticism. Reluctant or not, apparently Hinata was incapable of defying Luminus’s will. She did, however, extract a promise from her that no civilians would be harmed in the process. As long as she stuck to

that, Hinata was willing to hold up her end of the bargain.

But as the man who was with her then explained, this ploy wasn't Hinata's doing in the first place.

"No, I was the one who came up with the plan. My brother Roy was all for it. Lady Luminus had little to do with it, and Hinata was so against it at first that she tried to take us all down. If anyone has an issue with it, they should complain to me, not her."

This was Louis—the Holy Emperor, as he called himself.

"All right, so...um, Your Majesty? Mr. Emperor?"

He chuckled. "Just Louis is fine, my demon lord." Even though the paladins were right in front of us, he apparently didn't have much time for formality. Given how I was a demon lord just like his boss, Luminus, I suppose being casual with people like me came naturally.

Louis then embarked on a recap of recent events, loudly enough for the paladins to hear.

"So the Valentine I met at Walpurgis was your brother?"

"Indeed—my younger twin brother, to be more precise. Unfortunately, it seems he was killed by unknown assailants on the way home from the Council."

"Huh? Killed?"

He didn't look or sound too broken up about it, but this news was kind of a surprise. I mean, standin or not, that demon lord Valentine was clearly a powerful dude.

"Yes. Roy had a tendency to be overly confident; he must have left himself exposed. The Western Holy Church has many enemies. There are quite a few nations who see the Holy Emperor Lubelius as an eyesore. I imagine one of their assassins must have caught my brother unawares. It's a great disappointment."

Despite his lack of grief, Louis didn't seem wholly unmoved by the loss. Louis was pretty strong, too; I could see that much. But if his demon lord-class brother was now dead, he must not have been too optimistic about his own future.

"I'd been enlisting Roy to work with the new recruits lately, for on-the-field training," said Hinata. "One time, Saare actually managed to overpower him in battle, so he'd clearly been off his game—but we still need to watch out for whoever killed him. Not that any of that matters to you, I assume."

She had a point. Roy had left hardly any impact on my life at all.

Now, at least, I had a handle on Louis, Valentine, and Luminus, as did the Crusaders listening in on us. This was all news to them, and they were all shocked into silence.

Now Hinata turned to her soldiers. "All right. You all heard us. It wasn't my intention to deceive you, but I suppose that's how this worked out, isn't it?"

"L-Lady Hinata..."

She raised a hand to stop the question before it began. "I couldn't tell any of you," she coldly continued. "We needed to have as few people in on the plan as possible. If any of you revealed it, we would've been forced to execute you."

Wow. Not mincing words, huh, Hinata?

"Heh... Heh-heh! Well, you won't trick old Arnaud here. The god—or should I say, the demon lord Luminus—threatened you into doing this, didn't she?"

This Arnaud guy was awfully brash. Hinata, however, swiftly shut him down. "No. I told you—our citizens are under the protection of Lady Luminus. That's the truth. So I've chosen to carry out her will, as long as she remains friendly to humanity. You will not insult her around me, Arnaud."

She shot her steely-eyed paladin a glare. I could see where this misunderstanding came from. No wonder Shizu had been concerned.

"Hey, now," I said. "C'mon, Hinata, why don't you try being a bit kinder? That's not nearly enough explanation for them."

"I'm sorry, does this involve you?"

Her glare was on me. Clearly, she wanted me to knock it off.

"I kind of think it does, doesn't it? Because it'd be kind of annoying if you guys started infighting with each other here."

"I don't need your concern, thanks. Besides—"

"There is no need to worry," Arnaud said, cutting her off. "You have fully earned our trust, Lady Hinata!"

"Arnaud is right," his compatriot Renard echoed. "Good demon lord Rimuru, we are led by Lady Hinata, not Luminus. There is no disagreement that could possibly separate us."

They might've all had their own thoughts about it, but none of that trumped the faith they had in Hinata. Having a trust-based relationship really is the most important thing, isn't it?

"Well, all right," I said, nodding.

"Besides, after watching *that...*" Arnaud pointed up, pausing. I knew what he was getting at. There, in the air above, Luminus and Veldora had just engaged in a battle that was nothing short of breathtaking—as much as I wished they hadn't. I kept everyone on the ground safe through Uriel's Absolute Defense skill, but they fought over such a large range, I couldn't say if there'd be any outside casualties. Anyone who had seen Luminus's ferocious attack would be just as flummoxed as Arnaud.

Frankly:

"Looking at that battle, I can understand how Lady Hinata was defeated."

"No, she certainly doesn't call herself a god for show. If she turned her back on humanity, there'd be nothing we could do about it..."

To the Crusaders, the sight of it was far more convincing than any speech I could have given them.

"Well," Louis said, "there is no need to concern yourselves about that. Lady Luminus is a generous god. She has no interest in tormenting those under her divine protection. Why else has she proven to be so friendly toward the humans who do *not* try to defy her? Of course, no one here is allowed to divulge her *true* identity, but..."

Maintaining confidentiality about the whole demon lord thing was top priority to him. It was Veldora who blew her cover anyway, so I saw no reason not to

cooperate with that effort. And the other paladins seemed convinced this was a valid thing to do—mainly because Hinata wanted it, as far as I could tell. They must have loved her a lot more than I thought.

So I didn't think I had anything to worry about. Which was good. Because in my eyes, Hinata tended to be too terse, too blunt, too easily misunderstood for her own good—

"Were you thinking something rude about me again?"

"Huh? N-no, I wasn't..."

Does she have ESP or something?! She's got to be reading my mind...

Incorrect. No influence of that sort detected.

No, Raphael? Then maybe she just has the uncanniest sixth sense ever. Better watch what I'm thinking around her.

At that very moment, *he* came onto the scene—falling at terminal velocity from the sky, of course, and making a small crater on the ground. He stood right back up, though, none the worse for wear, and ran up to me. It was Veldora, obviously, and now he was sidling up behind me, using me as a shield as he glared up at the sky. Ahead of him, up above, I could see a beautiful silver-haired young woman, a mask of rage on her face as she floated in midair.

"R-Rimuru, give that pigheaded woman a piece of your mind! I'm giving her as generous an apology as I can, but she refuses to listen!"

Uh, yeah... Sure. But can you *please* stop bringing me into this? Seriously.

This time, at least, it was completely Veldora's fault. Has it never *not* been, if you think about it? He hadn't even been resurrected for that long, and already I felt like he'd been a huge thorn in my side.

I had been watching them, but the method Veldora chose for his apology only served to rile up Luminus. She was trying to put her sword away, and then he went off like "Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I had no bad intentions back then. Call it a youthful mistake and forgive me with your most generous of hearts!" That was easily enough to set her off.

"Bring that lizard here," she ordered me, in a voice that'd make your hair

stand on end, as she glared behind me at Veldora in all his haughtiness. Frankly, I didn't want to get on Luminus's bad side over something like this. I knew exactly how she felt. That was no apology at all. Veldora ought to be taught a lesson over this, I thought. So:

"All right."

Without hesitation, I grabbed Veldora by the neck and presented him to Luminus.

"Gehh?! Rimuru! You've betrayed meeeee!!"

At a time like this, it's important you get your message across. I needed to make sure everything was crystal clear to everyone about this, if I didn't want Luminus to have any lingering resentments.

She gave me a surprised look, then let out a smile cold enough to freeze blood. "Yes. I am glad to see, Rimuru, that you possess great senses of perception. Unlike that *lizard* over there."

"Oh, it's nothing that great. But I know he's been a real thorn in your side this time. If you agree to forgive him afterward, you can feel free to rake him over the coals as much as you like."

Luminus grinned and nodded.

"Mmm. I will give that some thought."

That seemed to smooth things over with Luminus well enough. Veldora was shouting things like "Wait! Does—does *my* opinion not matter at all?!" as she dragged him away, but neither she nor I was paying attention.

"Time to let off all the steam I've been building up... Embracing Drain!!"

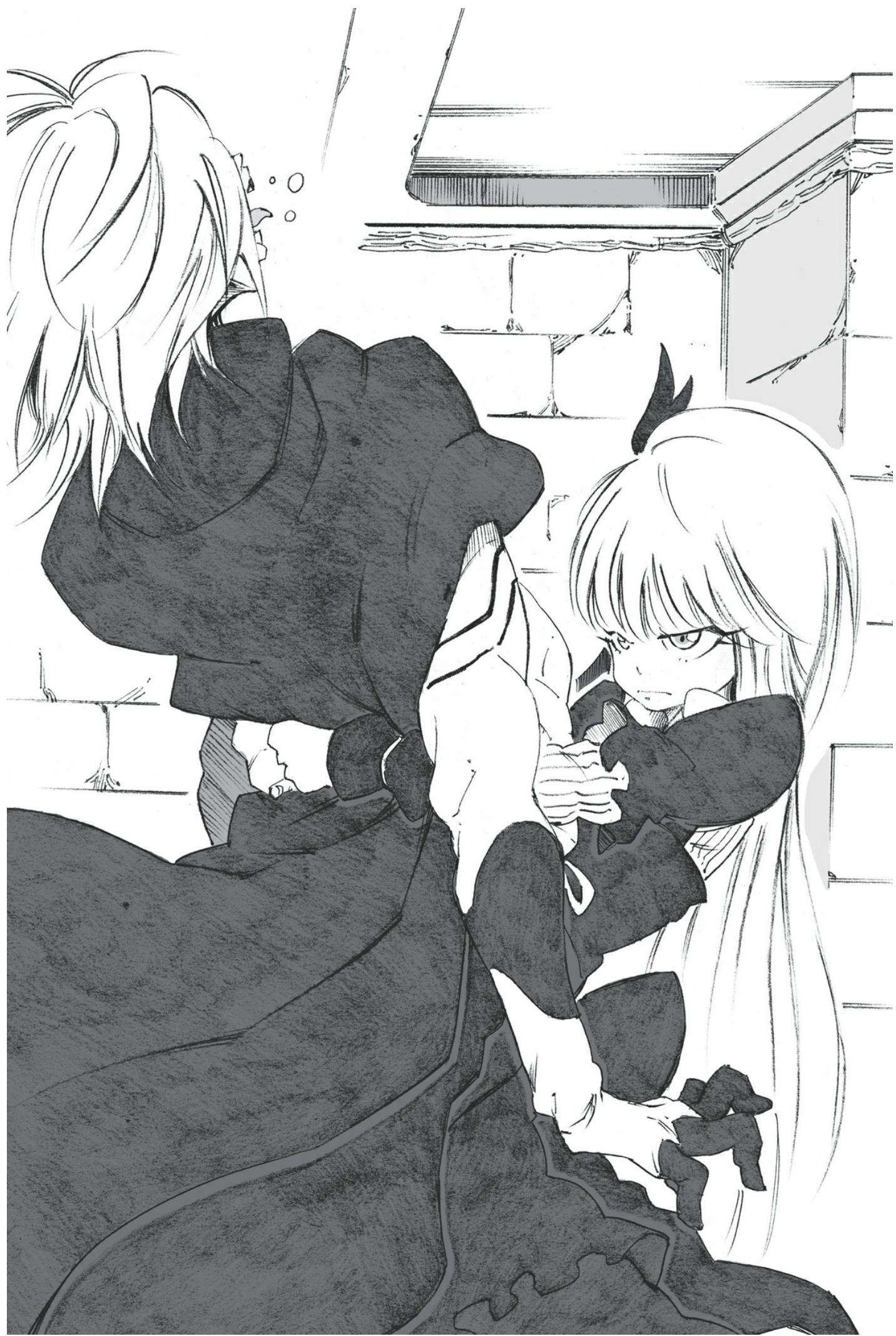
"Gaaagghhhh!!"

It looked like Luminus was giving Veldora a hug, but there was certainly no sweet sentiment behind it. It was really more of a bear hug, despite the height difference.

You'd think that wouldn't be enough to hurt Veldora much, but...

Understood. She is absorbing the magical energy from the target, while

injecting it with signals of intense pain and discomfort. These signals likely install themselves into the “soul” of the individual until cut off, regardless of Cancel Pain possession.



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Um... So to a spiritual life-form like Veldora, this attack "hurts," then? In a way, this seems a lot more effective than just destroying him. With the near-infinite stores of energy Veldora had, no amount of energy draining on Luminus's part would kill him—but she *could* wear him out. Adding pain and discomfort to the mix would make for a punishment he'd not soon forget, I imagine.

Luminus kept going with that attack for a decent amount of time. Veldora started crying out, tear-filled eyes longingly staring at me, but I watched silently and offered no mercy. This was for Veldora's sake... Or really, if sacrificing him was all it took to make Luminus feel better, I'd say I got a bargain. Call it a political transaction. Forgive me, Veldora.

"Well," an expressionless Louis observed, "at least Lady Luminus seems to be enjoying herself. It'll let her work through all her negative emotions as of late. I couldn't be happier."

"Yes," Hinata said, nodding. "Given we don't know who killed Roy, we don't want any needless hostility right now. By the way, just to be sure, that guy over there... Is he...?"

She looked at Veldora, a tad unsure of herself. Oh, right. We hadn't made introductions yet, huh?

"Yeah, that's Veldora. Kinda hard to tell when he's not in dragon form and all, but it's definitely him. I think he's kind of busy right now, but I'll introduce you to each other later."

"W-wait, Rimuru! N-n-now! Introduce us nowww—"

"Hmm? Still haven't had enough, eh?"

"Worrrgghhhh!!"

Poor guy. It was his fault for trying to escape Luminus. I could tell she increased the voltage or whatever just now. Loose lips sink ships, and so on.

"...So *this* was the Storm Dragon who Lady Luminus feared so much? Certainly, the amount of sheer power is astounding, but..."

Hinata looked disappointed. Who could blame her? Right now, Veldora was little more than comic relief. No sort of draconic majesty whatsoever. It was hard to believe this was a Catastrophe-level monster straight out of a nightmare. The other paladins must've thought the same thing, because they couldn't have looked more confused.

"I—I can't believe it..."

"That? That's the Storm Dragon we were told such terrifying tales about?"

"Surely you jest? I honestly feel a little sorry for him."

I think the form he had taken was tricking a few of the paladins, to be honest. Plus, I'd based my own Replication on a younger Shizu. So similarly, if Veldora kept his mouth shut, he looked like a pretty handsome young man. If a guy like him was shouting for help with that desperate plea in his eyes, it'd move the hearts of untold numbers of women.

But don't be fooled. Indulge him just a little, and he'll walk all over you. I needed to teach him some firm discipline right away, or else we—well, really, I—would pay dearly for it later.

Report. The aura of Veldora the Storm Dragon, previously in danger of spontaneously combusting, has fallen back within the threshold of stability.

...What?! Wait a second. Did Raphael predict Luminus would do *that*, too? No way. That was a bit much for even me to swallow. It'd be impossible to read *that* far ahead. No need to give him *that* much credit—the fight with Hinata had followed Raphael's plan so closely, though, I couldn't help but feel that way.

I shook my head, banishing the thought.

"Right. I'd say it's time to head out. I know we've had a few misunderstandings, but once things calm down, I'd like to discuss our future plans."

With that, I guided the paladins back to town.

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Rigurd was waiting for us at the gate, panting. I had sent Soei on ahead to send the news, and he had just now run out to greet us. He didn't need to do that—I was sure I gave him ample warning—but the guy just likes to run, I guess.

"On behalf of the city of Tempest," he said with a friendly smile, "I welcome each and every one of you!"

Nice smile there. He must've learned it as part of his diplomatic efforts, and it put a professional service worker to shame. I appreciated it, especially given how we had our swords at the ready against these guys not long ago.

"We will prepare meals for all of you, so please let us know if there is anything you'd prefer not to have."

I had to hand it to Rigurd's zeal for study—making sure to check if anyone had any allergies or religious reasons to avoid certain foods. He must've been roping in adventurers and merchants while I wasn't paying attention, learning about human culture and thought. Would anyone believe that this guy used to be a helpless goblin?

"Oh, um, there is no need to go out of your way for us..."

Hinata looked a bit awkward about this, preparing to turn the offer down, but we needed to talk about our future relations. It was already evening by now, so that talk would likely come the next day—and since they were here anyway, I couldn't ignore a chance to advertise our city a little.

"Ah, don't worry about it! We can talk in more detail tomorrow, so for today, let's treat ourselves to a peacemaking party!"

"Oooh, a party! A fine idea. And with that will come fine drink, yes?"

Veldora, looking none the worse for wear after Luminus's punishment, was naturally the first to react. He was in fine shape, after all, not that I had been concerned.

"Hmm... If this is a feast, I imagine I am invited as well?"

Whoa! Luminus, out of nowhere, was standing right next to me. And she *was* invited, of course, but were things really square with her and Veldora?

"Well, sure, but um... What do I call you? Lord Luminus?"

"Don't be weird. Luminus is fine."

I suppose it was. We were fellow Octagram members.

"All right. Luminus, then. And you're safe calling me Rimuru, too. But about Veldora—"

"I will *not* forgive him. That much is certain. I've come here today to atone for what my servants have done. In deference to you, Rimuru, I will give the lizard his *full* punishment another day."

Oooh. She's just calling me straight Rimuru. I thought she'd act more high and mighty, but I guess she's a lot more unaffected than that.

I was thinking about how I might just get along with her when Veldora started acting out again. And Luminus took the bait, of course.

"What?! I've had more than enough punishment!"

"Silence, you! I've already given you my concessions. Or if you'd prefer, we could settle this right here!"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Very well! Allow me to show you the sheer scale of my might—"

They fought like cats and dogs. I wasn't so sure they were enemies at all, really. Maybe the term *frenemies* was invented to describe this.

"Stop it, you idiot. No violent rages within city limits."

I had to put my foot down. Otherwise, they'd be apt to tear the whole place down.

Luminus, at least, seemed to be happy, no doubt appreciating all the magicule energy she had sucked out of Veldora's body. It seemed like she was letting bygones be bygones for now, so maybe it was best not to needlessly prod her. *If she's joining in the party, let's give her the time of her life.*

"So about this party— I wouldn't expect the kind of first-class dining you'd get at Walpurgis, but are you okay with that?"

Luminus nodded, thankfully. "I did not attend the last one because I had a bad

feeling about it...but that was not the only reason. My own team of cooks produce delicacies similar in quality to what you found over there. And eating is already optional for me; one simply gets bored of it over time. But you have rare and uncommon spirits here, no? Given how that lizard is already licking his lips, I must have a lot to look forward to.”

“Lady Luminus, do you not feel that is too careless of you?” an elderly servant of hers interjected.

I say *elderly* strictly in terms of outward appearance. He had extraordinarily good posture, and from the general aura he presented, I could tell this wasn’t some guy off the street. No, this servant was more comparable to Louis, standing adjacent.

Luminus gave this servant a dissatisfied look. “Why do you insist on opening your mouth constantly, Gunther? This is exactly why I didn’t want to take you.”

“Because it is my duty, my lady.”

“Well, enough of that. Rimuru seems like a sensible person to me. I’m not about to settle things with Veldora right here. There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“But—”

“I said enough! You have no right to boss around a demon lord as old as I am! I bid you to go back ahead of me!”

Gunther gave a tired sigh to this show of force from his master. But he couldn’t defy her. After a few moments of thought, he carried out her orders.

“...I will return now, in that case.”

Luminus smiled. “Very good. Thank you, Gunther. You worry far too much. We have Louis and Hinata here.”

“I cannot help but worry about my princess,” he replied, looking at Louis. “I leave her in your hands, Louis.”

“Understood.”

Louis wasn’t too enthused about this, either. His expression didn’t change, but I could sense it anyway. Maybe Luminus was in the habit of using and

abusing them both on a regular basis...or at least, that's what the conversation suggested to me.

Regardless, Gunther vanished the moment he heard Louis's reply. Once she was sure he was gone, Luminus brightened up.

"And now that I've swatted that bothersome gnat away, we have a party to enjoy!"

Thus, Hinata and everyone under her on hand was joining the feast—whether they wanted to or not. Nobody dared voice any disagreement—nobody was foolish enough to rile Luminus. That was how spectacular her fight with Veldora had been, really. It might've been a little light sparring from their perspective, but if any of the paladins got too close, it would've spelled disaster for them.

It's a good thing I was around to stop them just now, or the fallout around town would've been catastrophic. Some of them had turned pale, contemplating what they had just narrowly avoided, while others hadn't even realized the gravity of it all yet. Which—yeah—if you were a paladin, today's myriad of events must've been mind-blowing. My battle with Hinata was superhuman enough as it was, but then we extinguished the Seven Days Clergy, and *then* they found out the god they worshipped all along was a demon lord... *Then*, to cap it off, the Veldora fight. It seemed to me that their faith in Hinata was the only thing that allowed them to keep it together, but this would take time for them to fully accept.

But hey, let's all relax for today, okay?

Rigurd, perhaps picking up on this, clapped his hands a few times and began barking out orders, sending the townspeople around him scurrying in all directions. Some collected everyone's horses; some approached the paladins to accept their weapons and armor; some gave out potions to the wounded. And I guess the paladins really *did* believe in Hinata, because once she handed her gear over, the rest all followed. Some were even trying out our recovery potion, acting shocked at the results.

I thought this was going to be harder, for some reason. But this was actually pretty chill.

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"Now, it will be some time before the meal is ready, so why not take a bath first to take the grime off your bodies? We have rooms prepared for all of you, of course, so you may feel free to relax as well."

The paladins didn't seem to understand what any of that meant.

I knew the people of Englesia were in the habit of bathing regularly. I think the words used were all familiar to them. Hinata's team members were using inns along the way, apparently, and they all definitely had baths. Perhaps they never imagined monsters wanting a dip now and then, too.

Well, prepare to be amazed, guys! The baths we got here will beat anything you'll see in your capital, trust me. Really more of a hot spring, in fact, and I've got everything from a large pool-like room to private open-air baths. Just like a hot-spring-resort town back in Japan, I've got all kinds of different types to try out. It makes for killer advertising, and besides, it just feels good when you're all tired out.

They'd also need some new clothes to change into, wouldn't they? The simple gear under their armor was battered and torn, a hopeless mess after all the fighting they'd been through. A change of clothes should be good PR, too, I thought. Maybe some of the hemp-based *jinbei* shirt-and-shorts outfits we'd just developed? We had the more kimono-like *yukata* for the women, too—in a pretty broad color selection, even.

"Oh, don't you worry," Haruna told me with a grin. "Lady Shuna is already underway with preparations."

I guess I had nothing to worry about. Let's get going, then.

"All right, everyone. Please, enjoy our baths, the pride of our nation. The water is all pumped in from a natural spring, and I guarantee you'll find it rejuvenating. Does absolute wonders for your skin, too."

The salesman side of me was in full swing. Luminus swiftly took the bait.

"Ah, a bath? And good for the skin? Fascinating. I imagine you have saved your finest private bath chamber for me, yes?"

Um, private chamber?

And then I remembered. In the Dwarven Kingdom, as advanced as their tech was, personal steam baths were the common custom. They didn't have bathhouses meant for use by great numbers of people at once. Englesia had public facilities like that, but Blumund didn't. If the common people wanted to keep clean, after all, there were household magic spells for that, no water required. Every town had people who'd cast them on you for a nominal fee.

What all this meant was that, in this world, there's no common, unified custom of drawing a bath and just soaking in it for a while. A private bath was a grand luxury, something that would only be possessed by the upper class—and even then only in nations with a large population of otherworlders. I kept forgetting that, given how my home nation installed baths even in one-bedroom apartments.

Luminus must've been anticipating some nobleman's grandiose gilded chamber of delights, but I was gonna have to disappoint her. There was no telling how angry she'd be if I just guided her to our regular baths without explanation. I decided to address her misconceptions before anything else.

"No, um, we have baths that everyone can go in. Separated by gender, of course, but there's also a mixed bath if that's more of what you're into...?"

I thought that would've been enough. But others reacted before her.

"...?!"

"What was that?!"

"Ah-haaa..."

Arnaud and the other male paladins had stars in their eyes. Heh-heh. Must've piqued their curiosity.

"Well, if you're interested, right over there we have—"

I stopped midway. Hinata's frigid stare was pointed right at me. *She* wasn't falling for it.

"Lady Luminus, let's go to a women's bath. This will be my first hot spring visit in a while, so this is a very exciting opportunity."

"Oh? Well, if you say so, Hinata, I will not stop you."

I expected as much. But ah well. And here I was hoping I could join Hinata and Luminus for a... Wait, hang on. I shouldn't give up yet, maybe. Arnaud and his cohorts looked profoundly disappointed, but it was a fool's errand to expect the women to join the men in there. But what if it was just me?

"All right," I said, giving the paladins a suitably sheepish look, "let me guide you to the women's bath."

I tried to walk away as casually as possible. But it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Wait one moment. Why are *you* trying to take us there?"

"Why? You're gonna need a guide, Hinata."

No need to panic yet. Just keep calm. Make it seem natural.

"You don't know the way there, do you? We have baths with different compositions of minerals and stuff. There's even a sauna. I just thought it'd be prudent to explain how it all worked."

I had once guided two of the Three Lycanthropeers through it all, I explained to them, after they'd expressed an interest. They loved it, so that was now the custom I took.

"So yeah, I thought I could give you a better picture of how great all this stuff is, you know?"

"Let me handle that, Sir Rimuru!"

I *really* didn't need Shion's support right now, thanks. Gotta take a firm stand.

"Oh, I dunno if I can rely on you alone, Shion."

"What?!"

"But hey, come on! No need to be a stick in the mud. I'll even join you in there."

I tried to sound as chill as possible. Now my going around the women's bath wouldn't seem odd at all. Hee-hee-hee... Perfect. The perfect plan. Now I could join her in the—

"No, wait. You *used* to be a man, didn't you? Why are you acting like it's completely normal for you to join us in there?"

Erk.

She saw through it?!

I shouldn't be able to sweat, but I swore I could still feel a cold sensation running down my back. Luminus joined Hinata's skepticism, giving me a "Hmm?" and a focused look.

"Well, no, I mean..."

I was starting to panic, but before I could formulate a coherent thought:

"What is the matter with it? Sir Rimuru is Sir Rimuru!"

Shion, the one person I thought I couldn't count on here, swooped in to back me up. *That's right! Keep it going!* I tried to mentally encourage her, but—in the end—Shion was Shion, too.

"But you can guide us around, too, right?"

"Of course!"

"In that case, I'd like to ask you a favor, would you mind?"

"But..."

"Wouldn't this be a good opportunity to prove to your leader that you *can* be relied upon?"

"Oh, I see!"

In distressingly short order, Hinata had cajoled Shion to join her side. Even worse, the two Lycanthropeers joining us chose that moment to speak up.

"Don't worry, Shion. We'll be there, too, so if you forget anything, we can help!"

"Quite so. We've become regulars at this point, so we know how it all works."

"Sir Rimuru," Shion replied, her mind made up, "please let me handle this!"

"Uh... Sure. Make me proud."

Aw. And here I was hoping to get a look at Hinata's lovely naked body...but at this point, giving up was the only option left. I had just lost the chance of a lifetime, and I had to face up to that, as much as it distressed me.

Pulling myself back together, I turned toward Benimaru.

“Pfft. Ah well. I’ll pay the men’s bath a visit for the first time in a while.”

That’s one thing I like to give myself credit for—my ability to mentally switch gears fast.

“Okay, who wants to scrub my back? Nothing like letting water from deep in the mountains take the sweat and fatigue away.”

“Allow me, sir...”

Benimaru and the gang loved the hot spring we’d all built together. Going in as a group now and then wasn’t such a bad thing.

“Kwah-ha-ha! Will you do *my* back then, Rimuru?”

“Why do I have to do something like *that*?!”

I had no interest in dealing with Veldora. Brushing him off, I took the lead as we all headed over.

The majority of paladins were male, nearly a hundred in all, but that was no problem for my main bathhouse facility. If there was just one room, that would fill it up, but we had several, allowing them all to bathe at once. I could tell some of them were nervous—it must’ve been exciting for them. I’d love to give ‘em a bit of a shock.

As I walked on, thinking this over, I ran into Shuna.

“I’ve prepared the clothing—but why are you together with the gentlemen, Sir Rimuru?”

The question was casual enough, but her eyes weren’t smiling. It gave me pause.

“Oh, I just thought I’d join them in the baths.”

Shuna gave me a cute little grin. *Uh-oh. Doesn’t that mean she’s incredibly angry?*

“How do you mean?” she asked, sizing us up before squaring her gaze upon Benimaru and Soei. “I’m sorry, Sir Rimuru has an errand to handle, so I’m afraid he cannot join you. Also, Benimaru and Soei, I would like to speak with you

later."

"Er, um—"

"..."

The two fell silent under Shuna's pressure. I wasn't sure what this was about, but they must've felt it wise to avoid stoking her rage any further.

Me, meanwhile? I was being assigned to the bath in my detached house. How could it be? What set off Shuna like that? I had no idea, even as Shuna pointed me straight back home.



After wrapping up a quick bath, I decided to check on how our prep work was going.

We'd be using the banquet hall for the festivities. With all the events we'd been hosting lately, I had this hall hastily built for us; it had only just been completed. Basically, it looked like a circular domed stadium, about the size of a gymnasium inside. Internally, it was wide open, the floor lined with tatami mats. It was meant to serve as an evacuation site in case of emergency, so it could hold a fair number of people. We had a lot of space to work with, so we used steel frame to construct a building of a decent size and sturdiness, but over time, this was going to change to magisteel. Our nation, and all the powerful magic-born living in it, had a lot of natural advantages like that.

As I thought about this, food began to be delivered on serving trays, on a set of intricate-looking bowls like you'd see in a fancy restaurant. I had shown them how to knead clay into bowls like that, but then the children started imitating me, and nowadays you saw a lot of really impressive pieces. For colors, they made dyes out of herbal extracts or mixed weird ores into the clay, resulting in some dazzling work at times. The children's output was being used in the homes of families across town.

It's important to experiment with a lot of things, right? You never know what's going to stick. The trays themselves were intricately detailed as well, made by Dold using processed wood from other projects. The kids started imitating that, too, and these days, handicraft sessions were part of regular

recreation in Tempest.

Looking at it this way, from hot springs to the containers the food came in, my personal tastes were starting to show their presence everywhere. Compared with those first few days of chewing on grass, life had become unbelievably better for me. The food itself was really enjoyable now, too. I guess it's easier to strive for something if you really feel like it'll benefit you personally.

The main dish on tonight's menu was tempura. Excellent. I mean, progressing *this* far was seriously moving to me. It looked perfect; it tasted amazing. All the work of Shuna in the galley. Definitely *not* Shion, it went without saying. Whether Shion had the Master Chef skill or not, one look at her attempts at cuisine and you knew she couldn't be trusted with the responsibilities of a kitchen.

This tempura had also come about after I showed my memories to Shuna and we developed each component, piece by piece. And that wasn't all. Fried chicken, hamburger, steak, croquettes, fried shrimp—I loved it all, and it went without saying that Milim did, too.

For someone like me, not that well versed in cooking, trying to explain the difference between fried shrimp and tempura was quite a challenge. In simple terms, all you're doing is taking shrimp, coating it with batter, and frying it in oil—but the batter makes all the difference in texture and taste, you know? Frying can be done in a bunch of different ways, too, and trying to re-create that based on my (hazy) memories of look, and feel, and taste, proved fiendishly difficult. It took *work*, and now, thanks to Shuna's efforts, it had come all the way here.

Englesia had a lot of good food to enjoy, but nothing I'd describe as Japanese. Guy Crimson had prepared a Western-style full-course meal for me, but I just didn't see a lot of Asian influence in this world's cuisine. One reason for that: Few of the Western Nations bordered an ocean, so seafood wasn't in plentiful supply. Attempting to preserve the freshness of ingredients with magic, it was explained to me, took a massive investment that few were willing to make. Thus, even if you had otherworlders who ran kitchens back in Japan, they couldn't do much without the right raw materials.

That made me recall the Japanese otherworlder, Yoshida, who ran that

bakery and cake shop I liked in Englesia. He lamented how he used to enjoy making “drunken” cakes with gin, bourbon, and so on, but just couldn’t find anything like that in this world. I remember how excited he got after I told him I’d throw some his way.

Thinking about that made me realize just how blessed I was over here. Just because you have a recipe doesn’t mean you’ll pull it off flawlessly on the first try, after all. And with Japanese cuisine in particular, tracking down ingredients was a challenge. I’d do things like go to the sea and capture a bunch of different fish species to try to find an equivalent to make bonito flakes from. Having a skill like Spatial Motion made it possible to transport goods in as fresh a condition as possible, which greatly expanded what was available to us. (I wanted to build a transport network that wasn’t so dependent on magic skills, but that was a topic for the future.)

Cuisine, after all, is culture itself. If a nation doesn’t have a vibrant, expansive food culture, then if you ask me, what’s the point? Out of the three basic needs —food, clothing, and shelter—food was number one by far to me, although your mileage may vary.

This was why I was expending (some would say wasting) a lot of energy developing new dishes. Wheat-based grain was easier than I surmised at first. I saw loaves of white bread in the Englesian capital; if you were well-off enough to afford it, it seemed like a daily staple. Studying the production process for that got us bread in Tempest in relatively short order.

Right now, the main issue to tackle was white rice. We still hadn’t engineered something up to snuff taste-wise. Compared with what one saw in Japan, painstakingly curated and improved since ancient times, the quality just wasn’t there. That was expected; I wasn’t anticipating a sudden breakthrough for this one. Raising plants with magic, at least, sped up the harvests quite a bit, although research was still at a halt right now due to the winter season. For the moment, we just had a few experimental rice plants growing indoors, managed by researchers. Real results seemed like they’d be a while to come.

I actually *did* have a solution for this, though. When I asked Raphael about a potential answer, it gave it to me right off—basically, use Shion’s Master Chef skill to alter the resulting rice. Tinkering the final plant rather than the initial

seeds, after all, made improving the quality quite a bit easier. But was that really the right thing to do? It wasn't like anyone else could copy this method, and it seemed kind of ethically suspect to me...but given how much I relied on just that method to fine-tune our alcoholic drinks, I was in no position to moralize. Put my conscience and my appetite on the scales, and the latter's gonna win every time.

Since we couldn't ask Shion to alter every harvest for us, our research continued. But I *did* have her engineer a small supply of lovely white rice, though. Just a bit. Mainly for my personal consumption. Shion was more than glad to help, so I gave the bag to Shuna and had her steam it up for special occasions. Occasions like this one. I was entertaining a demon lord. Let's *live* a little.

If I wanted to make our relationship a good one, I had to demonstrate how useful my nation could be. The carrot and the stick. When someone you don't like treats you well for a change, your impression of them goes up much higher than it does with someone you're already on good terms with. Imagine the ex-juvenile delinquent who volunteers to help out kids for charity—that kind of thing.

Maybe a little show like that could turn Luminus and crew to my side. I wasn't sure the paladins would be that gullible, but appealing to people's stomachs is a pretty classic—and effective—strategy to take. It was a tad underhanded, but it was also a great excuse to turn this evening's feast into an extravaganza. And sure, the white rice might disagree with their palates—that particular element of our cuisine is more for me as a Japanese person—but I bet Hinata would appreciate it. It sure wowed *me* after going without it for a while.

Plus, who doesn't like tempura? Nobody, that's who. It was already a hit with the adventurers and merchants; Benimaru, in particular, was actually a huge fan. Clearly, there were no obstacles to its acceptance in this world.

As I reflected on this, the serving trays were all put in place. Now we just had to wait for the paladins to get out of the bath.



The place settings were lined up in the shape of the letter C, with three seats

at the center—me in the middle, Veldora and Luminus on either side. It gave me a view of everyone at the banquet, with the paladins and our city's officials facing each other along the arc. This had the nuance of an informal gathering, so I wanted to be sure people could all see one another.

Soon, the paladins were ushered into the banquet hall. They had just come out from the bath, wearing the *yukata* and *jinbei* prepared for them. It must've been a novel experience, but they looked comfortable for the most part. You'd be hard-pressed to find something even more relaxing to wear around the house, after all—kind of like lounging around in sweats all day.

They all seemed a bit on edge as they were guided inside. The lack of tables and chairs must have thrown them, not to mention the custom of taking off their footwear before going up on the tatami floor. The goblinas guiding them along were in their element, however, demonstrating some pretty surprising elegance. Vester must've been teaching them well. I could tell some of the paladins weren't sure what to make of them.

Luminus sat down first, the picture of high society as she settled next to me. Louis was next, a practical mirror image of the former demon lord Roy and every bit as dignified as his papal rank suggested. Third was Hinata, who (after sitting down) looked at me, determined.

"I have to apologize for all the trouble we've given you. What happened today, as well as the last time we met, was thanks to my own poor judgment. It wasn't an order from Lady Luminus, and my paladins are not responsible for it. I don't know if you can find it in yourself to forgive me, but—"

"Whoa, stop right there!"

I had to stop her before she started kowtowing to me on the tatami. Our first encounter? Yeah, that was all her fault. But our most recent rumble was all a misunderstanding, the Seven Days guys pulling the strings behind it, and Luminus had already taken care of them. And with Diablo wrapping things up over in Farmus as well, I saw no reason to keep dragging out the issue.

That's why I stepped up to interrupt her. But then I made an astonishing new discovery. I... I thought I could see it—the smoothly undulating twin peaks, unfolding underneath her partially opened *yukata*!! Slightly flushed after the

bath and so supremely captivating!

I hadn't deliberately tried for that, but man, talk about good timing! Was this Raphael at work?

Understood. That is not the case.

That reply sounded a little cold to me, but it didn't matter. Oh, man. I was starting to feel...*adventurous*. Now would normally be when I began sporting wood, but *that* thing was long gone. Ah well. A man never leaves his sense of adventure behind! Good thing I don't get nosebleeds in this body, either.

A *yukata*, though, huh? Wow. Talk about packing a punch. A woman, fresh from the bath, in a *yukata*. There's just no beating that. And if that woman was as beautiful as Hinata, the fearsome synergy that results...

...Well, she got me. I gave in. Defeated. I'd forgive her for anything she'd done. In fact, I already had.



"Sir Rimuru, where are you looking?"

Shuna had paused her serving, looking at me with a smile. It was strange. Her voice sounded so gentle, but something about it seemed as frozen as ice.

"No, no, nowhere! But, Hinata... If that misunderstanding's all cleared up, then we're all good, I promise! If you could just drop your prejudices against monsters, then all the better!"

Hinata appeared lost for a moment at my forced change of subject, but then wordlessly nodded.

I knew I was asking a lot, really. A monster, in essence, was kind of like a violent offender with a gun in his hand. If you believe one without question and innocent people get killed later, you have to recognize that you set yourself up for failure. Maybe we could speak to each other, and maybe that didn't mean we could *really* understand...but this town could make it work. People were believing me and trying to play nice with humans—even after Shion and Team Reborn had been killed by human hands.

"I mean, I know you won't trust me that easily or anything. You never know what the other side's *really* thinking, and I guess some monsters can be a lot slyer and more conniving than others. If you're a defender of humanity, you can't afford to be tricked *all* the time."

"...True. Conversation is the first step to a common understanding, but it can lead to some dangerous transactions. You run the risk of making commitments that bind you, heart and soul."

"Yeah, I bet. But if you can at least not declare that all monsters are evil, we're totally fine with that. And if you got a monster you're iffy about, we'll take 'em in. If human society can't accept 'em, they'll be fine here."

That was about the best compromise I could give. Any monsters deemed suspect could easily be taken into Tempest. Here in town, at least, we could be sure they wouldn't cause any trouble...assuming we could reason with the guy anyway.

"All right. I don't think our thoughts are going to change if I snap my fingers, but I will prohibit my ranks from condemning all monsters as evil. Is that all

right with you, Lady Luminus?"

"I care not for such trivial matters. But if it leads citizens to doubt their faith in me, I will *not* stand for that."

"Very well. I will observe that as our first priority."

Luminus seemed convinced. Given how the Holy Empire of Lubelius was wholly built around the people's faith in the god Luminus, any cracks in that faith could affect the entire foundation of that belief. That religion holds great sway over the Western Nations. I could understand Hinata's caution.

If anything, though, I feel like Luminus underestimated the influence she had on people. She goes on about how she "will not stand" for things, but then she acts like she's above it all and none of it matters. Maybe being bandied around as a supreme being wasn't Luminus's intention at all. I could just have been overthinking it, but it seemed like Louis was the de facto head of government, and Hinata did pretty much all her errands for her. Even all *this* drama was perpetrated by the Seven Days.

But... Really, though? An old demon lord who's ruled in the shadows for so long was really just a lazy girl palming off responsibility on others? No way, no how. She reminded me of the style I was aiming for with Tempest—"Let the king reign, not govern"—so I couldn't help thinking about it.

Now Hinata's eyes were turned toward my officials. "I must thank all of you as well. I promise I will not treat you as hostile enemies simply for being monsters."

She bowed her head deeply, and the other paladins hurriedly followed her lead, shouting "We're sorry!" together.

"Please, think nothing of it," Rigurd said. "Were it not for Sir Rimuru's orders, we would have considered humans our foes as well."

In other words, my orders had changed their minds. For a goblin who's just trying his best to stay alive, I'm sure anyone who doesn't look like you is an enemy.

"I am just glad you aren't against us," said Benimaru with a bold grin. "I saw your battle against Sir Rimuru, and I doubt even I could have defeated you."

The fact that his attention was devoted to combat was certainly very Benimaru-like. Soei nodded his solemn agreement next to him.

The world of monsters has always had a broad “survival of the fittest” streak to it; if you’re deemed the enemy and killed for it, it’s your own fault for being weaker. That’s how Soei’s mind worked, and he had no particular grudge against the paladins.

Shion, meanwhile, was dubious. Hinata’s apology must have confused her.

“Here, Shion, you forgive her, too. I understand your pain and anger, but it’s not like every human being on earth is evil. You have some bad guys and some good guys. That’s all there is to it. And monsters are the same way; you have to get a closer look if you want to really know anything. Plus, humans are capable of overcoming their mistakes. And not just them, either, right? Us too. What’s important is what’s in your soul, isn’t it?”

Instead of dividing all living things into humans and monsters, it was more important to see how they lived, what existed in their souls. I wanted Shion to understand that, but my pleas seemed to just unnerve her even more. Humans, I suppose, really *were* evil to her. I just didn’t want her to think they were all that way. She was following my orders for now, but there’s no telling when her frustrations would explode. I couldn’t have that. Instead of just following my orders, I wanted her to move and act on her own free will.

But perhaps I was too worried. In a single moment, Shion threw away all her hesitation. She never was one for thinking about matters too deeply.

“All right!” she blurted out. “Just like you, Sir Rimuru, I will judge good and bad people based on their souls!”

She beamed, as if unshouldering some heavy burden. Maybe she had just climbed over some kind of tall barrier in her mind. It’s not like I could see anyone’s souls, exactly, but if that won over Shion, then great.

Team Reborn didn’t seem to have any issues, either. There was no apparent bad blood with the paladins, and like Shion, I think they had it in them to judge people on their own merits. Nice of them. I sure was proud.

So then it was settled. I accepted the apology and let the mistakes fall into the

past. The borderline between forgivable and unforgivable was always tricky to discern, but we had made up well enough this time. If you can speak the same language as the other side, it's always possible for both of you to accept each other's feelings.



But enough of this gloomy stuff. All this food we prepared wouldn't be nearly as good cold—and considering Veldora's lack of a role so far, keeping him waiting any longer would just piss him off and make *my* life a hassle.

He wasn't supposed to require food at all, I didn't think, but from the moment of his resurrection, he had been demanding it for some reason. His love for cakes and such was already common knowledge, but he whined at me a lot about other types of cuisine as well. I knew he was revved up about the feast we had for tonight. Let's get him involved.

But before that, a toast. I made one up on the spot to get things started.

"Well, here's to the battles we've all fought—and all the ones to come. Cheers!"

A nice, cold mug, straight from the hot bath. No better moment in your life. And I was prepared, of course—we had all the treasured liquor my nation had to offer, and there would be no holding back. No mistake about it.

Wine was the staple drink in Englesia, I had learned. Beer existed, but it just wasn't very good. It lacked carbonation and the aroma from the bubbles, and being served at room temperature did it no favors, either. My nation had conquered all those problems—don't let anyone tell you I didn't have a passion for food. After all this research, day and night, our selection of offerings was now far more robust than it was when I first visited the Dwarven Kingdom. Sheesh—it's almost like I say something, and they immediately begin development on it. Was this because I was a demon lord now? Actually, I guess it was kind of always this way...

...Well, regardless, my beloved monsters were doing their very best for me, and as a result, my diet was now no different from when I lived in Japan. The food in Tempest is seriously good, trust me. I figured the paladins would be blown away, and I was right.

We kicked things off by having a group of women, all well versed in holding banquets like this, pour drinks for everyone. The first mouthful was a surprise to them, I could tell, but the moment they tucked into their food, they paused and looked at the others around them to gauge their responses. The taste must have astonished them. I grinned to myself, relieved.

Tempura was the main dish, but we also offered seafood—some freshly prepared sashimi. We had found something close to soybeans, so we even had some ersatz soy sauce to go with it—another fruit of Shuna’s labor. It wasn’t a perfect match flavor-wise, but you wouldn’t notice unless you knew the real thing. To someone trying it for the first time, *this* was what it was supposed to be. Soy sauce came in all kinds of varieties anyway, so maybe there was something like this produced by some local outfit in Japan, for all I knew. Either way, I was more than satisfied.

Preparing sashimi had become a specialty of Hakuro’s. He wasn’t with us tonight, but a number of chefs had been training under him. That whole process—developing the next generation of kitchen staff—was going pretty well, too. You could see them improve as time passed, their offerings growing more diverse and mouthwatering by the day.

It was an entirely Japanese-style meal, but nearly everyone in the hall seemed to enjoy it. Hinata, in particular, looked like she was having a life-changing moment, putting her inexperienced paladins to shame as she expertly used her chopsticks to eat. Then she turned to me, likely noticing my attention on her.

“Don’t you think this is going too far?”

“Too far *how*?!”

I wasn’t expecting this complaint. It kind of annoyed me, so I fired back. This triggered a rant that must have been building for a long time.

“We stopped at a tavern on the way here that had ramen and gyoza dumplings. You offer free fresh water on the highway. This is supposed to be a remote forest, and yet you’ve built these enormous bathhouses. And now this! How did you even *find* fresh sashimi in the middle of a huge forest? And going out of your way to find these wild plants for tempura... Don’t you find that crazy at all?!”

I had definitely broken her cool facade. Man. Wasn't expecting *that*.

"Well, um, I wanted to eat it, so—"

"What?"

"I... I mean, I wanted to eat it, so I tried remaking it for myself. And the sashimi... You know, we're on good terms with the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, and they've got a coastline, so I had some fish brought over. We don't really have the logistics for refrigerated transport yet, though, so that kind of thing's still skill-dependent. But what's the harm in splurging a little bit?"

"Skill-dependent?"

I gave her a reassuring nod.

The skill in question was Gourmet, a unique one possessed by Geld that granted him a Stomach to pass items between high orcs. Food couldn't be ferried around with teleportation magic, but skills didn't have any such restrictions. Of course, we still only brought enough over to cover this banquet; the high orcs were too busy with construction projects across the forest to handle every passing fancy of mine. A few of them taking some R & R in town had offered their personal support for the project, but my reliance on individual skills for the job was a weak point I intended to address in the future.

Hinata listened to my defense, looking a bit exasperated. "...Right." She sighed, resigned. "With a skill, you could transport that stuff without altering it at all...and you have a lot of people in this nation who can handle the job. I just can't believe you're using all this for yourself, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world."

That sounded a bit rude to me, but ah well. I suppose I had answered Hinata's question, but I didn't really see what her problem was with it. If something's available to use, why not use it?

"Well," interrupted Luminus, "what is the harm in it, Hinata? No matter the story behind it, there is no doubting how delicious this all is. I, for one, am very impressed."

She had a cup in her hand and looked to be well on her way, alcohol-wise, as she scarfed down another piece of tempura. She was grabbing them with her

fingers but still somehow managed to look elegant doing it. Which was fine. If you weren't offending anyone, you could eat any way you liked. You can't force chopsticks on someone who has never seen them before.

And speaking of which, that was actually kind of a thorny problem. Benimaru and the other ogres could work with chopsticks just fine, and the monsters of Tempest had largely learned by watching us. This wasn't the case for the merchants and adventurers who came from foreign lands. I was contemplating inviting nobility from across the world to build ourselves into a travel hot spot, so I wanted to be sure chopsticks remained an optional selection for them.

Along those lines, Luminus was proving an interesting research subject. You could use a knife and fork, a pair of chopsticks, or your fingers, and while hot food required chopsticks, she otherwise had no qualms about eating with her hands. Different types of food were eaten in different ways, after all, and there was no reason to put our visitors off by insisting on some "foreign" way of eating. Maybe it's best to just say "Hey, we can eat *this* way, too," then wait as the habit gradually takes hold.

"Do you like our offerings?" I asked Luminus.

"I do. Very much. The food is extraordinary—and the drink as well."

The observation made me realize that Luminus was downing the alcohol at an alarming speed. Milim was pretty strong, but Luminus was a powerhouse, knocking back any cup offered alongside her tempura.

"Glad to hear. But try to go easy, okay? Too much isn't good for you."

"Fool. I am impervious to all poisons—alcohol is no danger to me. In fact, at the moment, I am trying my hardest to lessen the effect of Cancel Poison so I can get drunk off this!"

I suppose my warning was pointless. But "weakening" Cancel Poison?

"Y-you can do something like that?"

"Of course. Stop playing dumb."

She must've thought I was kidding, but I insisted she teach me how that worked.

...

Oops. Sounds like Raphael is in a huff about something. Ignoring it, I followed Luminus's instructions and attempted to shrink down my own resistances. The moment I did, I could feel the intoxication sneaking into my mind. Yes! Yes! This is what drunkenness feels like!

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! You couldn't even do *that*, Rimuru? I mastered *that* much eons ago!"

Veldora seemed proud of himself. I didn't know where he practiced it, but he was now in a marvelous state of inebriation.

"Right!" I shouted. "Another round!"

"Yes. Let me join you."

"Silly boys." Luminus sniffed. "But if you two insist, I suppose I will have a refill as well."

Now things were heating up. I could almost hear Shuna rolling her eyes as she said "Oh, Sir Rimuru...", but she still grinned and poured out the drink. We were all much less formal now.

All the adult beverages we made locally were on offer, along with fresh water and as many ice cubes as you wanted. There was juice and tea available for the nondrinkers, too. Haruna was keeping Veldora's cup full, while Louis did the same for Luminus. There was a drinking contest brewing between Benimaru, Shion, and Soei, as well as among the Lycanthropeers and between Arnaud and his fellow top paladin officers. Those paladins were pretty snooty at first, but once their commanding officer Arnaud began sampling all the wares on hand, they loosened up considerably. Some were now amicably chatting with Rigurd and the rest, and a few of them asked the waitstaff for more food.

One demonstrated interest in trying some of the food the monsters on hand were enjoying. Fritz was his name, I think, a Crusader commander alongside Arnaud and one of the Ten Great Saints. Nicer guy than I thought at first blush, I guess. Expressing an interest in what other people are eating is the first step toward understanding them. It was a nice sight to see.

But that was... I thought for a moment. The drink was starting to make it

tough. He's talking about that black rice, isn't he?

This "black rice" was made using a type of plant raised on magicule water—the highly magical water found inside the Sealed Cave. I suggested trying that out as an experiment, and it resulted in rice that looked like an octopus squirted ink all over it. For someone like me, who enjoyed his rice hot, white, and fluffy, it looked absolutely gross—but it tasted good. *Really* good, in fact. It was also packed with nutrients, surprisingly, so we called the crop blackspell rice and moved into full production of it.

It was now a staple of Tempestian cuisine, but I was pretty sure there was some kind of issue with it I was forgetting—

"Whoa!" I shouted, alarmed all the way back to sobriety. "That stuff's poisonous to humans!"

Unfortunately, I was too late. Fritz already had some in his mouth. And his first reaction:

"Why, this... This is restoring my magical force!"

"Um, do you feel all right? Not sick or anything?"

A weaker being taking in large quantities of magic could have hazardous health effects. This blackspell rice was packed with magicules, which meant it was toxic to those with less-than-robust constitutions. Of course, it could also be a medicine in the right dosage—and like I said, potentially a dietary staple. Nobody in Tempest would have an issue with it, but I still hadn't tested out what it did to humans. Finding test subjects wasn't exactly easy.

Fritz's reaction, however, was unexpected to me. I assumed it'd be harmful to *Homo sapiens*, but maybe it's beneficial to you if you have enough magical force?

Understood. The subject Fritz's magic power-recovery effect has been confirmed. Those with resistance to magicules seem to be able to convert them into energy.

Ah, I see. Maybe eating this now, after exhausting his magic in that huge fight, made it all the more effective.

The other paladins, seeing this, immediately clamored for tastes of their own. Having a few pints in you could be a dangerous thing sometimes; none were afraid of the side effects. So I agreed.

Hinata gave the blackspell rice a funny look, likely reacting the same way I did at first. But without further complaint, she sipped from the bowl of *chazuke*, consisting of the black rice with some tea poured on top of it. I also offered it in rice-ball form for those who wanted something a little heartier. Both selections were huge hits, and a second round was carried out to the party in very short order. Considering that I busted out my personal stash of white rice for this event, it was funny to see the blackspell rice be the toast of the night instead—but hey, if you aren't conditioned to be turned off by the color like I was, it must've been much more acceptable.

So now I knew what this new breed of rice could do, and between that and all the other food and drink, I thought we were making a pretty good impression. I was starting to see monsters and paladins chatting with each other, taking advantage of the opportunity presented to them. Shion was even engaged in an impromptu arm-wrestling tournament with three of the paladins—dominating them, by the looks of it, but her opponents were all smiles regardless. I liked the trends I saw. Alcohol played no small role in it, perhaps, but if this became the natural flow of things, it wouldn't be long before we're all on friendly terms.

Good things to eat, enjoyable days to spend—that was my goal, and I wasn't afraid to strive for it. If I have any job here, I suppose, it's to make sure this sight doesn't go extinct. It gave me new resolve.

Then:

“What are you doing, Rimuru?! Drink up, drink up! Let me fill your cup!”

“Yes, yes! You have the demon lord Luminus accompanying you! Let us enjoy this evening as much as we can!”

“Wh-whoa,” I said, “chill out, Veldora. Also, aren't you a vampire, Luminus? Why are you eating and getting drunk and—?”

“Silence, you fool! Once you grow powerful enough, even a vampire can gain sustenance enough from regular food. Now hurry up and empty your mug!”

That wasn't what I was getting at, but she was in no mood to listen. So there I was, two drunken louts on both sides of me, feeling that newfound resolve disappear from my mind.

"Guys! Hey!"

Before I could stop them, they were taking shots from the sake we brewed from the blackspell rice. "Slow it down, you two," I thought I heard Hinata curtly whispering at them—she had a faint smile, though, so maybe the booze was giving me auditory hallucinations. She was kind of cute, actually, when she smiled—not that I was gonna tell her.

*

Morning came. God, my head hurt.

Understood. Of course it does. This is the backlash after deliberately weakening your resistances.

Thanks for the feedback, man. Raphael sounded a bit peeved, but I was sure I was imagining it. Nobody's skills get mad at them.

I shook the mental cobwebs away. Today we had an important meeting to conduct—one that could decide how Tempest and the Holy Empire of Lubelius dealt with each other going forward.

I was now seated in our usual meeting hall, soldiering through my headache.

Honestly speaking, if things had turned out differently, we might've been fighting both Lubelius and the Western Nations affiliated with it. The Papacy had given the Temple Knights stationed in Farmus permission to act, and if worse came to worse, the casualties on our side would've been eye-popping. If you thought about it like that, we couldn't afford to be too chill here.

On the other hand, though, I was done punishing Farmus. Not a single one of the Temple Knights who conspired against us was breathing today. We had a duty to govern over there, so I wasn't exactly an impartial observer...but Hinata had already apologized to me, and the masterminds who schemed against us were already gone. If we could build friendly relations, we were golden. There wasn't much point asking for reparations—we already had plenty of that from Clayman's and Farmus's coffers, and Farmus was physically far enough away

from us that annexing it or making it into some kinda colony was too much of a pain. If the other side had admitted fault, money honestly wasn't as important to me as working to build relations.

In time, Luminus and her people entered the hall.

Tempest was represented here by me, Shion, Rigurd, and Benimaru, along with Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd, the government ministers of justice, legislation, and administration, respectively. Veldora was there, too, but safely ignorable. He had some manga to read, and I doubted he'd even bother to pay attention.

From Lubelius, meanwhile, we had Luminus, Louis, Hinata, and the five top paladin officials. I had them all make their formal introductions. There was Vice Captain Renard, the Noble of Light. There was Arnaud of Air, the strongest of the force after Hinata, and under him was Bacchus of Earth, Litus of Water, and Fritz of Wind. I had us all seated facing one another, and with that, the proceedings began.

I wanted to start with a brainstorm session to see what each side's takes were on this situation. Along those lines, I created a list of issues affecting all of us and passed them out to everyone to kick things off. This was just to ensure we were all on the same page; I didn't want to turn this conference into a blame game, so if we disagreed on how we saw matters, I wanted it fixed as soon as possible, and so did Hinata.

Our respective stances were about what I figured.

To us, of course, the whole story began with Farmus's invasion of our land. Our view of this hadn't changed; all we did was respond to moves made by the other side.

On the Church's end, Hinata told us that problems actually began before Farmus's request to them. Essentially, acknowledging the existence of a nation of monsters went against the teachings of Luminism, a pressing issue that threatened to cast doubt on the faith of its believers. Leaving this unaddressed could trigger internal revolt and weaken the foothold the Western Holy Church had on the region. That's why they had to destroy the monster nation, and that was why they needed a just cause, a good reason to conquer us.

"That was the situation when we received the request from Archbishop Reyhiem, who was in Farmus at the time," Hinata explained. "Cardinal Nicolaus gave his approval, and I had no objections to it—and besides, I still wanted to get back at you."

She intended, in other words, to take advantage of Farmus's greed and seize the opportunity to annihilate us and gain revenge.

"Was that about Shizu?"

"Yes, it was. I suppose I was just being used, though, looking back. I don't know who is operating behind the scenes, but there are definitely Eastern merchants involved."

"Merchants? I knew it. Clayman had a merchant or two he was particularly close to as well. Given how well armed Geld and his orcish army was, I assumed they were connected to one nation or another. I guess it was the East, then."

I nodded, convinced. Judging by the account books I had Shuna look into, Clayman was dealing in a vast amount of merchandise—mainly goods from the Empire, originally crafted in the Dwarven Kingdom. That wasn't suspicious, since the Empire and kingdom had regular trade with each other—but there were no records at all of the middlemen involved in this. Shuna was thorough in her work, but she couldn't find any of them, even after we asked the assorted officials we took prisoner. Clayman was careful, no doubt drumming it into his force that no evidence should ever be left behind. We found absolutely nothing on the Moderate Jesters, either, the group closely affiliated with him.

Still, we could make educated guesses about who was involved. In Clayman's castle, we found a collection of artwork, rare magic items, and other such goods, brought in from around the world. The weapons and armor we discovered, however, were chiefly hand-me-downs from the Empire. They had teleportation magic, so they could've procured weapons from anywhere they wanted, but they got almost all of it in from the East. That suggested close connections, and while the evidence was circumstantial, it was still persuasive.

That and their food supply. Clayman's bases across the land held enormous stashes of fruit, bread, dairy, and luxury goods like alcohol. Being organic, they couldn't be teleported; physical transport was a must with them. Clayman's

domain, the Puppet Nation of Dhistav, apparently used slave labor for most of its agricultural output, but not everything we found in these stores was domestically produced—according to Shuna, some of it had to be imported from beyond their borders. The only real candidate for this was the Eastern Empire, adjacent to Dhistav. Milim's domain, after all, was self-sufficient to the point that she barely even considered international trade—hell, she and the ex-demon lord Carillon didn't even have currency to exchange.

So I had my suspicions that Clayman was linked to people from the Eastern Empire.

"That's right," Hinata said. "They told me you killed Shizu, and you happened to be stationed in Englesia. That's why I took the initiative to kill you."

"Yeah. You couldn't have picked a worse time, either. Even now, it still pisses me off when I think about it."

Hinata shivered a bit. Arnaud and the other paladins looked similarly cowed.

"Enough coercion, you upstart brat. I can feel the Lord's Ambition coming from you."

Whoops! As Luminus just pointed out, a bit of my aura was leaking out. I was pretty good at keeping it perfectly under my control, but I guess it gets kind of loose whenever I'm angry.

"So," I began after apologizing, "it's pretty clear an Eastern merchant or merchants is behind this. Do we know any names?"

"I know one. He called himself Dahm, but I'm sure that's an alias."

An alias? Probably so. But the name didn't really matter. What *did* matter was narrowing the culprit down to the Empire's merchant class.

"So this merchant was connected to Clayman, and I'm willing to bet he and his people are the guys who set Farmus's King Edmaris on us, too."

"No, there's no doubting that. Reyhiem made that much clear enough in our questioning."

I nodded. "Okay, so it's clear Clayman was controlling Farmus from behind the curtain. Not in a cooperative kind of way, either. It seems more coercive to me."

"And you think the Eastern merchants were his boots on the ground?" Benimaru asked.

"And I suppose I was just another cog in the machine," whispered Hinata.

I could sense her anger. The question was: Who drew up the plans?

"Well, based on how these merchants were involved with every step of this, I'm sure this was more than just a convenient business relationship. Clayman was trying to ascend to 'true' demon lord level. Farmus was trying to take our land for its own expansionist purposes. And *someone*, we don't know who, was engineering it all."

"Someone, huh? The one Clayman mentioned?"

I nodded at Luminus.

"What do you mean?"

Benimaru and the others already knew about this, but the humans in the room didn't. Realizing this, I gave them a quick recap.

"Well, it looks like Clayman was doing the bidding of someone else himself."

"Yes," Luminus added, "and he refused to divulge this someone's identity until the very end. Impressive for someone as small-minded as him."

"Oh..."

"Could this someone be the Seven Days, then?"

The idea came to me suddenly, and when I gave it voice, it felt even more plausible. But Luminus shot me a dirty look.

"What? Are you accusing the Seven Days of taking action unbeknownst to me?"

She might have wiped them off the planet by her own hand, but I guess she didn't like people second-guessing her staff. That was fair. I was about to apologize when her associate Louis spoke up.

"Hmm... I cannot fully deny that possibility, no."

"Now *you're* spouting that nonsense, Louis?"

Her ire had turned on Louis, though he appeared unbothered.

"Lady Luminus, please, listen to me. The Seven Days Clergy craved your affection. I'm sure you sensed that?"

"How do you mean?"

"I am talking about the Love Energy, the energizing kiss you give in a special ceremony. The last time you did that for them, it was over a hundred years ago. At one point, it was a weekly rite, but the intervals between them grew longer and longer over time. Did you not notice?"

Luminus gave Louis an unpleasant look. "Aha. Yes, my eternal youth tends to make me forget, but they all *were* human. Without my energy, they may not die, but they would certainly grow old."

"Exactly. That was why they worked so fervently to ensure no other 'favorites' besides them ever appeared."

As Louis frankly put it, the Seven Days were once a very special presence in Luminus's life. But as humans, they couldn't live forever. This Love Energy rite must've been how they overcame that.

"...I subsequently imagine that they must have tried to curry favor with you. It wouldn't be strange at all to imagine them working with the Eastern merchants to secretly entice Clayman into action. They weren't about to let Clayman get a leg up on them—especially Gren, the Sunday Priest."

It was just a passing thought, but it kind of surprised me how well these puzzle pieces fit together. Scary stuff. I'm shocked at the sheer well of knowledge flowing out from me.

...

Raphael sounded like it wanted to say something, but I'm sure I was just imagining things. Maybe it was just envious of my genius, or maybe it thought I'd stolen its thunder because I didn't ask any questions of it.

"Do you think," an exasperated Hinata asked, "the Seven Days thought I was a thorn in their side because of *that*?"

"Sounds like it. They probably intended to help Clayman ascend, then have

you get killed fighting him. *They* could never have defeated you, after all, so I don't think they had much other choice."

It wasn't a totally far-out concept. Step one, have Clayman defeat Hinata. Step two, either kill off Clayman somehow or operate him like a puppet. I couldn't say what they wanted to do with him, but Clayman's faith in them was genuine—if they could get Hinata out of the picture, Clayman would do anything the Seven Days wanted. Meanwhile, they'd have Farmus wipe us out and firm up the foundations Luminism worked with, naturally making sure everyone got to share in the resulting profits. A nation as big as Farmus mobilizing would mean big money for Eastern armor and weapon dealers. Plus, more than anything else, the Seven Days would be back on Luminus's good side.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions too early, but the possibility of all this seemed worthy of consideration to me.

"So you think they pitted me against you in hopes I'd be defeated?" Hinata asked, interested in Louis's theory. "Between that and protecting the tenets of Luminism, I suppose it'd be two birds with one stone."

This gave me another idea.

"But are we really sure the Seven Days were behind that?"

"There's no doubting it," replied Renard, seated next to Hinata. "It was the Clergy who introduced us to those merchants in the first place."

That certainly cast more suspicion on them. Having such a heroic band make the introduction, nobody would ever doubt their intentions—which would make it easier for the Clergy to reach their goals. I'm not sure they'd thought it out all the way like that when I fought Hinata for the first time, but the second? They definitely wanted me to kill her. Those conniving bastards. It scared me a bit, but they were all gone anyway, so it was water under the bridge.

"...But hang on. There were seven people in the Clergy, right? Isn't one of them still left?"

Hinata seemed pretty at ease as far as the Clergy were concerned, but thinking about it, this wasn't over yet at all. Whoever the final survivor was had

to be up to their ears in this. It unnerved me, but Hinata just flashed me a cold smile.

"Ha-ha! Nothing to worry about there. Nicolaus contacted me from his sanctum to say the final one had also been eradicated. It happened after they discovered that the crystal ball you sent had been tampered with. That was enough evidence to execute him."

The thin smile that accompanied her words would be enough to make anyone feel threatened. The sight of this beautiful woman talking about such sinister conspiracies was probably one reason it was easy to get the wrong idea about her. But anyway.

"Okay, but who *was* this last guy?"

I hated to think it, but it wasn't Gren, right? The Sunday Priest fabled to be stronger than even Clayman? Because if so, it meant I'd need to keep a careful eye out for this Nicolaus guy, too.

"I was told it was Gren, the Sunday Priest and chief of the Clergy. He almost never took the initiative on anything by himself, so it made sense he was the last one left."

Luminus's ears perked up. "Oh? Old Granville was defeated? Nicolaus... That cardinal was infatuated with you, wasn't he? How did he do it?"

"It wasn't the most heroic approach," Louis replied, "but he had a Disintegration spell set up in advance, and it was enough of a surprise move to do him in."

"Ahhh... Granville must have aged terribly, if he fell for a trap like that."

She sounded sad about it, but my mind was on other matters. Unfortunately, it seemed that I would need to add a new entry to my mental list of people to watch out for. It might've been a surprise move, but I couldn't let my guard down. Disintegration was lethal against most people. *Cardinal Nicolaus... Let's remember that name.*

"By the way, Lady Luminus, by *Granville*, do you mean Gren?"

Hinata had a thoughtful expression. The name Granville must have rung a

bell.

"That I do," Luminus replied. "His real name is Granville. He was known as the Hero of Light in his glory days. He even fought me once."

For a god, Luminus acted so oddly innocent at times. I might've been imagining it, but sometimes it felt like she was trying to act all high and mighty and not quite succeeding all the time. Was all this, you know...an act?

Then I felt it: her eyes, dead upon me.

Yep, I *was* just imagining things! So much for that suspicion.

"Did he...? I-I'm sure it couldn't be, but..."

Hinata seemed to have an idea in mind, but she must not have been fully sure about it, because she went no further.

"He *was* pretty strong in the past," she instead recalled. "Up to my level, in fact."

"You could say that," answered Luminus. "Anyone who calls themselves a Hero usually finds themselves bound by fate soon enough. Perhaps he resented me, somewhere deep in his heart."

Perhaps, indeed. Just like Milim told me, Heroes and demon lords often intertwined. Granville was defeated by the demon lord Luminus, opting to swear his allegiance to her instead. Deep down, though, he might've had mixed feelings about her—feelings he couldn't escape from, even after becoming a living legend who brought many champions in their own right into the world. But at this point, it was all just guesswork.

"Well," I said, "that's a relief, at least. It means that everyone who picked a fight with us—Clayman, Farmus, the Seven Days Clergy—they've all met their end."

Benimaru and my other officials nodded their agreement. "All's well that ends well," Rigurd eagerly commented with a smile.

"You said it," I replied, returning the smile as I felt the tension escape the hall. "We had to deal with a lot of dangerous foes, but at this point, most of the problems are safely behind us. But I sure don't want anyone controlling *me*

behind the scenes. If we hadn't noticed these merchants scheming in the shadows, I honestly would've started to suspect Yuuki."

Yuuki was pretty suspicious. When it came to humans in Englesia with deep ties to Hinata, Yuuki was the prime candidate. I felt bad about it, but I couldn't take him off the list.

"Yuuki?" Renard asked. "Yuuki Kagurazaka, the guild master?"

"Yeah," I answered with a nod.

Thinking about it impartially, it made sense. He was the prime suspect at the time. But Yuuki had no reason to have Hinata and me fight each other. If there was no motive, it was pretty hard to picture him as the culprit.

...

On the other hand, maybe someone was deftly scheming to frame Yuuki. The Eastern merchants could pull that off well enough, I thought—they'd proven more than capable of carrying out multiple operations remotely at the same time. If the Clergy were the main bad guys, the merchants would have a motive to take the heat off them a little. It made sense.

But:

"Yuuki, a suspect? Can't say that's out of the question, no."

Right when I had convinced myself, Hinata threw me with that observation.

"Whoa, you're doubting someone from your own homeland?"

"Hmm? I'm only considering every possibility. For that matter, it may be a bit early to assume the real mastermind is gone. The Moderate Jester that killed Roy is still on the loose, and those Eastern merchants still have deep roots all over the Western Nations."

It felt like she was splashing cold water on me. She was right. It was too early to breathe easy. I braced myself anew.

"Yeah... I guess you're right. It's not over yet. We can't afford to be too optimistic."

"No, we can't. We'd better inform everyone about this."

Benimaru nodded, while the paladins facing him looked similarly convinced.

"As Hinata said," I continued, "it's very likely that the person or persons behind all this is still around. I know I said the Clergy might be the main bad guys, but that was just a passing idea more than anything. It's no good to throw blame around without any conclusive evidence. Let's keep a close eye on this as we go forward."

Everyone murmured their agreement at this conclusion. No, it was a bad idea to cast judgment without merit. I was fairly confident in my supposition, but Raphael didn't offer its agreement. It didn't disagree, either, though, so I think the possibility was there; I just didn't have the evidence to be sure. For now, I'd have to trust in Raphael—and with the paladins happy with this conclusion, I thought it best to leave it at that.

*

That wrapped up our recap of past events. We knew we had to investigate the possibility of another mastermind out there, but that could wait for later. Today, we were here to figure out how we needed to work together to bury the hatchet for good.

It was at this moment that Shuna brought in coffee and snacks for us. It seemed that scones and French fries were on today's menu. I had to hand it to her; she demonstrated impeccable timing. I immediately tackled my plate as the paladins sat there figuring out what to do.

"Oooh, snacks? I'll take a double portion."

And of course, Veldora chose this moment to finally delve into the conversation.

"Very well," replied Shuna, well used to this act.

"Mmm, this is good."

Hinata was sampling her plate as well, which was enough to set the paladins to action. After our previous talk, we all needed to kick back and relax a bit like this.

A few minutes later, I suddenly spoke up.

"All right. So about our future relations..."

"Ah, before that," Hinata interrupted, "I want to make one thing very clear to all of us. Should I assume you've accepted our apology for all these events?"

"Sure. I want us to become friends as nations going forward. I don't intend to drag that problem along any further."

This wasn't my sole decision. I came to it after discussing matters with Benimaru and my other officials. There was no need to fight any longer, and all our misunderstandings were now worked out, so I felt it was time to make a deal.

But Luminus wasn't convinced.

"Absolutely not. I hate owing anything to anyone. This entire incident was clearly our fault, and I wish to compensate for it in some way. We can strike a deal after that is done."

She gave Veldora a hateful glare. Basically, I suppose, she didn't want Veldora to feel like he could ask her for something later.

"Yes," replied Hinata, "and if that is Lady Luminus's will, then I must say that it troubles me to put you through such pain and not make up for it. I want to show you as much as possible that I am being sincere."

Okay, sure, that's great, but what kind of compensation are we talking about? Because if Luminus—well, Lubelius as a nation, really—if they were willing to acknowledge us as a nation, then I was good to go. Combine that with an oath of non-hostility, and what more could I ask for?

"Hmm... Well, how about you formally recognize our nation, and we open up diplomatic relations?"

Luminus casually nodded. "Fair enough. Although, I won't expect us to be fast friends. And I *will* need to settle the score with that lizard sooner or later."

Pretty much all of Luminus's smoldering anger was pointed right at Veldora. If it really, *really* came to it, I was willing to offer him as a sacrifice. If that was enough to usher in a century-long era of peace, it was a dead simple decision to make.

"Wait a moment, Rimuru," I heard the dragon ask. "I hope you are not picturing anything...cruel for me."

"Just your imagination, Veldora. As long you act smart and mature, there's nothing to worry about."

"No, I know what you're thinking when you talk down to me like that. It *usually* means you're up to no good!"

Tch. He's getting sharp. But not as sharp as me.

"Now, now... Here, I'll give you my scone, so play nice with Luminus, all right?"

"What? Well, in that case, I will do my level best. Although if I ever *truly* willed it, it'd be child's play to make Luminus recognize my vast strengths! Kwaaaaah-ha-ha-ha!"

You see? Dealing with him is so simple. Luminus audibly sighed, but it looked like she would remain true to her word.

"Don't get cocky with me, you! For now, though, let us call a truce. I will open international relations with you for a period of one hundred years. I think that would serve amply well as an apology?"

Well, *that* came more easily than expected. Like, really? We're good? Benimaru, Rigurd, and the rest of my team looked just as shocked—to say nothing of Hinata. I doubt anyone expected this.

"So," ventured Hinata, "you're willing to open diplomacy with Tempest, if not necessarily go all the way with a nonintervention treaty?"

"Quit pestering me about this. I've said what I meant!"

With that, she reached for a second scone, content to let someone else work out the details.

"I suppose," Louis dryly stated, "we will have to carry out her will—"

"Diplomatic relations? Are you sure?"

Renard, however, seemed unconvinced. He appeared ready to bring up an issue but not quite sure if he should go through it. He gave Hinata a quick

glance, receiving a nod in return.

"What's the issue?" chimed in Fritz. "If Sir Rimuru and his nation were truly evil, we would have been wiped off the map long ago."

"True," Arnaud said. "I can trust in Sir Rimuru, yes. We need to cast off our prejudices against monsters."

"I agree with them," added Litus. "Sir Soei was such a gentleman to us."

Even the notably taciturn Bacchus was nodding. Renard, hearing them all, hesitated for a moment. As vice captain of the Crusaders, he couldn't give his ready agreement just yet. If anything, this choir of support only firmed his resolve.

"Yes, but there remains one problem. How will we explain this in the framework of our faith's teachings? Because depending on our approach, the Western Holy Church may face an onslaught of criticism, and I can't allow that to happen."

Their faith—a faith that refused to accept the existence of monsters. Yeah, if they accepted me now, it'd be like, hey, what about all the teachings from the past X number of centuries? I thought we were close to solving all our problems, but I suppose it never comes that easy.

But as I worried over this, Luminus dropped another bombshell.

"Don't be silly. Those teachings are nothing *I* established. I don't see why failing to protect them qualifies as betraying me. Those were *meant* to be guiding principles for those lost in their lives. Really, they're only a bunch of rules thought up by the leaders at the time."

This came as a shock to all the paladins in the room, Hinata included. "What?!" she shouted. "I've never heard that before..."

"Ah yes," Louis blandly replied, "I suppose you might not have. The original texts defining the faith are open to anyone who might want to browse, but the first written drafts they're based on have been lost long ago. If you read through those, then you'll see how those tenets were crafted."

As he put it, the doctrines of Luminism were put in place to protect those who

worshipped Luminus. She, Louis, and other high-level vampires were one thing, but the lower ones lived off human blood, and the blood of those who lived happy, contented lives was apparently more attractive to them. In the bad old days when monsters ran roughshod over the world, the human race had its hands full just surviving, which meant the poor quality of their blood created its fair share of problems among the vampire community. In response, Luminus took advantage of a move she had planned to switch gears and offer her protective hand to the humans. (This “move” was caused by Veldora, apparently, but I opted against asking for details. It’d just be stirring up a hornet’s nest.)

“Protecting the defenseless allows them to lead happy lives. By ‘spicing up’ their lives with fearsome demon lords, followed by the relief of being protected from them, we ensure they can savor as much happiness as possible. The citizens of Lubelius are kept safe under the name of their god.”

Humans, to put it in a rough way, were kind of like livestock to them. Vampires lived off their blood—but as it was described to me, they needed rather small quantities, enough that the human “victim” wouldn’t even notice. There were far more humans than vampires out there, so it made sense. A little blood donation now and then ensured a life free from existential threats. A real win-win situation.

“So did they write the holy scriptures of Luminism to help keep needless slaughter by the monsters at a minimum?”

“That’s right,” Louis said to Hinata. “Precisely.”

“To me, the most important thing is the faith itself,” added Luminus. “All of you here—you can cast your holy magic thanks to the faith you have in me, correct? That is how the arrangement works—it is an absolute law. It is my family’s duty to protect my people, and to me, the rest matters little.”

So to sum up, the faith’s refusal to accept monsters stemmed from a need to grab the hearts of the people and bring them into the faith. No, maybe that tenet *doesn’t* need to be so strictly enforced. Bending too much along those lines would cause chaos in the Western Holy Church, but there was no need to go that far. Basically—the way I was reading this—if the people here could find

a reason to accept us, the rest of the kingdom would fall in line.

It sounded like we had an agreement, then. But Renard's frown said he still wasn't convinced.

"I understand, then, that our doctrine is not based on the will of our god, Lady Luminus. But practically speaking, that is the exact doctrine all of us have spent our lives following. I fear that simply doing away with it would create issues..."

He had a point. Completely ignoring everything built up to now would lead to a huge backlash from the faithful, not to mention the current Church organization. Even if Luminus herself came out in public to appeal to the masses, there was no saying if anyone would believe it was her—and there was no way Luminus would do anything *that* proactive anyway. There was every chance of rifts forming between the paladins assembled here and the more hardcore factions of the Church.

"But we have to do it," Hinata solemnly said to the troubled-looking Renard. "I was hoping we could keep silent on this until things settle down, but we have a force of a hundred paladins here, and I'm sure the other nations are aware of us. Plus, those journalists were there to see a Battlesage be defeated, weren't they?"

Her gaze went from Renard to me. She was right. Diablo said he had defeated a man named Saare, one of the Three Battlesages. Another one was on the scene but apparently fled in rapid order. If the press saw all that, it could ruin this force's reputation as protector of humanity. If rumors started spreading that the paladins were defeated, it could lead to all kinds of needless confusion. Diablo said it was possible to coerce the media, if need be, but... Ugghhh, what a pain.

"Okay, well, how about we just say Hinata and I dueled to a draw? Then we signed a truce after discovering the Seven Days Clergy's scheme. People already know I'm a slime for the most part, but if we spread the word that I'm an otherworlder, you think that would be a bit more convincing?"

"I do appreciate that proposal," Hinata said, "but are you fine with that? Wouldn't a demon lord fighting me to a draw affect your reputation?"

My reputation? Do I have much of one, really? I feel like I've done nothing but

get yelled at by Shuna lately. Whenever problems come up, I toss them right into Rigurd's lap. For the most part, my main responsibility in town lately has been joining Gobta on his assorted jaunts. I didn't think a draw or two is gonna trash my rep that much.

"I don't see the problem. I mean, hell, you can say I lost for all I care."

Who won, and who lost, didn't really matter, I thought. But everyone on Hinata's side stared at me in shock.

"Um, look, in all of history, there's only been a tiny handful of times when a human defeated a demon lord, you know? If you just say 'Oops, I lost' like that, that really *will* wreck the balance of power around here. It'd create trouble for you."

"She—she's right!" bellowed Renard. "You are still just a fledgling demon lord. Let another force push you around right now, and that could invite interlopers aiming for your head!"

I suppose they are worrying for my sake, but... I dunno...

"Benimaru, can you think of any rival forces who might try to interfere with us at this point?"

"None, sir. If anyone was foolish enough to try, I would twist their heads off with my bare hands."

Glad to hear.

Diablo seemed to be doing well over in the Western Nations. Rescuing the journalists' lives let him proceed with his plan, even if it had involved a bit of extra force. It wouldn't be long, he said, before reports would go around about Yohm being crowned the new king—and the smaller nations surrounding Farmus would pitch in to support this.

Assuming all went to plan, the only individual nation who could possibly try to tangle with us was Englesia. With Luminus giving us a hundred-year truce, the Western Nations were as good as ours, really. The same was true of the demon lords. Me killing Clayman was one stellar performance. If we spread rumors that I lost despite looking perfectly healthy to everyone, I'm not sure people would believe them. If anything, they might grow *more* careful dealing with me,

fearing a trap or something.

"You sound pretty confident," Hinata said. "Well, in that case, I don't have any objection. If anything, I'll be glad to take advantage of it."

"Yeah! Let's take this opportunity to announce to the world that the Tempestians aren't evil at all!"

"Very true. Everyone here's so nice to us! It's so hard to believe they were all goblins and orcs not long ago."

"There had been some internal debate over whether demi-humans counted as monsters or not...but nowadays, I think that's far too narrow a view to take. It's just prejudice talking."

"You said it. Demi-humans are a formidable foe against humans, but dwarves, at least, are certainly human. If we started calling *them* monsters, then it'd be impossible to tell spirits apart from monsters, either."

Ogres and lizardmen had normally been treated as demi-humans up to now, too, but thanks to their hostility against humankind, they had been branded as monsters. Oni and dragonewts—the next evolution up from each respective race—were treated not as monsters, but as local gods. All that really mattered, in the end, was whether you were friend or foe to humankind—and that meant it was hard to interpret Luminist doctrine as a carte-blanche condemnation of all monsters.

"Well," I said, "we have formal relations with the Dwarven Kingdom. Why don't we mix King Gazel into this and sign a hundred-year friendship treaty? If we can get him to guarantee that we won't attack people, that ought to change a few minds, right?"

Hinata thoughtfully nodded, reaching her own conclusions in her mind. "Yes... If we can just build a little trust, that would make it easier to convince people. Plus, with things as they are, it's probably about time to purge all the people who were poisoned by the Clergy."

The Western Holy Church was hardly a monolith. No large organization is. And with Hinata putting it in such cold, blunt terms, all opposition was silenced. I guess she wanted to use this chance to lay all the guilt on the Seven Days Clergy

—kind of dirty, I thought, but that was a Lubelius issue. Certainly nothing I had a right to comment on. We then began to work out some of the smaller details.

For our future interactions, it was agreed that Arnaud and Bacchus would stay here in Tempest. They'd go back home to prepare first, then return with a few civil bureaucrats in tow. I was planning to build a Luminist church in town in the meantime for their use, and I didn't see it taking any longer than a couple weeks. Maybe we'd start to see some Luminists around here once we were done.

I was honestly a little anxious about allowing full freedom of religion, but... ahahh, I'm sure we'd figure it out. Monsters, frankly, are atheists. There was no such thing as a single god that was widely recognized by everyone across the world. My conventional wisdom from my own planet didn't apply, really. There *was* religion, yes, but it was usually more like paying your respects to the local deity than anything very fervent—and these deities could quite literally help you out if you prayed to them, because, like, they were right there. The Dragon Faithful's relationship with Milim is a prime example.

Along those lines, Luminism was really nothing more than the biggest player in an extremely crowded arena full of religions like that. The Crusaders served as Luminus's servants, protecting the weak and earning new adherents to the faith. So if you look at it that way, I could see a church in Tempest as a kind of center for Western Holy Church-style support of the vulnerable. You gotta help out your neighbor and all that, although I doubt they could offer much help to us. It'd at least mean we could fight alongside paladins if some kind of threat appeared.

There was no real reason not to take this opportunity. We'd keep close tabs on the local church, of course, but I figured we could grant them a certain amount of freedom. That was the common ground we found.



That was the end of the tough stuff. We had a deal with Luminus, more or less, and we had managed to get Lubelius to recognize us as a legitimate nation. That was more than enough compensation—now, if we could just keep interacting and getting along, it'd be perfect. I'd like to use our century-long

time limit to build a deeper understanding of each other, and that meant we'd be interacting regularly with the Crusaders.

The first effort along those lines involved providing skills and tech to each other. The battle earlier had smashed up a lot of the paladins' weapons, so they needed someone to repair them. We offered our skills in response, but that was kind of a front—what we really wanted to do was see what their weapons were capable of.

This allowed us access to one of those strange light-based suits of armor I saw. As Raphael put it, it provided the wielder's magical force to a spiritual life-form, letting them manifest it into a physical object. The one gifted to us had been overused and broken, so we traded it for a new Garm-produced armor set. The paladins, still feeling a bit indebted to us, gladly let us have it as part of their general apology, and while I expected Hinata to whine about it, she was actually fine.

I decided to reciprocate by giving her a sword I had made.

The sword Hinata used is called Moonlight. Luminus gave it to her herself, and it housed untold amounts of power—too much, really. I asked her, and she called it a Legend-class weapon, beyond even the Unique level that I thought was the highest.

Kaijin and Kurobe taught me that magisteel can evolve over many years, allowing well-worn, first-class weapons and armor to continue honing and polishing themselves. This evolution can provide a massive boost out of thin air, something proven by the way ancient weapons found in ruins sometimes boasted out-of-this-world abilities that modern technology couldn't replicate. This was the so-called Legend class, and apparently they were usually kept away from general access.

It was Kurobe and Garm's goal to craft equipment along these lines. They stared at Hinata's Moonlight, transfixed by it. *I hope they're up to the task.*

The thing about a sword this all-powerful is that you can really only use it when absolutely needed. If you decided to whip it out on the street in the afternoon, you could raze the entire city block to rubble before you realized what was happening. It'd be like carrying a machine gun instead of a pistol for

self-defense—just not the kind of thing you'd go bandying around every day.

It was the equivalent of a pistol that I thought about gifting her, and she liked it much more than I anticipated. It was a new version of the broken rapier I had consumed earlier, analyzed and improved for her. It was in the Unique class feature-wise, and I'm sure it felt the same way in her hand. I even re-created the unique ability it had to always kill its target on the seventh attack.

They also gave me a broken longsword—the Dragonbuster is what they called it. It was even more feeble than I thought, and I wasn't really sure you could slay someone like Veldora with it. I also inquired about her Holy Spirit Armor, but she sadly replied that she couldn't show that to me. It was an original, one-of-a-kind piece made just for Hinata, and I really wanted to analyze it, but...

Report. It has already been analyzed and assessed from the information gathered during battle.

...Whuh?!

M-man, does anything ever get by Raphael? Should I start calling it Professor or what?

...

Oops, got on its bad side again. Better just give it my thanks and move on.

I really had no idea, though. This is a huge feat. I can't get enough of that guy. According to it, we could take the assessment from some inferior spirit armor, then combine it with Hinata's battle data to re-create Holy Spirit Armor. This belonged to the holy element, but you could also tinker with the fundamentals of it to turn it into a demonic piece.

Sorry, Hinata. I guess this Holy Spirit Armor's a national secret, but a quick bit of Analyze and Assess and it's mine. I would need to think about who to grant it to, though. It seemed kind of difficult to use. Now, though, our battle gear would be more polished than ever before.

*

Between this, that, and the other thing, we were now even with each other. It was evening, and with the day's work behind us, I figured the paladins would hit the trail soon, but I thought I'd at least be polite and offer them one more meal.

"Hey, uh, it's getting late, Hinata, so why don't you and Luminus save your departure for tomorrow?"

It was kind of silly. Luminus could go home with Spatial Motion anytime she liked, and I'm sure Hinata had a Warp Portal set up somewhere in Lubelius. The same was true of all the paladins, each one an A-grade fighter; I'm sure the journey home was no great effort to them. I imagined they'd just say "Sorry, but our work's done here, nice knowing ya" and be on their way.

"Sorry, but—"

Yep. There it is.

"—if you insist on it, would you be willing to host us this evening?"

"Ah yes, I *did* like that hot spring of yours, and the food was simply excellent. What fun will we have tonight?"

Huh? Huhhhh?

I suppose neither Hinata nor Luminus was in any hurry to go anywhere. The paladins saw this, of course, and now they'd all need quarters for another night, too. They were all smiles now, chatting over what could be on the menu tonight. I wanted to ask if the Crusaders were really a bunch of freeloaders like this all along, but it was too late to whine about it. If they expect that much from us, let's give them the time of their lives.

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"Okay, today's banquet will feature *sukiyaki*, a big bowl of beef simmered in vegetable broth!"

""""Yeaahhhh!!""""

"..."

I wasn't sure what this feeling in me was. The paladins and my staff, mortal enemies until the previous day, were now salivating over the hearty meal they'd share shortly. They were happy, no doubt about that... But part of me

wondered if this was really the right thing for them. I guess there were no rules about religious figures giving up meat or whatever in this world—it was hard enough to keep yourself fed at times without inventing restrictions for yourself.

So we decided to treat them to the cowdeer and chiducken we had started to raise, pairing their meat with some fresh-picked veggies. Tossing all that into a pot of boiling broth would be perfect, and Shuna knew exactly how to pull it off. First, she used chiducken bones to make a soup stock, using the meat on them for sashimi purposes. Then, for the main course, she butchered up some marbled cowdeer, making for some downright decadent hot pot. After that, all she had to do was remove the poison from the chiducken eggs and pass them around to everyone. There was no way this wouldn't taste awesome.

"Okay, here's to our future friendship. Cheers!"

"""Cheers!"""

We also had more fresh-cooked rice, the big hit of the previous day's feast. Ignore the black color, of course. My beloved white rice would just go to waste on these guys. Hinata was staring longingly at my personal rice bowl last night, though, so I gave her a serving—from one otherworlder to another. When it comes to rice, plain white is where it's at, although I'm no stranger to assorted seasonings, too. I was also getting some rice in from Blumund that I had them test out for me, but it still needed some improvement. It was a wholly different beast from the white rice before me.

"White rice, though... Don't you find this almost selfish, in a way?"

I wasn't sure what Hinata was complaining about. Her voice was even shaking a little. What was she, jealous?

"Well, if you don't like it, I'll be glad to take it away—"

"I'm not talking about that," she snapped back, protecting her bowl with her life. *Geez, don't get too worked up about this crap.* Not that I'd say that to her. "I just mean... Being able to so perfectly re-create food from that other world? It's more exasperating than surprising, in a way. I can't believe you've created such a life of luxury for yourself, in the space of just two years. Just casually achieving all these things none of us ever would've hoped to manage..."

"Hey, praise me all you want. I'm here all night."

"Don't be stupid. I mean, I heard stories about you from Yuuki, but I took them all with a grain of salt. He was just relaying the reports he heard from his spies, after all. But *this...*" She shrugged. "I don't think I'd ever believe it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes."

I wasn't sure how to respond. I was nowhere near the finish line.

"Well, I'm far from done yet. Transport's still super-slow, and it takes forever to transmit information from one place to the other. With magic, though, it was straightforward enough to improve our food and living conditions, more or less."

"More or less...? *That's* how you describe re-creating all this delicious food? You realize it makes you sound like you're ridiculing all our hard work and sweat up to now?!"

I managed to set her off again. But really, if I was satisfied with this, then I'd never develop things any further. I'm a king, pretty much, and a king needs to be at least a little greedy. Not "king" so much as demon lord, but same difference.

"Well, I mean, we're pretty good in the forest food-wise, you know? The real issue is the culture. There's just way too little entertainment. I want to build the foundation for things like...you know, manga. Like what Veldora's reading."

"*Entertainment?* Do you realize how harsh a world this is? A world where the majority of people have to fight tooth and nail to see another day?"

"Yeah, I know. And that's why we're gonna make sure monsters and things are no longer a threat. I mean, I'm just gonna come out and say this 'cause there's no point hiding it, but we're trying to install Yohm as king, build a new kingdom from his domain, and use that to draw the Western Nations into our sphere of influence."

"Just what exactly are you planning? I'd like to know more details."

Does she? Well, let's tell her.

"I'm thinking about a lot, actually. For starters..."

I pecked at the hot pot as I explained my vision of the future to her.

Our current project involved getting the human world to recognize us, and this was already halfway done, with the leaders of many nations aware of who I was. I'd received reports of apparent spies going in and out of Tempest, so I'd taken a few measures to show them how harmless we were. The merchants and adventurers were spreading rumors of their own, and before long, even the common people would know we could coexist with them. It'd take time for that to really take root, yes, but we were on the path. No need to hurry it along.

After that came our road infrastructure. This was also well underway, as we had worked to build safe, efficient trade routes across our territory. Highways to Blumund and the Dwarven Kingdom were now open, and plans were in progress for a new road linking us to the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. There were no paved roads to Eurazania at the moment, so I thought we could tackle that afterward.

Running in parallel with all this was experimentation with communication methods. I didn't know how radios and stuff worked, so I had to give up on that. Raphael could tell me if I asked, but I didn't have the brainpower to help everyone *else* understand it. Kaijin and the three dwarven brothers might, maybe, but I didn't want to rely on them for everything. Thus, I decided to leave that issue to the next generation and build schools to provide education for our children. These were simple one-room affairs for now, but I was having them learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Before long, I intended to bring in some humans to provide more in-depth instruction.

But getting back to the subject, the communication crystals that served the world now could only be used by the magically inclined. They were magical items themselves, which meant they were vulnerable to theft. That was hardly a theoretical problem, and more to the point, if you needed to send out an emergency message, you'd never know if a wizard was nearby to help.

We needed a system that anyone could use and where theft wasn't an issue. It seemed beyond all probability, but it was actually pretty within reach. My idea involved the use of Sticky Steel Thread and magisteel. I tried the first out with Soei, but my transmission skills over the thread were honestly pretty astounding. Since it worked with magicules, you could get your voice and

thoughts across with remarkable clarity.

Magisteel was packed with those same magicules as well, so I thought it could work largely the same way—and after some experimentation, it did. What we could do is work magisteel into wires about a half an inch thick, run them through the dimension used by Shadow Motion, and connect the world's cities together with it. That alone wouldn't accomplish anything, but attaching this network to the device Vester and his team were developing could convert waves of passing thought into real-life sights and sounds. This device required no magical force to use, so I wanted to get it running as soon as it was complete. In the meantime, we needed to gather the requisite amount of magisteel and get ready.

With the amount of monsters we had in this nation, regular iron ore kept in storage would transform itself into magic ore. This could then be processed into magisteel wire, with Shadow Motion practitioners doing the wiring work. Nothing would really serve as physical obstacles to this network, so installation wouldn't be that terribly difficult. Once we really had the ball rolling, I also had plans to expand the network from the cities to the smaller villages. Now all we had to do was develop the necessary receivers.

Really, as someone who had lived in a data-driven society, communication speed was seriously important to me.

"What do you think? That'll be super-useful when it's done, won't it?"

I couldn't help but sound a little full of myself in front of Hinata.

Once this network was complete, it was time to start transmitting entertainment and nurturing a nascent culture. There were so many dreams I had and a mountain of things left to do—and if I wanted to get any of it done, I had to provide safe and comfortable lives for my people.

Somewhere along the line, the meeting hall had grown quiet. The paladins were frozen in place, perhaps enraptured by my speech. My own officials, meanwhile, were practically smoldering with anticipation; listening to me inspired them more than ever before.

Then Hinata rolled her eyes. "Look," she muttered. "That kind of information is *normally* kept confidential by governments, did you know that? I mean,

matters related to communications, in particular... You just don't go telling that to outsiders. Not that I'm complaining, but..."

Hmm. If you phrased it like *that*, then okay, maybe that was a mistake. Maybe I got carried away and said a little too much. Must have been the alcohol talking.

But even considering the possibility was a mistake. The moment I thought *Uh-oh, did I screw up?* Raphael jumped to conclusions.

Report. Resetting Cancel Ailments. This resistance cannot be adjusted for the time being.

Wh-what?!

But it was already too late. Even worse, a "reset" wasn't something you could do all the time. Whether I wanted it or not, the poison was being cleansed from my body. *But booze isn't poison!* I thought to no avail. My skills were just merciless.

Of course, I suppose this happened because I still had a pounding headache from getting wildly drunk the day before. I cut a little too loose for my own good, and that was the cause of it. Maybe I'd be more tight-lipped toward Hinata if I wasn't inebriated. Let's just call it my just deserts and move on.

I glanced at Hinata, just in time to see the jolly man next to her—Fritz, was it?—steal a piece of top-grade beef from her plate. Looks like I'm not the only guy in this room who played with alcohol a little too much.

"Now, now, what's the big deal, Lady Hinata? That just shows how much he trusts us! Oh hey, and if you aren't eating that, I'll take the rest!"

I think he was a top officer in this force. He certainly robbed Hinata's plate with lightning-fast dexterity, at least. Still, it must have taken a few drinky-drinks to decide it was worth the risk.

The moment Fritz tossed the morsel into his mouth, I could see a vein throb in the vicinity of Hinata's temple. Her natural paleness made it all the more visible, although it would've been impossible to miss no matter what color her skin was.

"Fritz... Were you looking to die today?"

"Um...? Lady Hinata, you're looking so...serious..."

Now Fritz's mind was perfectly clear, as he shot to his feet and attempted to run for it. But he couldn't escape Hinata, who promptly landed a chop on his jaw that instantly sent him to the floor with a concussion.

Let this be a lesson on how to enjoy a drink responsibly.

The next day:

"Back to our conversation yesterday, you realize that if you draw too much attention with all of that, the angels are going to attack you, right?"

Hinata blurted it out just before leaving, as if she had just thought of it. It wasn't really the kind of thing you could bring up at the drunken, festive feast we had last night, but since we weren't going to be strangers any longer, I suppose she thought it important to mention.

Erald and Gazel mentioned those guys to me before—the angelic army. Each one of these “angels” or whatever, according to Hinata, was a B-plus threat, and they had a force that numbered a million strong, all ready to swarm me. It was quite a bit beyond what I pictured, and *that* was just the infantry—there were captains and commanders above them, with a full chain of command between. The generals in their force—yes, there were generals—had even tangled with demon lords, if you went far enough back in history. Their ability in battle was a question mark, but if they were a good match for a demon lord, they must've been pretty strong.

The angels targeted monsters and cities with advanced civilizations. Not even the Western Holy Church saw them as allies of humankind—which made sense, given that their god, Luminus, was actually a demon lord.

"To me," Luminus told me, "they are little more than annoying flies. I would love to do away with them all, but then everyone would know my identity...and that lizard's already betrayed me to the paladins, as you know."

The paladins, by the way, had sworn to keep this revelation a secret. Hopefully, they'd be a bit more accommodating with one another—and me—in the future.

"Yeah, I've heard about these angels. If they are out to poke at me, I'm ready to fight back."

I had no intention of holding back, no. That angel force was free to think and do whatever they wanted, but if they thought they could force their will upon us, fending them off would be my only choice.

Hinata chuckled at me. "I thought you would say that. We might even be fighting on the same side, when the time comes."

"That you may, and that *we* may," Luminus said. "I have no intention of watching my city be destroyed a second time—not by those flies and not by that lizard. Rimuru, unless you enjoy having me as an enemy, I would recommend giving your lizard a *strict* education."

This has been a very useful meeting, I thought as they departed. I think we could build a pretty friendly relationship with Hinata and her forces, to say nothing of Luminus. The battle between us, Lubelius, and part of the Western Nations was over, and I'd say every side walked away happy from it.

Before long, and with next to no warning, Lubelius would give the Dwarven Kingdom more than tacit approval and officially recognize the nation as a land of humans it could potentially become allies with. They also formally announced diplomatic relations with the Jura-Tempest Federation, a nation of monsters—one that included a nonaggression pact, albeit one with a time limit.

Now, in one fell swoop, both demi-humans and monsters had been granted acceptance by human minds. It was time to explore how to build our relations from there.



CHAPTER
2

THE INVITEES

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 2

THE INVITEES

You could try hiding it all you wanted, but it was doomed to spread. In short order, the rumors had reached the ears of leaders in the nations surrounding the Forest of Jura—

Hinata, the Saint, was defeated by Rimuru, the demon lord.

The news came across several routes, delivered with careful precision, ensuring it would reach the people it was intended for. It sounded so eminently plausible, and of course, someone was behind its spreading—but in another moment, the word had traveled so far that nobody would ever know who.

No matter how secret the Crusaders' invasion was, there was no way to keep everyone in the dark forever. The reason was obvious: Tempest was now the center of attention, and to the nations that had relations with it, they had to be constantly vigilant about intelligence collection. The Crusaders' deployment to Tempest was an open secret by this point, and that helped make this new rumor seem even more believable. And this news was interpreted in many different ways by many different people. Some feared the demon lord Rimuru. Some angrily dismissed Hinata as a feckless fraud. Others proceeded with caution, trying to decide how best to keep their homelands safe.

But along with these flowing rumors, news was also coming from official sources: Hinata, the Saint, and Rimuru, the demon lord, fought to a draw. The result of this: a truce between Lubelius and the Jura-Tempest Federation, along with the signing of a nonaggression treaty.

Things were getting complicated—and that wasn't the only problem giving world leaders headaches. Those very same leaders were receiving invitations from Rimuru himself, the demon lord at the core of this crisis.

None of these nations were about to accept the Council of the West's official

announcement as the whole story. It would turn all common sense on its head—and alter the fabric of the world itself. Every leader could smell it in the air, and even if they lacked the whole story, they knew that the paladins had suffered no casualties. That told them everything they needed to make a decision.

And in the midst of all these wild, twisting motives, the Western Nations were about to experience earth-shattering change.



In a corner of the Dwarven Kingdom, the Armed Nation of Dwargon, a group of ministers and top officials had settled down into a meeting.

“Ah, now he’s done it.” The dignified voice of Gazel Dwargo, the Heroic King of the land of dwarves, rumbled through the chamber.

The kingdom’s dark agents, their network of spies, had been busy lately. Intelligence was flowing like a torrent, and their agents had to spend sleepless nights analyzing it all, deciphering recorded images and crafting dossiers from the finely mined details. Multiple copies of these reports were written out for the ministers, and with all the data involved, the number of pages in each one stacked upward and upward.

It was grueling work, but it was still better than the situation a few months ago, back when that slime Rimuru became a demon lord and immediately pivoted into a duel with Clayman. The dark agents, the agency behind them, and Gazel and his officials—they had all suffered terribly from a lack of sleep. Compared with those days, this was a walk in the park.

“Heh...heh-heh-heh. I find it hard to believe, but believe it I must. It would appear your sparring partner has defeated the Saint.”

“You are being disrespectful, Vaughn,” chided Dolph, the hardheaded captain of the Pegasus Knights. “This is a public meeting hall, not your personal chamber. Remember where you speak!”

Vaughn shrugged and gave him a languid nod before turning a more vengeful eye toward the ministers and coughing once.

“Do not berate him too much, Dolph,” King Gazel said. “I am as surprised by

this as anyone. I am sure Vaughn couldn't help but laugh."

The assembled members had no choice but to accept this. The news had shocked them all. Now was no time to go on about Vaughn's lack of decorum.

The reports in their hands laid out all the details behind recent events, and it was a roller coaster of a read from start to finish. Over a hundred Crusaders, the strongest force among humankind, had staged a clandestine violent assault on the nation of monsters. Even Henrietta's dark agents, the pride of Gazel, had only picked up the news the other day—or really, only found out once battle began. And if the dark agents knew, there was no doubting every other nation's secret service did. Tempest, after all, was crawling with spies. Rimuru seemed to be aware of them, but essentially left them be, perhaps to better advertise his moves. Once full-bore combat began, even the most amateur intelligence organization would know what was going on.

In the end, the Crusaders lost. The demon lord Rimuru had won—and without killing a single one of them. The dark agents sadly failed to witness the battle for themselves, but that was the report they gave.

"But Your Majesty," Henrietta said, "I saw it happen myself..."

As she explained, she was around to see the fight eventually devolve into a one-on-one duel between Hinata and Rimuru. However, due to an onrush of out-of-control magicules, the dark agents were blocked from magically eavesdropping on the event.

"...We also detected a powerful aura surrounding the area, and we believe that was the cause of this."

"So someone triggered a magicule storm powerful enough to block all monitoring magic?"

"It was not a magicule storm, Lady Jaine, so much as a clash of opposed energy waves triggering a jamming signal."

"Hmm," mused Jaine, the elderly arch-wizard of the kingdom. "So you didn't see how this duel ended yourselves? Why are you so sure Hinata lost?"

Hinata, all-powerful head of the Crusaders, required no introduction to Jaine. She had personal insights into the Saint's strength, and she found it hard to

believe Hinata tasted defeat.

"I can only offer circumstantial evidence in my defense," replied Henrietta. "But after centuries of refusing to side with monsters, the Western Holy Church has overturned its own doctrine. They've even sent us word about opening official connections with us, the dwarves. The nation of Lubelius is also moving to establish relations with Tempest. Word of this has been sent to governments worldwide, and we are now awaiting the official proclamation. These are drastic changes, and I believe they offer the clearest evidence yet that Hinata was defeated."

"Mmmm. Certainly, if those human-supremacist blockheads so quickly changed their tune like that...I suppose it means something must have forced their hand. But... King Gazel, you know this means there's a greater chance than ever that the demon lord Rimuru has grown more powerful than you, do you not?" Jaine seemed to find even asking the question painful.

Hinata, the Saint, and Gazel, the Master of the Sword, were an even match, whether Gazel wanted to admit it or not. If Hinata just lost, simple logic dictated that Rimuru now outclassed Gazel.

"Ridiculous!"

"How dare you insult His Majesty, Lady Jaine!"

The ministers howled at Jaine, but she refused to budge. As far as she was concerned, the truth was the truth. And Gazel agreed.

"That much growth in the space of a few months?" Vaughn casually asked. The question was greeted by a snort from the king. *It's no longer a matter of growth, my good man!* he thought.

Even the last time they met, something about the demon lord Rimuru seemed strange. This wasn't some gushing geyser of pure force in front of him—everything was calm. He couldn't feel a thing. Gazel's own power—the unique skill Tyrant, which let him see through everything, even other people's thoughts—gave him no insight at all into the creature. It meant Rimuru was able to completely restrain his force. Maybe he didn't know everything about the outcome of the duel, but Hinata surviving the ordeal was an achievement in itself.

"It is likely so," he said, considering this. "The evolution into demon lord means his powers now rival mine. Him defeating Hinata wouldn't be unusual at all."

"B-but, Your Majesty! You, the hero of generations, on an even keel with a monster born but a few years ago..."

"I agree wholeheartedly. Surely my liege must be mistaken?"

"And even if it is so, wouldn't that make the demon lord Rimuru far too dangerous?"

The ministers were uproarious once more. Gazel sighed to himself. If that was how the logic went, Rimuru was far from the only threat.

He looked down at his dossier. In it, the dark agents described how the officers under Rimuru fought against the Ten Great Saints—and according to their report, not one of the monsters fell. Each one scored a complete victory, some of them even overwhelming several Saints at once. It was amazing news, and if it could be believed, there was no denying that Tempest's overall ability to wage war surpassed Dwargon's.

The magically recorded video evidence from the battle was hazy at best, making it hard to discern much detail. That was a shame, given how these devices were the height of dwarven technology—but with the unstable magicules in the air, they failed to function properly. Only the visual images survived, the audio failed to be recorded, and the quality of this imagery made it impossible to analyze the subjects' abilities. You could barely make out what was happening, as valuable an asset as this evidence was.

Still, Gazel could make out a few familiar figures in the images—the magic-born he had spoken with before.

They've grown stronger. Our full force may not be enough to defeat them now...

Some of the minsters were prattling on about the potential danger, others loudly disagreeing with them. They were both correct, most likely. Gazel tuned out the noise, pondering to himself. Maybe, he began to think, he should have wiped him out before he became this much of a threat.

...No. Rimuru was a monster with reason. He hoped for amicable relations with human countries. The town he built, the people he saved, the nations he'd connected with were all ample proof of that. If Rimuru was this unthinking brute who couldn't empathize with people, humankind would be exposed to unprecedented threats right now.

But there's no need to worry about that. Heh-heh-heh... He wouldn't ever think about wiping out humankind. Not Rimuru!

Gazel was convinced of it. Rimuru killed the demon lord Clayman; he did not kill Hinata. That alone indicated to Gazel that Rimuru went out of his way to avoid antagonizing humankind. It was easy for him to drone out the minister's concerns with laughter.

"Heh-heh-heh. No need to worry! I will remind you that Rimuru remains my erstwhile partner in the martial arts. It would also behoove you to remember that we have backed the nation of Tempest earlier than any other nation. From him, we have earned the most trust he has given anyone. Do you intend to do away with that trust and doubt his intentions?"

He glared at the ministers, using some of his majesty to cow them into submission. It did the trick, restoring them to civility.

"Y-yes... Think of it that way, and it would be foolish to abandon our trade with them..."

"Quite. The goods we take from them have immeasurable appeal. And we've even transferred recovery potion manufacturing to them."

"Whether in the form of technology exchange or anything else, a relationship must be based on trust. Why is there any need for us to panic?"

"Yes, no need to worry at this point..."

They glanced at each other and smiled somewhat sheepishly. Gazel grinned at them.

To the Dwarven Kingdom, which valued fairness as a core tenet, being a demon lord was no reason for discrimination. All the ministers seemed to remember that now, and Gazel was glad to see it. Yes, Rimuru had obtained astonishing strength, but looking back at past events, there was no doubting his

trustworthiness as a person. They were still building a friendly relationship—keeping that going was the obvious choice.

Besides, Rimuru said he was an otherworlder, bringing with him knowledge of other planets and the drive to bring it to life with his vast litany of skills. The fact that he was pushing all this development forward mainly to satisfy his own self-centered cravings for luxury was nothing short of fascinating.

Plus, his followers always carried out his orders with a smile, no matter how outlandish. Tempest and the Dwarven Kingdom were already connected with a highway, winding its way over mountains and through valleys and providing safe passage for anyone who used it. Rimuru's monsters blazed that trail, and all it took was an idea and a simple word or two from him. Things that otherworlders of the past abandoned as being too costly or labor-intensive were no obstacle to Rimuru. He had the core strength needed to brute-force it all to life.

He had a drive, a drive backed by an army of loyal monsters. *How envious I am*, Gazel mused. No matter how difficult the problem, Rimuru could just offhandedly say “Figure it out! Good luck!” and his monsters would do their level best. They all assumed that was normal; none doubted him. Maybe it was that slime’s most fearsome asset of all—that genius-level ability to trick people into doing his bidding.

For better or for worse, *this demon lord was an entertaining one.*

And perhaps he's been tricking me, too, this whole time...

But, Gazel reasoned, that was just fine. If Rimuru was pursuing the kind of world he saw as ideal, what would result from that? Gazel was keenly interested in finding out. He wanted to see it. It’d trigger a Temma War, a struggle between mortals and angels, and Rimuru knew that. But he’d probably just fight back. Tempest had a terrifying military force backing it up—perhaps terrifying enough to fend off a horde of angels. And Gazel was willing to cheer him on.

“The demon lord Rimuru and I may not be related by blood, but we are brothers,” he growled, his voice dominating the meeting hall. “As long as he does not lose his heart for humanity, let us provide him with as much support

as we can—and let us welcome a new era and the budding of a new civilization. If anyone objects to this, let them speak now.”

That was, in effect, the king of the dwarves announcing his decision.

Vaughn, the admiral paladin on the force, smiled. “You’ve got me on your side, King Gazel. You’re the boss!”

“My lord,” stated the night assassin Henrietta, “I will always serve as your shadow and follow every whim of your heart.”

“Yes, do what you like. I am old, with little time left to live, but if my last few years may be happy ones, I will follow you as far as you may go, my lord.”

Jaine still looked pretty healthy, despite her words. This was just her way of saying that Gazel enjoyed her support no matter what happened.

Finally, Dolph, leader of the Pegasus Knights, sighed and shook his head.

“If that’s what you all have to say, I suppose I’ll have to clean up the mess that results. You’ll need someone to keep him in check, won’t you?”

That was his role, most of the time, and Dolph didn’t resent it.

The heroes of dwarfdom were in unison, and a new policy was forged. But while nobody would defy their supreme leader’s decision on the surface, some of the ministers were still of different minds. They would nonetheless offer their support, hiding their own intentions under the protective front of the administrators’ decisions.

There was just one reason for that: As part of a nation leading the world in technology, something about “budding new civilizations” struck a chord with them. Toiling away at their research, making only piecemeal advances, offered no hope of major developments. This demon lord, meanwhile, was pushing the envelope and demonstrating zero fear of anyone stopping him. Vester, their former colleague, reported as much to them, and some in the room had started to envy the freedom the man enjoyed.

“How dare Sir Vester just leave and join that band! Unforgivable!”

“Yes! Did you hear about the new barriers built on the highways to ward off monsters?”

"And the lighting, too. I hear of new communication devices under development as well."

"Potions weren't enough for him, were they? I can't believe how jealous—er, how outraged I am!"

It was starting to become clear where the ministers' hearts and minds truly were. Gazel snickered, then cleared his throat—a signal for everyone to stay quiet. The ministers' eyes focused on him.

"Our conclusion is clear. Our nation must trust in the demon lord Rimuru and walk forward in unison with him! Let us receive the fruits of their labor, keeping the technology they develop for ourselves. Thus, if they ever are defeated by the heavenly army, that technology will never be lost! Such is the will of the Armed Nation of Dwargon!"

Nobody was ever going to complain about that. King Gazel always prioritized his own nation above all else. The ministers bowed their heads at once, expressing their agreement.

"Heh-heh-heh... Not letting go of the goods, huh? I appreciate how you aren't couching it in rosy vocabulary, at least."

Vaughn was speaking—or muttering, really—for most of the people in the hall.

It wasn't long before the conference ended, with the final item on the itinerary—the acceptance of Lubelius' request—treated almost as an afterthought. Now the bureaucracy would go to work, drafting up new treaties with both Lubelius and Tempest. It wouldn't happen overnight, but the three of them, plus the rest of the Western Nations, would all need to prepare together for the Temma War. There was no way of telling yet whether this was the right move, but at the very least, Gazel was content.

Once things settled down a bit, one minister raised his hand.

"Your Majesty, a word?"

Gazel, preparing to leave the chamber, settled back in his seat and eyed him.

"My liege, we have received a letter of invitation from Sir Rigurd. It seems

that Sir Rimuru is holding an event to officially mark his debut as demon lord... and he seeks your attendance."

"His debut? What could *that* be about?"

The minister was just as in the dark as Gazel. He blinked helplessly a couple times, giving the other ministers enough time to raise yet another hue and cry.

"Just a front, I'm sure. He no doubt bids you to be present so he can boast to the world about how friendly we are with him."

"I think that boat has long left port, good sir."

"Ah! Wait, I have heard of this! Vester sent word that the monster nation wishes to hold a grand festival to shore up its public image. He himself is serving as an adviser to their administration, and they are preparing quite a number of festivities for the occasion."

Vaughn gauged the ministers, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "How interesting! I do recall how wonderful their accommodations were. I was allowed to bask in a hot spring, the food was excellent, and the conduct of their servants impeccable. I knew Vester was training them, but plainly he did his job well. And I can imagine how grandiose these 'festivities' might be!"

He certainly sounded enthusiastic about it to Gazel. If the king turned down the invite, Vaughn seemed likely to go in his stead.

Heh-heh-heh... That sly fox. I don't know what's motivating him, but he just doesn't know how to settle down and lie back, does he?

Gazel thought the demon lord's aim was to gain the confidence of the Western Nations, but this new act seemed to defy explanation. That's what made it so interesting to him. He found it difficult to stifle the laughter coming up his throat. Maintaining decorum around his ministers was such a stress at times.

Curse you... Setting just the sort of trap that would torment me the most... Relentless!

The irrational anger was enough to kill Gazel's urge to laugh.

"What is your bidding, my liege?" a minister ventured to ask the silent king.

"Sir Rigurd sends word that, while attending may pose some difficulty for you, if you are able to grace them with your presence, they will provide you treatment truly befitting a king. Similar invitations have apparently been sent to leaders around the world, and there are only a limited number of seats available. He also warned us to reply as quickly as possible, as Tempest will be crowded on the dates of the event."

It sounded polite enough, but it was no way to talk to the ruler of a great, powerful nation. The minister knew as much, fearing how his lord would respond as he spoke. But it was nothing that fazed Gazel—if anything, it perplexed him that anyone thought it would. His Tyrant skill made it easy for him to read the minds of his ministers, so he smiled a bit as he attempted to correct them.

"Let us accept the invitation, then. I look forward to touring Tempest anew."

"My liege! No matter how friendly Sir Rimuru is with you, I seriously question the validity of this event. We do not know what manner of entertainment there might be, but surely they could prepare a seat for you any time they wanted!"

"Indeed. And they did not specify how long the invite list was, but do they think the world's great leaders have all the time in the world on their hands? No, they will not accept such a sudden request so readily."

"And Your Majesty personally traveling to the event presents some serious issues, if I may say so!"

The ministers weren't in the wrong. But Gazel paid them no mind.

"I am not so sure about your concerns. If anything, this move shows supreme confidence on his part. You see, my ministers, you only know of him from the time he traveled to our gates. Now, as a demon lord, he is another creature entirely. *This* is the Rimuru so confidently holding this event, and it will no doubt be quite a fascinating one. Besides, I am sure many of us would like to explore the internal workings of Tempest, now that it has become a great military power. If they are sending out invitations, I have no doubts that many will be accepted. Just as Vaughn said, the lodging provided is superb, and if they want to establish a guest list sooner rather than later, it must surely be so they can provide the best service possible to their visitors."

"Very true," Vaughn agreed. "He certainly *did* strike a bolder image as demon lord. Very few people indeed could get away with treating Sir Rimuru like a fool nowadays. And I can't help but wonder what sort of festival the monsters would want to hold. Whether representing our kingdom or not, I most certainly wish to participate."

Vaughn had intended to be a part of this from the moment he heard of it, perhaps expecting to ask Vester for an invitation. Gazel certainly didn't want him to have all the fun. He knew full well the ministers would be dead set against their king's attendance, though, so he searched for a method to make them see things his way.

"Besides, I am Rimuru's partner in battle—and as such, I must guide him to ensure he is not being ridiculed by his own people. I must make it known to his neighbors that we of Dwargon are the first nation to make friends with Tempest."

Some of the ministers began to understand Gazel's true intentions.

"Ah... Y-yes, yes! We have the closest ties of all to Sir Rimuru, and we should be sure other nations are aware of it."

"Agreed. I understand that those scoundrels in Thalion are attempting to butter him up, now that he is a demon lord."

"Now would be a good time to show His Majesty in close consort with Sir Rimuru. It would do wonders to keep our rivals in check."

So far so good, thought Gazel. He opened his mouth a little, preparing to conclude this debate, when:

"I fail to see why we are even discussing this. We know full well that if we defy His Majesty, he will simply slip past our borders again. Instead of that, I feel it far safer for Dwargon to provide its full support to its leader."

This was the chief elder of Dwargon's senate chiding the ministers, a man who rarely participated in public debate. The time Gazel employed a body double to escape the kingdom undercover still grated at him, apparently.

Oh, brother. Well, at least I can join in the festivities now...

This wasn't exactly the way Gazel meant to gain support, but it was good enough. It kind of put him off a little, but he was willing to accept it.

Now, the Dwarven Kingdom was 100 percent committed to the Tempest invite, no matter how bewildered the ministers were by it, and with that, more and more people in the hall began expressing their desire to join in.

Before long, Gazel had quite another problem: *How am I ever going to pare down the list of attendants joining me?*

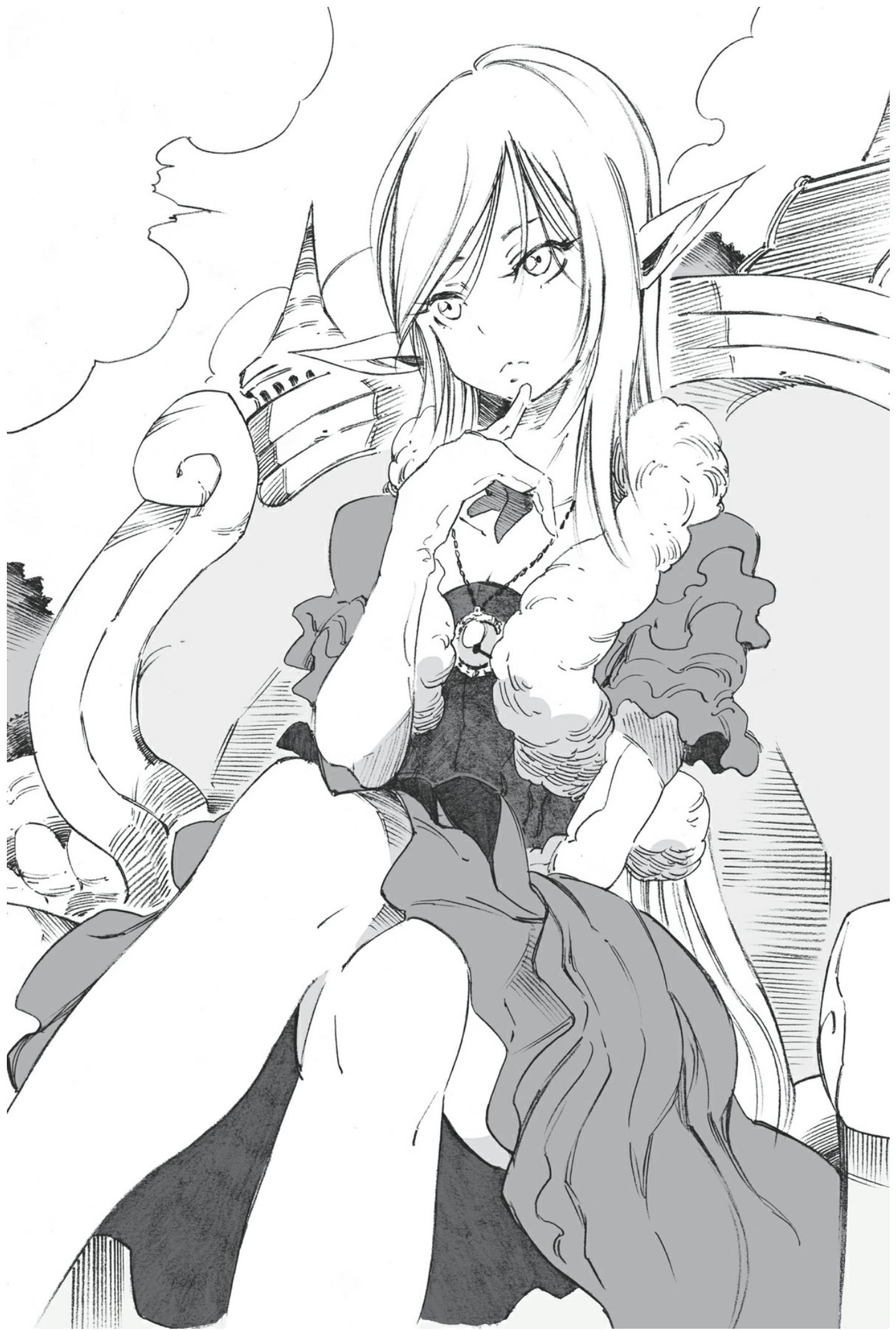


On the grounds of the royal palace of Thalion was a large, impressively beautiful garden, expansive enough to house a variety of plants and creatures rare to find in the wild. This park was personally funded by the emperor, who enjoyed a vast fortune thanks to the many streams of revenue she enjoyed. A very small percentage of that income was all it took to keep this masterpiece of natural beauty going. And not just the garden—nothing in and around the palace was funded by tax revenue. That was how impossibly rich the head of the Sorcerous Dynasty was.

Two people were currently relaxing within these gardens. One was Archduke Erald Grimwald, father of the adventurer Elen and one of the nation's most powerful officials. Facing him was the only person in Thalion who wielded more authority than he—Emperor Elmesia El-Ru Thalion herself.

On paper, the emperor was of ambiguous gender with beautiful features that were only vaguely feminine—at least, that was the act she put on. In truth, Elmesia was female through and through.

Her age, however, was unknown. She was among the most pure-blooded of elves, meaning her elven qualities were stronger than most; she simply didn't age. That made her a living witness to history, and asking how many years she had lived was a taboo. She looked elegant and noble, but she still hadn't lost her youth—in fact, her compact frame could cause one to mistake her for a child. Her jade-green eyes were sharp and intelligent, and her vibrant skin was like a fresh coating of snow. Her long silver hair shone as it flowed down her head, brushing past the light redness of her cheeks, and her unique, pointed ears poked out from underneath.



In short, she was the epitome of harmony in motion—a high elf, one of the most supreme beings in the land.

The archduke found himself smitten for a moment at this beauty but quickly regained his senses. His wife and daughter would be furious with him if he didn't. Clearing his throat, he turned to the exquisite wood-carved seat Elmesia was sitting on.

"Your Excellency, the nation of monsters I have reported to you about has sent me an invitation."

Erald took a letter out from his pocket, presenting it to her. He had already checked it for traps or hidden poisons, and he knew what it read, but he did not say it out loud; he was fully aware of how the emperor disliked people telling her things before she could see them for herself.

But he had his concerns. *I truly never expected that slime would ever be recognized as a demon lord. But even if he has...why would he call someone like me to this coronation of sorts?*

The letter Erald presented to the emperor was, in fact, addressed to him. There was no need to show it to Elmesia. But as the letter put it: *Please reply if able to attend, providing the number of participants you wish to bring.* He interpreted this to mean he could bring as many plus-ones as he felt like. But who should join him? That was the rub. Some bodyguards would be a must, but the archduke could hardly show up alone. Many of the nobles he had previously reported his travels to expressed keen interests in visiting for themselves.

With Tempest becoming a new trade partner, courtly circles across the Sorcerous Dynasty were alive with talk of this new land. And the fascination was hardly exclusive to the nobility. When the emperor received the initial report of Erald's audience with the demon lord Rimuru, her eyes had been cold and focused as she gave her response:

"...Hmm. So you went off to this fabulous land all by yourself? Well, weren't you fortunate, Erald. I imagine it was quite the exciting experience. And why did you leave me behind, hmm? Even naming yourself my representative and establishing ties with them, no less? If our business with them was that important, I would have liked to involve myself with it, wouldn't you agree?"

She had a point. But Erald came to Tempest on the pretense of rescuing his daughter, and what he found was a literal nation of monsters. He may have transferred his spirit into the body of a homunculus, but there was no telling what could have befallen him. There was no way he could have guaranteed Elmesia's safety if he took her there.

But the emperor gave him no quarter. *"If that is the charming sort of slime you met, I wish I could have seen him for myself. And meeting with a demon lord so soon after his birth? Why, I've lived for many, many years, and not even I have been graced with that opportunity. And look at you, hogging it for yourself! Does the term abandonment mean anything to you? Imagine, being treated this way by my own people. What a pitiful leader I am..."*

She had continued in this vein for a bit longer before wrapping it up like so:

"I've never been so envious—um, so offended in my life, I don't think. You, taking in all this excite—ahhh, risking all this danger and going off by yourself. It is scandalous!"

Elmesia's rebuke was really more whining than scolding. Most of her vassals only knew her unreadable mask and assumed the heart beneath was just as icy; she only showed this side of her personality to Archduke Erald and one other, although Erald took the brunt of it. *If only they knew what's actually underneath*, he always thought.

However, thanks to the emperor's pouting, the budget for this effort had been frozen, their plans to share technology with Tempest delayed for the time being. Erald wanted to soothe her hurt feelings about it all so they could get the ball rolling on the tech swap again. If he decided to join the festivities solo without informing Elmesia, he'd most certainly be inviting her rage upon him. By that point, he feared, the frozen budget would be the least of his worries.

This demon lord coronation was, in its own way, a show of force. It was devised to display Rimuru's strength as demon lord to the nations around him. They would be holding a festival in conjunction, along with assorted unspecified but large-scale entertainment. There was no way the eternally bored Elmesia would pass up an opportunity to attend such an exciting-sounding event. Erald knew she'd sniff it out, then interrogate him about not reporting it to her. The

potential consequences for her wrath were beyond imagination.

Thus, Erald opted to hide nothing and just show her the letter.

Now she lifted her head, fresh from reading it. Erald sat up straight in his seat.

"So what do you intend to do with this?" Elmesia asked.

"Do what, Your Excellency?"

He was buying time, but Erald knew what Elmesia meant. He knew, but he couldn't say it himself. If the emperor was going to join the festivities, this was now an official state visit, and that took the entire administration to prepare for. It was too significant a thing for Erald to suggest from his own lips. He wanted to be sure anything that came from this meeting was, first and foremost, the emperor's idea.

"Mmm, playing dumb, are we? Do you know, Erald, of the sweet pastries we procured from that man Yoshida's bakery? They're far tastier than they used to be, aren't they? Could you venture a guess as to why?"

Erald fell silent. This change of subject was unexpected.

"Or are you saying a strategic genius such as yourself is oblivious to the goings-on in the streets? What a disappointment."

"I apologize, Your Excellency. By Yoshida, you refer to the baker who runs the establishment in Englesia you enjoy so much? I believe the kingdom provides for his personal safety as an otherworlder, despite his lack of fighting skill. I was unaware that his work was distributed to Thalion, but how is that related to Sir Rimuru's invitation?"

If you didn't know something, better to be honest and ask. Maybe you can't get away from that if you're dealing with a stranger, but Erald was intimately familiar with the emperor—she even let him look at her unobscured face, a right granted to a tiny handful of people in Thalion.

"You truly claim not to know, then? Ellwyn brought some samples back several years ago as a souvenir. I suppose she didn't see fit to give you any."

"She what?!"

The revelation that his own daughter declined to save any for him hurt harder

than expected. Elmesia was clearly gratified to see this.

"All right. Seeing your expression is all I need. Let me tell you, then. Yoshida, it seems, has found a new source for his ingredients. It's allowed him to greatly expand the diversity of his wares, and the quality of his work has improved to match. In addition, in exchange for some monetary support, he's been willing to send a supply of his goods to us."

Erald was well aware of Kaoru Yoshida. Like his fellow otherworlders, he'd been the subject of much investigation and eventually pinpointed in the capital city of Englesia where he was running a café and sweet shop. He was said to lack any special skills, although that was unconfirmed. His talents as a pastry chef, however, were undoubtedly top-of-the-line, enough so that he counted the grand master of the Free Guild as a grateful client. There were even rumors of Hinata, the Saint, sneaking in after closing hours to avoid attracting a crowd.

Thus, Erald already knew him as a successful tradesman, but Elmesia wasn't done speaking yet.

"So you know I invited Yoshida here once. Ellwyn, you see, brought along the most tremendous cake I've ever had. I was hoping I could have him become the empire's official dessert specialist. But he turned me down. No matter how much money I stacked on the table, Yoshida refused to come here..."

The way she put it, Yoshida wasn't the kind of man who was moved by money. Instead, she made do with having a small selection of "souvenirs" purchased for her. *Your Excellency, what are you doing??!* Erald resisted shouting the thought out loud. But she still wasn't done.

"Recently, Yoshida apparently sent word that he'd be closing soon. I'm not sure if he's moving or opening up another location... But losing my dessert supply during his hiatus would be a nigh unbearable blow, wouldn't it?"

"Not especially, no."

"Hmm. That's what you have to say to me? Ellwyn is quite fond of that bakery, you know. If their wares remained easily obtainable, I'm sure she'd be glad to ferry my orders back here."

"Wh-what?!"

"Oh, yes. She already comes back here for our regular tea parties."

This was monumental news. Erald thought his daughter hadn't come near Thalion for years. Elmesia's revelation was a heavy blow. He already knew the two bodyguards assigned to her weren't exactly the most reliable agents out there, but he hadn't heard a word of this from the other observers he had hired to watch over her. He resolved to rake them over the coals about this later, but for now, he had to press Elmesia for more.

"This is grave news, is it not?!"

"Oh, yes, it is! But I've used some of my authority—and funds—to obtain some rather interesting information."

"What is it?"

"Well, of all the places, it turns out that this baker is seriously considering a move to the nation you visited, Tempest. So tell me, what were you doing over there?"

This actually jogged Erald's memory a bit. Every meal he had at Tempest was a delight; his daughter Elen practically wept tears of joy at first sight of their dessert selection. He even recalled her jumping up and down: "Ah, Shuna's perfectly re-created that new recipe!" and the like.

"Ahhh... Was *that* what she meant?!" Erald cried as the pieces fell into place.

Elmesia sighed. "Are you sure you still have all your marbles, Archduke?"

Erald wasn't so sure any longer. "I—I am sorry," he apologized, and he was entirely sincere.

Now he saw what the empress was displeased about. She suspected that Erald was hoarding all the sweets for himself—something he never would've done, even if it *was* for his daughter's sake.

"Nothing is ever too good for your daughter, after all..."

Now, at least, Erald's name had been cleared. Instead, Elmesia was now busy yelling at him about being totally oblivious to everything. Erald dutifully accepted it.

"But, Your Excellency, how will we respond to Sir Rimuru?"

Elmesia gave her companion a satisfied grin. “Yes...well...”

She was acting all stately about it but didn’t seem too interested in giving an answer. It irked Erald, but he wasn’t foolish enough to offer his own words. As stated, the emperor visiting a foreign land was a national-level project. If Erald brought up the idea first, he could see himself being shouted down by criticism. People would get in his way; it’d turn into a big mess.

The Sorcerous Dynasty was established by the emperor Elmesia, its sorcerous sovereign, and the thirteen royal families and other rulers under her gave her their total loyalty. In general, each family was responsible for governing their own fiefdoms, while the imperial court ran on the taxes they provided. None of the royal families had their own standing armies; all of that was concentrated on the empire side. The emperor was Thalion’s commander in chief, responsible for arbitrating across fiefdoms and nations. Erald was born into one of these thirteen families; his mother, Ellis Grimwald, was the matriarch who ran it. This Ellis was also the grandmother of Elmesia herself—the only other person in Erald’s life he was forced to submit to.

Erald’s elder brother, the father of Elmesia, had been killed in battle with monsters. It was an event that happened both before Thalion’s founding and well before Erald was even born. It made Elmesia his niece, even though she had lived far longer than him—another reason he owed her at least some respect.

What about the other royal families besides Ellis’s? They were, to say the least, often very peculiar. Some holed up in their domains, refusing to take any part in imperial administration, while others took advantage of their posts to actively participate in internal politics. Elmesia never made any policy statements herself, so a number of local nobles struggled to gain power for themselves instead. As archduke, one of Erald’s tasks was to keep an eye on people.

That was why he had to be careful here. If this was just a pleasure trip, that was one thing, but many people would fault him for organizing a journey to a literal monster den. It could give them an excuse to strip him of his position. He personally doubted it, but some of the nobles might have even been scheming to eliminate the emperor from the picture entirely. To keep that from

happening, he knew he had to be thoroughly prepared.

"Aw, you worry too much, Erald."

"Y-Your Excellency?!"

"No matter what those little fish think, none could ever exact revenge against me."

Elmesia was changed now. She looked, and felt, like a ruler—an emperor with absolute power, one who never allowed rebellion even once in her life. As long-lived as she was, all the great kings and leaders of the world—even Erald himself—looked like nothing but a street gang formed of children.

Erald tensed up and nervously swallowed. He could speak frankly with her thanks to sharing a bloodline, but technically speaking, she was far, far above him. He was lauded as a champion of the people himself, but Elmesia was on a whole other level. It was impossible *not* to be nervous around her.

"That demon lord... His name was Rimuru, yes?" she said. "We cannot let our guard down."

"...How do you mean?"

She was stating the obvious. He was strong, obviously, and you couldn't discount the leadership he showed guiding his monsters. And there was never a demon lord who tried to build cooperative relationships with the nations around them before. But Elmesia wasn't one to verbalize such an obvious point —hence why Erald asked for clarification.

"Hee-hee... This Rimuru; he rather easily accepted our request to build a highway to Thalion, didn't he?"

"Yes. He asked for rights to things like tolls and customs fees, but he accepted the full construction job on his end."

"And there's the issue. Those rights could grant him an absolute fortune. Can't you see that looking at me, Erald?"

She was back to her usual casual self. Erald knew what she meant.

"Ah, those revenue sources?"

Erald, too, realized early on that Rimuru was aiming for exactly that. That was why he thought carefully before giving him those rights. But now Elmesia was giving him a supercilious chuckle.

"You have a lot to learn, still. Long-lived species like ourselves can plan matters so we profit in the long term. You *do* realize that, do you not?"

"Of course. I made my decision after judging the passage fees the demon lord Rimuru could charge versus the money it would take for us to build the highway."

By his calculations, any tolls they'd pay would be far cheaper. Attempting to build a paved path through the Forest of Jura, as monster-laden as it was, would require countless years and a massive budget. The Khusha Mountains at the forest's border were ruled by the organized, warlike tengu. Working with them would be a slog—and once you were done with *them*, there were hundreds of other monsters and magical beasts to deal with. Even discounting them, the complex geography posed a major problem. It'd require tunnels dug through mountains, bridges strung across canyons, and workers who'd need round-the-clock protection the entire way. It'd be a century-long project, and while that wasn't out of the question for an empire with Thalion's resources, it was doubtful they'd ever see a return on their investment.

With all that in mind, Rimuru's offer was music to Erald's ears.

"How naive of you," Elmesia said, shattering Erald's confidence. "Certainly, crafting a highway in the forest is a daunting task. It has never been tried before because there was no benefit to it."

She began guiding Erald through the issues involved.

Just as he thought, there would be no profit from the project. It was rife with challenges, and there was no point to having a road through the forest anyway. But that was in the past. Before, the highway would've had to go all the way to the Dwarven Kingdom—now, all it had to do was reach Tempest, the new nation in the middle of the woods. Also, there was now a purpose to the highway—trade. Working with the dwarves could have improved Thalion's technology, but there were too many obstacles in the way to achieve that. Now, with Tempest on the scene, things had changed.

"The southern demon lord domains are ruled by Milim, alongside Carillon, the Beast Master, and Frey, the Sky Queen. With all the military might they boast, they are set to become dazzlingly prosperous. Beyond that, we have the Western Nations to the northwest and the Armed Nation of Dwargon to the north. This new nation, Tempest, is nestled right between them, is it not?"

"...It is, yes."

Erald felt he understood what Elmesia was driving at. He still didn't see how that meant he had erred. Things change over time, after all. That land had no value up to now, but as Elmesia pointed out, it now had boundless potential. Situated at a key location between multiple forces, it was bound to become a meeting point for all their cultures...and it was destined to grow rapidly. That was what the demon lord Rimuru wanted, and this was why Erald—deftly realizing this ahead of the crowd—wanted to firm up relations with him. But building a road to this new nation, as he knew full well, was a high-cost, high-risk endeavor.

"I decided that instead of embarking on a project that would require military support to back it up, it was better to secure profits through payment of their usage fees."

He was confident he did the right thing. But the response failed to wipe the smile off Elmesia's face.

"You aren't incorrect. We haven't sustained any losses, and normally, I would congratulate you on a job well done. *Buuuut*, he is just as long-lived as us. A demon lord, remember? And if you sign an agreement with no binding time limit, you need to think *much* more carefully about it than that. I give you eight points out of ten."

"...?!"

"What we *should* have done is lend a hand in the construction effort. We should have selected personnel and built our own teams to handle the roadwork. They, meanwhile, could have focused solely on security. If we gave them at least a token effort at cooperation, that would have made our fee negotiations much easier."

"...!!"

From now until the end of time, the demon lord Rimuru would hold all rights to the highway. And given their lack of cooperation at the beginning, these conditions would be frustratingly difficult to overturn. This was a demon lord—any attempts to coerce him with force would be the height of folly. Elmesia was right, and Erald, with his single-minded focus on profits, was wrong.

“This is why I always accuse you of being stubborn, Erald. You may be smart enough to notice when the tides are changing, but you can’t hold on to your preconceptions like this.”

Erald was forced to admit it: She was right. The construction work would be dangerous, but if he had considered that compromise option, the costs wouldn’t have been too high to consider. And bringing in people from Thalion could have led to the sharing of technical expertise, which would allow the empire to take in Tempestian know-how for itself.

...What have I done? I failed to read that far into it...

He could practically see Rimuru gloating in front of his face. But it was far too late to linger on the issue.

“So about my response to this invitation...”

Elmesia’s face grew sterner. Erald sat up, nodding at her.

“Between the sweets shop and the highway, it’s clear Rimuru is well versed in human customs. There’s no doubting his status as a former otherworlder, but now he possesses the power and authority to utilize his knowledge and experience fully. Demon lord or not, he is truly extraordinary. Grand Master Yuuki Kagurazaka and Captain Hinata Sakaguchi, both disciples of the Hero Shizue Izawa, may hold considerable clout in the Western Nations, but neither is a match for Rimuru. If we want to be on good terms with him going forward, we can’t afford not to attend this. We never had a choice from the beginning.”

That was the emperor Elmesia’s decision. Erald had no reason to disagree, although he still had his anxieties.

“I understand, Your Excellency. I will ensure no one impedes your participation. However, there is no guaranteeing your safety in that land. We must choose our attendees carefully.”

They knew Rimuru had engaged in armed conflict with the Crusaders not long ago. The battle, which ended overwhelmingly in Rimuru's favor, reportedly featured far fewer casualties than what the world saw in Farmus's invasion. It showed how confident the monsters were in this fight, although some criticized the demon lord for going easy on his foes. For someone who knew the inside truth, it was enough to make you swear off attacking Tempest forever, but there were plenty of clueless people out there looking to test their strength. This wouldn't discourage them, and Erald was concerned Tempest would see more conflict going forward, not less.

It's doubtful any of it will affect Rimuru himself, but law and order may fall apart in the forest soon. We can defend ourselves, but taking our sole emperor there?

Elmesia's decision was final, and it was his job to accept it. It'd involve a lot of hard work, but he needed to be sure they were ready for anything.

"Fine. Then let us deploy some empire-affiliated forces. I'd like you to choose several from the Magus to guard me."

The Magus were a group of high-ranking military officers called the Knights of Purity and vested with the full authority of the emperor. They acted as her mediators, and their ranks were open only to those who could trace their bloodline far back into nobility. The Magus were hailed as the strongest force in Thalion...and yes, Erald was part of them. Now the emperor was asking him to deploy a group who was kept a strictly guarded secret from other nations. It was a job he approached with dead seriousness.

"...Very well. I will send out the word at once."

The visit to foreign lands was set in stone, with word quickly being reported across the empire. Soon, Archduke Erald would find it fiendishly difficult to get a decent night's sleep.



In the headquarters of a trading company in the Kingdom of Blumund, Gard Mjöllmile was starting to wonder if this constant stream of visitors would ever end.

As a merchant who held sway over a litany of commercial ventures, Mjöllmile had a knack for accurately judging people with a single glance. Some people came to him purely in search of money; others arrived seeking new business ventures. Occasionally, he'd see nobles who'd fallen on hard times, approaching him with all manner of fishy-sounding offers. He was sick of dealing with them all, but sometimes he'd actually see people with real, concrete money-making ventures for him. That was why he refused to leave this job to someone else.

These facts were on his mind as he shooed away yet another charlatan and asked the next client to come in. This was a well-dressed man, but Mjöllmile wasn't fooled. The fabric of his clothing was of decent quality, but the style was outdated. He couldn't afford a custom outfit in the latest fashion, so he was making do with last year's model. No, this man wouldn't be worth his time. He was one of those hard-luck nobles, and he had already approached Mjöllmile once before, attempting to palm off random junk as pricey antiques he'd let him have for a song.

Doubtlessly, he was here on another get-rich-quick scheme—but still, he *was* of noble blood. Mjöllmile had checked into him enough to know that for a fact, so he couldn't just show him the door on sight. That sort of behavior could lead to *lèse-majesté*, and then he'd have to worry less about his financial ledgers and more about his life. It made the job tricky for him, to say the least.

Ah, here we go again. The two of us, trying to outfox each other...

So Mjöllmile heard him out—and just as he thought, the story made him wish he'd hidden under the table. This man (the Viscount Cazac was his name) was seeking a financial investment so he could use slaves to open a shop for him. The merchant saw, to be brutally frank, no chance that it would ever succeed. Employing attractive female slaves wouldn't be nearly enough to make the business work. Cazac needed to thoroughly analyze the market, his client base, and his potential location, not to mention employee costs.

Telling him all this, of course, was like explaining calculus to a pig.

"Huhhh? Why can't you decide on a location for me? And you speak of employee costs? Now what sort of fool *pays* their slaves?!"

The viscount wasn't interested in hearing any of Mjöllmile's objections.

“Payment” wasn’t exactly what he meant, only that slaves need food like anyone else. And clothing, and a place to sleep. Not to mention the up-front costs for them would be far from trivial. If you wanted a slave attractive enough to catch the eye of most people, the money you’d need to expend on the search could buy you a decent house. It’d be a far more effective use of funding to just hire part-time staff, much like Mjöllmile did with the public-fronting stores he ran in Englesia.

As he saw it, all beauties age over time, and thus it was too difficult to make back your investment on forced labor in situations like that. If you were aiming for quick profits running a sexually themed establishment, you needed to be even more careful laying the foundations, or else your place would become a hive of disease—which, again, would make both Cazac and Mjöllmile criminals.

The merchant sighed to himself. There was no way in this lifetime that he’d ever accept such a hazardous proposal.

“Yes, indeed, my good viscount, you have a discerning eye. I must take my hat off to your wisdom. However, regarding the slaves you mention, I fear it may be difficult to procure them at this time, would it not? Human trafficking is banned in this kingdom, and even if you turn to the illegal trade, I fear you may not find the quality you are looking for, you see.”

He tried his best to make his rejection sound as inoffensive as possible. It didn’t work.

“Ah...well, about that. I actually have an in. I’ll tell you about it, too, if you’re willing to invest. But you know, I have to keep this discreet... All I’ll say for now is that there’s a certain *elf* in the picture.”

The way Cazac never missed an opportunity to put on airs rankled Mjöllmile, but he had the willpower to retain his composure. A master merchant like him could never physically reveal his disdain for his customers. Anyone who did was below third-rate in this trade and incapable of ever pinning down a large-scale deal.

But this elf-slave talk piqued Mjöllmile’s interest. If he was telling the truth, that was *beyond* a luxury commodity. But even before that, Mjöllmile was a man with some influence in the underground, running a not-so-legal outfit and

not afraid to engage in some dirty work now and again, albeit no more than he knew he could get away with. That was why he instructed his staff in this outfit to never stray past that one, final line in their work, even though he knew he'd get off scot-free as their boss either way.

Mjöllmile knew full well just how dangerous elven slaves were.

An elf? Only serious organized crime would get mixed up in that!

Elves were exceptionally long-lived. Many boasted mesmerizing beauty. They were intelligent, and most of them were well versed in magic. If an elf had been enslaved, it must have taken some extremely underhanded means. Enslaving an elven citizen of the kingdom was impossible— So did they find one hiding in the forest, or...?

Mjöllmile had an idea what this could be. He had heard about monster hunts, where rich people seeking exotic pets hired hunters to capture monsters in the forest. But if a demi-human had been snared by one of these hunters—and an elf, no less—quite a few nations would never let that go by without comment. The Dwarven Kingdom would immediately look into it, and the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion was even ruled by an elf. If word of this got out, it'd be a huge controversy. This wasn't a small-time pickpocket or fraud; it was the kind of thing that could trigger an international standoff.

If he was dealing with a noble with no qualms about sticking his hand into the fire like this... There had to be something backing him up. Something huge, fearsome, and not afraid to kill for profit. Mjöllmile's nose told him that getting involved would be dangerous.

His mind raced, thinking of a good excuse to turn down Cazac's offer. He came up with nothing. But just as he was at his wit's end:

"Yooooo! Mollie! Doing well?"

Someone opened the door and stepped right into their meeting, a beautiful young girl (or boy?) with golden eyes and silver hair that had a tinge of blue.

"Who are you, and how *dare* you interrupt my important business meeting?!"

As Cazac bellowed at the boy, Mjöllmile realized who the intruder was, stunned. There was no way he could forget that face, the face of the champion

who'd saved his life—the demon lord Rimuru himself. He knew this was the leader of that nation of monsters, and hearing he had become a demon lord shocked him to the core. But he really did it. He was part of the Octagram, recognized by his fellow demon lords—and for some reason, he seemed to take a liking to Mjöllmile.

They'd often meet up, occasionally working together on potential new business ventures. Recovery potion sales, for example. Mjöllmile was still the exclusive vendor around here, and he was now earning stable profits from his work. Just as things settled down with that, Rimuru approached him about developing a new type of food, "ramen," brought in from his own world. This was already on sale in a handful of restaurants, and the feedback was encouraging so far.

Now, more recently, Rimuru had had him taste test something called a "burger," talking about building a "chain" of restaurants specializing in their production and sale. Mjöllmile had agreed to test the concept, and right now he was busy assembling and educating a staff, as well as finding a location and outfitting it with everything needed. He had wanted to report back to Rimuru about his progress, but his demon lord duties kept him fiendishly busy. It had been about a month since they last spoke.

"Well, well! If it isn't Rimuru! I thought you said you were too caught up in this or that crisis to come visit?"

Mjöllmile, surprised at this sudden appearance, couldn't help but ask. After all, Rimuru had a thundering horde of Crusaders to deal with at the moment. He even advised the merchant to avoid Tempest for a while, as it'd be too dangerous for him. Fuze, guild master for the Kingdom of Blumund, was still cursing himself over his failure to stop Hinata, the Saint. So why was the lord himself here? All these thoughts immediately pushed Viscount Cazac out of Mjöllmile's mind.

"Stop! Please, stop! The master is seeing another visitor!"

He could hear the voice of one of his servants, someone too new to know who Rimuru was. Upon catching sight of him, the servant stopped in his tracks and just stared at him, slack-jawed. It was a rather pathetic sight to see—but

Mjöllmile couldn't blame him, since he himself might be doing the same if he didn't stop himself. It was fine if they were talking or scheming over something, but when Rimuru was his normal self, he was just so touchingly attractive, a completely different person.

"Rimuru, you said?"

Mjöllmile ignored Cazac. Rimuru, finally noticing him, gave him an awkward look.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were busy. I'll be waiting over at your manor, all right? See ya!"

The sound of Rimuru's voice brought Mjöllmile abruptly back to consciousness. He began to feel honest pity for Cazac, the viscount who told a demon lord "How dare you" to his face.

If Rimuru wasn't so easygoing, I doubt the viscount would be breathing right now...

What you don't know can't hurt you, as they say, although Mjöllmile wondered if he should make an exception at the moment.

But Cazac spoke up again, his voice raised. "Look, you little boy...or girl? What are you, Mjöllmile's mistress or the like? Do you realize you've both interrupted my meeting *and* listened in on confidential information? Do you understand the consequences of your indiscretion, hmm?"

Oh, by the gods, what is he saying...?

Mjöllmile, seeing Cazac eye Rimuru up and down with lecherous intent, could feel his heart stop.

"Oh, I apologize about that, sir. Nobody stopped me from barging in, so... Sorry."

Rimuru was cheerfully apologetic. But Cazac was too high-handed to forgive him.

"Hmm... You know, I like your face. Look, you could use a little instruction on how the world works, I'd say. How would you like *me* to look after you?"

Great. And now this.

Why do I have to deal with these utter fools, day in, day out...?

Mjöllmile was beyond exasperated and well into the realm of anger. Life seemed too ridiculous to be worth it at the moment. He could handle the scorn of bush-league nobility. But treating Rimuru, a man he owed a life debt to, like some harlot was unforgivable. Cazac's behavior had crossed the line and then some.

Yes, picking a fight with a noble would put Mjöllmile at a disadvantage, in the eyes of the law—but did that mean he should just sit there and take it? No. He was willing to be modest with rabble like this because it'd be a pain for him otherwise, but open hostility deserved to be treated in kind.

The merchant steeled himself.

“Cazac, you are being rude to the individual who saved my life. Why does some viscount think he can get away with riling me?”

“Wh-what?!”

“There will be no more business between us. I don’t want to see you in here begging me for anything again!”

“H-how *dare* you! A merchant, rebelling against nobility... Mjöllmile, have you gone mad?!”

“Hmph! Anyone willing to work with criminal groups and trigger cross-border crises is nothing but trouble to me. You’re liable to bring *those* kind to this city, too. Better to stamp out that pestilence before it can happen, I’d say.”

“M-Mjöllmile! After all the favors I’ve done for you... I’ll make *sure* you regret this!!”

With that, Cazac stormed out of the office, spotting the servants who had come in to see what the racket was about and figuring now was a good time to leave.

“Pfft. This child, thinking he rules the world...”

“Uh, Mollie? You sure you’re okay with riling that guy?”

Rimuru, meanwhile, was as breezy as always. *He really is like nothing on this world*, Mjöllmile thought as he relaxed. *It’s just as I thought when I heard of his*

ascension. He never changes...

He then dismissed all the other potential clients in his waiting room. In this world, there were certain opportunities you couldn't afford to miss. He wasn't foolish enough to misread the truly important things. He was a capable merchant, and he understood the importance of finding diamonds in the rough. But he also knew that some things were vital enough to abandon everything else for.

And really, he couldn't find it in himself to make Rimuru wait any longer. Not because Rimuru was a preferred, profit-making customer of his. He knew Rimuru helped him out in his time of greatest need, and he thus felt an obligation to never betray him. To him, there was no such thing as a job more important than dealing with Rimuru.

Has he come up with another scheme? he thought, growing excited as he instructed his staff to handle all other pressing matters for him. But in just a few moments, Mjöllmile's frustrating days of listening to endless strings of confident men and swindlers would come to an end, marking the start of a new chapter in his life.



Mjöllmile guided me over to his manor. When his butler caught sight of us, he almost fell over himself bowing to greet me. I'd been here several times before, so he must have recognized me. I keep telling him he doesn't have to do that, but ah well. Mjöllmile, meanwhile, paid it no mind, smiling ear to ear as he gave instructions to his servants. I imagine he'd provide the same tea and snacks he always did.

"Um, sorry," I said. "I guess I kind of interrupted your work?"

Mjöllmile chuckled. "No, no, Rimuru. I had wanted to cut ties with that dunderhead for a while now. He kept barging into my office with all these outrageous schemes, using his noble title to bully me around..."

He winced, then explained the whole story to me. So that freaky-looking dude back there was nobility? I could fully extinguish my aura at this point, so I didn't need a mask or anything when traveling to human towns. I broke the thing

when I ascended anyway, but I still kept it in my pocket, unrepaired, for the memories.

That's why the guy must've thought I was female, but I wasn't about to be upset about that. I knew how to read a situation and go with it, unlike Veldora and Shion, and I went easy on him because he acted pretty high-born. That was the right decision, I guess—but if Mjöllmile wanted him out of his life anyway, maybe I shouldn't have bothered.

"But what if the nobles start getting hostile with you? Wouldn't that make life difficult?"

"It would, but that man, Cazac, is nothing but a parasite. Today he came in saying he wanted to deal in slaves. An elven one, even..."

"Elven?!" I fired back, surprised. I saw a bunch of elves in that Dwarven Kingdom nightclub. Elen had some elven blood in her, too. They were treated as demi-human, not monsters, and slavery was likely outlawed around here.

"Uh, Mollie"—I had taken to calling him that; *Mjöllmile* was a mouthful—"Mollie, wouldn't that be a...?"

"A crime? Yes, very much so. He was asking me to be an accomplice to a crime. And I'll admit, I'm not exactly clean as a whistle, but not even I am brazen enough to enslave an elf."

"Ah. What'd happen if people found out?"

"Good question. Cazac has his viscount title to fall back on. Blumund's a small kingdom, but that means the noble class isn't that extensive. Even someone like him has a fair amount of clout."

He was a viscount? No wonder he kept insulting me like that. That would put him above the Baron of Veryard, Fuze's friend, and I can see why it'd be so much trouble for Mjöllmile.

"You sure you're okay, then?"

"Bahhh! They call me the King of the Dark City, you know. Don't worry about me. I've got enough strength to look out for myself!"

The King of the Dark City? Did Blumund even *have* a city like that? Maybe he

was referring to the poorer districts of this nation, but even that was heaven compared with the kind of place Yohm grew up in. When it came to law and order, Blumund was on the relatively decent side. I'd take his word for it, though.

"Uh, you really ought to be more careful than that. I've got a big job I want your help with."

That's right. I had been in talks with him about all kinds of matters. If he picked a fight with some noble punk and it got out of hand, that'd be trouble for me.

"Wah-ha-ha! It's fine, it's fine. When it comes to good fortune, you'll find none better than ol' Mjöllmile here! Look at the relationship I've built with *you*, for starters!"

There's just no fazing him, is there? That's what I like about him. But I couldn't afford to wait until *after* something happened. *Maybe I should bring on a bodyguard or two for him*, I thought as I watched him laugh it off.

"So, Rimuru, what brings you here today?"

I recalled what we had to talk about.

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We were planning to hold a grand festival, attended by the monsters of the Forest of Jura and all the world leaders from the human realms. We called it the Tempest Founder's Festival, and we had already picked the dates for it.

With things patched up between Hinata and me, all my anxieties were gone. The date of Yohm's coronation as king had also been decided, and we had sent word to all the neighboring countries to help that plan along. Rigurd and his team were busy writing up invitations to the leaders we wanted there, but they weren't the only ones in full work mode. News of the nationwide festival had riled up enthusiasm across all my domain's monsters, and each of my administration's departments was formulating plans to wow them during the

event.

Look at Shuna, for example. She intended to launch an entire lineup of new dishes to impress our guests, as well as open Tempest's first café, offering a variety of colorful cakes. Yoshida, whose café in Englesia was now a favorite of mine, was assisting in the effort—he had once turned down every offer I sent him, but the moment he set eyes on Shuna, I could see him start to get fidgety.

“Be... Before I opened this café, I enjoyed the support of a great number of people. I’d be happy to help you, too, but I can’t really leave here...”

“I hope you will reconsider,” Shuna said with a polite and elegant bow, one hand over the other. It was a little show-off-y but powerful enough to shake the heart of any man. I figured it’d work well enough, but:

“Mmh... Flirting won’t work on me, you know. If you want to convince me, do it in the kitchen! If you can wow me with your culinary skills, I would be glad to consider it.”

Thanks to Yoshida, this was now a cooking battle. Nothing worth worrying about for Shuna, though; anyone could recognize her cuisine was first-rate.

“Shuna, give him everything you’ve got! Make this cocky baker beg for mercy with something spectacular!”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Whoa, who’s being cocky now?!”

I ignored Yoshida’s complaining; Shuna was ready to go. Yoshida’s own skills had lit a fire under her.

With the café kitchen left to her, Shuna began cooking up the dish nearest and dearest to her heart—*tamagoyaki*, a rolled-up scrambled egg. Simple, yes, but one’s ability to execute it perfectly was the ultimate way to test a chef’s acumen. Yoshida eyed the results placed on a dish, then nervously swallowed before silently stabbing it with a fork and bringing it to his mouth.

“It... It’s amazing!”

A one-hit KO.

“Thank you very much,” said Shuna, smiling—and that smile was the final

blow. Yoshida finally gave in, roundly defeated in heart and taste buds.

"Pfft. Well, you got me! But this is a *special* favor, all right?"

It was funny, watching this burly middle-aged guy act all shy around Shuna. He was practically falling over himself for this fetching young woman with light-pink hair. I think he was smitten from the very start, actually, but better not to say that. If he wanted to play it cool, it'd be mean to stop him.

So Shuna and Yoshida were now a pair in the kitchen. I had no doubts they and their work would be a star attraction at the festival.

Next, we had Gabil. The dragonewt was working with Vester to build a presentation devoted to the history of healing potions. They intended to keep the core fundamentals of their research a trade secret, but they wanted to use this pavilion to recruit new people interested in joining their team. They had enough staff for now, they said, but just wanted to find potential hires with the kind of passion they wanted.

Garm (eldest of the three dwarven brothers) and Kurobe planned to show off their own wares at the event. Their pavilion would be alongside Gabil and Vester's, and already they were talking about competing to see who attracted the larger crowds. Glad to see they were using this festival to have a little fun.

Kaijin was also set to return the night before the bash. I told Geld to take a break during the event, so construction should be largely complete before then. I informed my staff that our prisoners of war deserved a little celebration as well; they'd be enjoying a feast over in their own facility. A few people would have to work during the holiday, but we made sure to accommodate their schedules so they could trade off days and not be stuck on duty the whole time. The festival would continue for about a week, so I wanted everyone to get in on the excitement.

Come to think of it, Shion was planning something, too. She was very confident about it ("Hee-hee-hee, I hope you're looking forward to it, Sir Rimuru"), so I was half-excited, half-scared shitless. That...and Veldora was alarming me with his suggestions again. Better do something about that before he starts freaking people out...

Looking at all these people, I figured I should probably pitch in somehow—

which brings us to the involvement of my old friend Gard Mjöllmile.

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A manor servant brought me some tea. I had come here many times before, so he was used to me and provided a couple of the cookies I liked. Taking a sip of the drink, I grinned. It was just as tasty as always, helping put my mind in a better place. Time to move on to negotiations, then.

"Anyway, Mollie, I've got another job for you. Don't worry; it's an easy one this time, I promise."

"Oh, another bright idea of yours? You always bring such fascinating projects to the table, but they certainly require a lot of...*start-up* work, to say the least."

He grinned at me. Despite his complaint, it was clear he was interested in what I had to offer him.

My project to bring fast food to this world—burgers, the whole bit—was still underway. I had handed my outline of what needed to be done to Mjöllmile, and he was in the midst of executing it. The plan had been on the back burner for a while, what with Hinata marching on me and everything, but I wanted to come over and see how it was going, as well as talk about putting up a satellite location in Tempest in time for our festival.

"Hee-hee! Oh, don't be a stick in the mud, Mollie. You know our recent project? Before we launch in Blumund and Englesia, I'd like you to maybe open up a test location in my nation first."

"Oh? You know, I actually appreciate that offer a great deal, because I was just thinking about where we should train our staff. But if you're proposing that, have you worked out your differences with the Crusaders?"



He looked a bit concerned. I must have left him too long without updates. Although I didn't intend for it to turn into a fight, we had certain Luminism doctrine issues to deal with. If we were going to continue dealing with the Western Nations, we couldn't afford to ignore the Holy Church issues. Now, however, that was all taken care of. We had nothing left to worry about.

"Hee-hee-hee... Yeah, I 'worked them out,' all right. Hinata and I made amends peacefully, and I also worked things out with Lu..."

"Lu?"

"Lu... Loose ends! We managed to set a few ground rules and tie up any loose ends, that's all. Everything's peachy keen now!"

"Ahhh, I see! And here I thought the Western Holy Church was a much more intimidating group to work with. Glad to see they're more reasonable than that. Maybe I was too worried for my own good!"

Mjöllmile gave me a relieved smile. I politely smiled back, sweating on the inside about the mistake I just barely avoided making. If I had followed through there and said Luminus's name, there'd be hell to pay—which I could deal with, but what if she decided to rub out Mjöllmile as well? I was inviting both Luminus *and* Hinata and her Crusaders to the Founder's Festival, so I'd better not shoot my mouth off before then—not that I knew whether the demon lord would deign to grace my little event with her presence. She'd probably be like "Why would I ever let myself be seen among the rabble?" or something. I'm sure she'd be an incredibly demanding visitor if she showed, so I honestly didn't mind if she declined. *Though, maybe I ought to encourage her to attend...? I don't know.*

"In that case," Mjöllmile happily exclaimed as I thought about this, "let me show you the results of our training so far!"

There was no point wondering about whether she'd come. I needed to consider my own program for now.

"Oh, has it been going well?"

"Nothing less than perfect! We've trained them to the point that everyone can perform their tasks on the same level."

"Ah, I knew you wouldn't let me down, Mjöllmile!"

We grinned at each other. It sounded like making our debut at the fest wouldn't be an issue.

"So can we put up a storefront offering burgers, hot dogs, fries, and the drink lineup we talked about?"

"That we can. And I think we can attract customers with those beef skewers dipped in the 'secret sauce' you talked about. Pairing them with a rice bowl will definitely improve our bottom line."

"It's been getting good reviews?"

Mjöllmile briskly nodded. "It's become a low-key staff favorite, that's for sure."

Making yakitori skewers out of cowdeer and chiducken seemed to satisfy people.

"Great! Let's add that to the menu, too. Do we have enough employees to work with?"

"Well, for the moment, I'm thinking we could launch with upward of twenty locations. But starting that big would take a fair amount of money. We'd need backup personnel, which I'm training right now—that's a necessary expense, the way I see it. So along those lines, if we can deploy more gradually, say five locations at a time, that'll put us well within budget."

That's Mjöllmile for you. He fully understood my proposal, and already he was working out any staff issues involved. In that case:

"All right. Well, sorry to trouble you for this, but can you bring over around five of your best employees?"

"Five? What did you want from them?"

"Well, I've got this friend of mine. His name's Veldora."

"V-Veldora?!"

"Yeah, and he's, like, *super*-worked up about opening a hibachi booth at the fest."

"Er, is he...?"

Mjöllmile seemed to be growing visibly paler as I explained. It worried me, but I soldiered on.

"So you know, it'd be way too dangerous to leave him running that by himself, right?"

"I—I would say so, yes..."

I beamed at him. "So that's why I want five of your best staffers to help him!"

Mjöllmile, watching me gleefully dump all the responsibility on him, turned his eyes toward the ceiling. "Would you be able to guarantee the...er, safety of this staff?"

"Of course! Whenever they have any problems, they can come right to me. If Veldora starts getting all uppity, I'll put 'im in his place."

"I trust you will, yes, but... Um, we *are* talking about *the* Veldora, yes? The Storm Dragon?"

I suppose we were. Guess Mjöllmile knew the name, didn't he?

"Is that bad?"

"Ahhh... *Bad* may not be the correct term. I just wonder if the crew will be, too, well, petrified to get any work done..."

Hmm. I should've known. Yeah, if you haven't met Veldora, you must think he's crazy scary, huh? Catastrophe-class, and all that.

"Well...maybe that's not a good idea, huh?"

"No, perhaps not... If he could at least assume another name for himself, temporarily, our staff could work for him unawares..."

Aha!

"Yes! Brilliant, Mollie! Let's give him another name so nobody knows who he is!"

"Huh? You—you can *do* that?!"

"Sure. If he whines about it, I'll just tell him he can't do the hibachi thing at all.

Right, let's do that. And I'll pay a special bonus to the five people you pick for me, so let them know I'm counting on 'em, okay?"

Whether Mjöllmile was keeping up with me or not, I considered this problem as good as solved. Veldora was being as selfish as always, but we were entertaining world celebrities here. Embarrassment would be the least of our worries if he gave all our guests food poisoning or whatever, so I couldn't rest easy until I knew there were people who could watch over and direct him. I didn't want to dismiss him out of hand, but I was too nervous to let him off the leash completely, so it's a lucky thing Mjöllmile had the staff trained like I asked him.

He looked like he wanted to tell me something, but probably nothing important. The ball was in his court now.



Rimuru looked supremely happy with himself at resolving this issue. Mjöllmile, meanwhile, felt like someone had just thrown a lit bomb into his lap.

L-Lord Veldora?! I knew the seal had been undone, but he wants me to deal with him?!

This was a major headache in the making, for sure.

Rimuru was talking sense at first. Building a stand for the festival would be a good training opportunity. But if they were babysitting Veldora as well, that was another story. Mjöllmile wondered what the hell he had just gotten himself into, but as he observed the smiling, carefree Rimuru in front of him, he decided to take the "Ah well" approach. Ever since Rimuru saved him, he had tried to live life with no regrets. He might've been conniving and obsessed with money, but he was nothing if not brave.

"But a festival, though, eh? If we're talking a large-scale event, I imagine you must have people jumping up and down to join in. A good opportunity for a merchant like myself, hmm?"

He had reason to think so. Many people, merchants and adventurers in particular, were now filing in and out of Tempest. It was starting to get heavily advertised; Mjöllmile was sure they were attracting curious travelers from the

nearby towns and villages. That was exactly the kind of situation a merchant stood to profit from.

"Oh, you're interested?" Rimuru took a sip from his tea, apparently picking up on Mjöllmile's muttering. "You know, to tell the truth, I'm still wavering on a few things with this festival. I know you've helped us decide on some of our attractions already, but I'm still trying to think of a big, flashy centerpiece for the event."

"A centerpiece?"

"Yeah. Basically, my plan is to turn our town into a kind of health resort. We've got our hot-spring infrastructure in place, along with lodging and guest houses suitable for royalty...but I feel like we're still lacking in entertainment."

"I see," Mjöllmile replied, figuring it wouldn't hurt to hear him out.

As the excited Rimuru then explained, Tempest already boasted a healthy amount of high-end accommodation. Mjöllmile had stayed in it before, so he knew that much. The rooms on offer ran the gamut, providing a selection of things to enjoy—a nice meal with a fine view of the gardens, an open-air hot spring to relax in, and so on. In the smaller nations of the world, it'd be hard for even the nobility to maintain their own private baths. That went double if there wasn't any water service, forcing you to physically dump water in a tub and heat it up manually.

To Mjöllmile, who took that for granted, a facility with a hot spring you could enjoy any time you liked was nothing short of mind-blowing...but apparently Rimuru wasn't satisfied with just that.

"I understand all that," he said, "but if you already have good food and relaxing spaces, how much more of a resort do you need?"

Rimuru shook his head. "You aren't thinking big enough, Mjöllmile. Me, I think that won't be enough on its own. I'd like some kind of project that everyone can have a little more fun with. Like, for example..."

What Rimuru then laid out for him was a complete recreational tourism strategy for the Forest of Jura. They'd provide travelers with day-long walking tours deep into the forest, accompanied by a guide/bodyguard. They'd hold

fishing tournaments at the nearby canyons, hunting tours amid untouched natural reserves, and so on and so on. All the needed equipment would be available to rent for anyone interested.

"That *does* sound exciting. It'd certainly attract the kind of nobility with all the time in the world on their hands—and for those with more active work lives, it'd be a fine way to relax."

"Right, you see? That's what I'm hoping for, but I'm just wondering if there's something we can get *everybody* in on, you know?"

One of Rimuru's aims with the Founder's Festival, it seemed, was to encourage repeat visitors to Tempest. He was coming up with all kinds of things to keep travelers engaged and interested in the area. Mjöllmile was both amazed and exasperated. How many years ahead was he even thinking?

"Well, why not use Englesia as an example to imitate? The theater is quite popular over in their capital, I hear. They hold operas and stage plays nearly every day of the year there. You also see fighting tournaments held live at the arena..."

"Oooh! Oh, yes! Where the Hero Masayuki is, right? Isn't he really popular?"

"He certainly is. Lightspeed Masayuki, as they call him. He's dominated the tournaments for years. I'm actually rather a fan of his."

"You are?!"

Even a hardened merchant like Mjöllmile had his sports allegiances. He began giving an in-depth explanation of the tournament system to Rimuru, failing to notice how he began to yawn almost instantly.

"...So really, nobody's seen a man's sword flash that way before. Hence the name Lightspeed, as you see. Occasionally, they hold to-the-death battles with captured monsters, but the Hero's fighting companions are pretty strong themselves. I've been in the audience for some real white-knuckle matches myself. And if *you* had a spectacle like that... Ah, but I'm sorry. I've been talking for far too long. But come to think of it, isn't *your* staff pretty strong, too, Rimuru? Who's the strongest out of—?"

"Whoa! Stop right there! I can't let you go on, Mjöllmile."

It was obvious Mjöllmile's interest would shift over to Benimaru and the rest of Rimuru's officers, sooner or later. He had met Rigurd and the others several times, and to him, their muscles couldn't have been just for show. Between them and all the other powerful magic-born he saw around town, he couldn't help but wonder who was champion among them all. Now seemed like a good time to ask, but Rimuru's reaction was chilly.

"Listen," Rimuru said, voice lowered. "Between you and me, if you start talking like *that* around them, it's gonna cause some serious disputes, you know? There's this paladin named Arnaud, and he actually asked the same question back when we were all negotiating earlier. It led to the most insipid argument you ever saw—they were all trying to rank themselves on some impossible-to-understand scale, and it was starting to get pretty heated before I stepped in. I was lucky enough that only part of my staff was there, but seriously, better avoid topics like that. It's a real powder keg with those guys."

The one official who'd likely pitch the biggest fit of all about the question wasn't there, Rimuru said, so he'd managed to talk everyone down from their fervor. He'd been trying to avoid such delicate questions ever since. If his main staff ever got into a real fight with one another, it could affect everything he'd striven to build for his town, and he couldn't afford to risk that.

"I... I see. My pardons, then."

"That's okay. Just be careful around them. But I *do* like your point of view here..."

Rimuru didn't seem overly concerned about the issue, unlike Mjöllmile. *I'd say he's a little skewed, too*, he thought as he waited for Rimuru to continue.

"There *is* one vacant section of town. Perhaps we could turn it into an opera house, huh? Maybe that'd encourage people to become playwrights, and that'd lead to some new forms of entertainment. And an arena, huh...?"

He looked at Mjöllmile, and the merchant could almost see the gears turning behind his smile. *Great*, he thought. *He's got some grandiose plan in mind again. Why does he always have to look like that? He's good-looking enough as long as he keeps his mouth shut...*

"Mollie!"

He shuddered. The moment had come. “Y-yes?”

“You know a lot about battle tournaments, right?” Rimuru stood up and then sat next to Mjöllmile, voice as ingratiating as possible as he practically whispered in his ear. “How ‘bout we hold one, then? Can you arrange that for me?”

“N-now, wait just a minute! That’s a lot to put on my plate out of—”

“We can build the arena for you. For now, I just need you to handle the ‘show’ aspect!”

Mjöllmile’s objections fell on deaf ears. There was no point resisting him any longer.

“There’s just no beating you, is there, Rimuru? Every single time. All right. I promise I’ll do my best for you!”

He showed a bit of a smile now. Honestly, Mjöllmile didn’t hate this. In fact, being assigned such a vital mission was like music to his ears. What did he need to put on a show like that? He’d have to both research it and put his thoughts into action. Never in his dreams did he ever think he’d be entrusted with such a large-scale event.

Well, I’m in deep now! I... I’ll never get this chance again!

He didn’t even care if he messed this up. Based on all the business partners he ever had, he knew this man, Rimuru, wasn’t the type to get angry over one failure or the other. He brought ideas into fruition fast, and he could be trusted—the most important thing to any merchant. If he said he’d build an arena, he’d build an arena—as unbelievable as it was to Mjöllmile, he could give his monsters any orders he wanted, and they’d be able to pull it off for him.

He may not look it too often, but Rimuru’s a demon lord. As long as his plans are sound, it’d be simple for him to assemble everything he needed. And now he’s relying on me...

“Good to hear,” Rimuru replied blithely as Mjöllmile’s emotions ran wild. “And I know we’re trying to get lots of world leaders, but make sure regular people can join in the fun, too, okay? You can’t make a profit if it’s not open to the general public, after all. I saw that in Englesia.”

"The general public?"

"Yeah. I'm going to build a coliseum capable of holding fifty thousand people or so. Like I said, there's some vacant space to work with. If we build that fast-food stand we were talking about nearby, that ought to goose our profits, won't it? We could have people go around selling food, and besides, the more foot traffic passing by, the more customers we'll get, right? What do you think, Mollie?"

Rimuru was picturing entertainment for the masses—and taking the masses' money. A fifty-thousand-seat coliseum would compare to Englesia's pretty favorably—in fact, it'd be five times that arena's size. It showed how serious Rimuru was about this.

"You see, we can have some standing-room sections that we'll let people into at no charge. Meanwhile, we can direct rich people to the reserved seats and charge them appropriately. And then we'll have royal boxes for the nobility with more money than sense. We'll also need seats for special guests and invitees and things. I'd like you to figure out the ratios we need for all these seat types, if we want to make as much money as possible."

Once again, he was leaving it all to Mjöllmile with a smile. Not even Englesia's arena allowed the farmer and citizen classes to watch arena events for free. Mjöllmile could see the logic to it.

"I see... I thought fifty thousand was too high a number to aim for, but if *that's* what you're picturing..."

"Right. It's important that we attract people's interest with this stuff. And if we pack the standing-room sections, won't that make a reserved seat look more attractive if you can afford it?"

"I bet it would. Better to reserve a spot instead of vying for space you don't know will be available. That'll naturally make the seats more valuable."

This was a completely different approach from the arena in Englesia's capital, which was chiefly a diversion for the upper classes. The aim here was to build buzz and pack as many people in as possible. It sounded deeply compelling to Mjöllmile. If admission was free, farmers and field laborers would come over to see the show when work didn't occupy them—and when they spread the word

about what they saw, that'd attract the middle classes from neighboring nations.

Besides, having tens of thousands of visitors would no doubt fill up the inns along the highways to Tempest—it'd be kind of neat to build the “fast food” establishments Rimuru described at stops along the way. When they arrived, of course, they’d need somewhere to stay. And if it could help advertise their food, their lodging, their baths, and so on, the arena wouldn’t even need to make a profit. The business all these fans would bring to town could more than make up for it.

“I gotta hand it to you, Rimuru. You had this all planned out from the start, didn’t you...?”

“Huh?! Um, yeah, kind of? Of course, yes!”

“You have enough hotel rooms for it, I think. The issue becomes how to attract guests on a regular basis. We’ll need to think about boosting our profit margins later, but spreading the word comes first, I think. And that’s what you’re counting on me to help with?”

“Y-yeah. Pretty much.”

“I see, I see. You want me to come up with the kind of entertainment that’ll bring people back again and again. Something that’ll make them contemplate another visit, even if this particular battle tournament turns a loss. If we do that, you’ll consider this a success?”

“...That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’m impressed you understand me so well, Mollie. You’re the only man I can trust with this job!”

This job—find ways to attract people to Tempest, using a battle tournament as bait—excited Mjöllmile to the core. And really, Rimuru had all but worked it out by himself before throwing it in his lap. He had to resist the urge to shout out loud with excitement.

“Heh...heh-heh... This is just too much...”

“Hey, it’s best to leave things like this to a professional, right? Don’t tell me you don’t feel up to it, Mollie?”

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How harsh of you. I never realized you had such a mean streak, Rimuru."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Right you are! But this is a piece of cake for you, isn't it?"

They both laughed loudly at each other—then exchanged sly glances.

"You realize how much money is going to change hands here, hmm? I'm sure you do."

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... Not to worry. You have Mjöllmile on your side, and accounting is my middle name. Just watch—I'm going to give you exactly the results you want!"

"I'm sure you will. Counting on you is the smartest thing I've ever done."

Rimuru was right. This tournament *would* take a lot of money. He honestly scared Mjöllmile sometimes. He began to wonder just how far ahead he was thinking. The thought gave him vague fears, even as his mind filled with wild dreams.

"Now, along those lines, I think I've stumbled upon a new way we can use your healing potions. That medicine can heal you as long as you are not killed instantly, yes? That means our competitors can fight with no small level of intensity, I assume. Plus, if a fighter is injured in one match and appears good as new in the next one, that would certainly make for some good advertising."

"Wha?!"

"Oh, did you not think that far?"

"N-no, um, I did. It's just that, you know, I wanted to see if your thoughts were any different from mine."

"Ah, I see! Yes, I'm sure you've already considered that much, Rimuru, heh-heh-heh... But I'm not done yet!"

Mjöllmile began to lay out idea after idea for him. This turned into a volley of brainstorming and compliments on the ideas. One concept was advertising the healing potion at the tournament, then selling it on-site to adventurers. Another involved weapon and armor rentals and sales.

"Even Kurobe's failures at the forge are pretty off the charts when it comes to

raw power. We can't sell those to just anyone, but he has a workshop full of apprentices these days. Offering *their* stuff shouldn't be an issue."

They decided to give it a shot.

Another idea thrown around was state-run betting operations. This also existed in Englesia, where even simple pick 'em bets were netting huge amounts of revenue at the arena. They could do the same thing pitting warriors against captured monsters—which had its risks, of course, but Rimuru had a small army of powerful fighters at this point, so it wasn't nearly the hazard Mjöllmile pictured. Maybe they could even offer training courses for beginner adventurers, reserving part of the arena's space as a dojo of sorts. The lessons would be paid, of course, but they'd come with qualified instructors to guide newbies through the basics.

The ideas came rolling one after the other from Mjöllmile. As long as Rimuru was providing his full support, he felt like he'd never run out of them. He couldn't stop thinking about how huge his role was, dreaming up possibilities and being responsible for making them happen. It was a bit daunting, but far more than that, exciting.

"I'll do it," he said with a shiver. "I'll do it all for you! My merchant's soul is telling me we're going to make a massive pile of money on this!"

"Excellent! I love that confidence of yours, Mollie! And I *know* you got what it takes to give me the kind of revenue I want!"

Rimuru's praise embarrassed Mjöllmile a bit. But he wasn't done yet.

"Also, um, if you're interested, of course, if this whole tournament turns out well, you wanna come live in my town? I could make a trade department for you—or maybe a PR firm or general financial office. It doesn't matter what we call it, actually, but I could let you run it all. I got a pretty big population to govern these days, and once the tournament's over, I think it's high time we reorganize our administration. I'm sure everyone will agree to it, as long as you can pull this off. What d'you think?"

Rimuru sounded like he didn't doubt Mjöllmile at all. It made his heart dance. The question "What d'you think?" plucked his heartstrings like a master harpist, and the melodies echoed over and over through his mind like a concert hall.

He gave him a strong nod. "...There's just no beating you, Rimuru. Or should I start calling you *Sir* Rimuru? I promise you, Sir Rimuru, I'll do whatever it takes to succeed and join your team!"

There wasn't a moment's hesitation. How could there ever be? *This man has counted on me so far*, he thought. *I can't let myself mess this up!*

As advanced as he was in age, Mjöllmile was now captive to the burning fires of excitement and hope and dreams in his heart. He could barely stay seated. He wished he could bottle this feeling up in a jar and keep it nearby forever.

"You don't have to exaggerate." Rimuru laughed, but the more they got into details, the more Mjöllmile felt like he was going to jump out of his skin. Pulling this event off, and becoming Rimuru's trusted associate, was his new ambition in life, and he was ready to fight tooth and nail to make it happen.

Once Rimuru left, Mjöllmile called over his retainers and servants.

"What did Sir Rimuru want from you, Sir Mjöllmile?" asked Bydd, the former C-level adventurer who was now the merchant's personal bodyguard.

"Bydd," Mjöllmile replied with an elated nod, "things are about to get *very* busy."

"Oh, did he give you another impossible task? I like all the ideas he has, but I wish he understood how much he puts you through the wringer, huh?"

He laughed, but he didn't really mean it. Just like Mjöllmile, Bydd owed Rimuru his life. He was one of the demon lord's greatest fans, and while he described it as a wringer, Bydd probably enjoyed the wringing more than anyone else.

Mjöllmile chuckled back at him. "Bydd, this is gonna be nothing like you've ever seen before. Everything I've done up to now was like selling pencils on the street corner compared with what's coming. I'll be wagering my destiny on this one."

He already looked like a mob boss, but Mjöllmile's smile only added to his foreboding presence. His retainers were used to it, but none could hide their surprise upon hearing this declaration.

"What d'you mean by that, Boss?" his chief butler asked. His boss gave him a quick recap—running a battle tournament alongside the Founder's Festival, together with a test run of their upcoming fast-food concept. The festival itself would be a show of force for the newly ascended Rimuru, an effort all of Tempest was pitching in for, and the scope of it was likely beyond even Mjöllmile's imagination. His excitement at receiving such a vital assignment was plain as he explained to the staff.

"Thus, I've decided," he concluded, "that I want to become part of Rimuru's team. No matter what, I have to make sure this is a huge success!"

His servants began to chatter among themselves. Mjöllmile, it seemed, had no intention of returning to Blumund. It caused quite a stir.

"Heh-heh... You ain't planning on going alone, are you, Sir Mjöllmile? Maybe I'm just some punk off the street, but I'm still your bodyguard. The gang I got under me practically worships Sir Rimuru. Take me along with ya!"

"You wouldn't be able to guard so much as a flea over there."

"Aw, come on!"

"But if you would like to assist me in *other* ways, I suppose I could bring you alone."

"Sure thing, Boss! I'll do anything for you! I ain't exactly intelligent, but I got street smarts, you know."

Bydd likely did, given his swindler past, although it left Mjöllmile less than convinced.

"Bahhh, all right. The more the merrier, I suppose! And I bet that gang of yours could provide at least a *little* security, if they know they'll get a meal out of it. Let's take 'em along. Now," he continued, turning toward his retainers, "what about you? You're free to continue using this manor if you like."

"Let us join you, sir!" they said in near unison. There was no hesitation among them; after all, Mjöllmile had trained them. Nothing was keeping them in this nation.

It was decided...and now, the real work began. As a full-fledged citizen of

Blumund and member of the Free Guild, Mjöllmile had the freedom to travel to other nations. But as a man who believed in fast action once he made a decision, he felt a duty to the business he had remaining in town. There was no need for anxiety about the future.

"You," he said, pointing out one of his most talented employees. "You've proven yourself qualified enough. D'you think you could run things here for me?"

"S-Sir?! This is so sudden..."

"Well, I mean... I appreciate that you'd like to join me, but think about it. We'll be starting completely from scratch in Sir Rimuru's domain. I'm planning to be a big success and win over his trust, but I don't want you to run that gauntlet, too."

This was a cover story. In truth, he didn't want to sell this manor and lose his base of operations in Blumund. Ideally, a few of his people would remain here, keeping the lights on whenever his work brought him back.

The leader he picked, a man named Bach, was brought here by his father, a relative of Mjöllmile's who'd asked him to train his son in the business. He proved quick-witted enough to live up to his end of the bargain; however, Bach's family had faced difficulty after his father's business failed, leaving him with nowhere to return to, so Mjöllmile decided to formally hire him as head clerk. At the moment, that family was living off Bach's income, and Mjöllmile felt too guilty about having him go off on this risky venture. He had no complaint about his work; no doubt the business would work fine under his watchful eye.

"B-Boss... I couldn't be happier to receive this offer from you. But I hoped that we could perhaps join you..."

Bach, no doubt, was too young to readily accept this. He was reluctant to go fully independent yet; perhaps he thought he still had things to prove to Mjöllmile. It was cute of him, but Mjöllmile didn't like it. If Bach wanted to stand out on his own, he had to be let out in the wild sooner or later. This was a golden opportunity.

"Bach, I am not your father. I'm offering you a position running this business,

but I'm not *giving* it to you. Listen: Even after I leave here, you better not do anything that puts this business on the rocks, all right? In fact, once you're able, I'd like to see you buy this outfit out from under me! So make it a big success and bring your parents back here someday, all right?"

He gave him an affectionate smile and patted him on the shoulder. It was a tender moment, even if he still intended to work out a contract with Bach and keep a piece of the proceeds. He was a merchant, occasionally a hard taskmaster, but never a philanthropist. *Besides, he reasoned, if he can't even pay me for my share of the business, he'd never have what it takes to succeed in the first place.*

"Thank you," Bach said, choking up a bit, "thank you... I promise you that I'll make a man out of myself and repay this favor!"

"I hope you do," replied Mjöllmile, smiling ear to ear.

Now he went to work, choosing who to bring and who to keep behind.

"If you ever have any problems," he advised Bach, "tell me about them, and I'll help. But I believe in all of you. I know you'll do just fine. Don't disappoint me!"

The group remaining in Blumund all nodded at him. Mjöllmile had trained them thoroughly; none of them would fall out of line. Even if they were dealing with high nobility, he was sure they'd never do anything ill-advised.

"You've taught them all well. Rest assured they will not let you down!" Bach said in return.

"Well said. Also, while I'm sure you're aware of this..."

"Do not worry, sir. I promise we will maintain the sales markets you've built up here. If you ever need access to them, we'll give you first priority."

"Good. I hope you will!"

Just in case, Mjöllmile wanted to be sure he got first dibs on any goods he might need. He always kept an eye on every facet of the situation, and Bach was in perfect sync with his thoughts.

He's still a little green, but he's starting to look the part, at least...

Now he was sure Bach wouldn't let him down.

The last of his affairs were now squared away, and it was time for Mjöllmile to make the journey to Tempest with his retainers in tow.



Leaving Mjöllmile's house, I breathed a sigh of relief. So glad he said yes to that. He seemed ready to take the invite, too, so I should be expecting him shortly.

One thing I couldn't say about my monsters is that any of them were good on financial matters. I was having Shuna handle the account books for us, but she couldn't do that forever. A village is one thing, but a full-fledged nation is another; Shuna would be in over her head. Lilina in the management department and Vester from the Dwarven Kingdom were helping, but I'm not sure even that would be enough.

That's why Mjöllmile came to mind. His brain revolved around money in ways few people ever experienced, he had connections with nobility, and he was running businesses in multiple countries. It seemed a waste for him to remain a merchant forever; I was sure he'd be a great help to me. Besides, we had a good working relationship. If he could handle finances for us, maybe he'd allow me a little more spending money to work with. I had been running a few side hustles with him before, but now I could picture that extra income ballooning.

I mean, our treasury's pretty well-endowed, you know? But taking money out of it for myself, despite not paying any salary to my staff, seemed kind of low. Everyone always said "Oh, it's all yours, Sir Rimuru," but that just made me all the more reluctant. It felt wrong, and I wanted that money to help with expanding our nation.

Still, I needed some of it. I wanted to take people like Gobta out at night every now and then, even if I didn't have much interest in it. Veldora was whining at me about that, too, and you know how you go through cash pretty quick at nightclubs...not that I had much interest, that is. (No, really.)

But while it was a drop in the bucket for our treasury, if it was my personal money, I'm sure Gobta and Veldora would burn through it like it was nothing.

Plus, Shuna usually provides me with money, but if I tell her where I'm going, she snaps that wallet shut, and I can't really tell her it's "my" money then, so...

This was why I was running a few side jobs for extra spending cash. And with my future expansion, I had a feeling money wouldn't be a worry for much longer.

That battle tournament was a pretty neat idea, too. Mjöllmile is such a talented guy. I wasn't sure how he would take it, but he demonstrated some real enthusiasm as we brainstormed the plan. It barely took him a moment to suggest running a tournament to attract visitors, then take advantage of the crowds to sell potions and equipment. He's got a forward-looking eye and a knack for great ideas, that's for sure.

Once I get back, I'll need to get ourselves an arena to work with. Geld was busy with urban-planning work over in the Beast Kingdom, and Mildo was supporting him. Without our two main building specialists, I'd have to oversee the operation. But that's fine. After running all these construction projects, one after the other, we were starting to build a well-trained staff, enough so that I was mostly giving orders and not doing much else. I knew about this craftsman named Gobkyuu, who worked under the tutelage of Mildo, and he was involved with town architecture enough that I thought an impressive circular arena would be in his wheelhouse.

The job would normally take a decade or so, I'd imagine, but if you run the job with monster muscle, I thought we could cut that down a lot...like, down to maybe the two months or so we had until the festival. Even I had to admit that was far too little time to get everything done, so for now, I at least wanted the central fighting stage to be completed.

But how would we design it?

Understood. From my master's memories, I have found the Colosseum of Rome. Building blueprints using it as a base... Completed.

Well, *that* was easy. I had some paper on hand, so I drew up the plans, adding my own style to it. This alone would normally take several months—surveying the site, calculating soil strength, that kind of thing. You could often spend a whole year on that kind of preliminary stuff. And here I was, drawing up

blueprints that'd normally take several days at a computer on our equivalent of a cocktail napkin... Raphael's support helped a lot even with detailed work like this. It honestly felt unfair to me, but I had no plans to give it up, so...

Now I had my plans. Next I'd have to discuss them with Gobkyuu— But before that, while I was here in Blumund, I may as well stop at the Free Guild. I could forward the plans over to Gobkyuu in the meantime; once I was free, I could assemble a team of craftsmen on-site to get down to business.

“Ranga, you there?”

“Here, my master!”

He popped his head out from my shadow. With things settled over in Farmus, everyone except Diablo was back home, with Ranga lurking in my shadow like it was his personal den. I gave him the arena blueprints I had just whipped up.

“Take these to a craftsman in town named Gobkyuu. And can you tell him we'll meet up at the west gate once I'm free?”

“Very well. But are you not returning, Sir Rimuru?”

“No. I wanna see Fuze first, while I'm here.”

“Will you not need a bodyguard?”

He looked a bit nervous, tail down. But I wasn't concerned. I *am* a demon lord, and I had Absolute Defense activated. If I ran into an attack that could penetrate *that* barrier, I wouldn't be safe anywhere in this world.

“I'll be fine! We'll just chat a bit, and then I'll head back. But I *should* be concerned about Mjöllmile, huh? He's gotten kind of tangled up with this one bottom-feeder noble, and there's no telling what the fallout from that is gonna be like.”

“Ah, that vulgar man from before? Would you like me to snuff him out?”

Please, no. Doing that in a foreign city is how you trigger a diplomatic crisis.

“You know, I think you've been hanging out with Shion too long. You're getting too aggressive for your own good. I think you need to learn some more common sense.”

"I—I do?!"

Ranga looked shocked. He must not have realized it.

"Look, are you really sticking to what I told you back at the last fight? You weren't going *too* far, were you?"

"I—I would never do that, my master!"

He looked uncertain, and I was starting to get suspicious. Gobta and Gabil, I recalled, would only say things like "Oh, uh, he was fine!" and "Y-yes, having Sir Ranga at our side was a tremendous boon!" when I asked for a report. It sounded fishy, but I never followed up on it. It just seemed like an invitation for further headaches, and I was leaving that to Diablo anyway. If he had no complaint, I just assumed all was well.

Maybe I was just kicking the issue down the road...but ah well. If there *really* was a problem, I would've heard about it. Better trust in Ranga for now and make sure Shion doesn't poison his mind any further.

I patted Ranga on the neck. "Um, Ranga, buddy? Seriously, don't do anything crazy, okay?"

"I wouldn't dare," he replied, solemnly nodding.

"Good. Now go relay that message, okay? And if anyone's free on our security team, I'd like them to guard Mjöllmile for me. Check on that, could you?"

"Yes, Master!"

He disappeared back into my shadow.

*

So now Mjöllmile was under guard, albeit behind the scenes so he didn't pick up on it. I didn't know who would come to guard him, but there weren't that many people on the security staff I'd trust with solo duty. The new guys were out of the question, so it'd have to be at least a seasoned sergeant-class officer. Here, *sergeant* refers to a sort of team leader, the head of the groups of five that the force usually operated in. They were usually around a B rank in adventurer parlance, more than qualified enough for bodyguard duty.

I could personally keep tabs on Mjöllmile's whereabouts once he was in my

town, but in the meantime, if something happened to him over here, I'd find out immediately. Thus, I felt safe in saying hello to Fuze for a little bit.

So I headed into the Free Guild's headquarters in Blumund. Last time I was here, I made more of a splash than I meant to, so I was worried about a repeat—but despite a few threatening glares, I made it to the reception counter without a peep. I *was* wearing that mask the previous time, wasn't I? Maybe nobody recognized me. But hey, if they wouldn't let me see Fuze, I could just leave an invitation letter for him and head back home.

"Hey-yo, I'm Rimuru, but can you take me to see Guild Master Fuze? Oh, here's my ID."

I burped the card out of my Stomach and handed it to the woman at the counter. "*That* little girl's an adventurer?!" I heard someone exclaim behind me, but no matter. I was used to it.

The lady remembered me, at least. "Ah yes, Rimuru! It's good to see you here again. How have you been?"

"Mm? Oh, great, great! You're looking quite well, yourself..."

"I sure am! And I see you've passed the examination over at HQ and made it to B-plus, huh? Well done! You have my respect!"

"Oh yeah, I did, didn't I? I really wanted to score an A, but I got kind of busy, so..."

...Or really, it was too much of a pain in the ass to bother. Being ranked B or higher gave you a lot of perks, but it also came with more responsibilities. B-plus was enough drudgery to deal with, so I figured I could earn my promotion only when I really needed to. Not like it was a salaried position or anything. Like a volunteer fireman, I'd be tapped for duty whenever certain kinds of danger came along. In exchange, I got easier admission into foreign countries, as well as free food and boarding at Guild branches. I appreciated the perks, sure, but I didn't really like being forced to do anything.

But why rain on people's parade?

"Oh, I'm *sure* you'd pass with flying colors, Rimuru! I'll be cheering you on!"

“You think? Well, thank you! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...”

I sure can’t resist a young lady looking at me with those sparkling eyes, no... At least, not until she drops a bomb on me.

“By the way, Rimuru, it must be annoying to share a name with a demon lord, isn’t it? If you like, you could take advantage of our Renaming System to change your name in the Guild archives, if you find it’s causing you trouble. That’ll let you conduct Guild activity in areas where your face isn’t well-known yet, albeit at one rank grade below your current one. What do you think?”

Oh, crap, I forgot! Here I am, a demon lord, and I went and put that same damn name on all my paperwork! And now that Rimuru Tempest, the Newbie in the Octagram, was a household name around the world, I guess being Rimuru the adventurer would present a few issues. Time to retire from the Guild, maybe? If I really needed to work as an adventurer, I guess I could consider that Renaming System. It’d be starting at the B rank, but that’s good enough for me. Pretty helpful system, there.

“Thanks for telling me about that! I’ll keep that in mind. Now, do you think I might be able to see the guild master?”

“Right away. And yes, feel free to ask anytime!”

It took a little conversation, but she let me right in. I could hear shouts of “Are you kidding me?!” and “Who the hell *is* that girl?!” among the rabble behind me, as well as commentary from a few people who must’ve seen me here last time.

“Oh, no way! I never knew she was so cute?!”

“Unbelievable... That’s the face of a person who swatted down a Lesser Demon like a mosquito...?”

“And she had the same name as that demon lord, huh?”

“You think it might actually *be* him?”

“Ha! What are you, stupid?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Yeah, yeah...”

Sounds like more rumors would be spreading soon. Although, maybe I had

less to worry about than I thought. Sharing a name didn't seem to arouse *too* much undue suspicion. Maybe the name Rimuru wasn't that uncommon after all.

So I breezed into Fuze's office. The first thing he did upon seeing me was bring a hand to his temple. I ignored it.

"Hellooooo! I'm back to pay a visit! Something up? Why the long face?"

"Well, things were pretty slow for a while, until this *demon lord* came out from nowhere..."

"Whoa, really? Sounds like bad news. You sure you should be chilling out in here?"

"I'm talking about the demon lord here in *front* of me. So what is it *this* time...?"

"Oh? Well, you better feed that demon lord some tea, shouldn't you? I think he'd enjoy a little bit of cake, too."

"*Cake*?! You think I can pull that kind of luxury out from under my hat?! I swear, why's a demon lord like you just gallivanting around without a care in the world?"

Fuze poured out some tea as he complained. He was diligent like that. I thanked him and took the cup, sipping from it before we got down to business.

"So I'm sorry about everything that happened, Sir Rimuru. I tried putting pressure on the Western Holy Church, but it didn't work too well, and then the Crusaders got deployed..."

"Nah, I doubt you could've done anything to stop them. There was this band called the Seven Days Clergy masterminding the whole thing."

"Wha?!"

"Yeah, that's probably why Hinata never listened to me when I tried pleading my case."

"The Seven Days...? That legion of great heroes, tasked with protecting humankind...?"

"Apparently, yeah. They snared her, too, but...all's well that ends well. We worked out all the misunderstandings, I think. But there *was* one casualty, unfortunately—a commander named Garde is missing in action."

"Garde of Fire..." Fuze muttered with a frown. "He's one of the Ten Great Saints, the protectors of humankind. Quite gifted with a spear and flame-based spirit magic, albeit not as gifted as Shizu was..."

I didn't know Garde personally, apart from how he was after the Clergy got to him. I couldn't say anything about his personality, but apparently he was a well-known name, at least. Someone as well-connected as Fuze would certainly know him. I described him as "missing," but "killed," I suppose, was much more likely. Hopefully he's in a better place now. I felt bad for him.

Moving on, I gave Fuze a recap of recent events—including the Walpurgis Council, since I knew he was concerned about that. There were now eight demon lords united under the name of the Octagram, and I covered all of that, along with my conflict with Hinata and the fall of Seven Days. I made sure, of course, to blur the true identity of Luminus—I had a reputation for blabbing when I shouldn't, but I wasn't dumb enough to let *that* vital a secret out.

"I see... You know, no matter how much we tried to make contact with them, they always just flatly denied us. The Church's Blumund branch was a nonstarter, so I sent someone over to their headquarters, and they still said we couldn't meet with anyone at the level of minister or above... I had no idea the Clergy was behind all this."

"Yeah, Hinata said the same thing. The only thing uniting them, as she put it, was Lu—um, the god Luminus. Their faith, you know; that was the real thing."

"Humans are inherently weak, after all. They cling to the gods—and their strength."

"Would you include yourself in that, Fuze?"

"Ha-ha! No, not me. When my strength fails me, I'm prepared to call it a life, so to speak. I'd hope for a miracle, of course, but I can't pray to a 'god' I've never even met before."

Sounded like Fuze leaned toward atheism. Of course, this was a world where

a real-life monster with superhuman powers could get worshipped as a god by the locals. They, at least, you could meet up with and see for yourself. That must've made them seem more reliable. Even Luminus only offered protection to the people she knew, at first, and she didn't figure in Fuze's life at all. He just relied on himself instead—a little self-serving but certainly easier to come to grips with.

"Yeah, well, I can certainly understand why people want to pray to a higher power. But in life, you get what you're dealt, you know? Anyway, regardless of what Luminus may or may not bless us with, the Church and I are even now, and that's all I need."

Knowing Luminus personally taught me just how meaningless praying to her was—but not much point saying that. Sometimes prayer really *can* give a person strength. It wasn't for me to comment on.

Fuze smiled. "Very true. It's a load off my shoulders as well."

I got the feeling he was depressed about failing to stop the Church after I asked him to put the screws to them a bit. I just appreciated him looking out for me.

We chatted for a while more over past events before I stood up, recalling something.

"Anyway, I better get going soon, but I want you to take this."

I removed an envelope from my pocket and handed it to Fuze. It contained an invitation to the Founder's Festival I was planning; we had gotten so caught up in conversation I had almost forgot about it. This was why I came here today, after all.

"What's that?"

"Well, I'm gonna be holding my demon lord coronation soon, and I figured it'd be a good opportunity to advertise my town to the world. We're calling it the Founder's Festival, and the way I picture it, it's gonna be a huge blast. We're sending invites to all the royalty and nobility in the region, and I'd love for you to attend, too."

"Huhh?! Wait a minute, Sir Rimuru. What would inviting someone like me

accomplish—?”

“No, no, it’s no big deal! I have an invite here for the king of Blumund, too. Can you make sure he gets it?”

“Well, couldn’t you give it to him directly—hmm? Maybe not, eh...?”

“Nah. I gave the dwarven king and Archduke Erald their invites personally, but I don’t have many contacts in the other nations.” I smiled. “I’ve met your king once, but I don’t think a demon lord would be invited to his throne room, would he?”

“It’s distressing enough for a demon lord to be in Blumund at all.” Fuze snickered back. “But thank you for this. I’ll be sure this reaches the king.”

My errand was now done, and I was about to depart but was stopped at the door. “Oh, right! I needed to mention that the grand master was concerned about you. Negotiating with the Western Holy Church was a huge headache for him, so I’ll be sure to say you’ve worked things out.”

Yuuki was worried? A lot had happened since we last met. I was starting to miss him.

“Ah yeah. I must have put a lot on his plate.”

“Oh, not really. The Guild has no interest in making an enemy out of the Church, after all. If you were able to settle your differences without a fight, we couldn’t ask for anything more.”

That was nice to hear. But I still felt like I owed the Guild something.

“I know! I think I’ll invite Yuuki, too. You think he’d mind?”

“Hmm, hard to say. Not that I can speak for him, but he *is* a busy man. I’m not sure if he can make the time for it or not.”

“Well, I can give him an escort to and from the event, so I’m sure he can attend at least one day, you know? If not, I can stop by to see him sometime soon. So give him this for me...”

As Fuze watched, I wrote out a letter to him and included it in the envelope with the invites. Fuze winced at me a little as he accepted it.

"Sir Rimuru, where did you get that paper from...? Actually, on second thought, don't tell me. Can't you magically send it to him yourself? I'll do it, but..."

He looked tired. Maybe I was asking one too many casual favors.

"Ha-ha-ha! Sorry about that. Thanks."

"Sure thing, Sir Rimuru."

"Oh, and Milim's coming, too."

I felt it best to be just as casual with that bombshell as he took the envelope.

"Milim? Oh no..."

"Okay, see you there!"

With a smile, I half ran out from the office while he shouted after me: "Wait! You don't mean *that* Milim, do you? *Heeeeeey!!*"

Let's just pretend I didn't hear.

*

As I escaped from the Guild building, a man leaped out from behind a corner at me, taking a respectful knee.

"I, Gob'emon, am here at your summons, Sir Rimuru!"

This man was one of the hobgoblins I named. Pretty ambitious guy. I think Rigur told me he and Gobta were fighting for the vice captain spot back when he was running our village forces. He had the strength to back that drive, of course...

"Hmm? Hey, weren't you a lieutenant? You went to another unit after Gobta started captaining the goblin riders, didn't you?"

A lieutenant, in Tempest's armies, was an officer who could be assigned a unit to lead if needed. They didn't necessarily have one to lead, which meant that captains were naturally above them, but it was still a much higher rank than the sergeants leading teams of five to ten people.

"Yes, my lord. I was never one to serve below others, you see, so I thought I would work as an individual for now. Someday soon, I'd like to assemble my

own direct command and lead a unit myself.”

Hmm. Sounds like he's got some real backbone. He gave up his chance at vice captain of the goblin riders because he didn't want to serve under Gobta, after all, so he must've had some pretty high aspirations.

“Do you? Well, keep up the good work. Now listen, Mjöllmile’s someone very important to me. I need you to keep him safe—without letting him notice, if possible. I think you could learn a lot from the way he sways people’s minds. His financial acumen’s enough to move the folks around him, but it’s not just that. Think of it as a case study while you’re guarding him.”

“Yes sir! I will keep that in mind as I execute my duty!”

Gob’emon was up for it. The way Benimaru described him, he tended to rely too much on his own abilities, downplaying the strengths of the people below or alongside him. That’s one reason he failed to reach captain, despite being much more physically gifted than Gobta. If he could learn to be more of a team player, that captain’s job could be his before long. I hoped he could grow into the rank.

“If you can carry this out and learn something from it, report back to me afterward. I’ll give you this katana of mine as a reward.”

Kurobe had contacted me earlier to report that my personal sword was complete. I wouldn’t need this one any longer. It was just a temporary weapon, but it was synced up with my aura well enough that I liked the results I got from it. I brought it in for maintenance after the Hinata battle, but Kurobe was pretty impressed by what he saw. I figured it was a nice enough carrot to dangle.

Gob’emon’s eyes opened wide with excitement. “Y-you will!?”

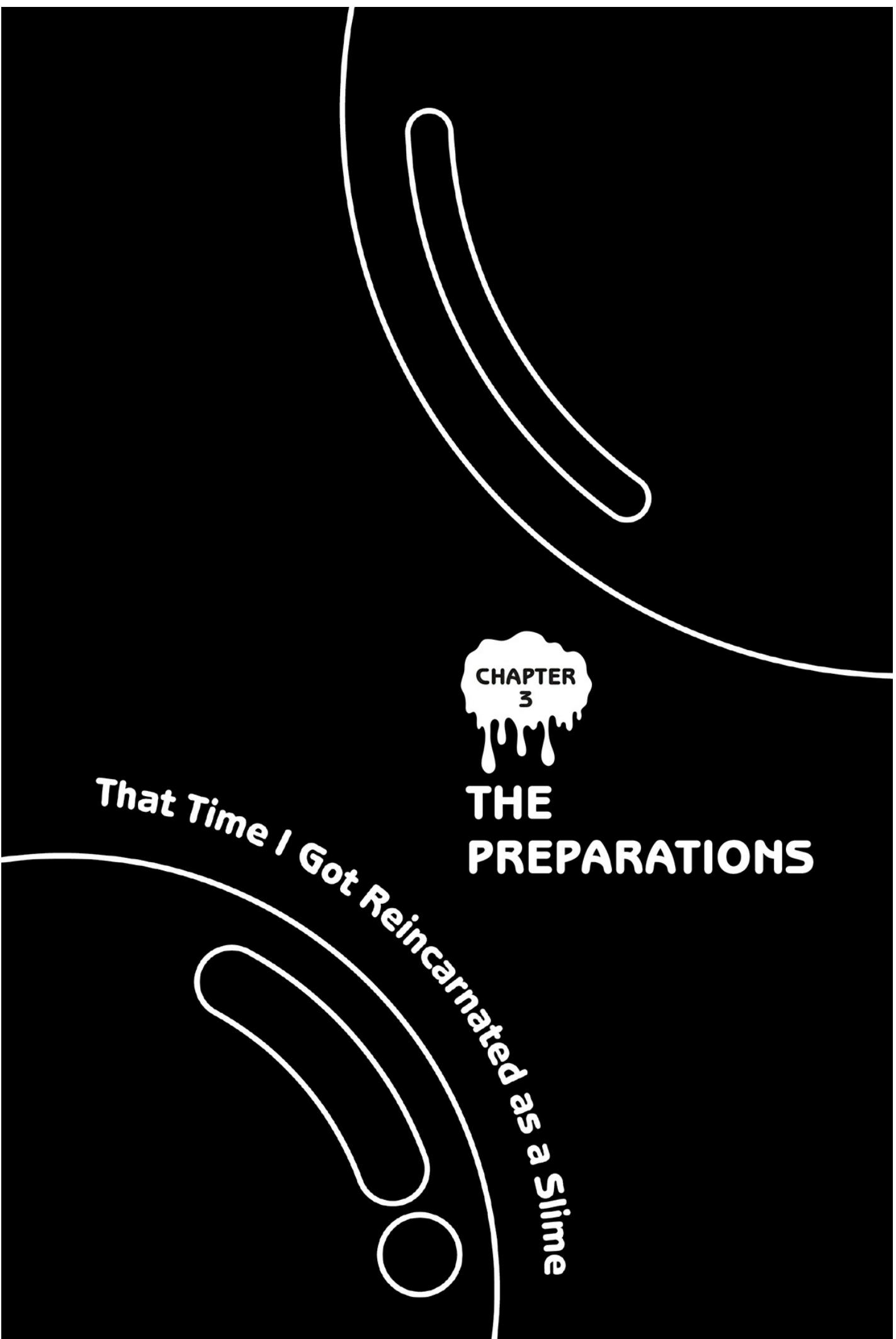
“Sure. I think you’re gifted enough to make use of this. But stay diligent, all right? Prove to me you deserve it.”

“Yes sir! I will live up to your expectations!”

He immediately went into Mjöllmile guard-duty mode. That was almost too sly of me, offering that sword to him, but hopefully I got my point across. You had to earn the trust of your subordinates. Like how people used to think about obligation and duty, if you didn’t look out for and provide service to each other,

it would wreck the whole master-servant relationship. I know I'm not exactly a stellar example of the ideal boss, but still, I hoped Gob'emon would answer my call in his own way.

I had now distributed all my invitations. Now we just had to prep for the big day. It needed to be a festival like none before. As I thought over everything we needed for it, I could already feel my heart racing.



CHAPTER 3

THE PREPARATIONS

In a hastily prepared meeting room, two suspicious-looking people sat quietly. Or not exactly—upon closer inspection, there was also a third, smaller figure, a foot or so tall, with dragonfly-like wings on her back. The two other people in the room were seated facing her—Ramiris and two of her servants, Beretta and Treyni.

The small pixie bashed a fist against the small desk in front of her.

“This is exactly why I thought none of this was working!” she groused, rubbing her hand. “I *told* you we needed to move outta here!!”

“Correct as always, Lady Ramiris,” Treyni agreed, watching her affectionately. “Truly, a most brilliant idea!”

“Right? Isn’t it, though?”

Ramiris gave Treyni a satisfied nod.

Beretta was less than convinced. “One moment, please. Brilliant though the idea may be, where do you intend to move to? And could you explain why?”

Why do I have to do this? he thought. Treyni, his colleague, was a thoughtful, detail-oriented, hardworking woman. She had a good reputation among the spirits, allowing her to manage Ramiris’s labyrinth all by herself. That was something Beretta couldn’t do, and there was no doubting her usefulness to Ramiris. But there was an issue: Treyni, ever the loyal servant to Ramiris, spoiled her far too much. She agreed with everything Ramiris said, never doubting it for a moment. Someone needed to stop this before it led to trouble.

The ex-demon Beretta couldn’t help but laugh at himself a little. *Oh dear... I am not here serving Lady Ramiris because I want to serve that role...*

To someone like him, who did enjoy Ramiris’s company very much, getting

bossed around all the time wasn't a concern. What *did* concern him—albeit only slightly—was how his lone coworker here was an unabashed yes-man. Unfortunately, it was an ironclad rule of life that the hardest-working people tended to be the ones who lost out in the end. If you blow the whistle and warn about the dangers ahead, it's usually your job to clean up the mess that results—something Beretta was about to learn the hard way.

"Great question, Beretta! Listen, aren't you *bored* being in here at all? There's nothing to do for fun in this place. The only diversion we have is building golems, and that's about it. Barely anyone even comes to visit us! But over *there*, they've got all kinds of stuff. So I figure, you know, I'll just invite myself over!"

Ramiris put forth what she must've thought was a convincing case. It just made Beretta sigh inside. He wasn't dead set against it himself, but he remembered what the demon lord Rimuru was like and suspected getting his permission would be a problem. If she tried moving there now, he could easily envision her getting thrown out on her ear. Treyni must have known that, but all she had to offer was her unequivocal agreement.

"But, Lady Ramiris, didn't Sir Rimuru already turn you down once?"

Beretta had to say it. She had already tried it. Without a better excuse, all she'd do was incur Rimuru's wrath. Maybe Ramiris was oblivious to this fact, but to Beretta, that was the biggest problem of all.

"Come now, Beretta," his unreliable coworker said. "You're overthinking this! Sir Rimuru is *such* a nice young man. He'd never be cruel enough to deny the dreams of someone as cute 'n' lovable as her!"

Treyni was being far too optimistic. If Ramiris wasn't involved, Treyni was a capable woman of action, but there was no counting on her now. So since the other two people in the room weren't using their brains, he tried to find a good way to navigate this. After all, *he* wouldn't mind living alongside Rimuru, either.

I suppose that's why I find even a situation as ridiculous as this exciting...

And it was a lucky thing he had a mask on, because under it was a smile almost childish in its glee.

After I saw Gob'emon go, I headed back to Tempest. I had been using Dominate Space to travel as of late, which allowed me to instantly transport myself to anywhere I had visited before. It consumed a nontrivial amount of magicules, but it was fairly trivial for me considering the energy I had to work with. I was free to use it as much as I wanted now, which made travel pretty simple—although I still tried to regulate my use, since I'd look so lame if I abused it and went into sleep mode as a result.

The moment I was back, Ranga sent me a Thought Communication.

(Master, Gobkyuu and the craftsmen have gathered at the western gate. However...)

He didn't finish the sentence. What happened? Concerned, I headed for the gate, using Dominate Space despite promising myself to lay off a moment ago. Activating Universal Detect to gain a broader vantage point than what my eyes could give me, I spotted Ranga at the site—and if my destination was within sight, Dominate Space made it easy to rush over. Just a matter of changing my coordinates, really. Really convenient, but kind of hard to use in battle, since it takes a little time to set off. I'm always scared of leaving myself open like that. Besides, I'm trying to conserve it, remember?

This, on the other hand, was an emergency, so I reappeared right next to Ranga. We were outside the west gate, and immediately I spotted Gobkyuu arguing with someone. Universal Detect already told me who it was.

"No, you see, like I just said, we're officially taking over this place!"

Oh no...

I took cover, listening in on the conversation.

"I know what you said, ma'am, but we can't really accept that, do you understand? I'm going to ask Sir Rimuru now, so if you could just wait here and keep quiet for a little while—"

"No! We've already abandoned our previous labyrinth to come here! Are you going to kick out a poor, homeless woman with no place else to go?"

"N-no ma'am, I... This area is officially the territory of the demon lord Rimuru,

you see, so you will need to obtain his permission first—”

“Pfft! Can’t sob story my way in, eh? In that case, I’ll have to resort to force. If you keep nitpicking every little thing, you know Beretta here isn’t gonna take that lying down— Ahhh!”

I couldn’t stand any more of it, so I sneaked up to the problem child in front of me and captured her in my hands. Taking a look at her, I confirmed it was Ramiris.

“*What are you doing?*”

“Um... Hey there, Rimuru! How’s it going?”

She was avoiding eye contact, clearly understanding she was in big trouble. Whatever she was up to, the small hut behind us clearly had to do with it. Ramiris was claiming the structure as her territory—she had to be hiding something inside. But how did she even bring it over here?

“Lady Ramiris! I’ve brought over some new wood!”

The riddle was solved by Treyni, coming over with an armload of wooden beams.

“Um, Treyni, what’re you up to?”

“Ah! Um, Sir Rimuru! I trust all is...well?”

She froze the moment she saw me. Did it not occur to her that building a hut right in front of the town gate might get spotted pretty fast?

“Can I ask what’s going on, Treyni?”

“W-well, this... It’s not what it looks like. L-Lady Ramiris did nothing wrong, um...”

The Treyni I knew always had this air of authority. Serving Ramiris had completely torn that apart. Like master, like servant, I guess. The only person here who could guide me through matters was likely Beretta, who was currently kneeling before me.

“Beretta, explain.”

“It always has to be me, doesn’t it...?”

Resigned to his fate, he relented.

It all began, he said, with something Ramiris told him.

“Beretta, you traitor!!” Ramiris shouted, freed from the prison of my hands, but I ignored her.

According to Beretta, Ramiris absolutely insisted on moving to my town, with Treyni in full agreement. I glanced at Treyni; she was staring into space and looking supremely awkward. Apparently, she spoiled Ramiris at all times, which I could see from the last time we met, so I believed it. Neither she nor Beretta would dare defy this lady, so they were all but forced into this would-be invasion of my land.

“And also, as Lady Ramiris stated, we came here after sealing off the entryway to the labyrinth we called home before.”

“Right! Exactly! So come on! If you kick us out, we’ll be homeless, Rimuruuuuuu!”

She tried to sound as forlorn as possible, despite this being entirely her own doing. “Oh, poor, poor Lady Ramiris,” I heard Treyni lament. *Please don’t keep encouraging her...*

Either way, though, now I knew the situation. This wasn’t Gobkyuu’s fault at all—it was all on Ramiris and her servants.

“Sorry you went through that, Gobkyuu.”

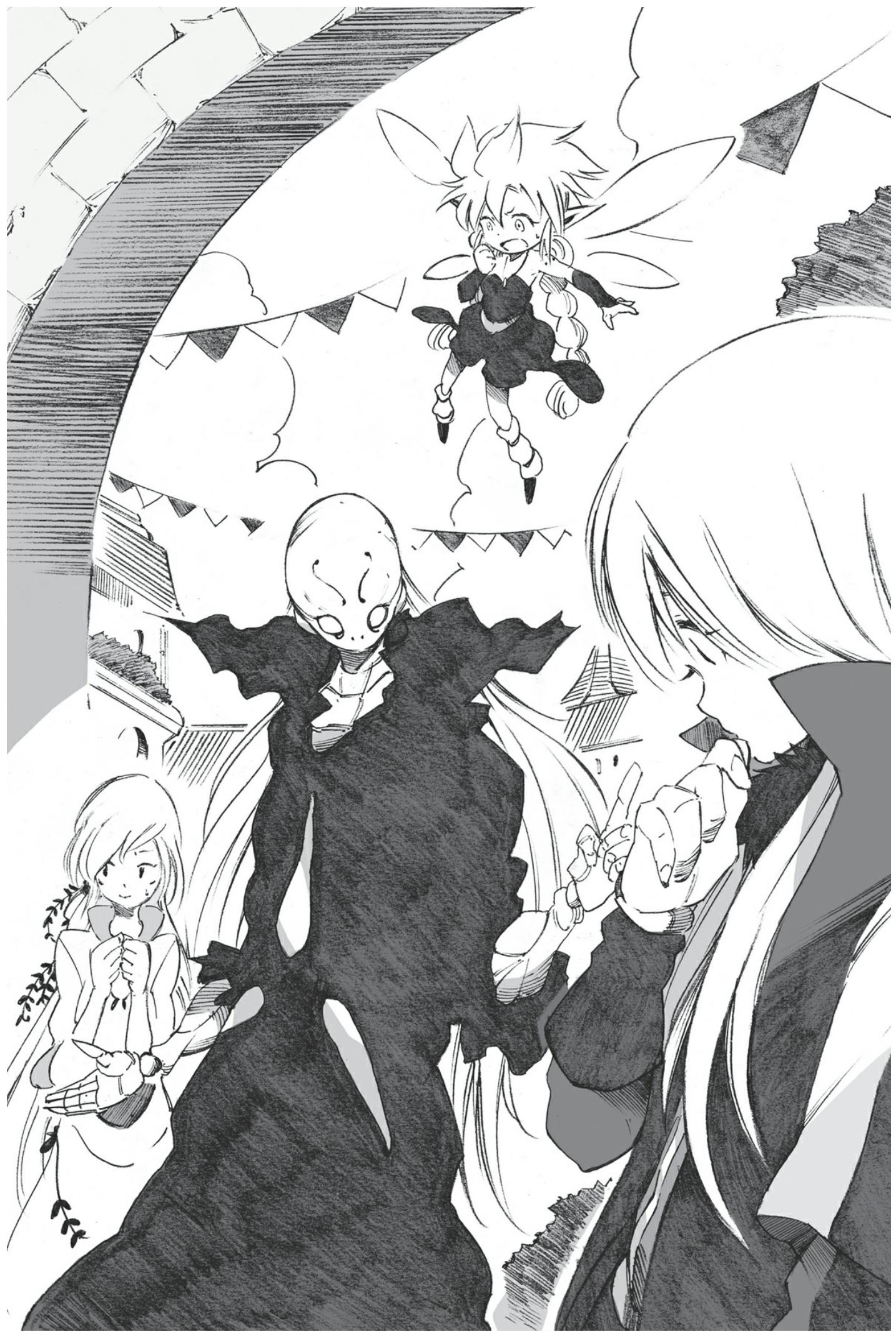
“No, no, we were fine, but the gate guards had the worst of it...”

He eyed a nearby hobgoblin by the gate, sleeping soundly.

“...Um.”

“Yeahhh, uh, sorry. I got a little excited...”

“That wasn’t Lady Ramiris’s fault! That guard was saying terrible things to her, so I used magic to put him to sleep for a little while.”



What had gotten into Treyni's mind anyway? She really *did* cast a spell, I presume for Ramiris's sake. No wonder Beretta looked so guilty at the moment.

I would listen to Ramiris's and Treyni's excuses later. I wanted to learn more from Beretta, but he didn't have much else to offer. They showed up here, Treyni brought in wood, and Beretta fashioned it into the log hut before me. Apparently, they had been interrupted just as he began work on a terrace in front of the door. This hut was meant to be the entrance to a new labyrinth.

It certainly wasn't the first time Ramiris had demonstrated a desire to move here. This hut—which served as an entrance to her full residence—was all the real estate she really needed.

"Okay. So you tried building it here, and the gate guard stopped you. He was getting in your way, so you commanded Treyni to put him to sleep, and then Gobkyuu and these other craftsmen spotted you. Do I have this right?"

"Um... No, that's not... Well, not *exactly* the case, I don't think... Maybe?"

"Okay, so I do. Ramiris..."

"Um... Ha-ha-ha-ha..."

Ramiris must not know the meaning of the word *no*. She knew this was my territory, as recognized by the other demon lords, and that what she did was tantamount to staging an invasion. If war broke out over this, she'd have nothing to whine about.

But I paused a moment to think it over. Having this hut presented to me gave me an idea. Perhaps I should encourage this. Maybe give her permission to make a labyrinth here, even.

My conversation with Mjöllmile flashed before my eyes. We needed attractions that'd keep visitors coming again and again. These could be theaters, arenas, health spas, you name it, but I was still fishing around for other ideas. Do the same thing enough times, and you're bound to get bored. We wouldn't hold daily arena battles—I figured the tournaments would be more seasonal, maybe four a year. We could hold beginner-level matches daily, like with horse racing, but I didn't see that attracting the connoisseurs among the nobility. We'd mainly be appealing to mass audiences—or maybe the

adventurers stopping by.

If this town turned into the trade mecca I was planning, waves of merchants would be visiting, with adventurers serving as bodyguards. I wanted Tempest to turn into a base of operations for people like that. Adventurers could make money in assorted ways, one being monster hunting. Perhaps we could build a labyrinth for them and release some monsters inside? Would that attract a decent amount of daily traffic? A labyrinth is a dungeon, after all; if we invited people to help clear it out, that might attract adventurers with a completist bent.

This could work.

I looked at Ramiris, still smiling awkwardly up at me. I wasn't too sure—okay, I was *completely* sure I couldn't trust her, but maybe we could make something out of this. It was time to talk things over.

*

First, I asked Gobkyuu's craftsmen to dismantle the hut for me. Since we already had the materials and everything, I decided to have it relocated for use as a break room for the gate guards.

Next, it was time for a strategic conference. We filed into the usual meeting hall, Gobkyuu in tow.

"Um, what is going to be the, er, happening to us?"

Ramiris's anxiety was making her less and less coherent. Her eyes were fixed on me now, gauging my temper.

"You don't have to be so nervous. If you're trying to be polite, you're failing miserably."

I didn't intend to *do* anything to her, no. If she was willing to accept my offer, I was willing to overlook her excessively bold overtures. But before that, we had to go over a few things.

"Gobkyuu, I was thinking we could build an emergency shelter space under the arena. Is that possible?"

"I'm not sure it'd be safe to have one directly under the arena stage, no

matter how we try to work out the structural calculations. Any empty space under the floor would cause a cave-in at the first shock wave. But if we move this space a little, I think we can avoid that problem.”

“All right. I’d also like to have a door built down there.”

“...?!”

“A door, sir?”

“Right. Make it thick and heavy—and maybe put a bunch of carved stone tablets around the frame and stuff. It needs to look foreboding.”

“Would there be another shelter beyond the door?”

“Nah. No need for that. We just need the door, is all. Right, Ramiris?”

“R-Rimuru?! Are, are you saying that—that...?”

Gobkyuu was questioning my sanity, while Ramiris buzzed happily in the air next to him.

My proposal was simple. Basically, I wanted to have Ramiris build a dungeon and let her manage it. If she was gonna build an entrance in a simple wood hut, better to give her something that looked more the part instead, right? And given how all good dungeons extend deep underground, having it beneath a battle arena just seemed right to me. We could use the arena to train rookies during the off days, and I planned to have a potion shop on the premises. If we ran a dungeon on-site as well, I bet a tavern for adventurers looking for a quick pint on the way back from work would be a big hit. We’d make money off them, and Ramiris would have a home, a job, and a little spending money from me. It’d require mutual cooperation from both of us, but I thought it was a pretty neat idea.

Once I finished explaining all this, Ramiris burst into a flurry of shouting.

“Wh-what?! So—so do you mean that, maybe, not only could I build a labyrinth and live here, but you’ll even give me a full-fledged *job*?!”

“I guess so, if you’re willing to accept that.”

“Huh?! Okay, okay, so you’re saying that, uh, I no longer have to be the ‘jobless shut-in’ people accuse me of being?!”

The proposal must've been a big shock. She opened her eyes wide, babbling on like she had been struck by lightning. "I'm so glad, Lady Ramiris," Treyni whispered, eyes welling up. Beretta, oddly enough, seemed to be smiling at me—I wondered if that fatigue I felt before was just an act. Did he *want* this? Maybe, maybe not, but either way, if he's happy, no worries.

After calming down a bit, Ramiris swallowed nervously. "Um... And you'll give me an allowance as well?" she carefully asked. "Do you really mean that?"

She must've been afraid I'd take it back. I'd never do that. I'm not *that* much of a sadist. Although, I couldn't give her an exact figure on her allowance yet, since that depended on sales proceeds. Better put her mind at ease for now.

"I really mean it. But I don't know how much profit we'll make until we get things going. How about we say you get twenty percent of the profits after I deduct advertising expenses, rent, and other needed expenses?"

"How, er, how much do you think that would add up to?"

"Well, if we can attract, say, a thousand adventurers in a day, that could net you as much as two gold coins, maybe?"

"Gahhh!! *That* much?!"

"That's just an estimate, keep in mind. There's no guarantee it'll work out that way. None of what I say means anything until we see some real, paying customers. But if you're planning to live here anyway, it's not a bad deal for you, is it?"

Ramiris bobbed her head. If she was going to squat on my property either way, she'd be maintaining her labyrinth no matter what I told her to do. It'd be smarter for her to listen to my offer, for sure—it'd grant her permission to stay *and* be a way to make money. Really, she only had one choice.

Thus, she latched on to my head and did a little dance of joy. I took that as a yes, and I was sure Beretta and Treyni wouldn't complain. In fact, they were smiling at Ramiris, who was currently busy tripping off to her own little world.

"Eh-heh-heh... I'm gonna be filthy rich now! No more ungrateful bums calling me a deadbeat and a destitute demon lord!"

Ah well. No harm in that. It'd certainly do nothing to damage the faith her two servants had in her. Her sheer enthusiasm for the offer made me wonder just how often she had been picked on in the past. She was more excited than I was about it, so I doubt I had to worry about compliance.

What's with her obsession over money, though? I didn't think a lust for riches was a common trait for a demon lord, myself excluded. Was her lack of a decent job the main issue? Her labyrinth wasn't exactly teeming with visitors. She must have been lonely, with way too much free time on her hands. It'd be great if we could attract crowds of adventurers to this dungeon—for my sake, as well as hers.

We better work out a plan of action fast.

Calling Ramiris back from her mental head trip, I decided to have her help rework our arena plans with Gobkyuu.

The way I saw it, we should expand the open area outside the western gate, where the highway ended, and build the arena there. There was ample pasture space for travelers' horses, as well as a vast tract of empty land to work with.

Sometime in the future, I'd like to lay rails on top of the highway and run trains up and down it. Ever since I decided to target noble customers for this, I had been considering what to do about our transportation issues. If I could guarantee safe passage for them, I thought it'd be much easier to attract richer tourists. But that wasn't the only goal. A rail system would make it possible to transport vast amounts of goods in one go, improving convenience and greatly contributing to town development.

That was what I had in mind for the town's future expansion, so I wanted a spot for the arena that wouldn't get in the way later on. I could establish a rail station near the spot, hopefully within an hour's walk of the gate—any farther would be asking a lot from our tourists. Having the arena within walking distance of town also made it possible to offer more hotel options in a smaller area. Unlike my old world, people here did a lot of their traveling by foot. If a journey was up to around six miles round trip, most folks wouldn't hesitate to hoof it, so a little distance wasn't a daunting obstacle.

Those were my thoughts behind my proposal for a location, but Ramiris had

other ideas.

"Why, though? Didn't you have empty space within town limits?"

"Yes, but it's occupied by beastman refugees right now. We have streets of temporary housing laid out for them. I can't build an arena over that."

"No," added Gobkyuu, "we can't throw the beastmen out of town. I think development will have to wait until after Sir Geld completes work on the new Eurazanian capital."

"Okay, well, how about we just move them into my labyrinth? I could transplant the entire layout of that area inside it, so it wouldn't be too much of a burden on them."

That sounded, to be frank, absolutely bonkers. Gobkyuu and I exchanged glances, unsure we were hearing correctly.

"Er, you mean we'd move the inhabitants in there as well?"

"Um, I can't move living things around without permission, no. They'd need to willingly go in there for me. But anything inanimate or unconscious? I can whisk it all right over, no prob!"

"Are you serious? So you can move all the beastmen's houses and belongings inside your labyrinth anytime you want?"

"Yep! You got it!"

She sounded proud of it, as she should. That's the kind of skill anyone deserved to brag about.

Pressing her for more detail, I learned that this was Mazecraft, one of Ramiris's intrinsic skills. As the name suggested, it basically made Ramiris the supreme god of any labyrinth she created. It worked over astonishing distances, too, even affecting people and things near the maze entrance. She could even take the weapons and armor off people close by.

It was a crazy power to think of, but it did have its limits. If the target's equipment had its own consciousness—a sword infused with its user's magic, for example—Ramiris couldn't affect it. You weren't exactly stumbling over sentient objects like that every day, though, so if you picked a fight with

Ramiris, you'd better be prepared to get stripped naked first thing. Maybe she really *did* deserve the demon lord moniker.

"Wow... I mean, honestly, I thought you had, like, zero ability to defend yourself in battle."

"Sheesh, way to be super-mean! You're talking to the woman they call the strongest demon lord in the world!"

"C'mon, Ramiris. Calm down. Tell me what else you can do with it!"

Upon further prodding, she revealed some more details behind her abilities. Essentially, I had five questions for her:

1. How many floors down can you build your underground labyrinths?
2. How many days do you need to build them?
3. What kind of monsters are inside?
4. Can you change their internal structure at will?
5. What happens if someone dies in there?

For a change, Ramiris gave me sincere answers to all of them.

For question one, there was no strict floor limit, but realistically speaking, she could max them out at around a hundred.

As for question two, one floor takes approximately an hour to complete. This figure remained steady for subsequent floors, so a hundred-floor labyrinth took around a hundred hours to complete. Any floors beyond that consumed exponentially greater sums of magical energy, hence the answer to question number one.

For question three, you wouldn't find monsters, let alone insects or other creatures, just arbitrarily inhabiting a labyrinth. Her previous labyrinth had "monsters" in the form of spirits—spirits who remained as part of the floor structure, partitioned off from the physical world but able to come and go as they pleased.

However, it was possible to "seed" a labyrinth with monsters for adventurers

to test their skill against. Fill a maze with magicules, and monsters would spring to life from them. Adjusting the labyrinth's magicule density made it easy to predict the strength of the monsters who resulted, as well as restrict monsters to a certain floor or floors. That made it possible to fine-tune a labyrinth's difficulty level with some precision. I had an idea of how this magicule infusion process worked, so I'd give that some thought once I had the right container for it.

Regarding question four, the sheer power of Ramiris's Mazecraft skill meant she could change the entire structure of a floor in about an hour, although floors could not be edited for twenty-four hours after the last revamping.

There were conditions, of course. She couldn't make something—plants or other organic matter, for example—out of nothing, so structural changes would chiefly result in staid-looking mazes of blank walls. However, if you simply wanted to redecorate a floor with some materials at hand instead of changing its structure, that wasn't too terribly difficult.

It was also simple enough, by the way, to rearrange a labyrinth's floor order. This, too, was set in stone for twenty-four hours afterward, but that made it no less useful a tool.

And last but not least, question five. Astonishingly, this depended entirely on Ramiris. If she was keeping tabs on things, she could snap her fingers and resurrect the dead inside her labyrinth. I was just wondering how she handled the corpses of monsters and hapless adventurers, but this sounded like nothing short of voodoo to me. Apparently, she wasn't sure what happened to monsters born inside the labyrinth, since she had no examples to work with yet, but she had already resurrected quite a few adventurers in the past.

This was why she emphasized not being able to move organic creatures inside "without permission" earlier. This "permission" was nothing too formal; what mattered was that the subject in question knew he or she was *going into* the labyrinth. Without that understanding, any visitors would be refused entry. In other words, when I went into Ramiris's labyrinth a while back, that was because I actively tried to do so. If I was carrying a sleeping companion on my back as I ventured inside, we would've been blown back at the entrance. (One exception to this was infants. Children young enough to not have their own free

will yet were essentially treated as “things” by this rule.)

You *could* drag someone kicking and screaming into a labyrinth, but only at a great burden to Ramiris, so it was impossible if she resisted you at all. “You wouldn’t want to try it,” is how she put it to me.

So there you have it. Essentially, anyone who goes into a labyrinth was under the tyrannical rule of Ramiris—something they agreed to the moment they stepped through the entrance. If they accepted the rules, Ramiris would keep careful tabs on their status.

“And you *know* how much we like playing pranks, don’t you?” she said, puffing out her chest. “I just like surprising people and seeing their reactions. If they died, you know, that’d kind of weigh on my conscience. So I do what I can to keep ‘em alive and set them back on their way.”

Sometimes, there’d be an unlucky subject who really did die on Ramiris, but it sounded like those deaths occurred outside of her labyrinth. At the very least, she didn’t want to kill *me* when I was in there. That golem who looked ready to stomp me to oblivion was only there because she knew she could fix me up, good as new, if called to. That made sense to me, although it seemed to lower the stakes of what I went through quite a bit.

“So if a band of adventurers goes in on a monster-hacking run, you can revive them if they die?”

“Yep! Once they’re booted out of the labyrinth, I can resurrect them like nothing happened. It’s a bit tougher if we’re talking a whole party at once, though, so we might need to send them in with some of my revival equipment.”

Equip a specified item from her Mazecraft labyrinth, and dying would just transport you back outside intact. That solved my safety concerns, which was really the biggest problem.

“Excellent! That’s wonderful, Ramiris!”

“R-really? You mean it? I’m really that great, aren’t I?”

“You sure are! Our ambitions are as good as accomplished!”

“They are? Yeah, they are! I was just thinking that myself!”

We looked at each other and nodded.

“I’ll be counting on you, Ramiris.”

“And I’ll hold up my end of the bargain! It’ll be nothing but smooth sailing ahead!”

Smooth sailing, huh? Hopefully the boat isn’t made out of mud. We couldn’t shake on the deal, given our size difference, but I think our minds were linked up well enough anyway.

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Accepting Ramiris’s offer, we decided to build the battle arena in the empty space on the southeast side of town, a dungeon spread out beneath it.

Our theater, meanwhile, would be put up on the northwest side, near where all our high-end spa facilities were. We had actually put up a gym, a museum, and so forth among all the luxury lodging over there, so all we really had to do was refurbish a previously built structure for the purpose.

So the dungeon and theater were in place, but we still had no arena. Geld wasn’t around, but I’m sure I could rely on Gobkyuu and his crew. With them, we’d doubtlessly have something in place by the Founder’s Festival—

“I’m not sure we can do this, Sir Rimuru.”

Oh, no? Yeah, guess not. I mean, any normal project like this would require several years of work. Asking for a finished arena in a month or so was kind of insane. Even with monster-level muscle on our side, I wasn’t so sure we could do it, either.

“Yeah... All right. Let me lend a hand, then. I’ll help move dirt around and process the metal infrastructure.”

I may not look it, but I *did* used to work for a general contractor. I didn’t have *that* much on-the-field construction experience, but with what I learned imitating the veterans, I wasn’t a total amateur. Besides, I had Raphael.

“Me too! Let me help!”

“In that case, allow me to help, too.”

“As you wish, Lady Ramiris.”

I suppose that meant I had the support of Ramiris and Beretta and Treyni, too.

Let's get right to work. I opened up my blueprints among the tents that lined the area.

"Hmm... All right. I don't see a problem with this."

"Great. Better explain things to your beastmen, then."

A lot of our nation's beastmen were out working on remote projects, so I decided to give Alvis and Sufia the full explanation for now. We would meet together this evening.

"If that is what you seek, Sir Rimuru, it shall be done."

"It sure will. We've got no right to complain!"

Once I explained my whole plan to them, they accepted with surprising speed. They also stated that I wouldn't need to explain it again to the other beastmen.

"Um, really?"

"Sure, Sir Rimuru," Sufia said. "You've given us all food to eat and a place to stay. We'd all be glad to help out with building this arena or whatever."

"Besides," Alvis added, "I hear that Sir Carillon will be involved in the festival you're holding. We all would be delighted to help you out. I am a tad under the weather, so I will leave the rest to you, Sufia."

"You got it!"

So Sufia would lead the beastmen on this job—and once that was decided, things proceeded at blazing speed. One order from Sufia was all it took to get the beastmen out of their tents. As they all lined up in formation, Ramiris nimbly transported all the tents into her labyrinth. We now had a large patch of empty land to work with.

Still a little wowed by this feat, I used Belzebuth, Lord of Gluttony, to consume parts of the lot I didn't need and pare it down to a square, flat expanse. The steel framing came up soon after, and once it did, Gobkyuu and his crew stacked up preprocessed stones to fill in the walls. Within the day, we had walls so hardy that not a single hole could be found in any of them. This

gave us a sturdy-looking underground space with a large door in the front of it. For someone from my “modern” era, the whole thing was wrapped up with unbelievable speed.

“W-wow,” Ramiris gushed. “My new castle... Oh, right! If you touch this door, it’ll take you to the labyrinth floor where the tents are!”

We all took a trip inside. There, we saw the beastmen’s living space, exactly as it looked up on the surface. Alvis and Sufia couldn’t hide their astonishment—especially since the air was kept refreshingly cool down here.

“Do we even need these tents now, I wonder?”

“I dunno, yeah. I assume it doesn’t rain in here, so I bet we could just sleep on the ground...”

They didn’t seem at all dissatisfied with this. I could see them and the other beastmen experiment with going back and forth between the real and labyrinth dimensions—all it took was a moment’s thought for them.

“So does it get dark in here at night?”

“Sure does,” replied Ramiris. “We’re linked to the outside from here, so I can even make it rain if you like!”

Man. She could do just about anything, huh? But it wasn’t like they were farming crops in here, so I just asked her to set up a normal day-night cycle for me. This whole space seemed a lot more useful than I guessed at first; I bet I could adapt it to other needs, too. We’d have to brainstorm some ideas.

Apparently reassured, the beastmen went off to help with the outside work. They’d pitch in with the arena, evidently, under the command of Gobkyuu. A lot of them were women and children, but that’s beastmen for you—they all wanted to work, and each one was stronger than a human, at least. Gobkyuu was giving them the basic manual-labor jobs, it looked like, but better-trained beastmen were on-site as well now, aiding in construction.

Treyni was supplying logs for the building (don’t ask me how she got them), while Beretta’s precision carpentry turned them into usable boards. He could even cast a spell to dry the wood, which slashed the time involved dramatically. I thought I had abandoned my common sense long ago in this world, but it was

sights like these that occasionally made me think *Wow, I really am in a whole different world, huh?*

If this keeps up, we truly *could* make it in time for the Founder's Festival. I had spit out the land I ate earlier to create a small mountain, too, so perhaps we could use that as a field feature in the arena. It should work great.

"Leave the rest to us, Sir Rimuru!" said Gobkyuu.

I nodded, full of excitement over the arena's imminent completion.

With the main construction now in full swing, Ramiris had been left to her own devices. She needed a job, if only so she wouldn't start pestering everyone else. And what was she good at? Why, expanding the labyrinth, of course. Better use her while I got her.

"I gotta say, Ramiris, your Mazecraft skill amazes me."

She had transported everything within a pretty broad stretch of land in the blink of an eye. I didn't want to compliment her *too* much, but I had to hand it to her here. The labyrinth itself was pretty amazing, too.

"Hee-hee! Aw, it's nothing! But right now, though, it's only this room, the deepest depths where my spirit friends live, and a connecting corridor. I'll have more levels for you tomorrow!"

It took one hour to build a level, right? Building a vast underground labyrinth that went down a hundred floors would be a pretty tall order even on modern-day Earth. Building up, after all, is a hell of a lot easier. Ramiris's skill, though, made that possible—and suddenly, some pretty fantastic dreams seemed within reach.

"Okay, let's go with your limit, then. One hundred floors."

"Huh?! Do you *need* that many?"

"Yep. I want to fill it up with traps, and I want enough space to gradually up the monster-challenge level as you go down."

"I mean, that's fine by me, but can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"I was just wondering: How do you plan to expand the number of monsters in there? Are you gonna catch them somewhere?"

I suppose her question made sense. It'd take a *lot* of monsters to fill a hundred levels. But I had an idea. *Let's tell her a little about it, at least so she'll cooperate with me.*

"Well, between you and me..."

I let her in on the secret of how I wanted to structure this dungeon. As she listened, I could see her eyes begin to twinkle.

"Wait, so—so..."

"Right—right. So then, Ramiris..."

We began offering suggestions to each other as we whispered. This was getting exciting. And given it was the two of us involved, we naturally began to go off on tangents we never should have. Before long, we had worked out the concept for our Advanced Dungeon, as we called it. I honestly wondered if we could get away with it, but there's no turning back now. We had to do it—and Ramiris was itching to start, promising me that she'd build this labyrinth with everything she had.

"You can take your time and rest along the way, okay?"

"Ha! There's no way I'll take a rest after hearing an idea like *this!* I'm gonna do it, lemme tell ya!"

I was just trying to motivate her a little, but I guess I got her *really* riled up. I'm glad she liked the romance of the idea, at least. I was just as excited. It was like a fantasy come alive.

"Well, do your best. I'll get everything we need ready."

"All right. Good luck, Rimuru!"

"You too, Ramiris."

We were comrades in arms now, grinning at each other.

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Exiting the labyrinth, I found the sun was already about to set. We must've

been talking for a while. Work had finished for the day, with crews cleaning up and starting to cook dinner. I didn't want to bother them, so I told Gobkyuu and Sufia that I'd see them the next day and took off.

My next stop was Kurobe's workshop so I could have him give me some of the weapons and armor he couldn't sell on the market—stuff that was more to his personal tastes. The southwest side of town was currently an industrial kind of area, and Kurobe's place was there, along with workshops owned by his apprentices. There was also dorm space for the newer pupils without their own sites yet, along with lines of warehouses. There were inns and restaurants for all these craftsmen and apprentices, of course, and overall it was a fairly lively place.

Kurobe's workshop was dead in the middle of it, and when I popped in, he warmly greeted me, showing me to his storage building after wrapping up dinner.

"Right here, Sir Rimuru. The stuff I have locked up in this warehouse is all pretty unique—not the kinda thing anyone can handle easily, you know. Are you all right with that?"

I nodded my approval. Kurobe was right—not all of it was very user-friendly or accessible. Some of it was locked up because it was too powerful, but a lot of it was just a total handful to use. The armor was a great example—like the suit of mail that sucked the wearer's magical force to erect a magic barrier. That might sound useful, but it continually sapped your power whether you wanted it to or not, eventually killing the hapless owner. Great defense, but a pretty damn pointless piece of equipment.

There was also a sword that attracted all magicules in the local area like a magnet, making it impossible to cast any spells, and transformed them into explosive force. You definitely got a bang out of it, but it didn't exactly spare the wielder from the blast. I'd be way too scared to use that thing or the suit of armor that granted the wearer extraordinary physical strength for a limited time. Once that time expired, your muscles all ruptured, rendering you motionless and dead unless you had healing magic on hand...

So basically, you had a room full of equipment that could kill you if you

weren't paying attention. I doubted anybody in town was dumb enough to try any of this unevaluated stuff out—especially because I didn't want to take responsibility for the fallout—but I thought it'd all work just fine in Ramiris's labyrinth.

"Yeah, it's fine," I told Kurobe. "These actually seem really valuable if you take into account all their different features."

This was decent stuff, after all. Much of it was valued at Rare or above, with a few Uniques scattered here and there—in the same lineup as the Scale Shield and Tempest Dagger I gifted Kabal's party.

I picked up one of the items—the Tempest Sword—as I turned to Kurobe.

"It seems like kind of a waste, doesn't it? Keeping all this high-quality stuff in here just because it's still in the test stage. Don't you want to pair some of it with the kind of people who could really take advantage of it?"

I was trying to lead him to the answer I wanted. Kurobe took the bait.

"Oh? Well, you can take whatever you like from here."

I wasn't tricking him, exactly, but I *did* feel kinda bad about it.

Soon, Kurobe's warehouse was a fair bit emptier. Now I had a set of weapons I could populate the treasure chests in the labyrinth with. They'd be obtained by adventurers who earned the right to them by reaching the level I put them in, so I didn't lie to Kurobe at all. No need to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Still, I was amazed at his sheer output. There was more here than the last time I had stopped by; I'd say it was at over a hundred items now. Much of it was dicey, yes, but some pieces were just difficult to master. The one common link among them was that they were all superior to anything you'd see in the capital at Englesia, the kind of thing you'd normally only see at auction.

During the Harvest Festival that marked my ascension to demon lord, Kurobe received the unique skill Mastercraft. This was a force that stacked on top of his previous Researcher skill, polishing it further. By this point, he was way past Kaijin. Whenever he got serious about a project, it wasn't uncommon for a Unique-grade piece of equipment to result. Rare level for sure, at least. That was much of the reason why only his apprentices' work appeared at public

showings.

"Gotta say, though, I'm impressed. I've learned forging myself, but no way could I make any of this."

"Heh-heh! High praise from you, Sir Rimuru. Oh, but lemme give you this before I forget."

Suddenly serious, the ever-modest Kurobe returned to the tatami-mat room in the rear to fetch something.

"What's this?"

"Well, it's something I've made you wait far too long for."

He handed me a long, straight sword, the blade a jet-black in color. Not too long, but not too short—made just for me, at truly the ideal length.

"So this is..."

"Yep. My greatest masterpiece yet."

At first glance, the only unusual thing about the sword was its black body. There wasn't some ultra-powerful aura shooting out; it wasn't generating its own magic or anything. But that's what I wanted. *This* blade's focus was squarely on durability. It'd never break, never bend, and would fully adjust itself to my magical force—without wreaking havoc around me, like with Hinata's Moonlight sword. It allowed me to be wholly unrestrained in a fight.

"Well done. You've made me proud, Kurobe."

"I'm just as proud of it as you, trust me on that. But the sword isn't complete just yet. As you know, my weapons usually have a hole at the base, the way you suggested they should."

I looked at the base. "Oh? I don't see any here."

"No. The other weapons get that hole when they're complete, but not this one. Because once it acclimates to your magic force, it'll grow...and evolve. And despite that, I built it so it'll always look like just another sword otherwise."

He had a right to be proud. As he put it, this sword in its complete state could be a piece of Legend-class material...not that it *felt* that way presently. The

other equipment in the family was still under development, and the magic crystal meant to go into the hole he mentioned wasn't done yet. No point having a hole if there was nothing for it yet. I would just look forward to that forthcoming moment.

I left Kurobe's workshop with a spring in my step. I had my own sword, and I also got all the other stuff I wanted. Now I could seed those treasure chests and spread them all around the Dungeon. It'd be kinda fun to insert boss monsters to protect the particularly nice pieces, too. This was almost like designing a real-life dungeon-crawl RPG, and it was unbelievably exciting.

Yeah, you could probably make a mint selling these test items and failed experiments at auction—I'm sure Mjöllmile or Fuze could hook me up with the right people for that. It'd be a surer way of earning income, but I didn't want that. The key here was to get humans interacting with monsters. I wanted to bring people over here and have them experience everything that made Tempest great—and if they liked what they saw, I'm sure they would come back. This was just one part of that effort.

Plus, this wasn't just a matter of bribing adventurers with loot and sending them on their way. I already had the next step of the process in mind. Let's say you have someone hacking their way through the Dungeon, collecting assorted items and bringing them back to the surface. Using non-appraised weapons or armor, I had heard, was considered extremely dangerous. That's where my little friend Assess comes in. This stuff was made in Tempest, so I naturally knew all about their traits and features. A lot of it would be quite useful to adventurers, assuming you used it right—yeah, some of it was downright dangerous, but we'd offer a buyback service for that.

Money's meant to be circulated, not kept in a vault or whatever. As long as we purchased the materials we needed and paid for necessary upkeep, we could give back the rest to the adventurers. Word would spread about this over time, and I was sure it'd make our land famous. Besides, filling adventurers' wallets would improve the outlook for our inns and lodging houses. More people coming to Tempest meant less downtime for places like that, which was important—for business and for advertising.

So the southeast side of town would have a battle arena, with Ramiris's

dungeon underneath. On the southwest, we'd have discount inns and hostels. Unlike the high-end facilities to the northeast, we'd keep things cheap down there, attracting primarily adventurers to help delineate our offerings. Their location would be convenient to the labyrinth, and I was positive it'd be a booming success.

I was worried at first when Ramiris talked about moving here, but maybe that was the right thing to do all along, huh?

We also planned to have at least one or two large-scale events at the arena each year. Mjöllmile was no doubt filling in the rest of the year's schedule with other things, too—military training, test-your-mettle events for adventurers, and so on. There could be a lot of demand for that kind of thing, I thought. We could have people try to use that training in the Dungeon—a kind of standardized exam, you could say. If you can't die in there, you could try some crazy stuff you'd ordinarily never dream of attempting.

Realizing how many options were open to us—not just commercial, either—I decided to talk with Benimaru later about them.

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I had my seed items, but it was too early to focus on the Dungeon; that could wait until it was done. For now, I wanted to wrap up talks with the one person we needed for the final touches, the whole cornerstone of this scheme—Veldora.

I found him relaxing in my little house a bit removed from town, a nice little Asian-style teahouse. There's actually a secret to this building—but I'll go into that later. Veldora was treating the place like he owned it or something, which I didn't mind *that* much, but...come on, man.

"Yo, Veldora. Can you do me a favor?"

"Mm? What? I am busy."

Yeah, busy reading manga, maybe.

"Ah... Too bad. I thought this was a pretty neat offer, too... But if you're busy, then oh well. I just figured we could use your aura to— Oh, right, sorry. You're busy. Never mind."

I pretended to walk away. Leaving what was supposed to be my own house was a little weird, but well, I had lots of places to sleep. Besides...

"Oh, just one moment. I am busy, yes, but if you insist upon it, I will lend you an ear!"

Great, I hooked him. As gullible as always, I see. Like taking candy from a baby. I should start calling him the Gulli-Dragon.

The rest would now easily fall in place. I stood tall, looking as haughty as possible.

"Well," I started, trying to sound suggestive, "I was thinking about providing a den for you to live in, sort of."

"Wh-what?! My own place? You mean it?!"

I really got him now. He took his eyes off the manga he was reading, watching me curiously.

"Yep. All for you. But if you're too busy right now..."

"Wait—wait! No need to be in such a hurry. We're friends, are we not? I'd be glad to put your requests at the top of the queue! Kwwwah-ha-ha-ha!"

I had Veldora excited now. Perfect. Might as well go through with the pitch. He almost never listened to people, so these preliminaries really were necessary. A pain in the ass, but I just considered it a little ceremony I conducted to help him be useful for a change.

"Mm, yes, what are friends for, after all?"

"Precisely. Tell me what you want!"

"Well, Ramiris is moving into town, and we're gonna build her labyrinth right underneath the arena. So—"

"Oh, Ramiris?" Veldora replied, picking up on what this meant. "Her powers are a bit of an unknown quantity to me. I understood them as creating paths that led you to the same spot, no matter where you were. Does she twist and turn these paths around to create mazes?"

"Right. And she can add more floors to these mazes, so I want to fill them

with tricks and traps and stuff.”

“More floors? That little girl was more powerful than I thought, then.”

Now Veldora was looking serious, engaged. So gullible.

I then regaled him about the entire story behind our dungeon plan. “But it’d be boring to just have a plain old labyrinth, right? That’s why I want to make it into something really great—like, great enough to be a huge attraction. I was just talking with Ramiris today, but she’s busy adding levels to her labyrinth right now.”

“Oh? And how does that connect to me?”

“Well, I’m thinking we need an overlord to govern the dungeon.”

“An...overlord?”

“Ramiris and I will manage the dungeon itself. On the hundredth floor, at the bottom, there’s a door that leads to the spirit labyrinth that’s Ramiris’s main residence. Don’t you think a door like that needs a guardian, Veldora? Like, the *strongest* guardian in history?”

“I do! I do! Yes, well said, Rimuru. And you would like me to take this role?”

Just as I thought, he latched on to the offer. The word *strongest* (when pointed at him) usually made him melt, so I knew uttering it would have the desired effect.

“That’s right, Veldora. And if you’ll take it, you’ll get another bonus out of it, too.”

“Oh? I was already waiting to say yes to you. But let’s hear what this...*bonus* is.”

Heh-heh-heh. The “bonus”...or really, the gist of the whole thing.

“So you’ve been wanting to let off your aura for a little while, right? You said you were about to hit your limit or whatever?”

“Ah! You mean...?”

“Yes! In the labyrinth, you’ll be free to unleash it all you want. You can go back to your normal dragon form, even.”

"Ahhh...!!"

"Just imagine, this divinely cool dragon lurking deep in the depths of a forbidding labyrinth—"

"Meaning myself?" he interrupted. "So I'll be allowed to use my full power on anyone who visits? All *Kwah-ha-ha-ha-ha*, welcome, you insects and so forth?"

Plainly, he loved it. The lethargy of a moment ago was gone. Dangling that bait in front of him got him monstrously excited. *Now for one final push*, I thought, as I recalled a little something Ramiris and I had discussed.

"I'll even put some units in place for you to fight off the adventurers with. That's right—I'm gonna re-create that game you wanted to try out. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

This, in a nutshell, was what I wanted to make—a real-time (also, real-life) strategy game set in a dungeon. The idea came to me out of nowhere as I'd talked with Ramiris. I'd have units (monsters) in place to tackle adventurers, along with bosses to protect the loot chests. The Dungeon would be filled with Veldora's magicules, growing thicker as you approached the hundredth floor. The force in the air would be pretty thin up top, so you'd only see minion-level monsters at first, but the deeper you got, the more higher-level foes you'd find patrolling the halls. Even in his former prison, enough magic leaked out to create tempest serpents (rank: A-minus) and other powerful creatures—I couldn't even imagine what he'd create at this point.

Frankly, the whole "gate guardian" thing didn't matter to me; I didn't really expect anyone to make the hundredth floor in the first place. The key to all this was getting Veldora's aura released. It felt to me like I couldn't get away with making him keep it in much longer, but if I just left him to his own devices, he might decide to blow it all out in some empty corner of the world. I couldn't take my eyes off him for a moment, because if he erupted closer to town, maybe my administration and I could withstand it, but nobody else would. With enough magicule concentration, anything below a B in rank would die.

I found it dangerous to rely solely on Veldora's willpower to keep us safe, so Ramiris's labyrinth was really a lifeboat in the nick of time. It was a completely sealed space, something I confirmed when I explored it myself earlier, so there

was no worrying about magicules leaking out. Veldora's full aura unleashed shouldn't faze it at all.

Even in the Sealed Cave, it'd be impossible to resist the aura of a fully revived Veldora—not that I'd bring him down there now, what with our research facility and all. The Dungeon was perfect for him, and for the purposes of my true goal. I wanted him to whip out that aura and go to town with it.

My “true goal,” you see, was to use the large, dense cloud of magicules he'd create and generate monsters with it. The whole plan rode on that idea—Veldora releasing his aura, and me making good use of it. An excellent plan, if I do say so myself. Two birds—no, *three* birds—with one stone. Not only would it keep him from crashing my house uninvited, it'd also make him useful as a magicule generator for my new monster factory, giving him a job to do so he wouldn't be such a freeloader. Not that I thought anyone would actually make it all the way to his floor, though...

But what did *he* think? Veldora stood up, placing his manga in a pocket, then extended a hand toward me, offering to shake.

“I like it. I like this very much, Rimuru. We will have adventurers dispatch these ‘units,’ so they can stand before me, and I can deliver them divine justice. They may try to run from me, of course, but I will never allow them to. Perhaps I could bellow something akin to *Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You cannot escape me! Didn't you know? There is no fleeing the Storm Dragon!* I always wanted to try saying that, and now I've got the chance, don't I? Ahhh, I cannot wait to begin!”

“Um, yes...”

His imagination was already running wild. I nodded back at him, but now I worried that I'd egged him on a little *too* much. Is this gonna be okay? Like, there's really no way someone'll reach Floor 100, right? I was a little concerned about that, but I needed to push this plan forward.

“...Well, you're the only person I could ask to do this. Are you in?”

“Of course. Rimuru, you've done well to reach out to me. Truly, it is a task only I am capable of.”

He gave me a firm nod. I'm so glad he's really *that* stupid. His cooperation,

and his reaction, were even better than I thought possible.



The next day, Veldora and I went to Ramiris.

Construction of the arena began early in the morning, and the site was alive with activity. Some of the beastmen that were out on training had come back to pitch in, following Gobkyuu's orders as they ran to and fro. I didn't want to wreck their concentration, so we headed for the labyrinth.

The moment we entered, we emerged in the room Ramiris was in. As she promised, she had been busy expanding the Dungeon.

"Hello, Ramiris. Doing well?"

"Ahhh! Hello, Master! It's good to see you again. I'm doing fine!"

Ramiris looked a tad fatigued but eminently satisfied with herself. I advised her not to overdo it. She was now seated on Veldora's shoulder; I was glad to see they were still getting along.

I was glad, but it was also a problem, because the sight of Veldora was making Ramiris totally forget my advice.

"Just leave this to me! I'll do it! I can totally pull this off, guys!"

To calm her down a bit, I decided to start with breakfast.

After that, I asked her about her progress. For now, she had expanded the labyrinth down to Floor 15; at the current pace, she'd reach one hundred several days later. I could decorate the interior along the way, so there was no need to hurry her further.

"The subsequent floors will formulate themselves at this point," she said. "I've got nothing to do right now. Would you like to mess around with the floors that are done?"

Apparently, the floor-making work would proceed on its own, as long as Ramiris had remaining magic strength.

"All right, how about we set up Veldora's room first?"

The domain of Veldora would be on the bottommost floor. I wanted to get it

all set up for him, if only so I could kick him out of my place pronto. For now, that floor was still an empty space—no walls, no hallways, no stairs; just a door in the middle of nothing.

“Wow. Literally starting from zero, huh?”

“*This is my room, Rimuru? Because it reminds me of my time being sealed away...*”

Veldora wasn’t a fan. I saw his point. I’d feel kind of bad for him like this.

“Not to worry, Master!” Ramiris smiled at Veldora. “I can add stairs and other things easily enough, just by thinking about it.”

“All right,” I said, “how about we all use Thought Communication to figure out what we want this place to look like?”

We connected our minds together, and I showed them what I was currently picturing.

“Oooh! Yes, yes! Quite fine, Rimuru! I knew you were better than that. I suppose I am in good hands after all!”

“Sounds like Veldora’s all for it. Think you can make it into this?”

“You got it! This much isn’t a problem.”

Ramiris wasn’t kidding. In another instant, the space transformed. We were quickly surrounded by walls of thick stone, forming a large chamber with several smaller rooms coming out from it. The main chamber was a square three hundred feet or so on each side, impassive and looking every bit like a boss room. She did it up exactly like I pictured it in my mind.

“Whoa! This is perfect...”

“That it is, Ramiris. I am eminently satisfied!”

“Hee-hee! Glad you like it! Yes, I really *am* that good, y’know!”

Ramiris didn’t get compliments often enough, I guess, because she looked beside herself with joy. I really *was* impressed, though. If you tried to physically construct this, it’d take decades, not even years—and she was done in an instant. Plus, since this whole space was under her jurisdiction, she could

customize it pretty freely. Astounding. I really started to see her in a new light.

But I couldn't marvel at her forever.

This chamber was meant to be the reception area for any adventurer who made it here. But it wasn't *just* that. In reality, it was a space large enough for Veldora to return to his original form. He needed to be able to fully relax and get comfortable in this space, or we'd never get anywhere. Of course, looking at him lately, he was chill enough in pretty much any physical form, I felt... If anything, being human made it easier to play games and read manga. He liked that form enough to use it to hang out uninvited in my home, after all. Maybe we'd need to build a human-Veldora room, too.

In the chamber was two doors, a large one that connected to the upper floors and another that connected to his private chambers. Ramiris did such a good job crafting my vision, it was literally just as I thought it'd be.

"Hoh? This is my room?"

Letting the curious Veldora look around a little, I took out a set of furniture from my Stomach. Deftly, I laid down a carpet woven by our town's goblins, placing a handmade desk and chair set on top of it. There was also a sofa in case he wanted to lie down, as well as a bed that I wasn't sure would be used very much. The place looked comfy enough to me, and I even copied some manga I knew Veldora would like and filed it all into a bookshelf on the wall. The main chamber was dark and foreboding; this one was a cheerful little studio perfect for young, urban singles.

"Oh, how nice!" chirped Ramiris, looking a bit envious. "I'd like some furniture like this, too, y'know."



I promised I'd bring her some next time I stopped by. I wasn't sure what to do about sizing it for her, but judging from how Ramiris was already spread out on the sofa and reading manga, I guess I didn't need to worry... And whoa, there's Veldora sprawled in bed and doing the same thing. Guess I made him happy. If anyone saw him in here, the solemn majesty of the main chamber would totally go to waste. I really hoped no adventurers would see him like this, as unlikely as that'd be.

Well, no need to go overboard. We spent the afternoon getting Veldora's room in order before wrapping up the day.

One week later—the pace had dropped a bit toward the end—the labyrinth was complete down to the hundredth floor. The interior, as I directed, was made out of blocks whose structure could be altered freely, allowing us to switch the paths around once every few days. This way, even if anyone memorized the way down, they'd have to start all over next time. I'm talking truly demonic difficulty here. Selling maps would be sacrilege, I thought. I wanted this to be a true gauntlet, and this way, it'd be a new quest every time—always fresh, retaining its difficulty, never getting boring.

As a kind of fail-safe, I did provide “save points” every tenth floor. It turns out that Spatial Motion was possible in Ramiris's labyrinths, under certain conditions. This wasn't affected by the local magicules, amazingly. It made it possible to do things like transport food in and out—super-useful—and it also worked on people, letting them freely travel back to these preset locations. In other words, save points, through and through. Reach one, and you get to start from there next time.

It works on your fellow party members, too; you could cheat a little and bring someone below where they've been before. There was some debate about that quirk, but I decided to go with it, see how people used (or abused) the feature, and adjust as needed. Besides, even if you cheat your way down a few floors, you'll still have to deal with the challenge waiting down there. There's a boss stationed at every level, guardians that work along the lines of the local boss warlords dotted around the Forest of Jura. I was thinking of making the ones located before save points particularly powerful; if you wanna take *those* guys down, save points weren't going to help you.

Basically, someone would need to be strong enough to reach a save point in the first place before they could take others down there, so I didn't think anyone would try anything too stupid with them. If a problem came along, we could always reconsider. We had some nice bonuses in the treasure chests, after all, so I hoped our visitors would try hard to defeat the bosses on each floor.

Was it okay for our bosses to kill (or be killed), by the way? Sure, that was another key point. Ramiris's Mazecraft had the power to revive life itself, resurrecting any adventurers who came into the Dungeon. This could be done only with the subject's permission, but as long as he or she existed as a consenting part of Ramiris's realm, it was all good. Ramiris was, in essence, the eternal leader of anything made with Mazecraft. If she was killed, the whole thing would disappear, but otherwise, any of her servants could get revived at a save point, and a "servant" was anyone she had forged a pact with or otherwise agreed to the presence of. I still couldn't believe the power of this skill.

Now I see why she wanted Beretta so bad. Ramiris was no big deal out on the surface, but in *her* world, she was invincible. It's just that the invincibility only worked on people who were *part* of that world. It didn't work on golems with no free will, including that Elemental Colossus that vanished. Beretta, meanwhile, wasn't just a puppet—and that meant he was invincible, now that he served Ramiris. She had Treyni, too, now, which made me begin to wonder if I should start worrying about them. Treyni was kind of strong, after all, and if she couldn't be destroyed, not even Benimaru or Shion could beat her. Beretta and Treyni were still outside, beavering away at the arena construction work, but still...

Thanks to Ramiris's hard work, the labyrinth was smoothly approaching completion. Once things calmed down a bit, I'd need to talk to her and her servants about keeping the maze defensible. But that'd be later.

"Ramiris, did you make the thing I asked for?"

"Oh, this, right? Here it is."

This was a resurrection item.

In order to receive the immortal attribute within a Mazecraft world, you

needed to give your express permission. But we planned to have tons of people storming in, and if it was open to the general public, it'd be a pain to get everyone's agreement on paper. Maybe Ramiris could keep track of a small handful of visitors, but if multiple parties were running around at once, she couldn't keep up.

That's why I asked if there was a disposable item for single-use resurrection purposes. What she gave me now looked like a regular old armlet, knotted together like a friendship bracelet.

"Did you check to see if this works?"

"Sure did! I tried it out on Beretta last night!"

"Whoa, what are you *doing* to him...?"

Apparently, Beretta willingly agreed to this, his reasoning being "*I am a demon, so even in the worst case, I will not truly die.*" I know I asked and all, but this was ridiculous. Thanks to that, however, I knew we had a working bracelet. Treyni had taken Beretta's core out of his body, and within ten seconds, the corpse was transported out of the Dungeon and fully revived.

"Perfect. I appreciate Beretta being brave enough to try it."

Ramiris smiled and nodded. "Oh, yes! This was the first disposable item I ever tried to make, after all. I figured it was possible, but I'm just glad it worked!"

This was her first time? So what if it *didn't* work? I shuddered at the thought. She could've at least tested it on animals or something. I wish she wouldn't be so rash.

Regardless, we now had Resurrection Bracelets. Ramiris reported that she'd also prepare return whistles that brought you back to the surface in an emergency. We could sell both of these at the labyrinth entrance—buy them or don't; it's your choice. Don't blame us if you die or get lost down there, though. Me, I'd definitely buy 'em. We could work out the prices we'd charge later, but for now, we were all set.

If you think about it, though, these Resurrection Bracelets are just Ramiris's power in a handy physical form. All it did was put you back at the Dungeon's entrance in the state you entered it in, assuming you died within the labyrinth. I

think we'd better carefully explain to customers that it wouldn't revive you just *anywhere* in the world. Some people out there, you know, it's in one ear and out the other. If they die outside somewhere because they assumed the wrong thing, that's their problem—but I'd still feel bad for them, so I ought to make sure I get the message across.

So the basic framework of the Dungeon was complete. Not bad for a single week's work. I asked Raphael out of curiosity if it could make something like this for me, but:

Report. The subject Ramiris's intrinsic skill Mazecraft cannot be replicated.

It sure didn't take its time providing *that* answer. No, only Ramiris could do this, and really, I ought to thank her for camping out on my doorstep.

"Great job, Ramiris. Now we can finally move on to part two of the plan."

She flitted her wings as she replied, "Hee-hee! Of course! I'm a hard worker when I wanna be, y'know!"

I turned to Veldora. "Well, sorry this took so long, but I think it's time for you to let your aura out."

"Ahhh, the time has come, has it? Kwah-ha-ha-ha! I am ready!"

Yes, the moment was here.

The Dungeon had ducts and stairways connecting all one hundred floors to one another. How did they keep things ventilated all the way to the bottom? With magic—and that's the best answer you can get from me. Maybe we didn't need those ducts at all, but they were there to ensure magicules would make their way to each floor. And that rush of magicules would happen once Veldora came to that central chamber in Floor 100, assumed his original form, and cut loose.

"All right. Here I go. *Hraaahhhh!!*"

I didn't need the theatrical shouting, but I suppose he felt better that way.

Instantly, a spectacularly evil aura engulfed Ramiris and me. I had enclosed us in an Absolute Defense barrier, just in case, but for a moment, it felt like a bomb went off in front of us.

"Phew... Sh-sheesh, that was dangerous," a shaky Ramiris said. "If you didn't protect me, I might've been blown right outta here..."

Yeah, that was stronger than I thought. The shock wave was packed with an intense concentration of magicules, easily enough to kill a normal person.

"Kwaaaaahhhh-ha-ha-ha! Make way for Veldora!!"

The boss chamber—er, sorry, Veldora's underground lair—was pretty large, but with the Storm Dragon back to his normal size, it actually seemed a tad cramped. I hadn't seen him in dragon form in a while, and the sight was just as stately and magnificent as I recalled.

Seriously, if he would just keep his mouth shut, he'd be so *majestic*.

"Ahhh, such a relief! But *oooh*, what an onrush that was. If I did that outdoors, there might have been a little trouble!"

He made it sound so casual, but that scenario would've been a disaster. And if it was such a "relief," why were there *still* magicules coursing out of him?

"W-wow, Master... I didn't think you'd wreck the labyrinth itself..."

Ramiris was right. The explosion had caved in the walls a bit; the internal pressures had been too much to withstand. And this wasn't even him attacking!

"Guess you really *were* holding in a lot, weren't you? Can you maybe, you know, loosen the valve on it a bit now and then, so it doesn't come to *that* again?"

That was just the magicules mixed in with the aura blast, after all, and they came in *dense*. Veldora's total energy count must've been off the charts. No wonder releasing it was so dicey. Definitely gotta vent a bit more often than *that* from now on.

Then I was struck with a brilliant idea. Why don't we build another room in Floor 100 to serve as storage? We could put in the iron ore and so on that we get from the mines, then infuse it with magicules to transform it into magisteel ore in a flash. That stuff's worth its weight in gold, far more in demand than regular metal ore, and it could become a huge resource for us.



"Ramiris, can you make another room connecting to this chamber?"

"Sure! No problem!"

She was already hopping to it. *Next time I stop by, I'll bring in some of the metal ore we have in storage around town.*

As I schemed internally, the magicules gradually began to distribute themselves around the Dungeon, just as planned. Most floors still didn't have walls or internal structures, so there was nothing stopping them from diffusing into every corner of the labyrinth. The magicule count on Floor 50, even, still surpassed what you saw in the deepest part of the Sealed Cave.

Now we'd just have to wait for monsters to start appearing. At this rate, I could expect some real juggernauts.



Veldora spent the rest of the day releasing his magic and chilling dragon-style in his lair, and the next day, I brought Beretta and Treyni with me.

"Ah, Rimuru," he purred to me, "last night was the most enjoyable one for me in ages."

"Oh? Good. Keep releasing as much as you want from now on, okay? No holding back. Just *never do it outside* of here, okay?"

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I understand."

Did he? I wasn't sure, but I had to take him at his word.

Discussing matters like this would be awkward, so I had him go into human form for a moment as I explained the current situation to Beretta and Treyni. I wanted to get right to work, but before that, I needed to make one final check with Beretta.

"Beretta, you swore to Guy that you'd serve Ramiris, correct? You still feel the same way now?"

He gave me a surprised look. I wondered if, under the mask, his expression actually changed a bit.

"...Sir Rimuru, I apologize if this is rude, but as I stated before, I wish to serve

both you and Lady Ramiris.”

“Yeah, I remember, but doesn’t that go against what you promised Guy?”

“...It does. I was alone at the time, and—”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. Ramiris wound up here in town anyway, just like you wanted. She’s gonna help run this labyrinth for a while, and I expect you’ll be happy to help us out, right?”

“Of course!”

“Great, then serving her is pretty much the same as serving me anyway.”

I had been thinking about this ever since I heard about that—the idea of having Beretta just switch his allegiances to Ramiris, if he wanted to. That’s what he promised Guy, likely the strongest of all demon lords, and I don’t think Guy appreciated people who broke their promises to him.

“If that is what you wish,” he briskly replied, “then I will work under Lady Ramiris.”

Wow. Everything turned out the way he wanted, didn’t it? Ah well. I wonder where he learned to scheme like that...

Understood. The answer, of course—

I didn’t need to hear that. *Raphael just doesn’t let up, huh? Who does it think it is? Ugh. Maybe Raphael’s the real schemer here.*

...

It sounded a bit sulky about that, but I wasn’t about to start caring.

“Excellent. From now on, Beretta, you will work as Ramiris’s servant!”

“And her servant I shall be, but I still remember the great debt I owe to you, Sir Rimuru. If you seek anything from me at any time, please, just say the word.”

“I will. Thanks.”

I then undid the master lock set in Beretta’s core, handing the role over to Ramiris. With that, I could only take credit for creating him from now on. I’d get to give him orders again if something happened to Ramiris, but otherwise, Ramiris was his sole master. That came as a relief. Now Guy had nothing to

whine at me about, and I could certainly trust Beretta to keep Ramiris safe.

Besides, this labyrinth was proving useful in many more ways than I originally guessed. On the surface, it was advertising to get adventurers to visit town. Underneath, it helped Veldora let off steam—and generate the massive magicule counts needed to turn metal ore into magisteel ore as a byproduct of the process. The maze would be a great springboard for future research into the nature of magicules, and all in all, this was a much more vital asset for Tempest than I thought at first. Treyni protecting this asset alone made me nervous, so having Beretta around put my mind very much at ease.

As for Ramiris herself, the new master of Beretta... Well, this sudden event was making her weep tears of joy.

"My little Beretta, now my full proper servant...? Now I'm no longer all by my lonesome forever...?"

"Um, Lady Ramiris, you have me as well?"

"Oh! Yes, I do, Treyni! We're turning into a really big family now!"

She loved the concept, darting around and flying circles around Beretta. Treyni watched on with a warm smile. Being alone must've pained that demon lord for a long time, huh? Her "family" was just two people, still, but it must've been big enough by her standards?

The sight worried me. I could rely on Treyni well enough, but she spoiled Ramiris *way* too much. It'd be a tough job, I knew, but I wanted Beretta to be the one "sane" person keeping this crew together. He had his conniving side as well, but I was sure he wouldn't let me down.

"Beretta, don't worry about me as much. Take care of Ramiris. Protecting her is job one for you now."

"Yes sir! I swear it on my life!"

I'll trust him on that. He's trustworthy enough. Ramiris and Treyni alone might find it rough going, managing all the monsters we'll find in this maze—with Beretta around, all problems are solved.

This was perfect. Veldora and I watched as Ramiris carried on with her little

happy dance—silly, but charming in a way.

With the master-servant relationship set in stone, Beretta was now immortal inside Ramiris's labyrinth, no Resurrection Bracelet necessary. The same was true of Treyni. Resurrection Bracelets and return whistles were temporarily infused with Ramiris's skills, but as her servants, the two had no use for those items at all. They were free to revive themselves at any of the pre-positioned save points available, so they wouldn't be flung out of the labyrinth after every death. In addition, they could teleport, more or less, between any save point in the Dungeon.

In some ways, it felt like Ramiris's Mazecraft was more beneficial to her servants than herself. I mean, being able to resurrect yourself as many times as you like... That's downright scary. She had only two people working for her now, but what if that number started going up? The labyrinth was going to be teeming with monsters shortly; if she had full control over them, they'd be a virtual army for Ramiris. There wouldn't be any calling her a pip-squeak then—not without serious consequences! And oh man, what if *they* had the immortal attribute, too? You just couldn't downplay this threat.

Really, in terms of the defense it offered, Ramiris's skill couldn't be more superior. People just never worried about it because, you know, this was Ramiris we're talking about. No big problem—just a lovable, lonely, tiny pixie. I'm sure she'd never even think of commanding an unstoppable army of invincible monsters or anything. Probably.

*

Now on to the next step—the labyrinth's internal structure. With a hundred floors to fill, coming up with a maze for each one seemed daunting, but we'd just have to plug away at it, I suppose. It's not like the maze itself was the main challenge to visitors.

The first floor of this labyrinth was basically a square, about eight hundred feet to a side—roughly the size of Tokyo Dome, although the Dungeon as a whole gradually got smaller as you went on, forming a sort of inverse pyramid. With Veldora releasing his aura at the bottom, I wanted a structure that got the magicules distributed as efficiently as possible. We were free to adjust the size

of any of the floors, however, so we could change anything that didn't work. It was really an anything-goes kind of thing, beyond the realm of all common sense. Better not think too carefully about it.

Into this labyrinth, we could install the following traps:

- **Poison arrows**—Venom-tipped missiles that fly in from out of nowhere
- **Poison swamps**—Vicious-looking and causes damage and status ailments if you fall in
- **Rotating floors**—Confuse your sense of direction. Mapping is key, people!
- **Moving floors**—Running by themselves. Pretty scary.
- **Bladed wires**—Strung at neck level along the path, neatly slicing off your head if you walk through without noticing. Lethal if paired with a moving floor.
- **Pitfalls**—Causes falling damage and pangs of fear once you see what's waiting for you down there
- **Mimic chests**—Think you found a treasure? Sorry, it's me!
- **Exploding chests**—Think you found a treasure? *Kaboom!!*
- **Magic rooms**—Hello! About time some prey stepped in.
- **Closed rooms**—Start a fire inside one, and...
- **Dark levels**—It's common sense to bring a torch with you, right? If you didn't, I can sell you one at an exorbitant price.
- **Low-ceiling levels**—You sure don't want to run into a monster when you're crawling on all fours...
- **Levels with special ground effects**—Whoa! What's a volcano doing in this labyrinth?!

...and so forth. Combine them, and you could implement pretty much anything imaginable.

"Nice work, Ramiris. You can craft these kinds of traps with your skill?"

"Sure can! As long as it's within the labyrinth, I can set up nearly anything!"

She was probably right. We were on the hundredth floor right now, but the composition of gases in the air was little different from the surface. Everything she accomplished with this reminded me once again of the power of Mazecraft.

"By the way," she asked, "what's this closed room thing? Does that count as a trap, really?"

I gave her an evil grin. "Well, in the air, there's this gas called oxygen. People, and most living things really, breathe this to bring it inside their bodies, although sometimes you see exceptions like me or Veldora. If there's very little oxygen in the air, taking a single breath could asphyxiate you—and maybe even kill you instantly. So you gotta be careful in rooms like that. That's the golden rule."

Simply sealing off a room is not terribly dangerous, but if you start a campfire or something, you could drain all the oxygen from the space and even replace it with poisonous gases. Best not to leap right into any old room you find in labyrinths or hidden areas, you know? You need to analyze the atmosphere inside first, asking whether there's poison gas and measuring the oxygen content. That's Adventuring 101 right there—if you can't do that, you're not gonna live for too long. This world runs off magic, so you ought to at least have wind-based magic to circulate the air around.

I explained all this to Ramiris in the easiest terms I could think of, but she didn't really get it.

"My. Certainly *sounds* like a mean trap anyway. If it doesn't affect us, I suppose I don't have to worry about it. But you... You're scary sometimes, you know that? You've always given me that impression. But you're still a great guy to have around! I sure never would've come up with this..."

Once she knew it couldn't hurt her, she was all smiles. I appreciated the compliment, although it embarrassed me a little. A fellow gamer back in my old world would be well used to traps like this. But this was real, not some theme-park attraction. It put real lives on the line. I had no idea how many days it'd even take someone to conquer a dungeon like this. Was it possible in two or three? Plus, if the walls and geography were constantly changing, you'd

probably opt to storm multiple levels at once to reach the save point at every ten floors. Someone like me—invincible to poisoning, no need to breathe or eat or sleep—could treat it like a footrace, but normal people couldn’t. Even heroic champions needed to rest now and then.

I had to admit, this labyrinth was starting to look pretty forbidding.

“Hey, you think this dungeon might be a touch too difficult?”

“Really?” Veldora replied. “I fail to see the problem.”

“Yeah, Rimuru! This is no big deal at all!”

Ramiris and Veldora were just laughing it off. *Maybe I’m fine after all*, I said to myself as I switched my focus to maze design.

Several days passed. Ramiris buzzed around, crafting all the traps we’d need, and Beretta and Treyni installed them for us. Veldora and I, meanwhile, brainstormed ideas for the mazes, coming up with several patterns and setting them up so we could easily change them in and out. Things were going smoothly, but once we began considering the ground effects we could add to floors, Ramiris brought up an issue.

“Oh, no, I can’t do *that*. I don’t have the massive amounts of energy it’d take to keep it all going!”

She quickly threw in the towel, and she had a point, admittedly. Basically, I was picturing floors where you’d potentially run into natural disasters—fires, floors covered in ice, howling winds. I guess volcanoes were asking a bit too much. I was assuming we could do anything with magic without considering the practical issues.

“Yeah... Sorry, Ramiris,” I apologized, throwing in the towel. “I probably went too far—”

“Well, how about we find some Fire or Frost Dragons, tame them, and bring them in here? I could even catch ‘em for ya!”

This voice sounded familiar to me. It belonged to someone who shouldn’t have been here. I turned around to find a pair of platinum-pink pigtails framing a face staring right at me. It was Milim.

"Uh... What are *you* doing here, Milim?"

This was, I remind you, the hundredth floor, the bottom of a freshly designed dungeon. It wasn't open to the public; there shouldn't have been any way to get inside. So why was the demon lord Milim grinning at me in here? (Raphael apparently noticed her but didn't report to me about it because she didn't pose a threat. I know I gave the initial order, but maybe I should reconsider. Raphael was so inflexible like that. It annoyed me.)

...

But that could wait. I had Milim to deal with.

"Ha-ha!" She met my eyes as she stood proud, sticking out her nonexistent chest. "You looked like you were doing something interesting here, so I stopped on by. You got guts, y'know, trying to shut me out of the fun!"

Her wardrobe was as revealing as always, but it actually covered more of her body than before. Shuna and the goblinas had been designing her outfits, so maybe she'd developed a shred of fashion sense. The massive Dragon Knuckles dully shining on her hands didn't match too well, though.

Very Milim-like was all I could say. She really *was* still a kid. But I didn't mean to keep her away from the action. If she wanted to help out...

"Heh. Milim, huh?" Veldora gave her a glance. "This is noble work, performed by grown-ups; it is far too complex for children like you. This is not a playground. Stay out of our way!"

He shut her down before I could even respond. This *was* work, more or less, but it sure didn't feel that way to me.

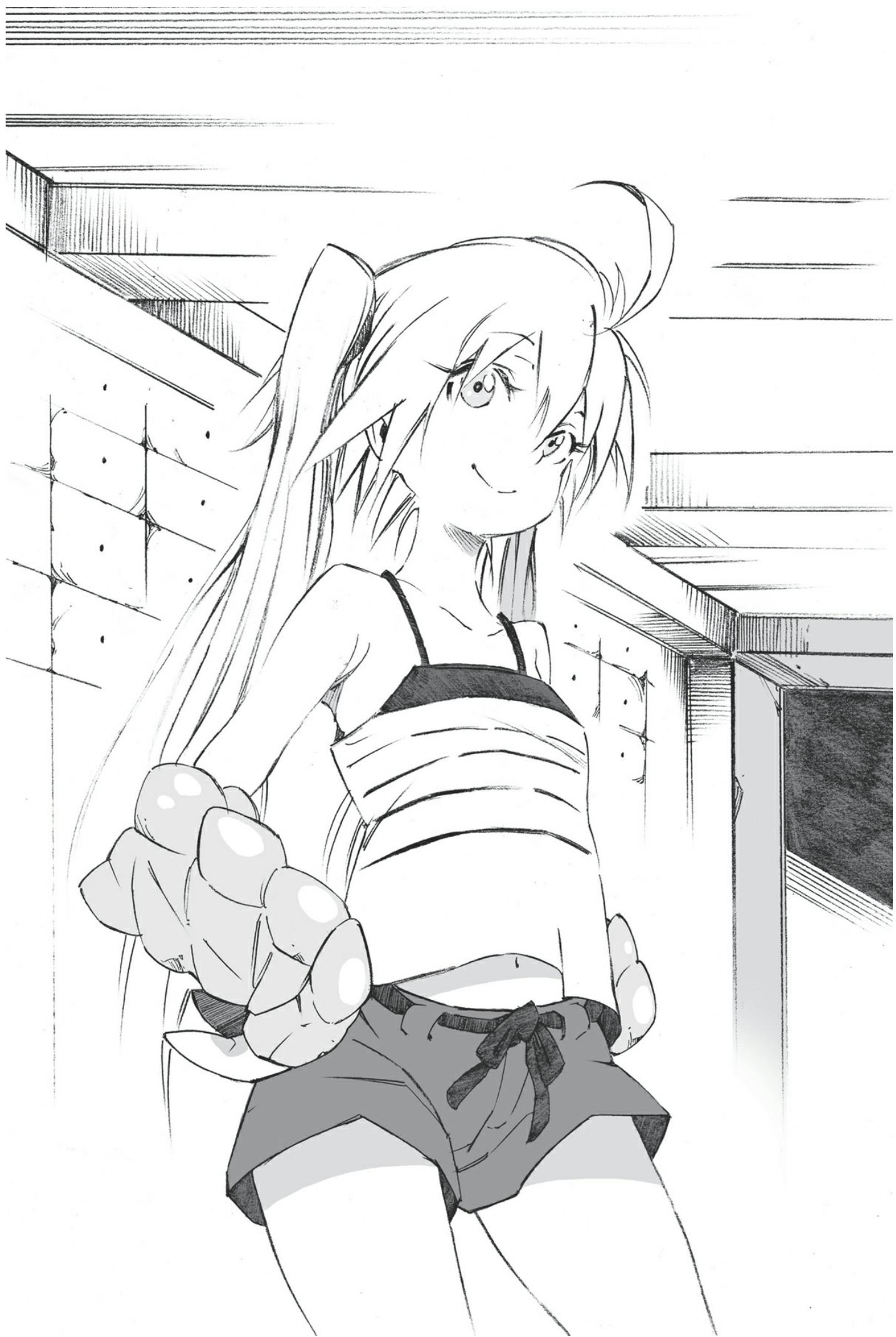
"My master is right!" shouted Ramiris in a fury. "We're on work duty right now, so go away and bother someone else for a change!"

Alas, Milim simply snatched the pixie out of the air.

Ramiris needed courage to try that with her, but she also needed strength to back it up. *I'm* sure not that brave.

"What do you mean, it looks '*interesting*'?" I retorted. "I'm planning a huge festival, remember? And I'm even gonna accommodate the request you gave

me in your letter, too."



“Huh?! You didn’t ignore my letter?!”

“Of course not. I’m inviting demon lords to this event, y’know. I’m not about to piss them off for no reason.”

Milim looked a bit peeved, although contented that I didn’t forget about her request.

“Wait a minute, Rimuru!” Ramiris shouted, livid about this treatment at Milim’s hands. “I’m a demon lord, too, you know! Part of the Octagram with you and Milim!”

“Oh yeah, Ramiris, I didn’t even *need* to send you an invite, huh? Not after you decided to just up and *move* here!”

“What? You *moved* here? Wait a second... Ramiris, are you living with Rimuru?!”

Ramiris began to panic a bit. “Y-yes! Yes, I moved here, okay? So the invitation doesn’t even matter! I’m not alone any longer, and I’m living with Rimuru and everything, too!”

Great. Panic or not, that statement was bound to be misunderstood.

“Aw, that’s no fair! I wanna live here, too!!”

“Ha-ha! Tough luck! I’ve got a job here, remember? I’m helping out Rimuru! I’m not some overbearing, unwelcome houseguest like you!”

“What? How *dare* you say that! Why, I oughtta—”

Milim was ready to duke it out right now. Ramiris, despite how hopeless her chances were, refused to stand down. Me? I just watched it unfold.

Fortunately, this was just a verbal spat, limited to the two trading insults with each other. Neither had the vocabulary for this kind of contention, which made it kinda cute in a way. Ramiris occasionally accentuated her disses with a flying kick to Milim, who kept trying to grab her out of the air. It was kind of like a game of tag, and from the side, this almost looked like they were playing at recess. Apparently, they’ve known each other for a while, so perhaps this was just their way of expressing affection.

Their squabbling came to a close within moments, however—Shuna had just arrived with some sweets in tow, took one look at the two demon lords, and shot them a firm rebuke.

“No sweets for anyone who’s bickering!”

That immediately shut them both up.

A couple slices of cake later, and everything was roses. They were awfully chummy now—but more importantly, I needed to grill Milim over why she came here in the first place.

“So, Milim, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“Hee-hee! I told you! You looked like you were up to some fun stuff!”

“Um, is that really it?”

“Uh-huh. But now I’m really glad I came. This cake tastes *so* good, and I like what you’re doing with this labyrinth. I had no idea Ramiris could make herself so useful!”

“Ha! Sure showed *you*, huh? I’ve got untold powers at my disposal, you know. You just never noticed!”

You didn’t, either, Ramiris, I thought. But...man, Milim really has a keen nose for underground scheming like this. You literally can’t hide anything from her. She had two ex-demon lords in Carillon and Frey to deal with, but she still had the time and wherewithal to look into stuff all the way over here. Logic just didn’t work with her. She shouldn’t be able to get in here, but maybe it wasn’t unusual at all for Milim. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“All right. We have had our dessert— How about we get back to work? You can enjoy this, too, Milim, if you stay out of the way.”

Veldora was being unusually mature and accommodating. Come to think of it, a fight between him and Milim would be a *serious* problem. Milim was going easy on Ramiris, I could tell, but it’d be a different story with this dragon. If *they* started to tangle, this whole labyrinth would fall apart. Good thing she was on Veldora’s good side for now.

“No complaint there, Master,” Ramiris said. She and Milim actually got along

pretty well, in my eyes—that fight just now must've just been some friendly teasing.

“All right!” exclaimed an excited Milim. “I won’t get in your way. Gimme all the work you want!”

I figured I was safe in accepting that offer, but one concern remained—something I needed confirmation for.

“Well, I don’t mind if you join in, but—”

“Great! This looks like so much fun! I wish you called for me back when you were planning it!”

“Right, right. But Milim, what about the people working under you? Did you get permission from Carillon or Frey to come here?”

She was a free spirit, to be sure, but she was also a demon lord—one with two ex-demon lords in her stable and all of Clayman’s old land to rule on top of her own. Even with Carillon and Frey running things in her territory, she had to be a lot busier than before. Did she really have the time to go poking around my domain for fun?

...Huh? Me, you ask? Hey, I got talented people working under me, so I got time for projects like this, yeah. I’d just get in their way if I bothered them. Besides, I had a fully valid motive for this plan—a desire to attract more visitors to Tempest. This wasn’t playtime for me, I promise.

But who cares about me? Milim was the issue right now, and my question had just caught her out.

“Well...y’know. I’m really smart and stuff, so... Not like I ran away from my place ’cause I don’t like studying or anything!”

...Aha. Frey must’ve been researching the state of Milim’s domain and teaching her about it. That must’ve bored her so badly that she fled her own country.

“Wait, no!” she blurted out before I could even answer. “Don’t say it! I’m staying here and helping you, and that’s *that!*”

Sharp as a tack, that girl. I should really contact Carillon or Frey about this,

but...ah, who cares? Not like they'll get angry at *me*. I'll just pretend I didn't know any better.

But back to what she said earlier...

"All right! That's your mess to clean up, as far as I'm concerned. You're the one who's gonna get yelled at, not me," I said to her. "But what about those dragons you mentioned? You said you could bring them over and tame them? Is that really possible?"

"Huh?! Y-you really think they'll be angry at me? Um... Eh, whatever. It's not an adventure without a little danger, as they always say!"

She was acting like a child willing to do anything to avoid doing their homework. But that was the path she'd decided to take, and I suppose it was my job to watch over her. She may've been conflicted over it, but she elected to goof off anyway.

"But dragons, huh? Sure, you can tame 'em. I can do it for ya, if you want!"

Now her mind was entirely on our project, talking about taming dragons like it was catching butterflies with a net. I couldn't ask for anything better.

"You'll do that for me? So what types of dragons are there? Will they be anything like Veldora, or...?"

Hey, if she's offering, then I'm happy to take her up on it. I kept my questions pretty casual as a result, but Milim and Veldora were quick to respond almost in unison.

"Um, Rimuru, those are two *completely* different things."

"Very different," Veldora intoned. "I will *not* allow you to bunch me in with those *lizards* the way Luminus does!"

They both had strong objections that then segued into an equally intense explanation of the nitty-gritty of dragonkind.

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"The draconic species of this world is nothing more than monsters created from broken-down elements in the body of Veldanava—my elder brother, the Star-King Dragon, and the most powerful of our kind," Veldora began.

Basically, the difference between regular dragons and Veldora's kind involved the difference between a material life-form and a spiritual one. Regular dragons, as monsters, have a physical presence in the world. They were called dragons since they resembled the ones of myth and legend, but in essence, they were closer to dinosaurs—big, mean lizards.

There were only four *True* Dragons in the history of the world, three of which currently existed. The Star-King Dragon Veldanava—Veldora's older brother and Milim's father—perished following certain unspecified events, and he hadn't shown any signs of reviving ever since. Dragons had eternal life, so something *really* serious must've gone down with that guy...but that was outside the scope of this conversation.

Veldanava was the origin of the monsters known as dragons—or to be exact, the Spirit Dragon that he gave Milim as a pet. With what I heard from Elen before, I suppose this Spirit Dragon died and subsequently became a Chaos Dragon, and then the essence of its body spread far and wide. The remnants of this essence were still birthing Lesser Dragons to this day in areas with high magicule concentrations; if you had enough bits from the Spirit Dragon to work with, they could even create Arch Dragons.

The most powerful among these Arch Dragons were called Dragon Lords, which came in four types depending on the element it was affiliated with. These Dragon Lords, who boasted human-level wisdom, had spent several centuries as Arch Dragons before making the evolution, and with their strength, they could tap into some of the powers of the original Spirit Dragon. With their extended life spans, Dragon Lords were a step closer to spiritual life-forms, although they couldn't resurrect themselves from death the way Veldora and his ilk could.

The Sky Dragon I defeated a while back was one of these Arch Dragons, classified as a Calamity-level threat. A Dragon Lord would be even stronger than that, maybe up to a demon lord's powers—about as strong as Clayman or a high-level spirit. That level of magicule energy should be more than enough to wrangle the floor effects I wanted for this labyrinth of mine.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Milim interjected. "I may be incredible, but not even *I* can tame a Dragon Lord!"

Getting an intelligent being like a Dragon Lord to cooperate with us would be pretty fruitless, now that she mentioned it. *Maybe we could get one to agree to the job if we asked them nicely, but it wasn't that worth it to try*, I thought.

"Guess not, huh? So what'd you mean when you said you could catch one?"

"Well, there *are* some Arch Dragons with elemental attributes to 'em, even if they aren't quite Dragon Lords. If we catch some and let them run free in this dungeon, they'll eat up the magicules and change the landscape around them, I think."

I see. Dragons were in the habit of creating nests for themselves, so wherever they decided to set up shop, they'd transform the local environment for us. We had tons of magicules for them to chow down on, so no issues there. *Let's go with Milim's offer.*

"All right. Can you do that for me?"

"You got it! I'll grab you one from each type, right on the cusp of becoming a Dragon Lord."

As she explained, dragons derived from that original Spirit Dragon came in just four types. At the top of the pyramid, you had your earth, water, fire, and wind Dragon Lords, with the element-infused dragons below them. They also came in four types, known as Earth Dragons, Frost Dragons, Fire Dragons, and Wind Dragons, respectively. The Sky Dragon I tangled with was a rarer case, a would-be evolution into a Wind Dragon that missed the mark for some reason. There was no sky type to these guys, unlike with elemental spirits, although there *were* other variations and special types—little things that occasionally made the resulting dragon unique, kind of like with humans.

This sounded like the perfect engine for giving our labyrinth some nature-based spice. Let's put those dragons in the deeper floors once Milim picks them up. These element-infused dragons, by the way, were stronger than offshoots like the Sky Dragon, maybe a Special A in terms of ranking—not a match for Charybdis, but still packing a big punch. I hadn't really thought about it, but I supposed one of those rarer offshoots would be a good, even match for six paladins. Upgrade that to an element-infused one, and you'd need a whole Crusader platoon to stand a chance, apparently... But hey, this is my dungeon,

and I get to decide what goes in there.

With spirits, the five elemental attributes work like this: Earth is strong against sky, sky against wind, wind against water, water against fire, and fire against earth. This, however, didn't apply to dragons. Battle experience was more important than elemental attributes—in essence, older dragons were stronger than younger ones.

As a result, I decided to order the elemental floors like so:

Floor 99: Fiery Hellscape

The final challenge, encased in raging flames. Fire-resistant equipment is a must. What could be waiting beyond...?!

Floor 98: Icy Grave

Keep moving or die instantly. Will your cold-resistant equipment be able to save you from this?

Floor 97: Electric Skies

Lightning rains down from above. Only luck can decide whether you'll survive or get singed!

Floor 96: Raging Earth

A punishing quake sorely tests anyone who makes it this far down. Behold the blind rage of the dragon!

These four element-themed floors would serve as the last challenge before the final boss, Veldora himself. It was perfect. I saw absolutely no way anyone could beat it.

“Not bad, Rimuru!”

“Heh-heh-heh... Placing those half-breeds ahead of me, eh? I imagine you’re trying to put adventurers off their guard with those also-rans before encountering my full might!”

“Aw, why does Veldora get the coolest part? You oughtta put me in as that final boss thing from time to time!”

All three seemed to like the concept. Good to see—but we still needed to get

those dragons worked out for it. Flattering Milim ought to ensure she'll get the job done.

"You've already got a vital role in this, Milim. If it wasn't for you, this final set of traps never would've existed."

"!"

"He's right, Milim!" exclaimed Ramiris, probably picking up on my intention. "I really hope you can get some strong, mean-looking dragons for us!"

"No problem, guys!"

She looked motivated enough. That was good. If I had the dragons, I had the traps I wanted—and the way Milim described it, the dragons would do all the interior decoration work for me.

Not long after, Milim set off to capture the dragons, the latest members of Ramiris's rapidly expanding band of underlings.

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A few days after Milim's sudden visit, I had the traps set up across all the floors. The only thing left to do was wait for Milim to come back with those dragons.

"Man. Beretta and Treyni, you guys did a hell of a job."

"Oh, no," Beretta said, taking a step back and being modest as usual. "This is all for you and Lady Ramiris."

"Exactly," said a beaming Treyni. "It is a joy to work for the sake of my master."

Ramiris herself was sitting on Treyni's shoulder, and Treyni looked ready to carry out nearly any order she gave her.

That wrapped up the bulk of the work—

"By the way, Sir Rimuru, I still have these with me..."

—but then Beretta took out a Unique-class weapon and armor set.

"Those?"

"I received them from a golem in the service of Clayman. I was unable to give

them to you earlier, but I thought, perhaps, they would make good loot for a treasure chest or two..."

Oh, right. Clayman's greatest masterpiece, or whatever it was? Viola, I think was the name. Beretta stripped all the weapons from it, and he meant to present them to me, but I turned them down. He wanted to pay me off with that stuff so they could move here, after all, and I wasn't up for that.

"Weren't you going to offer that stuff to Ramiris?"

"Ha-ha!" Ramiris said, butting in. "There's no way I could use it right, and I don't really care about it anyway. I think it's a pretty fancy piece of weaponry, but that's about it—not much else you can do with it. So I talked to Beretta to see if we could make better use of it!"

"Are you sure about this? Because it'd be worth a lot if you sold it."

"It's fine, it's fine! All part of my job! And I'm gonna make a ton of money before long, so why quibble over the little stuff? Besides, we finally have somewhere to live!"

So the weapon and armor were mine—and thus, I decided to put them to work for me.

It was time to put the treasure chests in place and see how the labyrinth was shaping up.

From Floor 1 on down, we checked our work. That topmost floor was kind of a demo of things to come. I made it so even beginners could proceed without too much hassle; the chamber and its hallways were broad, wide, and hard to get lost in.

Still, eight hundred feet to a side was big. I worried that people would spend all afternoon mapping out every nook and cranny, only to be rewarded with nothing. That might cause people to start dissing the maze, but with all the weak monsters prowling around, I figured there'd be enough excitement for everyone—the magic crystals and other useful stuff they dropped would make it worth novice adventurers' time.

I intended to buy this loot from those adventurers. There wasn't a Free Guild post in Tempest, so the nearest one would be Blumund's. Going all the way

there could be a tall order for some people, so I thought we could function as a pseudo-Guild, accepting their loot for discount prices and pocketing the difference to cover expenses. Or could I talk with Yuuki about building an official Guild post here? Maybe, but until that came up, we'd kind of function as them with this labyrinth.

This was the basic scheme of things up to Floor 5; the mazes gradually got trickier, but otherwise, no difference. Floor 6, though, is where things got tough. The traps would make their debut here, although nothing truly vicious up to Floor 9, so nobody would die from them (probably). A seasoned adventurer would cruise past them. If I made things too hard too fast, it'd discourage repeat traffic, and that was out of the question. I wanted to be kind with the first nine floors' design.

That all changed with Floor 10. Here, I placed a single monster who was, shall we say, kind of strong. In other words, this was a boss room. Defeat it, and a door would open to the floors below.

"What kind of monster did you go with, Rimuru?" asked Ramiris.

"I'll decide on that once I see how these guys are spawning, but... We haven't seen *any* so far, have we?"

No, we had yet to encounter a single monster, all the way down to Floor 10. Veldora released his aura a week and a half ago, but it still hadn't resulted in any baddies.

Understood. Even with his aura hidden, monsters can still detect the presence of the subject Veldora. Few would want to approach him.

Oh. I see.

"I guess monsters born from the magicules you released can pick up on his presence. They're too scared to go near him."

"What?! So *that's* why!" said Veldora, convinced. "No wonder I never saw many in my presence inside the cave I was sealed in."

I think it's more like the weaker monsters literally couldn't take the heat from him. But regardless:

"Well, I'll figure something out. One way or another, I want just a *kinda* strong monster in here, ranked B or thereabouts."

"Hmm... All right," said Ramiris. "I don't want any unintelligent beings among my lackeys, but if you find the right monster, bring it in here and put this collar on it!"

I accepted the collar, which apparently let the wearer be resurrected even if they hadn't forged a formal pact with Ramiris. That helped a lot. It meant I didn't have to find a replacement every time someone killed the guy.

"Wow, convenient. That'll save us a lot of trouble."

"Right? Remember, in this labyrinth, what I say goes!"

It probably did, too. Her skill let her change the effects of pretty much any item in here. I realized once again how much of a pity it was that I couldn't learn it for myself.

That took care of the boss issue. The boss room formed the entirety of Floor 10, making it perfectly safe after the battle was over. Beyond the room lay a save point and a simple stairway down. And let's not forget about the treasure chest! The one in the boss room had no trap installed, but I did carefully adjust the rates at which you'd find certain weapons or armor inside. In subsequent floors, however, there'd be both hidden chambers and chest traps.

Mimics would debut in Floor 20 and below—pretty diabolical, but that's the thrill of a labyrinth like this. Being able to experience something like this in real life was something I thought I deserved praise for.

But it wasn't all threatening stuff. With abundant magicules all over the labyrinth, the swords and lances found inside could start to get a bit magical themselves. *Getting your hands on stuff like that was worth risking your neck a little*, I thought. With a Resurrection Bracelet, nobody was going to die, so I figured revving up the difficulty would make it more fun and exciting. I couldn't wait to see how the adventurers would react to all this.

Finally, we wrapped up our inspection of the first ten floors. "Well, now what? Should we set up someplace on this floor where you can sell the stuff you found or put it in storage for safekeeping?"

"Oh? Do we really need that? Because then we wouldn't be able to sell any return whistles."

Ah. Right. Ramiris actually had a great point. She was always sharp with issues related to money, I guess.

"True. Not much point putting ones up in floors with save points. How about safe zones starting in the middle dungeons, say one every five levels?"

"Oooh, that could work!"

We could offer storage for items found, sell healing potions at marked-up prices, and offer some simple fare to eat. The labyrinth could have doors at regular levels that connected to a single zone, so we wouldn't need to construct separate zones all across the maze. It wouldn't be that much work to implement. Would more people opt to go outside when they needed a break, though? It'd depend, I suppose. Return whistles were meant as insurance, after all, so maybe we could price them on the higher side. I decided to reconsider that once this labyrinth made its debut.

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As we chatted about this or that labyrinth-related issue, we continued to inspect each floor—and as we checked out all the little details, the labyrinth slowly approached completion.

Finally, we were done with the hundredth floor, generally satisfied with ourselves. To be frank, the complete labyrinth ventured far beyond mere viciousness.

...Based on the skills of the average adventurer, low-level monsters and a labyrinth would provide enough of a difficulty level. Adding crafty traps and a legion of upper-level monsters, the term vicious seems rather tepid a description.

Sorry? I didn't hear that. Raphael sounded a bit exasperated with me, but I'm sure, of course, that I was just imagining it.

I'd learn not much later that I definitely *wasn't* imagining it. Between working out monster placement and boss setups, I suddenly realized that the labyrinth was now full of monsters. Tons of them.

"Wh-what in the...?!"

Well, too late now. This difficulty-balancing work wound up biting me in the ass, which I suppose I deserved. But no worries. It's important to leave little mistakes like this behind you.

There was still plenty left to do, but I decided to leave the rest to Veldora and Ramiris, who were now even further motivated. Milim was kind enough to fetch those dragons she offered to bring in, and we released them on the appropriate floors, adjusting the atmospheric magicule count as needed. The dragons helped cull the excessive numbers of monsters being generated, too. We still only had our bosses worked out down to Floor 30, but that would do for now.

The coliseum up top was still under construction, but the framework was getting completed at speeds I couldn't believe. It should be done in time for the Founder's Festival, once the snow thawed. The labyrinth below, meanwhile, was turning into a more splendid attraction than I had guessed. You needed to buy a Resurrection Bracelet to enter, but once you got one, I was sure you'd be addicted. Hopefully it would remain one of our city's main draws as long as I hoped.

There were still a lot of ideas left to implement, but for now, this was fine. I flashed an evil grin at the others, sharing a nod with them. We had our labyrinth all prepped and ready.

Before long, our town started to see some new faces. The snow was melting away, and once it did, we began to see visitors from all over traveling to the Forest of Jura.

The Founder's Festival was near.



CHAPTER
4

THE AUDIENCES

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 4

THE AUDIENCES

With everything running on schedule (to some extent), I returned to town. Veldora and Ramiris stayed in the labyrinth, and Milim was helping them out now that her dragon-wrangling work was done. The thought struck me that Milim might have to, like, go back and run her domain sometime, but I let her be. *She* was the one who'd get chewed out over it, not me.

Looking at the traps I laid, the three of them apparently had some complaints about the areas they were allowed to work out their final touches in. Until Floor 30, I really didn't want a lot of traps. It'd be pointless to sprinkle a bunch of dinky ones around, and if they got too sadistic too fast, adventurers would just give up. If they gave up too early, of course, they'd stop coming.

That's why I personally laid out the traps for everywhere between Floors 1 and 50. Ramiris and Veldora were allowed to handle only the deeper levels. I suppose, though, that witnessing my cruelest traps mainly inspired them to come up with even more insidious ones.

"Y'know, Rimuru, I think I had the wrong idea," said Ramiris. "Traps aren't meant to be installed one at a time, are they?"

"No fair! Let *me* invent some!!" whined Milim.

"Yes, perhaps I was so focused on my overall might that I overlooked how best to install these traps," said Veldora. "Let's approach this a little more seriously, then."

I mostly let them be. I didn't have the time to deal with all this selfishness. Ramiris was allowed to do whatever she wanted with Floors 51 to 60; Veldora, Floors 61 to 70; and Milim, the trickiest part of the labyrinth—the dragon chambers on Floors 96 to 99. The floors might turn out ridiculous, I knew, but I doubted any adventurer would make it past Floor 50 for a while to come, so I

didn't see the problem.

Floor 95, by the way, was where we decided to place the beastman refugee camp. I'd been considering putting some (very expensive) lodging down there for rest purposes as well—another idea I filed away for the future, after I saw how things went. As for the remainder—Floors 71 to 94—I left those in their default, untouched state for future purposes. They were fully infused with magicules, so you might see monsters show up down there, but otherwise, nothing of note. Everything else, the three had free rein over.

A few days passed. While I was scanning the buzzing city streets, I spotted Mjöllmile and his entourage heading this way. That was quicker than I had expected. He must've packed up and come over in a hurry.

"Sir Rimuru! I do apologize we didn't make it here sooner. I'm ready to begin at once!"

"Ah, Mjöllmile, thanks so much for coming! Let me guide you over to your home here."

I took him over to a residence we had only just recently built. I had asked Rigurd to get it done for him in advance, advising him to make sure it was move-in ready. I loved that guy. So well put together. Ask him to do something, and he'll never let you down. I also wanted Rigurd and Mjöllmile to say hello to each other, although Mjöllmile already knew Rigurd from their healing potion business. Leaving the guide goblins and Mjöllmile's servants to the house, I went with him over to Rigurd's office.

"Excuse me, Rigurd."

"Oh, Sir Rimuru! And Sir Mjöllmile as well. What brings you here today?"

He must have been busy, but Rigurd warmly greeted us nonetheless.

"Ah, I'm sorry it's been so long, Sir Rigurd! Your boss— Er, Sir Rimuru here has always been kind to me in our business ventures, but today—"

Before I could explain matters, Mjöllmile skillfully took over the role. We moved over to the parlor, quickly getting down to business—the state of arena construction, the lodging on the southwest side, the stalls we'd build around the arena site, and more. We also talked about the freshly built Dungeon and

using it to attract adventurers to town.

“...So the Dungeon is all ready to go. It’s not complete yet, but I think we can run it right now without any problem. The coliseum’s going to need some more time as well, but the main stage is complete. The VIP seating’s done, too, all fancy and stuff, so I figure we can have the regular audience sit on sheets in the grandstand for now. Or make it standing room only if need be.”

We were short on time, so I had been procrastinating on that issue. The arena structure was still bare-bones, but I figured that could wait until Mildo returned. Even incomplete, I think it had style, and I was also making sure it was safe to use.

Rigurd and Mjöllmile listened to my explanation with rapt attention, and we quickly lost ourselves in discussion. Rigurd accepted the job of educating our citizens, ensuring they were fully able and ready to handle the people who’d be coming in soon; meanwhile, Mjöllmile had his own ideas for the arena and dungeon we had planned out, as evidenced by his commendably confident smile. We discussed it all, pointing out flaws and trying to correct them, figuring out what we needed and what had to be on-site.

“It’s a tremendous relief to see Sir Mjöllmile with us on this,” a smiling Rigurd said.

“Yeah, isn’t it? He’s a pretty useful guy, you know. If this Founder’s Festival ends well, I’m thinking about making him into our nation’s chief financial manager.”

This was important to me. I wanted him in charge of our country’s finances, and I also wanted him running our new commerce and publicity departments, doing all he could for Tempest. Rigurd nodded at this, promising to personally select the staff who’d work under him. We had been asking the inns along the highway and such to keep track of their own accounts, but this was still an uphill process. Literacy rates had gone up thanks to Vester, but not everyone could read, write, and do sums yet. If we wanted to keep this nation going, we’d really need people like Mjöllmile. Rigurd, to his credit, seemed to understand that and was accepting to Mjöllmile joining my administration—and not just because I wanted him there. Maybe he knew that numbers were a weakness of

ours. He seemed to welcome him, even, outside of our current festival plans.

"...I see. That sounds like a splendid idea!"

"No, no, I still have much to learn. But I promise you that I will tackle our issues with every bit of strength I have!"

He was sounding modest, but I knew he had his heart set on this post from the outset. He had ambition, and as long as the Founder's Festival worked out well, I'd have no qualms about appointing him to the roles I had laid out.

"However," I said, "you'll still need to perform well for us. The others won't accept you otherwise."

"Indeed," replied Rigurd, "although I am sure one word from you would be enough to convince them all..."

"I'd like to avoid that. Honestly, if anything, I feel like I'm too involved in this stuff right now."

"Maybe so. And the very fact that noncitizens of Tempest can take top administrative roles will serve as fine advertising. To achieve that, however, Sir Mjöllmile will need to put up results that everyone can appreciate."

"You said it. Sorry to put all this pressure on you, but can I count on you for that, Mollie?"

That *would* be the tricky part. If this was just about strength, or something similarly easy to grasp, the monsters would easily be convinced. Diablo was a prime example; when I appointed him my second secretary, nobody complained about that at all. (Okay, Shion did, but that's because she can't take a hint.) Diablo's strength was undoubtedly second only to mine; you'd have to be silly to pick a fight with someone like that.

In other words, when it came to military roles or the like, pretty much anyone could become an officer if I recognized their talents. If they're strong enough for the post, we're all good.

That wouldn't work with the more bureaucrat-type positions. I imagine most governments have examinations and stuff for those posts, but sadly, we hadn't reached that point yet.

I'd gladly welcome experienced people like Vester, but again, they needed to put up achievements. Even Vester was still technically just a consultant—a visitor, if you will. I wanted to give him a promotion to an administrative job, but first I wanted Mjöllmile to prove himself at his. If possible, I'd like them both to play a simultaneous role in our new system of government, bringing them on as ministers.

But Mjöllmile's confident smile banished my concerns. "Heh-heh-heh... Sir Rimuru, I hope you won't underestimate me *that* much. Just watch as I satisfy your expectations and make this into a massive success!"

Glad I could rely on him. He didn't run the underground scene in his hometown with his mouth alone. That brazen attitude put my mind at ease.

"Heh-heh-heh... Mollie, you have earned my trust. Make me proud!"

"And even if you *do* make a mistake or two, I'll make sure it *becomes* a success in the public eye. Anyone who defies Sir Rimuru's will shall face the might of my iron fists!"

"Um, Rigurd, you can't do that. That's why I want Mjöllmile to do well for us, all right?"

"Never fear. I will leave no evidence—"

"You are quite an impressive official, Sir Rigurd," murmured Mjöllmile.

"No, please, I mean it. If you do anything, you're on your own, all right?"

Still, we exchanged dark smiles with each other. Rigurd and Mjöllmile weren't unfamiliar with each other; I trusted they were comfortable with this relationship. Knowing that helped me relax. And really, I didn't care *why* people decided to accept Mjöllmile's presence, as long as they did.

Now, to go back to our respective groups and prepare for the Founder's Festival. Things were humming along now.

*

That night:

"This is insanity... This must be insanity! This is far posher than even the grandest lodging in Englesia!"

Mjöllmile began shouting the moment he entered his new residence. He must have liked the place. I was happy.

"There is running water, magic-driven burners, baths, and these toilets. Every advanced piece of equipment this town has to offer is available to us."

The elated servant's report almost made Mjöllmile faint on the spot.

"R-Rimuru... Er, Sir Rimuru? Are you sure all this luxury is suitable for me?"

Hey, man, this all comes *standard* in Tempest.

Of course, given the servants he brought along, Mjöllmile *was* living in a larger mansion, not your normal kind of place. I had taken note of his residence in Blumund and made sure we had something similar for him here. There were ten individual apartments, rooms with small kitchens and toilets. These were linked by a large shared bath and a dining hall, allowing Mjöllmile to share this home with a decent number of servants.

"You needed this, right? This was cheaper than building separate homes for each of them, too. If anyone wants their own house, they're free to save up for one."

I couldn't build homes for them all, so I kind of reused a building we had set up for an administrator-level resident, but everyone seemed happy enough with it. The house came at no charge, too—I mean, with all the money I had made off Mjöllmile, I really couldn't charge him. And that money was gonna keep flowing, too. This was a necessary expense, you could say—a steal, even.

"Y-yes, true... But this is the standard you enjoy here? Then what about the more economical lodgings in the southwest?"

"Yeah, they don't get individual baths in the rooms, but they *do* get toilets. There's a low-cost public bath nearby, and some of the inns have their own baths for free."

"I see... Yes, you did talk about making this town into a kind of health resort, didn't you? Now it makes sense to me. So you offer this level of services to even the commoners, not just the nobility or well-funded areas? Yes, we certainly *can* expect some adventurers here!"

“Pretty easy living, huh?”

“Not just ‘pretty easy.’ This is the best you’d find all around the West. If adventurers can find a steady income in this town, we’re gonna have a lot of excitement pretty soon.”

“Hmm...”

“...?! Ah! Right! Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

Er, what? Mjöllmile was shouting at me again. I had no idea about what.

“That’s what the Dungeon is for! Well *done*, Sir Rimuru! I couldn’t be more in awe of you right now!”

“Oh. Um, yeah. Definitely.”

What’s he talking about?

“The adventurers can hunt the monsters in the labyrinth. I thought this was a bit of charity for adventurers short on work, now that the Forest of Jura is more stable...but heavens, you had thought *that* far ahead?”

Ch-*charity*?!

I mean, yeah, there aren’t as many wild monsters around Jura as there used to be, but...like, the Dungeon’s just a fun attraction, so...

“This can work. This can really work! We’re seeing more adventurers out of a job, what with monster counts dwindling and all. Perhaps some can use the Dungeon as their workplace. Plus, we’ll be selling healing potions and adventuring gear nearby, right? Picture this: What if this town isn’t just a tourist site or health spa, but someplace where they can permanently reside? With all these inns providing fantastic service, a coliseum attracting tourists, and a dungeon providing thrills *and* a potentially decent wage...”

Um...was that what we built the Dungeon for?

I did intend to offer money for whatever the adventurers earned in there, but that was kind of like offering buybacks on carnival prizes. But was Mjöllmile’s line of thinking worth hearing out?

“Wow, Mollie. You only just came here today, and you already worked it

out?"

"Ah, of course, sir. If there's money to be sniffed out, I'd never lose a single coin to you!"

"Heh-heh-heh... You're incorrigible."

"Ha-ha-ha! Ah, don't be silly. It wouldn't be possible without you!"

"But thinking and doing are different things, of course. I was hoping I could leave you to work out the rest of the plan..."

"Oh, would you? I'd be glad to help!"

I guess the plan was now to let adventurers "work" in the Dungeon, and Mjöllmile was kind enough to accept the job. He already had a ton on his plate, I knew. Talk about energetic.

But... Hmm. I didn't think that far, but I totally overlooked the idea of adventurers *living* here. To me, the dungeon attraction was kind of a gamble—maybe some customers would make money off it, but the majority would leave with their wallets pretty thoroughly emptied. But have a permanent group of adventurers hunt monsters in there? There's no stopping Mjöllmile's imagination, huh? I love getting his insights.

Unlike forest creatures, there was no chance of overhunting and wrecking the ecosystem. Much better, really, to have the hunters cull the monsters' numbers before they multiplied too much, then buy the materials they harvested from them. With Veldora around, there was no need to worry about where the magicules would come from—the monsters would be constantly replenished.

This actually might be a brilliant idea! It'd give adventurers money to go spend around the city and help fill Tempest's coffers, which would allow us to provide more support to them. We could process the materials they hunted for us, and I suppose we could even export them to other countries. Magic crystals could be shipped off as is, although we wouldn't export them all—we had our own uses for them.

Maybe this would be the tipping point that made the Free Guild build a post in town, too. We could give them exclusive rights to the dungeon business, so we weren't in competition. *And if they paid the adventurers directly*, I thought,

that would also open access to foreign capital for us—capital we could use to import goods from other nations. With imports cut off from Eurazania at the moment, I wasn't sure the produce and grains we farmed would be enough to keep the adventurers full, so some imports might become necessary.

Besides, I wanted Tempest to become a trade hub; that was part of the idea from the start, and I needed to think of ways to move larger amounts of goods and money around. There were plans in my mind. That was why I made sure the highways were designed to be pretty wide, after all. We'd paved only half the width of the roads; the other half was bare earth. I planned to put rails down on that land someday, and with the rails would come freight trains.

"After that, I suppose it all comes down to advertising."

Mjöllmile pulled me back down to earth before I floated off too much into fantasizing about my dreams. No, no need to go too crazy yet. It'd take time to develop rails, much less the trains that'd run on them. First, we needed to pull off this massive party without a hitch and make a good impression on the world.

"You're right. This isn't advertising, exactly, but I've sent out invitations to world leaders. Journalists from several nations are working with me as well, so I think we should see a pretty decent turnout."

"Oh? Good to hear, Sir Rimuru. I was just thinking that we'd best start negotiating with royalty and nobility before the winter thaw if we want them to join in, but you've already planned ahead, eh? In that case, I'll contact the larger merchant operations I work with and let them know about the festival."

"Could you do that?"

"Certainly. I'm already prepared to, in fact. I intended to send out messengers once I scoped out how things were in Tempest."

Mjöllmile grinned at me. He was so useful.

"Ah, my hat goes off to you, Mollie. You never leave a single stone unturned, do you?"

"I could say the same of you, Sir Rimuru! The foresight you've shown with all this is a far cry from anything I could ever manage."

Another exchange of knowing smiles. I think Mjöllmile's far more of a schemer than I ever was, but I'll take the compliment.

"Sir Rimuru," he continued, turning more serious as he stood up, "there is no way this plan of yours could possibly fail. If you have what it takes to build a nation up *this* far, I'm sure you could guide just about anyone to success!"

I'm not sure about "anyone," but he did help put my mind at ease. I suppose Mjöllmile was impressed enough by our town's food, environment, and creature comforts. That's why he was reacting that way, and perhaps it was a sign of our future promised success, even.

I stood up and extended a hand to him. "I'm counting on you, Mollie!"

"Certainly," he replied, gripping it in a handshake. From that moment, I was sure we had it in the bag.

*

That night, we held a big dinner at Mjöllmile's mansion. Afterward, he and I were relaxing together over some tea when he whispered something to a servant and had him go fetch someone. This someone, or rather someones, turned out to be Bydd and Gob'emon.

I had thought Gob'emon was staying undercover as he kept watch over Mjöllmile. If he was here, had he introduced himself to the guy or something? And that wasn't even my main concern.

"Sir Rimuru, I understand that kind Gob'emon here was sent to protect me?"

I thought about playing dumb for a moment, but I guess Mjöllmile already knew he was here on my orders. No point trying to hide it.

"Well, yeah— But, Gob'emon, uh, what's up with your arm?"

I kinda had to ask. Half of his right one was missing, ending at the elbow.

"S-Sir Rimuru! My—my sincerest apologies!" He kneeled down, head virtually to the floor. "I made a terrible mistake and exposed my identity to Mjöllmile. This arm was my punishment, you see."

I turned to Mjöllmile for some kind of explanation.

"Now, now, Gob'emon. Go on, lift your head up. Have some tea to calm you

down."

He sat Gob'emon on a seat and offered him tea from a servant. Once we were all in place, he turned to me and went into the story.

It turned out that Mjöllmile had, indeed, been attacked several times since our meeting. Mjöllmile, being no fool, ordered Bydd and the rest of his security detail to redouble their efforts, but there were a few close scrapes that were foiled thanks to the assistance of an anonymous bystander—Gob'emon, in other words. There were considerably more assaults than I had planned for, and I guess that's how he got spotted. Mjöllmile apparently figured he must've been with me and kept pretending not to notice out of politeness.

And then *it* happened. Viscount Cazac, whether he lost his temper or whatever, decided to get serious.

"So I left my business to a trusted associate and left for this country. Once I reached the highway, I assumed I was safe and nobody would try to touch me. But..."

The highway was full of adventurers, traveling merchants, and patrolmen. I had teams clear the roads daily to keep them free of snow, so the winter hadn't slowed the flow of people much. An attack in such a well-traversed area was unthinkable, and even if it happened, our security team would be right on the scene. Someone like Mjöllmile, who traveled the highways frequently, was fully aware of that.

But as if to prove his confidence was misplaced, his party came under attack at a village near the far end of the highway.

"A village? You mean the one where Bydd tried to rip— Um, where Bydd and I first met?"

"Yes! The very same, Sir Rimuru!"

Bydd might have been Mjöllmile's bodyguard now, but when I first met him, he was a pretty low-end swindler. It wasn't worth bringing up past drama, though, so I glossed over it. He had shown up to help defend Gob'emon, and now they were both behind Mjöllmile as he explained matters.

As Bydd then explained, they were accosted by a wagon painted black, out of

which popped monsters—several of them, all ranked B. As an ex-C fighter, Bydd and his team couldn't do much, and they were all about to say their prayers but still did their best to evacuate the villagers and buy some time. Then Gob'emon showed up.

"Yeah, that Gob'emon guy saved all our lives, man!"

"That he did," Mjöllmile added. "Not just me, but everyone who was there owes him a word of thanks."

"But I still failed..."

Gob'emon didn't seem interested in the compliment. He wasn't the sort to lose out to this monster band, and apparently he had dispatched them in short order. He then attempted to capture the criminal leading them, only to go eye-to-eye with a basilisk, a B-plus threat. It spewed petrifying gas at Gob'emon's right arm, and he hurriedly amputated it himself before it spread any further. That bought the black wagon enough time to speed off.

"Failed? Meaning you didn't catch the guy behind it?"

"Yes, but I let Mjöllmile notice me..."

That's what he's talking about?!

"I don't really care about that. Your bodyguard duty was the more important thing. Plus, like, *fix that thing, dude!*"

I extracted a potion from my Stomach and attempted to hand it to Gob'emon. He bit his lip, refusing to take it.

"No, this injury is the result of my inexperience. I was unable to defeat the basilisk by myself and compelled to seek the aid of Bydd and his team. It was terrible of me, and while missing an arm presents its difficulties, it will grow back over time..."

What a stubborn goblin. Or proud, I guess you could say, but he was trying to do way too much by himself.

"Gob'emon, are you embarrassed that you needed Bydd's help?"

"Well...my job was to guard Mjöllmile, but I exposed him to danger instead..."

"Hang on, Gob'emon. You're misunderstanding this."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. You're trying to do everything alone. *That's* the difference between you and Gobta."

That summed it up, really—the ability to work with the people underneath them. Gobta never tried to do all the work himself. Even when fighting powerful monsters, he was always issuing commands to his team. For the easier jobs, he barely even lifted a finger—or maybe he was just deliberately being lazy, much of the time—but in terms of encouraging growth among his team, Benimaru called Gobta a better commander.

With Gob'emon, if a strong monster reared its ugly head, he'd leap right in front and try to fight it. I could understand his line of thinking—he was talented, so this would make things faster—but doing that accomplished nothing for the rest of his team. And what if Gob'emon fell? It'd leave his troop defenseless. I'd be deeply concerned about their chances of surviving the encounter.

That was the reasoning behind Benimaru's evaluation, and that's why I wanted Gob'emon to learn how to rely on others. Mjöllmile was great at handling his people, and I thought using him as an example would help Gob'emon grow a little.

"...That's exactly why you need to learn how to trust in your friends more. I'm not saying to throw them recklessly into danger. I'm saying that you need to conserve a little bit of your strength and give them a hand if things get hairy."

"I—I..."

"Everybody knows how strong you are. But that's not enough to lead a unit."

"....."

Gob'emon hung his head, and I took the opportunity to throw the healing potion at him.

"Ah?!"

The fluid spilled all over his right arm, which visibly regenerated before us.

"Gob'emon, I want you to stay with Mjöllmile for a while. You can train Bydd

and his men if you like, or just chill out and relax for a bit. I doubt Mollie needs anyone to guard him in town, so take a moment to reevaluate yourself a little, all right?"

"L-Lord Rimuru..."

"Because, I mean, none of us can really do anything by ourselves, okay? I think you learned that with your mistake there. Just think about what you should do next time, and you'll find the answer, okay?"

I smiled at him, took the katana off my belt, and presented it to him. He froze, eyes wide open in surprise.

"Take it."

"B-but... My mission..."

"Look, you got Mollie here in one piece, right? I'll be expecting even bigger things from you now. Treat this sword as a mirror into your heart, and use it every night to try looking into yourself."

If Gob'emon could get over his arrogance and pride, we'd be able to rely on him more than ever.

"Yes sir! Your loyal servant Gob'emon shall live up to your expectations!"

There was fire in his eyes. He always *was* a goblin of ambition—giving him a goal to strive for should make the growth process go faster. I was sure he'd live up to every bit of my expectations.

"All right, Mollie, you mind taking care of Gob'emon for me?"

"Ha-ha-ha! I don't mind one bit. I was just about to ask you the very same favor! Bydd, we've got Sir Rimuru's permission. I hope you're ready for some training from Gob'emon!"

Looks like he was already welcome on the team. Gob'emon was now a sort of houseguest of Mjöllmile's, free to do whatever he wanted.

Once I left the mansion, I looked at the night sky. The assorted constellations up there were twinkling bright, although none looked like what I saw on Earth.

I wondered about that attacker, though. Was it *really* Cazac behind that? I

doubted a nobleman on the level of a viscount had the resources to stage an assassination attempt with multiple monsters. And B rankers were one thing, but B-plus? It'd be impossible to tame one of those guys unless you were some kind of tycoon from a wealthy nation...

...Wait a second. If you wanted to tame a B-plus monster, would money be enough to achieve that?

Understood. Thegis, a summoner rated A-minus, once summoned a B-plus Lesser Demon. It is not out of the question for someone to tame a basilisk.

Ahhh, summon magic could do the trick, huh? That'd sure be quicker than carting the monster around on a wagon. But while Shuna's barrier kept external magic from entering town, the highways were wholly unprotected.

"Better beef up our security," I whispered to myself as I set off.

Mjöllmile had been gracefully accepted by the residents of Tempest. I introduced him to my administration, and Rigurd relayed word of him to the others, but really, it all went surprisingly smoothly. Looking at the way he worked for me after that, I could see why nobody was complaining. In no time at all, he had a firm grasp of the people and resources he had at hand, delegating duties to both man and monster. Between them and the servants he had brought along, he had a full organization set up in no time whatsoever. Capable people are just different like that.

As he managed this new company of his, Mjöllmile used his connections to send out invitations to VIPs worldwide. Powerful nobility from the inner countries, the wealthier merchants from each key city, the movers and shakers over in the Englesian capital, that kind of thing. Once the snow melted, the Founder's Festival was going to be even larger in scale than I had first envisioned.

Of course, his organizational skills were also pointed in other directions: the performances for our new theater; the format and rules for our arena battles; the admission fee to the Dungeon, along with prices for the items we sold there; inventory and sales approaches for the stalls around the arena site. I was shocked this was a first for him; he seemed completely in his element as he arranged all this. I introduced him to Veldora, too, and he agreed to work out

the guy's hibachi-grill concept with him.

I definitely made the right choice. Out of all my crazy ideas, hiring him was probably the smartest one. Without his talents, there was a pretty high chance the whole thing would've crashed and burned. No way I'd ever be *this* nimble with things. I was lucky to run into this guy, and as I watched him do his magic, I couldn't help but feel exhilarated.

*

Time sure flies sometimes, doesn't it? The whole town was in a festive mood now, the streets alive with energy and enthusiasm.

Arena construction was proceeding well. Gobkyuu was proving an excellent foreman, and everything was still on schedule. Mildo, youngest of the three dwarven brothers, was also back from his break and adding his own touches to my blueprints. Now there was an aesthetic, even artistic value, to the structure. He was a real artist, indeed, and I sure wasn't, so this was a huge help. I was sure it'd be more than enough to wow those jaded nobles. Plus, Mildo's touches even looked like they'd be done in time for the first battle tournament.

Mjöllmile's staff also had their stalls open, selling to the workers in the area for practice. This was going well, too, generating business at a pretty decent clip. Neither of us anticipated any problems, which was a relief. The Dungeon, meanwhile, was in Ramiris's and Veldora's hands—I wanted to be more involved, but I was rapidly running short of free time.

Now the various leaders of the Forest of Jura's monster races were assembling in town to celebrate (or maybe probe into) my new title. We had a series of audiences with each contingent scheduled across several days.

They wanted to declare their fealty to the demon lord in hopes of obtaining protection in return—but if they saw that the demon lord didn't have that kind of power, they'd no doubt bare their fangs at once and start rebelling. Under a powerless demon lord, there'd be no prosperity, only a straight, downhill road to oblivion, and they knew it. Taking action to avoid such a fate was a matter of course.

Until fairly recently, the whole of Jura had been protected under Veldora's absolute, irresistible power. That made the Forest an impregnable fortress, but

now it was under the rule of a new demon lord—a freshly ordained one, whose priorities and policies were still a question mark. That'd unnerve any of the monster leaders, I was sure.

...So. Here I was, in the audience chamber we set up, being enshrined on my little platform, in full dress. As a slime. It made me feel like some kind of table decoration, a conversation piece laid out on a divine altar.

I suggested just putting one of my Replications up there, but my team of advisers just smiled and said no. They had a knack for working together against me at times like this. My only guess was that they were using Thought Communication to talk to each other behind my back.

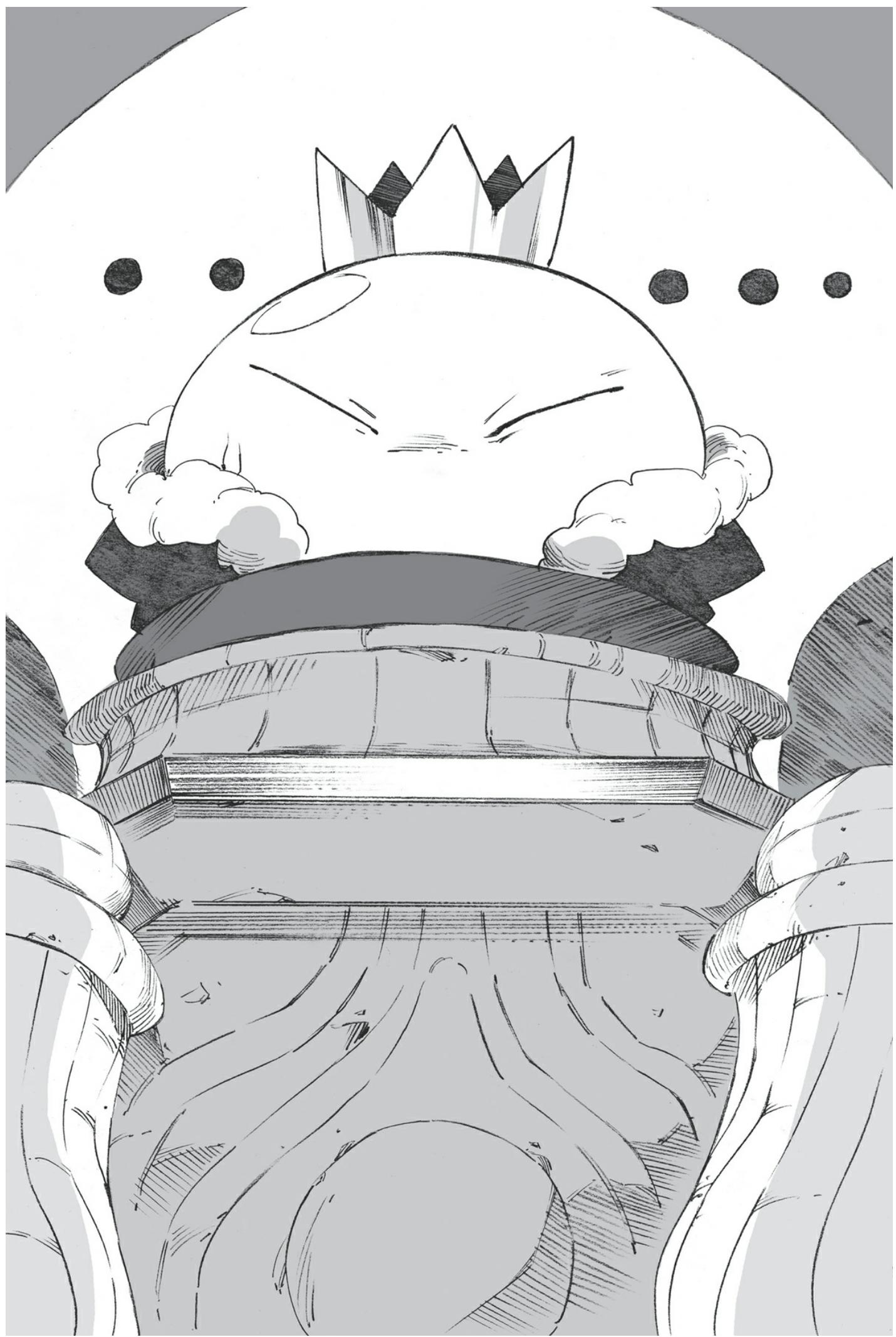
So I let them do what they wanted with me, and they dolled me up so much that I couldn't even move. They even prepared special slime clothes for this day. It was exhausting. Several outfits, changed daily for me—or maybe even morning, afternoon, and evening; I stopped paying attention. I wished they'd knock it off, but they kept talking about how I had to strike a dignified pose—which indicated to me that my slime form didn't look dignified at all.

Ah well.

Everyone participating in this “presentation ceremony” was dressed like they were members of a military honor guard. Every button was polished, not a wrinkle in sight. The pressure was intense, and in the midst of this oppressive atmosphere, Rigurd and Rigur—just as smartly dressed—were dealing with the envoys. I looked down at them, as instructed to do, without saying a word. Me speaking would ruin the effect anyway, so I was glad I didn't have to.

Benimaru and Shuna stood guard over me on both sides. Behind me was Shion, Soei, and Gabil, in a neat little line. Ranga, as always, was holed up inside my shadow.

Over to the right was Gobwa and another hundred-odd members of Team Kurenai; the other two hundred were patrolling the city streets. They were all more powerful than our normal security team, so I took this measure so they could quickly handle any weirdos who showed up during the event. Shion's Team Reborn in plainclothes, meanwhile, was also keeping an eye on the town, ready to address any flare-ups before they got out of control.



Diablo and Hakuro, by the way, still weren't back from Farmus. According to Gobta, Ranga, and Gabil (who came home before them), they said they'd wrap everything up before the Founder's Festival. Apparently, they were pretty disappointed that they couldn't see me make my royal debut like this—but they had Yohm's own coronation to handle over there. With it, Farmus would be reborn as a new country, and I'm sure they had a million things to do, so I couldn't blame them for missing out. Even Diablo was showing up here only on rare occasions, and Hakuro didn't have access to Spatial Motion, so I hadn't seen him at all lately. I'd definitely need to thank them once they're back.

I wasn't the only one suffering right now. It was all so tremendously embarrassing, but I resolved to put up with it and get this stupid, exaggerated, bombastic presentation ceremony over with.

What was funny was how each of the monster races reacted to me. I had nothing to do, so I sat there like the conversation piece I was and looked down at the assorted monsters giving speeches.

Generally, the monster reactions were divided into three camps—worship, observation, or fear. On the observation side were a few people who openly looked down on me. The new guys from the other side of the Great Ameld River were particularly notable on this front. But it was no big problem. Show off some of my strength, and I'm sure they'll acquiesce to me.

The monsters who feared me, however, were the real issue...

Here, for example, was a contingent of rabbitfolk in front of me right now, a race of demi-humans who were honestly pretty cute—human, basically, but with long, pointy rabbitlike ears. Unlike lycanthropes, they were degraded beastmen, unable to transform and possessing the same amount of strength as an average human. The equipment they had on didn't look too sturdy, either, but they were all gifted in the Detect Danger skill, which I'm sure was a must to survive in the Forest of Jura. My own cutesy exterior must not have fooled them at all.

"Um, tha-thank you for i-inviting us here today..."

Dealing with someone who was petrified of you was kind of tough. Some of the rabbitfolk were visibly quaking, so we had to calm them down before they

could begin.

"Very well," echoed Rigurd's voice. "You are hereby granted an audience with our ruler, the great demon lord Rimuru. Lift your head up!"

The rabbitfolk leader didn't move. Or maybe he couldn't. This darling little slime was simply too much of a threatening presence to look in the eye—not that I had eyes. But that wasn't the issue. I didn't *want* to oversee a reign of terror with these guys; I wanted a frank and open relationship...but to races like this, a demon lord who *looked* wimpy on the outside was nothing short of horrifying. Too much of a gap, I suppose. We had worked hard with guys like these, earning their support for our transportation and logistical efforts all over the forest. Maybe it wasn't possible from the outset, but I really wished I could interact normally with them sometime.

The halflings and kobolds were like this when I first launched the federation, although the kobolds started trusting us once we agreed to let them continue their merchant trade. Koby, their representative, and I were old war buddies by now, constantly sharing potential business leads with each other.

These rabbitfolk were equals to me, and so was every other weaker race in the forest. I'd just have to stick to my guns and try to explain that I didn't value my citizenry strictly on their ability to fight. Maybe they wouldn't believe me at first, but we could work it out. So I sat, looking at the twitching ears of the rabbitfolk kowtowing to me.

"There is nothing to fear. Sir Rimuru is a fair, generous leader, one who says he will treat everyone in his domain as equal. Please, feel free to share a few words with him," intoned Rigurd.

The representative finally held his head up. He was young and fairly handsome, but there were deep rings under his eyes. Out of overwork or nervousness?

"O—O great demon lord Rimuru, please accept the sincere loyalty of the rabbitfolk..."

I gave him a firm nod. It seemed to relieve the guy. I could practically see a literal weight lift from his shoulders.

"See?" Rigurd beamed. "I told you. There is no need to be nervous!"

"Ha...ha-ha...! Um, I've actually brought my daughter along, but she got so restless once we entered town, I'm afraid I've lost sight of her..."

"Ha-ha-ha! Yes, the whole town's in a festival frenzy right now. I can imagine a young girl would let her curiosity get the best of her!"

"Ah, this is so embarrassing... I let her out of my sight for a single moment, and she runs away to who knows where. I had wanted to leave her behind in the village, lest she offend Lord Rimuru, but she insisted..."

This leader must've been panicking about his daughter causing some kind of ruckus in town. So all those nerves weren't just from being in awe of me? That's good to know. I didn't want the weaker races any more scared of me than they already were. But a young rabbitfolk girl, huh...? A pretty lass with rabbit ears *would* be a sight to see, I bet. Hopefully I'd get a chance.

As I thought over it, I began speaking a bit more honestly than I perhaps should have.

"If she's that curious, then she must be taking in all the trends and different things around here, isn't she? I bet she'll make a wonderfully reliable successor to you."

The direct compliment from me visibly moved the leader.

"Such...such kind words, my lord! If I have the chance, I would be delighted to introduce my daughter Framea to you."

He bowed to me. It seemed like we had broken the ice a little. Rigurd then briefed him on political matters a bit, and they agreed on the spot that the rabbitfolk were officially part of my domain. He bowed several times again before finally leaving the altar. *Hopefully*, I thought as the next visitor was brought to me, *this'll show people that I'm not such a scary guy*.

This visitor kneeled before me, turning an eye toward the other monsters seeking an audience. I knew this guy—it was Abil, Gabil's father and chief of the lizardmen. Seeing him reminded me of the good old days—or it would have, if he didn't look virtually like another person by now. He had transformed into a square-jawed warrior in the prime of his life. Giving him a name must've

evolved him to this point—to a dragonewt, one far closer to humanoid than before. Gabil sure didn't change that much, but Soka had gone almost entirely human, so maybe it depended on what the individual wanted.

"It has been far too long since we last spoke, Sir Rimuru. It pleases me greatly that you have risen to demon lord, er, the status of demon lord, and all of us er, are..."

Abil was acting oddly stiff. He was probably more on the "worship" side of matters. Gabil himself said demon lords weren't *that* worth freaking out about. He already should've known what I was like, so why all the nerves?

I tried to be informal with my response. "Hey, Chief. Good to see you again. No need for the formalities here. We're all part of the same federation, right? Keep up the good work."

Benimaru snickered, and Shuna sighed at me, but I didn't care.

"It is not that simple, Sir Rimuru. As a demon lord, you have grown into something extraordinary. You are not only our lord, but the de facto ruler of the entire Forest of Jura..."

As always, Abil was too serious for his own good. But that's what I liked about him.

"All right, all right. There aren't any other races in this chamber we're in right now. You don't have to be all nervous. Your son, Gabil, is working hard under my leadership. He's become a full-fledged part of my administration. I couldn't have done this without him."

I decided to name-drop Gabil to ease the tension a bit, reminding Abil of his son and indirectly hinting that he ought to let him back into the family already.

"Ah, there is no fazing you, Sir Rimuru. So that no-good son of mine has been of service to you? He's such an incorrigible fool, so..."

He must've noticed my intentions. The fact of the matter was, Gabil had still been kicked out of Abil's family, so he must've thought it improper to ask how his son was doing without some kind of prompting. Now that I brought him up, that wasn't an issue. I could already see his usual bold attitude coming back.

"Incorrigible? Hardly! I'm having him lead our research and development department, and he's doing an excellent job for me. Aren't you, Gabil?"

"Wha? Ah—yes !!"

Gabil, meanwhile, was frozen solid through all this, blushing all the way back to his ears, and when he was suddenly expected to join the conversation, his voice cracked.

"That stupid kid of mine..."

As Gabil continued to work himself into a panic, I unleashed just a little bit of Lord's Ambition. That was enough to turn everyone's attention back to me.

"Abil, chief of the lizardmen... Though I may be demon lord, I request your continued support as a member of my federation."

"It shall be done! By the name you've given me, I will never forget my allegiance to you!"

He bowed down, head nodding deeply at me. He was the classic noble warrior, and he looked the part, even in this strictly formal setting. I nodded back, then glanced at the still-panicking Gabil.

"...?!"

He can be so dense sometimes. I guess he didn't see what that glance meant. I'm sure it wasn't because I was in slime mode and didn't have eyes, either.

Rigur, exasperated, jogged over to Gabil and whispered in his ear. "Sir Rimuru would like you and your father to speak to each other privately. If he doesn't let you back into the family now, you won't have another chance for quite some time to come, you realize? And having an estranged son accomplishing so many great things puts Sir Abil in a delicate position, too, no doubt..."

Nice one, Rigur. Way to perfectly understand what I meant, unlike Gabil here.

The step-by-step explanation finally shook the fog out of Gabil's brain. He saluted me, still a little flustered, and accompanied Abil out of the chamber.

Next up were the assorted high orc tribal chiefs, each with a little entourage along for the ride. They must've trusted me enough to not bring guards in; the entourages were composed of children and grandchildren. With their food

situation much improved, life had plainly gotten a lot easier for them. They were fathering children now, and these children were themselves high orcs, which surprised and elated them so much that they wanted to show them off to me.

Well, why *wouldn't* they be high orcs? Apparently, that wasn't as much of a given as I thought. Normally, they'd just be regular orcs; the mutation into high orc was seen as a one-and-done kind of thing, generation-wise. With birth rates going down among them, they'd be able to devote more time and effort into raising each one, I imagined. I wanted to be sure of that, so they'd become the next generation of manpower for us. Children really *are* treasures, thinking of it that way—a fact that remains true no matter what world, or species, you're talking about.

I was a little concerned about how their names were being passed on, but apparently it was going well. I had given those names almost at random, but I guess they all sounded natural enough to them, so...great? It's all about getting used to it, I suppose. Call someone anything long enough, and it's bound to stick. They didn't really *need* names anyway, so maybe I was over-worrying it.

Fully reassured, I saw off the high orcs and their entourage.

Next came the final group of the day—the treants, the other major players in the Forest of Jura Alliance after the lizardmen and the high orcs. Actually, the only individuals who made an appearance were the dryads Traya and Doreth, Treyni's younger sisters. But hey, treants can't move anyway. No helping that. Besides, the dryads acted as the treants' representatives, so no issues there.

I had been visiting the treant colony on regular occasions; Zegion and Apito had been keeping it well protected, and we were receiving regular shipments of high-quality honey from them. Thus, the atmosphere at this audience was pretty casual.

"Charmed to see you again, Sir Rimuru. Congratulations on being appointed a demon lord."

"We hope you will continue to provide us with your benevolent protection."

They both smiled at me without hesitation. That saved me a lot of trouble.

So we filled each other in on recent happenings. For now, nothing was particularly amiss. The only real concern to report was the thinning out of magicules around the Forest of Jura, which made transport a tad inconvenient.

They both looked exactly like Treyni, and I could feel vast amounts of magical force in them, but apparently they were still affected by the lower magic concentrations around them. In fact, Doreth *did* look a little thinned out to me.

"Hmm... I didn't think that far. That's probably the magic barriers along the highways doing their work. Better think of something for that..."

"Oh, no, it's not that serious a problem."

"We sisters use magicules to form the magical bodies you see before you, and they are merely more susceptible to the barriers, is all."

"But outside of that, Sir Rimuru..."

"We have important matters to discuss!!"

They didn't see it as important. Very few creatures around Jura would be affected by magicule concentrations like that, dryads and treants among them. Thus, since they were the last people I was seeing today, I offered to continue our talk in a private room that night.

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The moment I entered the room, the two spoke in unison.

"So what we wanted to talk to you about..."

"We wish to serve the beautiful fairy queen just as our great elder sister does."

You know, now that I think about it, I don't like that "fairy queen" name. It was overblown, way too fancy for such a teensy little thing. And *beautiful*? I recalled a smiling Ramiris in my mind. No way. Not beautiful. We were picturing totally different things, I was pretty sure about that. If Ramiris was beautiful, you could describe Shizu, the base for my own looks, as a goddess. I'm used to

it now, but even I was a bit taken by my own appearance in the past.

Benimaru and Shion, who joined me in here, seemed to agree with me—but Traya and Doreth paid them no mind.

“This is not just our opinion, but that of all the treants.”

“And we hear that, in this very town...”

“...Lady Ramiris has built her residence.”

“If so, we can only hope to be of some service to her...”

In their uniquely sequential manner of speaking, they begged me to let them serve Ramiris. If they had already requested a different master, that’d make it hard to ask them to serve me, I suppose. Besides, Treyni, their big sister, was already Ramiris’s. I had no real reason to be opposed.

“Um, you wanna ask her?”

“...What?!”

“Is that all right?”

The reaction was swift and forceful.

So off we went to Ramiris’s place, where we found Beretta silently working and Treyni falling over herself to cater to the fairy’s whims. Man, Beretta must have it pretty tough.

But as I thought that:

“Ahhh, Lady Ramiris, you are so ravishing...”

“As beautiful as always—and so elegant! The perfect master for us to serve!”

Just as before, Traya and Doreth were crying their eyes out over her.

Treyni just nodded in response. I wasn’t sure who they were talking about at this point. “Elegant” was one of the last words I’d ever use to describe her.

“Did you hear that?” Ramiris huffed, tossing her head. “Hey—hey, did you hear that? Better not look down on me any longer, you hear?”

Man, shut up. Now she was flying around the room, lording it over us as best she could with her size. Ah well. Everybody likes a compliment. But judging by

this, the answer to the dryads' question seemed pretty clear.

"Well, Ramiris? I think all the treants want to serve you, too, not just these two."

"Huh? But..."

Ramiris gave me a hesitant look. I suppose she still felt like a freeloader in my city. So I threw her a life preserver.

"How about we have them move into your labyrinth? We moved the beastmen's camp without breaking a sweat, so could it be much harder to move the treant colony?"

Or did the distance involved create an issue? I felt like she said she could build a corridor into the maze from anywhere she wanted...

"Are you sure?" She beamed, nodding at me. "In that case, I'll head out as soon as tomorrow! Expanding this labyrinth was a snap when I borrowed some power from my master, and I feel like I've gained some power, too. It'd be kind of fun to make some of the empty floors into a jungle section!"

That part about borrowing power from Veldora concerned me a little, but whatever.

"But as creatures who live in the Forest of Jura, shouldn't they be placed under Sir Rimuru's rule?" Treyni pointed out.

She must have been worried about that. But there was eager anticipation written all over her face. Clearly she would love to live with her sisters—and like I've said before, I had no reason to deny them. Ramiris *did* rule the labyrinth, a unique space with her living quarters and a zone left to my management. For the parts under her control, perhaps I should recognize them as extraterritorial from Tempest.

I explained this to them, showing how I wouldn't question their moving here. Her rule over the labyrinth was unstoppable, and besides, it'd be nice for them to be reunited with their original master.

"We, the treants and dryads, wish to reposition ourselves under the blessed protection of Lady Ramiris."

"We know it is selfish of us, but would we be able to receive permission for this?"

They'd have it, of course.

The treant colony would be placed on Floor 95, the level on which the beastmen camp was located. It was the largest floor in land area, a circle with a radius a bit over three miles, so we had space to work with. I was intending to build the rest stop on that floor, too, so this worked out well for that, too. People talk about how refreshing a walk in the woods is, and I didn't want our resting post to be this depressing, clinical thing.

Moving day went pretty fast. It was more of a moving *moment*, really. Ramiris just opened a door to the labyrinth at the treants' location, then moved them right inside. The actual process took a few hours, but all it took was opening a door next to each treant, so it was pretty straightforward.

Now Ramiris had an even greater domain to rule over, and I had a more stable labyrinth to work with. Managing the magicules was much easier now, to say nothing of the air conditioning, and the treants couldn't have asked for anything more. Thanks to the high levels of magic concentration in the air, they were all brimming with energy.

None of the beastmen living in their temporary quarters had any complaints, either. Treants are generally pretty chill, usually asleep and looking like plain old trees—and besides, the beastmen would be going back to the Beast Kingdom sooner or later, so they didn't mind having some neighbors for the time being. If anything, they welcomed them, since it made the whole floor more comfortable to live in.

They had also extracted a promise from the dryads to help maintain the labyrinth—or really, the dryads volunteered to help. "We've had a paradise made for us, so that much would be simple," Treyni said. Her sisters, and the other dryads, all nodded their agreement.

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With that, we had a small forest village in the labyrinth, along with some very unexpected helpers.

Floor 95, being a multiple of five, was a safe zone. Since we had a bunch of extra floors anyway, I decided to use Floors 91 through 94 as a storage site, a greenhouse for gardens, and a processing facility. To be more specific, Floor 91 would contain storage for metal ore; Floor 92, a plant for producing magisteel; Floor 93, a garden; and Floor 94, another facility for producing honey. There was also free passage all the way to Floor 95, which made movement easy, and the save point in the center of 95 included doors back to other floors above and a single, foreboding stairway going down.

This was a pretty convenient setup, one that cheerfully ignored all the laws of physics but still seemed to work just fine.

By the way, defeating the boss at Floor 90 granted you access to stairs down to Floor 95—if you somehow made it *this* far, I was happy to give you a bit of a shortcut. Your final, hellish challenge would begin on Floor 96, and before journeying onward, you’d naturally want to rest up and inspect all your equipment. I made sure to put up a door before the stairway down, along with a notice explaining the dangers below, and I also planned to provide an inn and weapon/armor shop near the door.

This inn would be connected to the other safe zones in the labyrinth. The doors were all connected, which helped with this setup a lot. The shop, meanwhile, could offer valuable equipment not available anywhere else, all lined up in front for sale. We were unlikely to see much in the way of customers, so I imagined the shop would be more of a hobby of mine than anything else.

I fantasized about putting some of my own creations in the shop down there as I decided to discuss my idea with Mjöllmile.

So after talking to monster species all day in the audience room, I spent much of the evening helping Ramiris and her new subjects with their move.

This new floor we built would eventually blossom into a forested city of its own. We called it Labyrinth City—a final oasis for those who made it through the Dungeon, a fantastic town that granted visitors more power than they ever

thought possible...

...but at that time, I hadn't imagined that far down the line yet.

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My itinerary for the following day involved meeting with the relatively stronger species, including the biggest factions in my recently conquered territory. *Guess most of 'em will be in the “observing” camp again*, I thought, only to notice a commotion in front of my audience chamber.

A couple of different factions were having a verbal argument. Shuna was staring at them, scowling, while Shion's eyes were flashing with barely repressed rage. Hoo boy. Hopefully this all works out...

These were the bovoids and equinoids. They had each brought along about a dozen warriors, currently attempting to intimidate one another. It turns out they didn't get along too well—in fact, they had been at war for over a century. They were fighting to see who would get an audience with me first. I guess they thought being granted my protection ahead of their rival would give them a leg up, but I really didn't want to get involved. It was all just an annoyance to me.

The two races stood by the door, keeping each other at bay. The situation looked ready to devolve into physical combat at any moment—and given their positions high up the Forest of Jura food chain, they were both intimidating presences.

A magic-born with bullhorns spoke to me first. “Ah, the demon lord! If you want a stout ally in battle, turn to us first! Let the bovoids join your side, and you'll get to strut around the forest with *authority*! And once we wipe out those wimpy equinoids once and for all, you won't find any race in the forest to defy us!”

He certainly was bold, making this proclamation to me without a hint of fear, and he had the strength to back it up. He had more magical energy to him than the ogres and lizardmen I first ran into, that's for sure. Conservatively, I'd say there were a few A rankers in the group. You'd need that kind of force to wage a hundred-year war, and in terms of pure fighting ability, they may have been the best the Forest of Jura had to offer.

But before I could answer, one of the equinoids erupted in anger. “Hmph! Fool! Any demon lord would have the perception to see that pairing with the equinoids is clearly the decision to make. We’ll destroy any race who dares to claim otherwise, from those bovoids on down!”

Pretty harsh words. These guys sure were hotheaded...and exhausting. At least the rabbitfolk were smart enough not to be fooled by my slime exterior.

But...hold on. Yes, they *were* exhausting, but the moment I laid eyes upon them, I came up with an idea. What labyrinth was complete, after all, without a minotaur or two?

Those creatures were celebrated in Greek mythology, hailed as the stuff of legend—but in the early twentieth century, when people discovered the ancient temple of Knossos in Crete, they found a complex maze of passages, along with an underground section that suggested the labyrinth really existed. Maybe there wasn’t a bullheaded maze guardian inside, but there were many bull-themed frescoes and such inside. Even back then, labyrinths and minotaurs went hand in hand with each other.

And...I had to say, the bovoids before me appeared *exactly* how you’d expect a minotaur to look in real life. Their leader, a measure larger than the others, practically oozed with evil energy. Our labyrinth was a little sparse when it came to bosses. I only had creatures selected for Floors 10, 20, and 30—but this leader guy, I thought, had what it took to occupy Floor 40 or 50. I wanted him, no matter what. I just couldn’t fight the feeling.

Unfortunately, these monsters didn’t seem like they’d be too loyal to me. They probably just thought of me as a nice patron, or employer, to have. It was clear they wanted to leverage this relationship so they could annihilate their current foes. If I was honest with myself, that was the only conclusion to make.

So I busted out just a little Lord’s Ambition on them. If they saw how awesome I was, maybe they’d get in line and— Whoa. They didn’t seem to notice at all. I was right in front of them, and they’re still glaring and yelling at each other. Should I take more drastic measures and “tame” them down?

But as I weighed my options, a clearly miffed Rigurd stepped forward. “How dare you show such rudeness before our lord! I see that I, Rigurd, need to show

all of you your place!"

He was normally quite gentle, doggedly pursuing administrative tasks around town, but I knew Rigurd had secretly been working out. He was stronger than the younger guys, at least, like Gobta and Rigur—and given his performance against the paladins when they attacked, he definitely had something of a warrior inside him. The way I saw it, he was stronger than the leaders of both factions here.

"What? Look at this bureaucrat who thinks he's the lord of all things!"

"We don't need some demon lord flunky to bad-mouth *us*!"

The leaders quickly barked back, while their younger hangers-on bleated their agreement.

I've had people look down on me before, but I don't think I've ever been treated *this* badly. Just a little Lord's Ambition was enough to humble everybody before these guys. They were just so worked up, oblivious to what was going on around them. I thought being dissed was better than being feared, but if it gets *this* bad, I might have to reconsider.

Still, a little lesson ought to help them see the light. Rigurd looked at me. I nodded, just about ready to give permission, when:

"Wha?!"

"...What on...?"

"...Oh dear, some trouble?"

"Hmph. Not a problem."

We felt a tremendous wave of pressure from outside town. Someone had broken through Shuna's barrier around it, and soon we felt the massive aura and vast magical energy of a monster— No, likely a magic-born. Judging by this act, we doubted this guy was here to make any friends. The bovoids and equinoids might not have noticed my Lord's Ambition, but they sure noticed *this*, judging by their panicked gasps.

"Such power..."

"Wh-whoa, Demon Lord, are you getting attacked by another of your kind?"

Up until now, the Forest of Jura had been protected by a pact between the demon lords. These guys here talked a big game, but they were in way over their heads. Against a *real* threat, they had to face up and admit how powerless they really were.

I no longer had time to deal with them. I hated to throw out the idea of having them serve as bosses—it just felt so epic to me—but there were other things to do. Instantly, I transformed into my human form and shouted “Let’s go!” to Benimaru and the rest.

“Yes sir!”

“As you say.”

I ran toward the source of the disturbance.

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Upon reaching the site, I saw ten or so members of Team Kurenai surrounding three men. Several security guards, gatekeepers, and Team Reborn troops were on the ground.

...Oops, I saw Gobzo among them. I was sure he gave them a fight, but it was crazy to even fight them at all. Meanwhile, the survivors were busy directing the townspeople and visitors to evacuation sites. They were acting just as they’d been trained to, which was nice. Things weren’t too chaotic yet, but I hated to see casualties this early on.

I turned to the three men behind this. One was tall, well-formed, and wore an earring. The second was enormous, a virtual slab of meat, and sported a nose ring. The third was smaller, but his frame going beyond merely “large” and venturing into “heavy” territory, and he had a lip piercing. They sported colorful hair in strange styles, which only added to their stereotypical street-punk look.

“You realize you’ve perpetrated this violence in the domain of the demon lord Rimuru?!” shouted Shion, who had been following behind me.

The earring guy stepped up, grinning fiendishly. “Outta the way. I’m not here

to deal with minions. We wanted to rub out Clayman and seize his demon lord spot, but you got in our way, and we're pissed off about it. I ain't here to kill for fun, but mess with us, and we ain't gonna go easy, all right?"

He was being rude and intimidating, but looking around me, I realized nobody was dead. Judging by the difference in magic force, if they hadn't been going easy, even Team Reborn would've been wiped out. He must've been telling the truth, kind of.

Maybe they weren't as bad as they looked—but if they wanted a fight, they'd get one. We were in the middle of my public unveiling as a demon lord. The Founder's Festival was just around the corner, and we had merchants from all the world over going in and out. It'd be tough to let an incursion like this go without comment.

It was annoying, but so be it. I'll just have to take them on—

"Wait, Sir Rimuru. Let me handle this."

Shion stopped me from stepping forward. Benimaru was trying to step up, too, but I guess they had looked at each other and silently decided which would go first. The casualties among Shion's forces were the likely decider.

"Oh, you one of the demon lord Rimuru's aides? Dad told me about you—the ogre woman who whipped Clayman's ass? I like it. Let's warm up with you first —"

"Wait, Big Bro. Can we take her? You can have the demon lord."

"Fwehhhh-heh-heh! Yes, yes! I'm getting hungry, you know. I could use a girl or two right now!"

Sounded like they were all brothers. The earring guy must've been the eldest, and their dad told them about not just me, but Shion and Clayman's battle. Their father must've been either a demon lord or a close associate, but judging by their energy levels—each equivalent to a pre-awakened Clayman—I assumed the former.

But who? I immediately crossed Guy, Milim, Ramiris, and Luminus off the list. That left Daggrull, Deeno, or Leon...but the last two seemed pretty unlikely. Was Daggrull my prime suspect?

Shion, meanwhile, took a step forward. “Silence. Sir Rimuru is busy with his audiences right now. To save on time, I will handle all three of you at once.”

“Huh?”

“Whoa, are you picking on us?”

“I wanted to go easy on a girl, but forget it. I’m gonna make you cry, I swear.”

“Fweh-heh-heh, that sass is like a punch in the gut. I bet you’re gonna make me feel the fullest I’ve been in a while!”

I groaned. Taking on three foes more powerful than you at the same time was insanely reckless, even by Shion’s standards. I tried to stop her, but this trio was already far too worked up to call time-out. Why does Shion always get so freaked out like this...?

“B-Benimaru?”

“Just let Shion do what she wants. If we’re going easy on them, Shion is more suited to that than I am.”

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His casual response stunned me into silence. Guess I’d just have to give up. I decided to believe she’d win and just let her have her fun.

That said, I didn’t want my town wrecked. I suggested that we all move elsewhere, and surprisingly, the trio agreed to it and followed me, curiously checking out their surroundings as I led them into our freshly built battle arena.

“Whoa, lady,” earring guy said. “You got guts, I’ll admit that, but if you wanna take back what you said, now’s the time.”

“Let me show you magicules aren’t the only deciding factor in a battle!” she snorted back.

I remember a certain red-colored ogre saying something similar a while back. But regardless, we now had an audience of rubbernecks here in this arena, ready to watch Shion fight off these three would-be pretenders coming for my throne.

Shion wiped the floor with them.

The fat guy with the lip piercing moved far more nimbly than looks would suggest, charging at Shion like a cannonball. Shion just kicked him away and sent him flying straight into the earring dude. Then, seizing that single open moment, she plunged her fist into the stomach of the nose-ring man, too stunned to react in time. Grabbing earring man by the arm and collar, she executed a perfect judo throw on him, smashing his head against the stone floor. He lay there, motionless.

“Arrrgh! What did you do to my brother?!”

The fat man with the lip piercing grabbed Shion from behind, attempting to lift her up. Shion’s brute strength stymied him.

“Wh-what the—?! But I’m so much stronger than you...!”

Shion glared at the man and snickered. Shifting position, she locked arms with him, and the test of strength began.

“Hnn...nnnnggghh...”

Snap!

Sadly, it wasn’t long before the fat man’s arms both bent in ways they shouldn’t have. They *were* all magic-born, so I figured they’d be all right, but judging by the way he was screaming and writhing around, it must’ve done a lot of damage.

But Shion didn’t even take a moment to marvel at her work before another pistonlike fist slammed home. Before the fat man could shout anything else, she landed a one-two finish on him like none other. The earring guy attempted a screamer of a kick on her body, but Shion simply bent backward and let it whiz past her. But the guy was smiling. His leg, still in the air, came down like a vicious battle ax, aimed squarely at Shion’s head.

There was a loud, dull *thuddd!* Shion’s stonelike head had just shattered the man’s leg. She executed a low kick to shatter the other one and sent him crashing to the ground. Without missing a beat, Shion straddled him, landing a flurry of punches on his head and body.

That sealed the deal.

Without even needing to take out her enhanced Goriki-maru sword, Shion had beaten the crap out of those three guys. Clearly, she had grown stronger. Smashing these opponents, all of whom equaled or beat her in magic force, didn't even quicken her breathing. And she took all three down at the *same time*, no less.

"B-Benimaru?! Shion's...?"

"Yes, this is quite a surprise. I see she went quite easy on them after all."

That's not what I'm *talking* about! This isn't Milim there, on the arena stage! Benimaru clearly had a different definition of "going easy" than me. That wasn't at all what I meant, but...ah well. No point wasting my breath.

Seriously, though, Shion's amazing. No joke. She just proved that you can easily overwhelm an opponent otherwise your equal through prudent use of your magical force. Whipping Clayman must've helped her grow a lot. Benimaru's non-reaction to it indicated he was expecting this all along, too.

I didn't like it much, but Shion was now as powerful as an ex-demon lord—and by definition, Benimaru as well. Hell, maybe even Soei and Geld. Or maybe I'm overthinking it? Watching Shion grow must be wrecking my mind or something. Or not. Better stop thinking too much about it.

"I'm sorry, was that not enough?"

Shion must have been taking my disturbed look wrong, as she eyed the three heaps sprawled on the ground.

"No, no, that's fine!" I hurriedly shouted. That was *more* than enough, yes. "And if you guys have had enough, then stop getting in our way! Also, the other demon lords are even worse than that, so try not to fall out of line again, okay?"

The earring guy (the first to regain consciousness) rapidly nodded. That advice was for their own good, really. I guess they got cocky enough to think they could take on a demon lord, but good thing they picked me first. If they went to someone else, their punishment would've been a lot harsher than Shion's.

"You guys are even stronger than Dad said," the earring guy muttered.

"So Rimuru himself is...?"

"Yeah... He's even better."

"Fwehhh-heh-heh! I'm getting hungry."

Now all three beheld me with respect. One of them was still acting a little strange, but no point worrying about it. I really didn't want to bother with them any longer, but I felt it prudent to at least look into their backgrounds.

"So who pointed you here?"

I hoped they would be honest with me. I didn't have to hope for long.

"Ah yes! We're the sons of the demon lord Daggrull. I am Daggra, the eldest."

"I am Liura, the second oldest."

"And I'm Chonkra, the youngest!"

Just as I thought.

"Um, you sure you want to be so open with your identities like that?"

"Sure," Daggra replied. "Dad actually ordered us to go train under you, the demon lord Rimuru."

"We kind of caused a ruckus back home, and he got royally mad..."

"Fweh-heh! So he kicked us out!"

That was...refreshingly honest of them. So basically, Daggrull had had it up to here with his problem children, so he was forcing them on me. What the hell? It's not like we knew each other that well or anything. Where did *he* get off?

...But maybe I could make him owe me a favor now, huh? It's not like we were that stable of a presence yet—I didn't think it wise to make an enemy out of one of the strongest people in the world. Plus, while I didn't want to spend another minute with these guys, I had the perfect drill sergeant in Shion right here. I'd seen her train Gobzo and the others, but she was so mean to those guys (way worse than Hakuro, even) that it had taken me aback a bit. If I left them to her, I figured they'd get sick of it and run away—and if they did, hey, I'd held up *my* end of the deal. Daggrull would have no right to complain.

"All right. Let's have you train under Shion, then."

I gave Shion a glance, knowing she'd probably hate it but hoping she would

take this ticking time bomb off my hands. But Shion nodded back at me with an evil grin. Wait a minute. *This* wasn't what I expected.

"Hee-hee-hee... I have received my orders from Sir Rimuru. And trust me—I, Shion, can even take a pack of weaklings like *you* and build you into first-rate warriors. You may follow me with confidence!"

"I-I'd hope for nothing else!"

"Yeah! We're gonna do our best for you, lady!"

"Me too! But can you give me something to eat first?!"

I was expecting some sass back, but Shion was pretty up for it. Which, okay, if she's cool, I'm cool. I decided to head back to the audience chamber, hearing cries like "Let us call you our teacher... No, our *master!*!" and "I'll expect all of you to follow my commands to the *letter!*!" behind me. I figured I'd just ignore them for now.

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Back at the chamber, the bovoids and equinoids were now kneeling before me, visibly quivering. The younger fighters were following their leaders' example, prostrating themselves as well. The high-and-mighty attitudes of the past were gone; now they reminded me of some of the weaker races I saw the previous day.

"We—we were awaiting your return!"

"Our loyalty shall forever be with you, Sir Rimuru!!"

I wondered what made them have a change of heart like that. It's certainly a new attitude, coming from them. I climbed up to my throne, reverting to slime form and expecting them to get huffy with me again, but they didn't.

"Do you *mean* it?"

"Of—of course, my lord!"

"Please, use our powers however you like!"

I guess this was a sincere change of heart. Judging by how frantic they looked, they really were trying to curry as much favor as possible with me. That little bout just now must've shown them how scary Shion can be, huh? In that case, no need to hold back. I'd have no qualms with taking advantage of these guys. They had been fighting for a century, which was *really* something I didn't need in my domain, but I suppose that meant they loved combat. Would anyone complain if I just moved their battlefield into the labyrinth?

"Well, by the looks of things, you guys have more power than you know what to do with. How about I prepare an arena for you guys to duke it out in?"

"Y-you're going to forgive them?" a saddened Rigurd asked. "I was thinking I could provide them with their divine punishment for you, Sir Rimuru..."

Yeahhh... I had forgotten, what with all this nonsense going on, but both races had pissed off Rigurd pretty good. But I thought it better to give them a chance and see if they could be useful.

"Now, now, Rigurd. They were just ignorant of us, I think, so why not forgive them just this once? If they try that stuff again, though, go right ahead."

"If you say so, sir, I have no complaints. How good for all of *you*, hmm? If Sir Rimuru wasn't such a forgiving lord, you may all have breathed your last just now. If you dare to defy us a second time, all that awaits is your final destruction. Give up your resistance and know your place!"

I was glad Rigurd got me, at least.

"Yeah, you guys are lucky," chimed in Shion, who was already back from the arena. "If it wasn't for those unwelcome visitors just now, I would've joined with Rigurd to do you all in. Why, for all the unbearable things you said, I would have plucked your tongues out so you could never speak again! So thank Sir Rimuru for his mercy, and try to show some obedience from now on!"

The bovoids and equinoids all nodded, shaking uncontrollably. "We—we promise we'll live up to your expectations! Please forgive our disrespect!" And given how they were acting, I could believe they wouldn't try it again.

"If you swear loyalty to me, I will consider it. First, though, stop your fighting and be quiet until you hear from me."

I didn't need to speak to them directly, but I thought it best to be doubly sure. I wanted to invite the bovoid leader over later under one pretense or another, so I could negotiate with him about working in the labyrinth. Given the (unintentional) fright we gave them, he ought to be cooperative.

Really, the chance at getting such a great boss for my project made all the stress of the day just fly out of my mind.

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The audiences went smoothly after that. Rumors of Shion taking control of Daggrull's sons spread like wildfire, enough to make even the powerful bovoids and equinoids lie low, so nobody was looking down on me now.

I was hoping things would end on a high note, but...

Soon after, an elder from the elven race and a few of his men arrived. I say elder, but he looked like a regular young man to me. No women were among them, which was kind of a shame, given how gorgeous lady elves tend to be.

Elves, of course, had a reputation for living practically forever. Both they and dwarves were originally spirits brought to physical life (or fallen from higher planes of existence), who became fairies and were eventually granted material bodies. Apparently, you could trace the genealogy of goblins back to the fairies, too: Fairies bearing the earth element eventually became dwarves; those with the water element became merfolk; fire became goblins; and wind became elves. Their ancestors were the results of fairies intermingling with creatures from other races long ago.

Apparently, goblins had little in the way of fairy blood left, which made their lives comparatively short. Even ogres, the next evolution up from them, only made it up to a hundred or so. When you got to ogre mage level, that reenergized the power from your spiritual ancestors, giving you skills that bordered on the divine.

But back to elves. Their lives were said to span between five and eight hundred years. Even elves with human blood mixed in could make it up to almost three hundred. This could vary a lot, though, since the more fairy blood you had in you, the longer you tended to live. Elves grew into maturity around the age of twenty, and beyond that, the passage of time simply did nothing to

them. Only when on death's door did they suddenly begin to rapidly age, and in about twenty years, infirmity would finally take their lives.

Staying young for a few centuries might sound like a dream to most humans. But another trait of theirs was how you never really saw them produce a lot of children. Living such long lives, they didn't have much of a natural inclination to keep their bloodline going. That's why they still numbered relatively few. (Bear in mind, of course, that I learned all this from the ladies at the Night Butterfly, a nightclub in the Dwarven Kingdom I was well familiar with, so I couldn't say how much of it was true.)

By the way, fairies themselves still existed—they were pretty common monsters, actually. These were smaller spirits given monster form by the effects of magicules around them; they were about the size of Ramiris and had a reputation as pranksters. They had intelligence, but they couldn't procreate and didn't live long. The personification of a major spirit was a far cry from them, enough so to be classified as a different monster entirely.

Ramiris tended to be bunched in with these fairies, but she was actually something different. She was fallen from an upper-level existence known as a spirit queen, which meant she may've been higher up the evolutionary ladder than the ancestors of elves or dwarves. It sounded like she went through an eternal pattern of reincarnation, although it didn't seem like she understood the process herself too much...

...But I've gotten way off track. I lent an ear to the elder.

"It is an honor to lay eyes upon you," he said with a salute. "We have come here today to celebrate you and offer our heartfelt gratitude..."

Normally, this would be the time when they'd offer their loyalty to me. Some of the races—the initial entries into the Federation—even expressed their thanks at their safety being guaranteed. But this was the first time I had ever met this elder. I wasn't sure what he had to thank me for, so I had Rigurd ask for me.

"Ah, that would be—"

As the elder put it, it had to do with the bad blood between the bovoids and equinoids. It turned out the biggest victims of their hundred-year war were the

elves.

According to him, elves, a race that lives off the blessings of the forest, fear the expansion of war zones more than anything else. To protect their hidden enclaves from outside enemies, the elves install “barriers” that scramble one’s sense of direction, but these barriers had fallen with the trees in the midst of the wars. Directional confusion didn’t mean much, after all, if the enclaves were in plain sight.

They tried to move their settlements, keeping casualties as low as they could, but the war kept growing bigger and bigger. It made the forest’s animals and monsters flee for their lives, it razed the local fruits and vegetables before they could be harvested, and some elves even resorted to taking work in the Dwarven Kingdom. (I guess that was what the ladies at the Night Butterfly were up to.)

Over time, the loss of population grew to become a crisis, making it hard to keep the enclaves going. Some of the elves considered making yet another move elsewhere, but as large as the Forest of Jura is, it wasn’t that easy to find a suitable destination.

“Thus,” the elder continued, “we considered appealing to those violent thugs to see if we could reach some kind of agreement. But before we could, my lord, the events of just now transpired. Now all we need is somewhere to move to...”

Hopefully, as he said, that would convince the elves who left to come back.

This gave me an idea. Someplace to move to? Yeah, I got that. Right here in town.

There were fewer than three hundred elves in the forest. At one point, there was a lot more, enough to build a prosperous kingdom in ancient times, but those glory years were long past. The elves were forced to turn nomadic, spreading to the four corners of the world—but regardless, I knew a place that could fit three hundred just fine. Remember that little forest I had just built down in Floor 95 of the Dungeon? There you go.

I could even put them to work—helping Apito run our honey operations, cultivating rare plants that only grew in magicule-rich forests, maybe running the inn I planned to open on Floor 95. They could run the weapon shop down

there, and if any monsters appeared on that floor (not that I expected it), it'd be great for this town to have a little elven protection. I heard that elves and treants got along well, so I doubted Treyni or the others would be against this.

Plus, with all the jobs on offer, I figured it'd help attract the more distant elves back here. Maybe the ladies from that nightclub would venture back, too—and then I could build an elf-run VIP room down there, maybe...?!

Yes. This was excellent. There was already a tavern in town, but that was more of a gastropub geared for adventurers. If you wanted someplace for a quiet drink and relaxation, you'd have to go to our administration-exclusive dining halls. I'm sure Shuna would be glad to serve me in my own room, but I didn't need alcohol *that* badly. I'm just talking about, you know, taking a breather. It's not that having Shuna around would make it impossible to relax or anything—or impossible to BS with Gobta, or have private discussions with Mjöllmile, or whatever.

...No, *really*!

I'm just saying, if we had something like the Night Butterfly on the ninety-fifth floor, it'd be useful for a lot of different situations.

I decided to offer this idea to the elder at once. "Elder, I think I know someplace that'd be able to accept you..."

When Rigurd realized I was speaking, he took a step back and listened. I don't know how he got trained to do it, but he could calmly handle just about any situation by this point. If I ever went off script during an event like this, he could keep up without any blank stares. I loved that.

"Ah! You do, Lord Rimuru?"

"Mm-hmm. If it's about three hundred of you, we'd be able to fit you all in..."

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"...Thank you so much! I will inform my people of this the moment I return."

"Great. I'll get it all set up so it's available for move-in when you're ready. But

do you mind if I ask a favor in return?"

"Of course not, my lord. If our powers can be of help to you, nothing could make us happier!"

The elven elder was even happier about it than I thought. It'd save them from having to wander the forest in search of a safe haven, which I'm sure came as a relief. It sounded like he was sending an envoy over right now to get people ready.

So now we had elves moving into our labyrinth.

I figured that was the end of the conversation, but one thing did concern me. The elder mentioned that elves had been leaving their enclave to work and not coming back. With a race as tightly knit as the elves, it seemed odd to me that any of them would abandon their homeland. Some elves even reportedly went out hunting and never returned, which disturbed me.

Elves could be very individualistic by nature, the elder said, so perhaps a passing whim drove them away from home. But then I remembered what I heard in Mjöllmile's shop—the proposal from Viscount Cazac of Englesia. A place that dealt in elven slaves, wasn't it?

Maybe it wasn't a matter of these younger elves *choosing* not to go back. If my hunch about the criminal group Cazac was fronting turned out to be true... Well, hopefully it wasn't, but if it was, that would be a big problem.

My dream of launching an elf nightclub was so close at hand. Seeing the elder off after we said our goodbyes, I thought that I'd better investigate this thoroughly.

Thus, I gave Soei behind me a Thought Communication message.

(Soei, I want you to investigate a man named Viscount Cazac in Blumund.)

(Yes, my lord!)

In a moment, he sent out a Replication of himself, beginning his work at once. That should be enough. He'd probably find something out before my audiences were over.

I'll probably want to ask Mjöllmile what he knows about criminal slave

merchants, too. If it turns out Cazac's involved, there'd be no mercy for him. It was an affront to the deep love I had for elves—a love that drove me to open my very own elven nightclub. I wasn't about to let anyone keep me from that dream.



The long, long audience period was finally in its last day. Once I was through this, I'd kick off the Founder's Festival in three days.

No problems of note occurred after the elven contingent. It was going smooth as silk, and there were no major issues among the monsters staying in town. The little scuffle with Daggrull's kids was the talk of the town in pretty short order, which probably kept anyone who wanted to show off their strength in line.

Geld had taken some time off, which let him return to Tempest a few days ago, and Diablo and Hakuro also arrived back the previous day.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru! You are as stately and dignified as always. My heart bursts with joy at being able to see you again!"

Diablo was buttering me up once more, punctuating the flattery with his usual ominous snickering. There was nothing "dignified" about a slime, so I reasoned that he probably needed glasses or something. I wanted a report from him, but that could wait—which disappointed him, but I needed to keep today free for an important discussion.

That was how major today's visitor was to me. No letting my guard down around them, that's for sure. As I saw it, it'd be my toughest audience yet. That was why I had my whole crew in attendance for today's sessions.

Right now, this entourage was being welcomed into town by Benimaru, my right-hand man. (This should also say something about how crucial this was to me.) Already, on the other side of the door, I could sense a violent force approaching like a tidal wave. The rumors, I realized, were true.

The door opened, revealing a posse clad in full armor. These were the tengu, an independent force residing in the Khusha Mountains on the horizon of the Forest of Jura—outside my jurisdiction. While Benimaru had met with them

once before, this was less of an audience and more of a summit between two factions.

Standing in front of this armored crew was a beautiful young woman. The tengu were humanoids known for their almost comically long noses, but this girl looked like any normal human. Tengu, bearing the same name as the figures of Japanese mythology, were apparently a hybrid species between angels and wolfmen—

Report. To be more accurate, they are not a hybrid. They are angels incarnated into the bodies of wolfmen.

Right—a type of incarnation. That.

Wolfmen were a type of beastman—a proud, isolated race who held an almost divine presence in people's minds. Thus, calling the tengu long-nosed was often more a metaphor than anything else, a way of referring to the supernatural sense of smell they boasted.

Now then, for this species worshipped as the gods of the mountains—

Report. To be more accurate, they are not a species. They are a group born from a single individual, much like the subject Ranga.

Um, sure. Right. Honestly, I don't really follow it all, but anyway, a bunch of crazy-powerful gods decided to create a bunch of crazy-powerful wolfmen, and then an angel incarnated themselves in one, creating a new sentient species. The single individual that led to this species was the tengu elder—the mother of the girl before me. And since creating all these children apparently weakened the elder to the point of powerlessness, this girl was essentially the tengu leader.

This is why it's more accurate to call this a summit. And not even *that* fully described how important this meeting was.

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Benimaru had come to the tengu's domain once. They had been kind to us at times, permitting the migration of high orcs through their territory, but they

were also proud, and if I floated the idea of enforcing my rule over the mountains to them, it'd almost certainly result in war.

I, of course, didn't want that. I didn't see any need to fight this race revered as mountain gods. Benimaru understood that, so he was on strict instructions to just get their permission to build a highway on their lands between Tempest and Thalion.

"The negotiations went successfully," Benimaru had said when he later reported back. "Everything went well with them. Not even the tengu can afford to ignore you, Sir Rimuru, so they mentioned plans to come see you sometime."

The news sounded good, but Benimaru looked exhausted.

"You sure there weren't any problems?"

"No, not exactly, but..."

He was dodging the question. And Alvis, whom I sent along with him, had seemed off her game—or at the very least, miffed about something—ever since she got back. It seemed like something I was better off not asking about.

So I decided to force it out of Benimaru anyway—in private, over a few drinks, since he didn't seem interested in telling the rest of our administration about it. The way he described it...



Benimaru had headed over to the tengu's hidden homeland with Alvis and a dozen or so members of Team Kurenai. The journey over went smoothly, but in front of a cave near the peak of the Khusha Mountains, they were stopped by a young tengu warrior, dressed in white with a katana on his belt. On his back were two white wings, and he also bore a tail and doglike triangular ears.

Based on the refinement of his posture, he was clearly trained in battle, Benimaru thought. Speaking with him, they asked for permission to go through the "barrier" placed within the cave. The warrior agreed but allowed only Benimaru and Alvis to follow him inside.

On the other side, they found a flowery paradise. It was neither hot nor cold, the temperature always pleasant—a beautiful land, befitting the powerful race

who called it home. In the courtyard they were taken to, Benimaru was greeted by a beautiful woman—one who looked human, unlike any of the other tengu. Her hair came down to her shoulders, pure white at the roots and fading into a crimson red around her ears. Her small, soft lips were the color of cherry blossoms, but her long, sharp eyes were the eyes of a wolf, watching Benimaru like a beast sizing up its prey.

Benimaru realized he couldn't let his guard down. The commanding presence she had over the room was reminiscent of the demon lord Carillon—or perhaps even stronger than that.

"My name is Benimaru. I come on behalf of the demon lord Rimuru."

"Welcome, kind messenger. I am Momiji, daughter of the tengu elder. What brings you to us? Are you aiming to take over this land?" the girl asked with a beguiling smile.

Her words were poison-tipped. Benimaru could tell he wasn't welcome at all. But he didn't let that bother him.

"I have no such intentions. What we seek is permission to venture over the Khusha Mountains along the border with the Forest of Jura. And, if possible, we'd like to request permission to dig a tunnel into this mountain."

"Hmph. No ambitions of a land grab, then? You may pass through the mountains all you like...but what is this tunnel you speak of?" Momiji seemed less than enthusiastic about this conversation, but the word *tunnel* piqued her interest.

Benimaru didn't know a great deal about it, either, apart from my vague description of boring a hole into the mountain. In fact, the idea had already been shot down by my team. A tunnel would be the shortest route between Tempest and the Thalion capital, but the highway would only lead to the nearest large town on the Thalion border, so no tunnel was strictly needed. Benimaru knew that, but he wanted to bring up the concept in his negotiations regardless.

"A tunnel involves digging a hole in the mountain to allow passage through to the other side. If you do not wish to permit this, we will not—"

"Wait. Dig a hole in the mountain? Are you quite serious?"

"I am. That's what the project plan called for. But no tunnel is necessary for the route we have now, so I only wanted to ask in case it *does* become necessary in the future. If you don't like it, I will not force the question."

To a race who treats the mountains as divinity, digging a hole through one was seen as anathema.

"That is *very* ill-advised. You are free to let a slime become a demon lord, but as long as you do not interfere with us, I see no harm. I am even willing to shut my eyes to that slavering half-snake you've brought along with you. But if you wish to make a mockery of our glorious mountains—that I cannot abide."

As if to prove the point, Momiji stood up.

Benimaru had no intention of making an issue out of this, but now it seemed like the discussion was over. Had he failed? He stayed in his seat, reasoning that any reaction would force the other side to up the ante—but not everyone was willing to remain silent.

"A slavering half-snake? Are you talking about me?"

A fuming Alvis leaped out of her chair instead, staring Momiji down. The two seemed ready to come to blows at any moment.

"Whoa, stop—"

Just as Benimaru spoke, Alvis's eyes met Momiji's. Her extra skill Snake Eyes could cause paralysis, poison, insanity, and many other ailments. But none of that fazed Momiji.

"Such a silly move," she said as she took out a folding fan with both hands. "Mere status ailments won't work on the daughter of the tengu elder."

Tengu are half-spiritual life-forms and as such bear a high resistance to status ailments. In addition, Momiji had the extra skill Godwolf Sense on at all times, giving her information beyond what her five senses provided—a sort of powered-up version of Magic Sense that picked up on illusions and illusory magic. Thus, sneak attacks like that didn't work on her.

Then it was Momiji's turn. She brought her fan down on Alvis in a sort of

dance. Alvis blocked the first blow with her golden staff, but the second one hit her on the side and sent her flying to the far end of the open-air courtyard.

“Kffhh...?!”

Momiji’s moves were simple but refined. The blow had shut the fan; now she reopened it, elegantly hiding her lips with it.

“Are you done? I see the Lycanthropeers are all bark and no bite.”

“You better not rile me, country girl. I went easy on you because we were here to negotiate, but perhaps I didn’t need to?” replied Alvis, her pride hurt.



She stood back up, her wound already healed, and glared coldly at Momiji. Her presence was formidable indeed, as befitting one of the most powerful magic-born in Eurazania.

"Went easy? I was going easy on you. It's taken quite an effort to avoid killing an envoy like yourself, I'll have you know. Or do you want to make me *truly* angry?"

It felt like their face-off was literally freezing the air around them. The younger tengu warriors at the side of the courtyard tensed up as the concentrated auras filled the area. And in the midst of it, Benimaru sat drinking his tea, musing about how this had gone beyond the realm of a gaffe and into truly painful territory.

"Yes, you may be strong, but if you think a little girl as inexperienced as you in battle has a chance, think again."

"Would you care to try? I was hoping to build some battle experience, as you so kindly pointed out. I think you would make a fine test case!"

The stare down grew ever more heated—and then they both moved at once. The next moment, a flash of light streaked through the air, and the fan flew out of Momiji's hand. Silence fell over the courtyard. Faster than anyone could have reacted, Benimaru stepped into the fight.

"Enough," he blankly stated. "I apologize for her offense, but I really can't have my companion killed."

"S-Sir Benimaru?! You thought I would *lose*!?"

"Yes. If I didn't stop you, you would've been cut in two."

"Nonsense!" Momiji said. "I put none of my force into—"

"No. You're careless with holding your aura back. You put too much power into it."

"I—I didn't..."

"I... I lost...?"

Both Momiji and Alvis fell to their knees. As they did, the doors on one end of

the courtyard opened, revealing a large, beautiful, canine-eared woman. The young tengu in the audience kneeled before her.

“M-Mother?!”

The tengu elder smiled at the panicking Momiji, ambling over to her daughter. When she reached her:

“You fool of a daughter!”

The roar echoed like a thunderclap.

In another few moments, the group had relocated themselves to an inner chamber, one in the classic Japanese style with tatami mats and flat floor cushions for kneeling on. A door ahead led to an alcove, allowing the ill tengu elder to take a rest whenever she needed. The elder had seen fit to give Momiji a rap on the head for her insolence; she rubbed it tearfully, dissatisfied with this treatment but unwilling to risk any more disobedience around her mother.

“No, no, there’s no need to go that far. We simply wanted to introduce ourselves...”

Benimaru had yet to accomplish what he set out to do, but this was no longer an atmosphere for casual talk. Plus, with Alvis as dejected as she was, he sensed that overstaying his welcome would be supremely unwise. But the elder had other ideas.

“Hee-hee-hee! Don’t worry about it, boy. That was quite some swordplay you showed off, by the way. That’s the Haze style, ain’t it?”

“How did...? Ah, no, I do have some idea. Momiji’s dancing did resemble my own sword style in parts. Could it be, perhaps...?”

“Yes, I’ve studied Haze as well. From my master, Byakuya Araki.”

“Wha?!”

Benimaru was shocked. The tengu gave him a satisfied smile.

“My name, you see, is Kaede.”

With that, she began telling a story of her past. Over three hundred years ago, she’d been spending her time in the land of the ogres. She had been on a

journey, hiding her true powers, but then she encountered Byakuya and became an apprentice on the ways of the sword. But Kaede wasn't alone. She trained alongside someone else—a born talent, living by the sword, and Byakuya's own grandchild.

"It pains me so much that I am unable to give you a name," Byakuya had often said.

Naming monsters willy-nilly, it seemed, could come at the risk of one's life. As a human, naming this grandchild of his would've surely killed him. Kaede didn't have a name at the time, either, so she didn't understand what his hang-up was about it, but now she had an inkling. If you love someone, after all, you want to leave something behind for them. It was natural for monsters not to have names, but for humans, it was the opposite.

Time passed, and Byakuya grew old and passed away, leaving behind his ogre grandchild who had become a virtuoso with the sword—enough to challenge even Kaede. In terms of technique, she lost out completely. She was smitten, and underneath a large maple tree, she confessed her love. Then, after a single night spent together in bliss, she left the ogre homeland.

The Forest of Jura had been known for its unstable weather, but this tree was a large, broad maple, one that shone with bright-orange leaves in the fall. It had become a symbol of the ogres' homeland, and Benimaru knew it well—proving to him that her story was true...

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that Hakuro's—?"

...and shocking him in the process.

"Hakuro, you said? Ah, so the Sword Ogre I trained with has gained a name? My... I'm surprised to hear he's even alive."

She smiled at the thought, shaking Benimaru down to his very core.

Whoa—whoa... Is Hakuro aware of this?!

His mind was swimming with all kinds of questions. But the greatest shock of all was yet to come:

"Well... That is a relief to hear."

“...?”

“Because the fine young man Sir Hakuro raised is going to be the future groom of my daughter.”

Bppht!!

Benimaru spit out the tea he was drinking to calm his nerves. He was normally cool and composed, but here in the land of the tengu, everything was shaking him to the core. And he wasn’t the only one—Alvis, next to him, was staring blankly into space as the teacup slipped from her hand.

Momiji blushed intensely at the news and looked at Benimaru, then Kaede. “M-Mother...?!”

Flustered, she attempted to shut her mother up, but it was no use. Kaede casually raised an arm to hold her daughter back as she addressed Benimaru.

“Now, Sir Benimaru, regarding your request earlier, I will be happy to accept it. In fact, I am prepared to acknowledge the rule of Sir Rimuru over our lands. However, that comes on the condition that you accept my daughter as your spouse. I doubt you will need much time to think it over, but what do you say?”

Benimaru froze. Such a dramatic question, posed so casually. He *did* need some time, as it happened. Fortunately, Momiji—the other related party in this question—stepped in to rescue him.

“Wait! Wait! I know you’ve accepted him, Mother, but I haven’t yet! Yes, perhaps he’s stronger than I am...but if so, then I don’t want you to force him into this. I want to win his love first. Don’t you always say, Mother, that a truly good woman is one who makes her sweetheart turn back toward her?”

She hid her reddened face behind her fan and all but ran out of the room, fleeing the scene. Kaede laughed heartily at her behavior.

As Alvis regained her senses, Benimaru could feel embarrassment creeping over him at Momiji’s reaction.

Y’know, Hakuro could stay calm through anything... As sudden as this proposal is, if that’s all it takes to throw me, I still have much to learn...

He took the moment to reflect.

...But still, this is way too sudden...

In the end, it was agreed that he would bring the question of Momiji back home to think over. This was all entirely Kaede's idea, and she had no interest in forcing anyone into it. It was something she thought it'd be nice to see, and if it actually happened, why, all the better. As for the rest of Tempest's demands, she largely agreed—the tunnel through the mountain was still an issue, but she gave them permission to construct the highway to Thalion any way they pleased.

But their talks didn't end there. Apart from potentially marrying Momiji off to Benimaru, Kaede also expressed an interest in building a constructive relationship between the demon lord Rimuru and the tengu race.

It may not have been obvious, but Kaede suffered from an illness. At least, that was the backstory; the truth was a bit different. She did indeed lose the majority of her remaining power bringing Momiji into the world. The birth and the subsequent "naming" of the child took place fifteen years ago, and it consumed nearly all the force of a woman once lauded as the goddess of the mountains. Death would be coming for her sooner rather than later, and that was why she wanted to find someone to back up and support her dear, inexperienced daughter. Benimaru's visit was a coincidence, but to Kaede, he brought hope—a final hope, gifted to her by her former lover Hakuro.

If he turns me down, so be it, thought Kaede. You're still there, aren't you, with Sir Rimuru? I thought you would die before I did, but I see I was very happily mistaken. And won't seeing Momiji remind you of our own past a little?

After some contemplation, Kaede agreed to postpone any concrete marriage plans. And with that, Momiji herself made her way to meet with the demon lord Rimuru in person.



It was a pretty headache-inducing tale—and one representing the greatest danger Benimaru had experienced in his life. He described it as scarier than the first time he met me, which I wasn't sure how to take. Maybe that was just his sense of humor.

Regardless, this was why Momiji had been sent here. If she landed such a clean hit on Alvis, you wouldn't want to underestimate her in battle. Honestly, I was glad she wasn't hostile to us anymore.

...But really, I couldn't dodge the real question any longer.

Hakuro had a daughter all this time? No way.

I was in a panic over it, worried that it'd balloon into a huge issue, but there wasn't much to be done about it until I met her. Besides, this wasn't something Benimaru and I could solve alone. We needed to hear from Hakuro, who had just as large a stake in this—but I didn't want to hurry him over here needlessly, either. So I decided to shelve the issue until he came back.

And come back he did, the previous night, after his journey to Farmus. The three of us held a little chat. I had no idea what the tengu would demand from us or what would happen with them at all, so we decided to save their audience for the final day. I was planning to call for Hakuro if he still wasn't around by then, but fortunately I didn't need to. Not that his timeliness solved a lot of problems, either.

Benimaru and Momiji marrying was strictly an issue between the two of them. I didn't mind if they said yes; it didn't really seem to affect me at all, but...

"Wait just a minute!" Benimaru began. "I—I have my own issues to think about, you realize!"

"What do you mean?" Hakuro countered. "Do you not like my daughter?"

"I am not saying that! Besides, why are you acting like a father *now*? You've never met her in your life. You didn't even know she existed!"

"Well, now that I do, I have a certain responsibility for her, do I not?"

Hakuro seemed to be relishing Benimaru's consternation. It only made the problem worse. We kept talking all night, but it never really came to a conclusion—so here, in the audience chamber, I was going to be forced to wing it.

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The beautiful girl sat down on a hastily prepared chair in front of me. The colorful white-to-red gradient of her hair was indeed beautiful. This was the Momiji I had heard so much about, representing the tengu elder here. She gave me a haughty look and began to speak.

"Demon lord Rimuru, it is good to meet you. My name is Momiji, and I have come here on behalf of the elder of the tengu race. I look forward to working with you."

"You're very kind. My name's Rimuru, and I've become a demon lord. I'm in human form now, as you can see, but I'm actually a slime. In general, I'm pretty much a pacifist, so if you have any problems, don't be afraid to hit me up."

"There is no need for such concern. The way you have conquered the Forest of Jura was breathtaking to witness. We recognize you as the ruler of the forest and look forward to being a good neighbor to you. However, we will not allow you to interfere in our affairs."

She was saying that in front of all my officials. I could see Shion's eyebrow twitch a little, but luckily no one reacted further. I hadn't explained the full story to her yet, so she actually stopped herself that time. That was a new change in her, as of late; she no longer responded to small things in her usual exaggerated fashion. That was a good trend to see, if a little creepy. Hopefully she wasn't just bottling it all in, only to have it explode later.

Momiji, meanwhile, was waiting with bated breath to see how I'd reply. She put up a bold, dignified act, so you wouldn't notice unless it was pointed out to you, but I'm sure her nerves were killing her. She must not have been sure whether I was friend or foe yet.

Declaring her allegiance would've been fine, I thought, but the pride her race had in themselves must have forbidden that. A young, inexperienced ruler faces doom if people look down on them, after all. I can understand that—even though it seemed like Momiji had the support of the younger tengu warrior classes.

"All right. I understand. Certainly, we don't have any interest in unduly interfering with you, either. As I think Benimaru here explained to you, we just

want to build a highway around the base of the Khusha Mountains. Also, just to be sure, you recognize the rights of the high orcs who have already moved into the mountains, right?”

“Yes, that is not a problem. I make no exclusive claims to the right to enjoy the mountains’ blessings. You may mine the ore as much as you want—we have no need for it. We only wish to be left alone.”

Um...

The mountainous areas were considered part of the Forest of Jura’s territory. I had braced myself for some sort of complaining about that, but I guess it’s not a problem. So what were the tengu so on edge about? She acted pretty prickly toward Alvis; was there a fight between them and Carillon during his demon lord days? I decided it was safest to just ask directly.

“Um, so I don’t know what you’re so on guard about, but we really have no intention of starting a conflict with you, so...?”

“You want me to believe that?”

“Yeah. I mean, have I said or done anything to make you suspect I’ve got my eyes on expanding my territory?”

Momiji eyed me carefully, judging my intentions once again.

“You associate with that crafty bird woman Frey. That’s all the evidence I need to recognize your ambitions!” she retorted.

I can safely say I did not see that one coming.

“Whoa, time-out!”

“What does time-out mean?!”

“It means stop! We need to discuss some things!”

I called my administration over. Momiji agreed to this—with some complaints, I think, but I wasn’t really paying attention.

“What do you think of that?” I asked once we were all in a circle.

“The former demon lord Frey’s territory is connected to the Khusha Mountains,” Soei quickly replied. “I could imagine some conflicts with the tengu

erupting along those lines.”

I consulted the world map in my mind. True enough. The tengu settlement was outside the Forest itself, so fighting for it wouldn’t violate any noncompete contracts. They might’ve tried to invade at one point.

“But why, though?”

“I can’t think of any reason,” Benimaru said. He must not have noticed anything amiss during his visit.

“I have heard rumors. It is said that Frey likes high places. As her second name of the Sky Queen suggests, perhaps she’s endeavored to move her capital to the tallest place within access to her?” Hakuro offered.

That didn’t sound quite right to me. Benimaru himself said the tengu stronghold was an idyllic enclave on the other side of a cave at the peak of a mountain—in other words, a small plane of space on another dimension. That’s not the kind of thing Frey would want.

“Hmm...”

We all murmured to one another. Then:

“Will you *stop ignoring me*!?”

“Whoa!”

I leaped up at the sound of someone shouting in my ear. Momiji was there, fuming and sick of waiting any longer. This time, I definitely couldn’t tune her out.

I gave up and sat back in my seat, facing her.

“Let me ask you a question. Does Frey have ambitions on tengu territory?”

“Huhhh? Of all the stupid things to ask...” She rolled her eyes, then realized I was being serious. “You’re kidding me,” she muttered.

It sounded like we weren’t on the same page at all here, so I decided to let her tell her side of the story.

As she put it, Frey’s aim was to capture Elmin Thalion, capital of the Sorcerous Dynasty of Thalion. She wanted it not for its territory, but for its height.

I sure wasn't expecting that. It was very in character for her, but I couldn't laugh about it.

In terms of size, Thalion was a huge country. Frey didn't have the military resources to overwhelm it. However, while the nation enjoyed a geographical advantage against ground-based armies, against Frey and her aerial forces, they would face tougher going. Tactically, they were an even match, but Frey refused to let her ambitions stay just ambitions forever.

That was why she had turned her attention on the tengu. She wanted to bring them under her rule, shoring up her resources for a later assault on Thalion. But the tengu were too proud for that, not ready to so easily accept Frey's demands. Thalion, expecting this, hoped for the two sides to erupt into conflict with each other, which would take the heat off them and also let them profit from the ensuing war.

Frey was fully aware of that, however, and that stayed her hand. The result was this three-way détente that, frankly, looked pretty twisted to me.

While all that was going on, I fought against Clayman, and once the dust settled, Carillon and Frey gave up their posts and resolved to serve the demon lord Milim. It was the birth of a new superpower, one the tengu alone could never fend off, and now their government was in a heated debate over how to hold themselves going forward.

And then Benimaru came along, taking one of the Three Lycanthropeers with him. *Bad* idea. Momiji mistook that as my attempt to silently apply pressure on her.

"How's Frey been lately?" I asked Geld. As the person responsible for building a new capital city, he had been taking orders from Frey, making him the most familiar with her out of our little group.

"Well, Sir Rimuru, Lady Frey seems tremendously satisfied with your plans. As taciturn as Mildo is, the two have gotten along well, and she's been participating in some very detailed planning meetings."

Frey found a way to make Mildo talk? That's impressive.

"All right. So has she lost interest in Elmin Thalion?"

"Lost interest? I'd say her interests lie in...um..."

"In?"

"Well... Lately, I haven't seen Lady Milim around. Lady Frey had been teaching her about governance and the like, but apparently she ran off on her unawares."

Oh, right. I'm pretty sure I know where she is. For the sake of this conversation, though, let's pretend that I don't. Let sleeping dogs lie, and all that.

"As a result, I'd say that Lady Frey's primary focus at the moment is figuring out where Lady Milim went," concluded Geld.

The gigantic capital building project, skyscrapers and all, had completely charmed Frey. It turned her interest away from any other potential capital she could conquer; they all paled in comparison. Milim, as Geld put it, was the bigger issue. And Momiji, listening to all this stuff going against what she imagined, was stunned into silence, unable to figure out how to react.

I couldn't blame her. That's reality for you—a force who you assume wants you and your people dead, and all of a sudden, their focus is on something else entirely. If it happened to you, *you'd* probably want to run away from reality, too.

"...All right. I understand. So there you have it. If you recognize all that as the misunderstanding it was, I'm cool with that."

It could be said that tengu were not terribly wise in the ways of the world. The worry that they were surrounded by enemies had clouded Momiji's judgment. Based on her situation, I could see why she made the decision she did.

"So I was imagining it all along...? Mother *did* say I was overthinking matters..."

She slumped back in her chair, the strength drained from her body. It was a lesson for all present: Jumping to conclusions can bite you hard.

*

With that behind us, our talks quickly came to a close.

Since Momiji was still a little out of it, one of the tengu warriors looked over the pact we were to sign in her stead. I thought these were bodyguards, but I guess they served as government staff, too.

The tunnel question would be saved for later. We wouldn't be allowed to start on it, I was told, until we could prove it was safe. That made sense to me, so I didn't make a big deal out of it. We needed to talk to Thalion about building a tunnel anyway, and it wouldn't really get underway until we finished developing trains, so there was no need to set anything in stone quite yet.

The tengu didn't want us to interfere with them because they mistakenly thought we were prepping for an invasion, but now that we'd addressed that misunderstanding, nothing stopped us from having normal relations. So we agreed to help each other out, in case something ever happened.

"...So is that all?"

"Yes," the tengu aide said with a bow. "My thanks to you, Demon Lord, for allowing us to conduct such constructive negotiations."

So things were square with Momiji. Our pact was signed. Now we needed to talk about Momiji and Hakuro's relationship—and Benimaru and Momiji's potential marriage. We failed to reach a conclusion on that last night.

Momiji started the day hostile toward us, but that had presumably changed now. Should we maybe work this out just with the people directly involved?

As I debated with myself over how to broach the topic, the tengu aide took out a sealed envelope.

"There is also the matter of this. Our elder, Lady Kaede, has this letter for you, Lord Rimuru."

He respectfully handed it to me. Rigurd accepted it, and Shuna handled opening and reading it. It began with the sort of verbose, convoluted greetings you often saw in royal correspondence, probing me a bit to guess at where my disposition was, but grew less formal as it went on. Shuna's face contorted in confusion as she read on.

"...I know things are complicated, and there have been a few misunderstandings, but I hope you will treat my daughter well. I remind you of

what she told me about making Sir Benimaru turn toward her. I am sure she is not against the idea—”

Wait, are you sure this letter's for me?! It really doesn't sound that way! If I had known it contained stuff like this, I would have dismissed my staff...but it was too late for that now.

“M-Mother?!!”

Momiji leaped back to her feet, snatching the letter out of Shuna's hands. Rude of her, but I'd just pretend I didn't see it. Couldn't blame her. If I were Momiji, I don't know what I would've done, either. This goes beyond infamy and straight into humiliation.

“So... So there *were* two letters?! Mother, why can't you be more careful...?”

She slumped back down again. Aha. Kaede must've put a message for Hakuro in the letter to me. The tengu aides surrounded Momiji, trying their best to assuage her, but it only had the opposite effect. Times like these, it's best to just leave people in peace.

“Heh-heh... That's just like her.”

Hakuro, smirking, walked up to Momiji, taking the crumpled-up letter out of her hand and giving her a nod.

“I see... ‘She has a great deal of strength but is still lacking in technique. As a fellow student of the sword, and as her father as well, I hope that the Sword Ogre will deign it worthy to offer her training and instruction. From your ever-loving Kaede.’ So she still likes me, eh? Heh-heh! Ah, how lucky I am to live to see this day.”

His smile couldn't have been more sincere.

“F-Father...?”

“Mm-hmm. My name is Hakuro, and I am your father.”

“Father!!”

Momiji's dark eyes, reminiscent of Hakuro's, teared up as she hugged him tightly. Father and daughter were reunited. The girl, no longer wary of us, would never doubt Hakuro's words again.

"I must warn you, Momiji, I am a hard taskmaster on the training grounds."

"Yes..."

"But I want to see you overcome your challenges and win the heart of Benimaru!"

"Yes, Father!"

Um, what...?

Here I was, nodding my approval at this lovely little family reunion, and now the conversation was going kind of haywire. Talk about bridging a major gap. Hakuro, usually gruff and reserved even in the best of times, suddenly had a daughter...and it turned him into a weepy, doting parent.

"Uh, Hakuro..."

Benimaru's words failed to reach him. He and Momiji were in their own little world.

"Oh, now I see," Shuna murmured.

Everyone's eyes turned toward her. She paid it no mind as she addressed Benimaru, who was looking straight at her.

"My brother, I have a message for you from Sir Alvis."

"What is it?" a pained-looking Benimaru said.

I could get how he felt. He must've been thinking "*Please, let's do this later,*" but Shuna was staring at him with a distinct lack of emotion in her eyes.

The message, given with Alvis's accent, was this:

"Sir Benimaru, I have made up my mind. I intend to defeat Lady Momiji in battle and take the right to be your wife for myself—but even in the worst-case scenario, I could always be a concubine, couldn't I? Either way, I refuse to give up, so prepare yourself!"

My staff chattered with one another, their curiosity raging.

...

Benimaru just crossed his arms in silence. I'm sure he wanted to bury his head

in his hands, but I have to give him props for not doing it. Or maybe it's more like he was frozen in place, unable to move or speak. Unbeatable in battle, maybe, but powerless against "threats" like these—we'd just discovered an unexpected weak point of Benimaru's.

Sorry, man. As someone without much experience in love—not zero experience, but not much—I doubt there's much I can do to help.

"Man, life's sure hard when women are attracted to you, huh?" I tried.

"Sir Rimuru," Gobta said reproachfully, "are you serious? Because I think you face some of the same issues..."

Don't be silly, Gobta. I'm genderless now, remember?

"Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh... I have no interest in silly romance. To me, Sir Rimuru is *everything*."

I didn't ask you, Diablo. If you have no interest, then leave me alone, okay?

But even as I thought this, I could hear my staff gossiping.

"Sir Benimaru *is* rather popular, is he not? I believe some of the people under my sister Soka's command had taken a liking to him, too, but compared with Lady Alvis and Lady Momiji, I'm not sure I like their chances."

"You mean Toka, Gabil? And maybe Saika?"

"Right, right. They've already given up on you, Sir Soei, what with Soka staking her claim already..."

"Oh, don't be silly!"

"No, it's true!"

"Wow, it's like a harem, huh? I'm so jealous!"

Come to think of it, Gobta had a point there, in the end. I began to wonder if this was the start of an envious romantic rivalry between Benimaru and him. But still, Alvis was a beautiful, reliable woman. Momiji was a little headstrong but still a nice little-sister type. Between them and all the other girls aiming for a chance, Gobta was right—Benimaru *did* have something of a harem going. Not that he wanted one...

"A harem, eh?" remarked Gabil. "Yes, that would make anyone jealous."

"Well, not so fast," Soei replied. "Benimaru *is* something of a late bloomer. I would not call him particularly adept with the opposite sex. He *acts* tough, but I'm sure he is just as confused as all of us."

My thoughts were exactly the same. Having all this attention would be nothing but trouble for Benimaru. Shuna was watching him, too. I had a feeling Benimaru cared a lot for her sister, so I'm sure he was sensing danger from her and her overbearing ways right now.

"But I think it's nice," Geld said. "As manly a man as Sir Benimaru is, it's only natural the women around town would love him. Lady Alvis is leader of the Three Lycanthropeers, and I suppose Momiji is the daughter of Hakuro—both worthy partners. I have a lot to learn from him."

He certainly seemed enthusiastic about the idea of Benimaru finding a wife, harem or not. Geld himself cared more about his work than chasing women, so I wasn't sure whether he really meant the part about having a "lot to learn."

Besides, Geld was already pretty popular. As quiet, serious-minded, and responsible as he was, he had a fan base among not just high orcs, but other races as well. If he got off his ass and did something about it, he'd have a partner in no time.

"Oh, no, you are doing well enough for yourself, Sir Geld! Like I said before, Toka and the others never give me a second glance... For some reason, only the men show me any kindness in my unit," Gabil insisted.

Geld nodded sagely. "You just need more chances to encounter women. I understand that a little." He mostly worked on construction sites manned by burly male workers, so I bet he did.

Someone like me with no gender—or maybe an amphibian where gender was just a messy topic to begin with—was one thing, but building a work environment where women could participate equally was probably important, huh? It'd help encourage the men more, maybe. I'd have to think about that.

"Well, I should say, there are a few female dwarf apothecaries in my workplace. We do exchange some pleasantries, but..."

“Oh? No problem, then, right?”

No, that is a problem. Those are two totally different monster races. You aren't okay with anything that breathes, are you, Gabil?

“No, a big problem. They told me that going out with a lizard was ‘physically impossible’! I’m just so unpopular with them...”

“Oh...”

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Well. Don’t know what to say about that. Sounds like the species difference wasn’t the only wall to overcome there. Gabil may want to explore other avenues.

“And yet, they keep inviting Nanso and Hokuso out to eat—or for dates in the forests. It happens all the time! I find it *so* frustrating...”

Oh, so the species thing didn’t even function as an excuse, then?

“I, um, I’m not sure what to say...”

Geld was out of words, unsure what else he could do to comfort Gabil.

“Yes... That’s why I’ve been thinking lately that I should take more of a human form. My own dad transformed into a tall, dark, handsome person, so I wonder if I have a chance at that, too!”

Doubt it. Besides, it’s not about looks. *I* looked like a pretty nice guy myself, but I went almost forty years without a girlfriend!

The *real* key is—

“Don’t be ridiculous. You need to get up and *do* something.”

Right! That’s correct, Soei! Sitting around all day and whining like Gabil won’t win anyone over. Stop pretending someone’s going to pop out of nowhere and confess her love to you—and start going more on the offensive! Too bad I didn’t realize that until after I became a slime, but...

“W-well, yes, of course, but...”

“Soei’s right! I heard those dwarves talking once, and they were saying all these nice things about one of your men, Gabil. All like ‘Oooh, isn’t Gazatt so

cool?' and 'Oh, you think so, too?' and 'He's the classic strong, silent type, huh?' and 'He's cute, kind of like my pet lizard.' They were crazy for him! So I really don't think it's just about looks, Gabil!"

Wow, Gobta. Way to throw him under the bus.

Gazatt was one of Gabil's underlings, part of Team Hiryu—quiet and handy with a spear, but not exactly the sharpest nail in the box, so he was mainly tasked with guard duty for our researchers and pharmacists down in the Sealed Cave. He was a former lizardman, of course, and even now as a dragonewt, his looks, much like Gabil's, were more reptilian. As cruelly as Gobta put it, it definitely proved that looks aren't everything.

"Besides, women can be easier to attract than one would expect," Soei added.

"They can?!"

"Very much so," he said, half-chidingly. "A lady knight from before, for example. I am unsure how she got the idea, but she seemed to have quite an interest in me."

"R-really?! What did you do?"

"Oh-ho?"

"How very interesting!"

"Tell us more!"

This was enough to even arouse *my* interest. Which "lady knight" was this? Wait, wasn't he up to something with Litus, one of the Crusader paladins? What was up with that? I meant to ask, but it kind of slipped my mind. I spotted her looking at Soei and blushing, so I feared the worst, but...

"You want to know, too, Sir Rimuru?"

"Of course I do. And that report you made that one time..."

"Ah yes, that. You see, I took some Sticky Steel Thread and—"

He was stopped mid-sentence by a feeling of impending doom from behind us, followed by an almost deafening clearing of the throat.

"Ah-hemmm!!"

Our little whispered chat was over. We immediately shot straight back up, faces serious. Sensing the danger, I slipped back into slime mode and attempted to escape the front line but instead found myself lifted up by a thin, pale arm.

"Enough joking, Sir Rimuru. Don't we have my brother to talk about right now?"

Ah yes. That we do. We got a bit derailed, didn't we? And we sure couldn't afford to piss Shuna off anymore. Right. We needed to get serious about this.

Anyway...

Well, not that thinking about this issue would get us any closer to solving it.

"What do you think about this, Benimaru?"

"Hmm... Personally speaking, I do feel this is all going too fast. However, one thing I can say for sure is that one spouse is all I'd like to have."

Yeah, fair enough. Being asked out of nowhere to marry would knock anyone for a loop. I know it'd throw *me* off. The past is one thing, but we live in an era where you're free to love whoever you want. Besides:

"Besides, for higher-level magic-born like ourselves, siring a child is not a simple task. Some people have many wives and they impregnate each, who must compete with one another to give birth, but I have little interest in that approach. I do not intend to keep any concubines."

Momiji watched Benimaru starry-eyed as she spoke.

"So no harem, then?"

No harem, it sounded like—or no polygamy, to be exact. No real reason to adopt that in Tempest, unless we were forced to because of a glut of widows or something.

I was hoping that was the end of the topic, but it was really just the beginning.

"All right. In that case, I accept Alvis's challenge. I promise you, I will earn the role of Benimaru's wife with my own two hands!"

Momiji all but shouted this declaration out to the world. I wasn't sure this is

how love worked, exactly, but Benimaru seemed to have given up and didn't comment on it.

"What do you think of that, Sir Rimuru?"

What do I think of it? All I can say at this point is—hey, whatever.

"Well, there's no problem with it, is there? I don't want any to-the-death duel or whatever, but if it's more like vying to woo him, sure, that's fine. If *he*'s not up for it, we'll need to end it, but..."

As long as it didn't venture into stalker territory, I was cool with it.

"Very well," Shuna said with a smile. "In that case, do as you like."

I had a bad feeling about that the moment she said it.

"I can beat you, Lady Shuna!"

"I look forward to seeing you try, Shion."

They both smiled at each other. I wasn't exactly sure what this meant, but I hopped out of Shuna's arms anyway, sensing mortal danger.

I should note, by the way, that the previously reserved and hesitant Alvis got *seriously* aggressive from that day forward, attacking Benimaru from every possible angle regardless of how it made her look. Momiji, of course, followed her every step of the way, resisting her efforts. The other women coveting Benimaru, of course, didn't take this lying down and immediately threw themselves into the fray. To say the least, things got intense.

It kicked off the start of a new tradition in Tempest—the idea that, if you love someone, prove it to them with your own might. Love on the battlefield, I suppose.

EPILOGUE

THE FINAL BRIEFING

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

EPILOGUE

THE FINAL BRIEFING

It was evening by the time we wrapped up our talks with the tengu on the final day. After an earlyish dinner, we decided to hold our first administrative meeting in a while.

Since we had all my officials here for a change, I figured it'd be a good chance to brief each other on recent events. We also had a few visitors—Veldora, Ramiris, and her servants Beretta and Treyni. Milim would be “officially” coming to town three days from now, and I guess she was really starting to feel the heat from Frey, so she decided to head back home in the meantime. Smart girl. I don’t know how pissed off Frey was, but if Milim stayed here for much longer, I bet the answer would be *very*, and I didn’t want to be caught in the cross fire.

Plus, we had another new face:

“Now, before we begin this conference, there’s someone I’d like to introduce to you all. This is Mjöllmile, or Mollie, and I am considering a government post for him. He’s been intimately involved with arrangements for the Founder’s Festival in three days, and if it turns out successful, I’d like to name him chief of our financial affairs. I want all of you to treat him well.”

I had wanted to do this when everybody was around. Plus, I wanted Mjöllmile to handle the final pre-festival briefing for me.

“Er, my name is Gard Mjöllmile. Sir Rimuru has been kind enough to give me a crucial duty in the upcoming festivities, and frankly I’m rather tense, but I hope I will earn good favor from all of you here today.”

As an ever-so-slightly overweight fellow, Mjöllmile didn’t look “tense” at all. Still, it must’ve taken guts, introducing himself to a room full of monsters. Even *he* gets nervous sometimes, I guess. Dealing with mafia types in the big city was probably a far cry from going face-to-face with high-level magic-born like us.

With our introductions now concluded, I jumped right into the topic at hand.

"All right, Mollie, if you could go over how things are looking for us right now..."

"Yes sir. If you'll excuse me, then—"

Taking my cue, Mjöllmile got up from his seat next to Rigurd and went over our preparations for the Founder's Festival.

Two days from now, on the night before opening ceremonies, we would be holding a citywide launch party. This would be open to everyone, including not just event invitees but the merchants (and the adventurers bodyguarding them) visiting town, with free food and drink for all. The news had already gone out, of course, and I heard about farmers and the like from nearby cities traveling over for it—the exact sort of tourism I wanted to attract, so I wanted to be damn sure they had a great time.

In the reception hall, meanwhile, we'd hold a palatial banquet for the visiting royalty and nobility. Everything served here would be a tandem effort between Shuna and Yoshida the baker; they were debuting a lot of new dishes, I knew, so I couldn't wait. This would be a standing buffet-type thing, since I wanted guests to enjoy smaller bits of as many different kinds of food as we could offer.

Then the Founder's Festival officially began. On the morning of the first day, I would hold a speech. Yes, yet another speech, but I needed *some* kind of event to officially proclaim that I was a demon lord, so this was kind of unavoidable. I suggested skipping this, since everyone knew already, but my advisers all just smiled and said no.

Right after that, we'd kick off the battle tournament at the coliseum. I, however, would not be in attendance. This festival was meant to help VIPs from other nations get to know Tempest, so I couldn't just sit around watching the preliminary rounds all day.

Instead, my itinerary included a seat at our newly refurbished and extremely fancy-looking theater. Nobody's told me what kind of performance to expect, which made me a bit anxious, but Mjöllmile seemed really enthusiastic about it. "I feel this will be a chance to show the world that you are a *cultured* demon lord," he'd said with a grin.

Shion was smiling right along with him, which did nothing to calm my nerves. But no point stewing over it. If it had Mjöllmile's stamp of approval, I'd have to trust in him.

After lunch came a technological exhibition, including panels like Gabil and Vester's history of healing potions, Kurobe and Garm's grand tour of their weaponry, and so on. This would take place at our museum—which, like the theater, would be open to the general public from day two onward; for today, it was open to nobility only, so they could take their time with everything on display. I thought that staggering the schedules like that would be best for security purposes.

Speaking of day two, that's when I'd begin to take in the battle tournament. Later that afternoon, I'd also hold a series of chats—or to put it another way, it was some unscheduled free time for me. Basically, I'd be in my VIP box at the arena, and if anyone wanted to talk to me, I'd take their questions one by one. Mjöllmile was arranging all that for me, so really, it'd just be a pleasant distraction as I took in the tournament. Everyone who received paper invites would have a guide provided for them, and they'd be free to enjoy the fest any way they wanted—peruse the stalls, enjoy our luxurious hot baths, or check out the tournament themselves.

Then, on day three, we'd finally open up our long-awaited Dungeon. The final matches of the tournament would take place that morning, and in the afternoon, you'd get to watch as adventurers tried their hand at conquering the labyrinth.

"You've completed quite an impressive coliseum while I was gone," marveled Geld, no doubt impressed that there was a whole generation of talented craftsmen below him now.

"That we have. You and Mildo have a great apprentice in Gobkyuu. It's a perfectly sound structure; you wouldn't even know this was a rush project. If our top magic-born fought in here, I'd be worried, but any fights between competitors ranked below A shouldn't be a problem."

In terms of safety, the arena could *juumust* about withstand a high-level spirit like Ifrit raging inside it. Which, I mean, if someone focused the full brunt of

their attacks on the arena itself, I couldn't do much about that, but I'd be there for the main battles, and I planned on putting a light Absolute Defense barrier over the stadium. Barring a catastrophe, the audience would be perfectly safe, probably.

"Kwah-ha-ha-ha! And I've discovered the ultimate in gourmet bliss with my hibachi grill. It will be a can't-miss delight, trust me on that!"

Oh, I almost forgot. He *really* wanted to run a stand, so there wasn't much to do for it except let him participate in disguise. It's funny, though—somewhere along the line, Mjöllmile and Veldora had really started to get along with each other. All the impossible demands I had given them, and it looked like he was now fully used to things. Amazing. This guy may be more of a monster than I thought.

That was all for Mjöllmile's rundown. Diablo, Hakuro, and Geld—who weren't around for all the lead-up work—listened intently to it all, no doubt saddened that they couldn't be a part of it. I should probably give each of them a reward of some sort. Geld's could wait until he was done with his current job, but Diablo and Hakuro had wrapped up theirs with flying colors.

Making a mental note of that, I turned to my officials. "So far, everything's been going smoothly," I said. "Have any of you run into any issues?"

If nobody had, I was going to turn it over to Soei, but—

"Yes sir!"

That was Ramiris's cheerful voice sounding out as she raised her hand. *Ramiris, huh? I'm sure it's nothing serious, then.*

"What's up, Ramiris?"

"Well, um, I got a problem?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Okay, well, you see, it's about the bottom floors of the Dungeon..."

She fell silent, glancing at Veldora.

"Kwaaaah-ha-ha-ha! Yes, erm, it is nothing serious. You recall the forest installed in Floor 95 of the labyrinth? Well, for some reason, it has started

growing its way up into higher floors, and it now covers everything up to Floor 71!" Veldora said.

He sounded so *casual* about it, too. Floors 91 to 94 were thankfully sealed off, so they apparently weren't affected. But the rest of the levels were now lush forest, thanks to the plant life making its way up the magicule ventilation ducts.

"Uh, that's gonna be a pretty big pain in the ass to clean up, isn't it?"

"It sure is! That's why I'm bringing it up with you!" Ramiris cried.

I hated to say it, but she had a point. Eesh. If this was anyone's fault, it was Veldora's.

"And erm, we do have one more small issue," the dragon added.

"...What would that be?"

I really didn't want to ask, but I had to. But what Veldora gave me went far beyond my expectations.

"My boss-level monsters are missing. That was what I wished to discuss."

Ah. Well, at least he wasn't bringing up something stupid. Apparently, this creeping forest was sucking up the magicules in the labyrinth before those monsters could be spawned. As a result, we weren't seeing monsters worthy of being deemed bosses of the lower dungeons. We *did* have a single tempest serpent born (rank: A-minus), but I already designated that the boss of Floor 40. It was Veldora and Ramiris, after all, who said they didn't need "small fry" like that in their domains. If they wanted it back now, forget it.

"Also, I'm thinking about making a new Elemental Colossus, so I want you to get the materials for me!"

"Yes, and I want you to employ monsters worthy of serving as my bosses. And clean up the forest for me."

"....."

Ramiris, I could at least lend an ear to. I was only planning to open everything up to Floor 50 for this unveiling anyway, so I figured we could manage. But I really didn't have time for Veldora's selfish demands. We'd have time to worry about that later; for now, he'd just have to take care of things himself.

I was just about to turn him down when I heard three voices at the same time.

“I think we have the perfect person for the job, actually.”

“Sir Rimuru, why don’t you let them take care of this?”

“My master, I can think of someone suitable...”

It was Shuna, Treyni, and Ranga.

Shuna suggested that Adalmann the wight would work as a boss; Gabil rapidly agreed with her. “Adalmann’s forces are weak against sunlight,” she reasoned, “so they would thrive in cave-like environments. I think the labyrinth would be perfect for them.”

Indeed, while Adalmann could leave the cave in the day, none of his forces could. I heard they liked to wander outside at night, much to the consternation of passing merchants. I had a stack of complaints from them in my office. Yeah, if I ran into a walking skeleton in the dead of night, *I’d* probably pee my pants, too. Putting them down in that maze seemed like a good idea.

“Besides,” Shuna glumly continued, “he *is* a little pushy. Praising you as a god and everything...”

In Adalmann’s eyes, I was a god, and Shuna my shrine princess. That *was* pretty annoying, yes.

“All right. We’ll stick Adalmann in Floor 60 as the boss. And Ramiris, I’ll get some stuff to make an Elemental Colossus with. Have Adalmann help you out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. He’s got a lot of intelligence, if not much else. He ought to help out with your research.”

“All right. Thanks, Rimuru!”

So we had bosses for Floors 60 and 70.

Now it was Treyni’s turn, and she suggested leaving Floors 71 through 80 (where the vegetation was still relatively sparse) to Zegion and Apito. “Those two can summon their underlings,” she said, “so they should be able to reclaim

those floors in quick order. Plus..." She flashed a look at Ramiris. "I think that Zegion would make a fine boss for Floor 80," she said, smiling. "He's done a wonderful job protecting the treant homeland up to now."

"I see..."

"That sounds like a splendid idea," chimed in Veldora. "I would be happy to train him up to a fighter worthy of making Floor 80 proud!"

Yeah, Zegion was definitely a lot stronger than one might guess. Definitely stronger than a tempest serpent, or at least he was the last time I saw him. But this is still Zegion we're talking about—he's just a bug the size of a squirrel or something, you know? I'm not sure how much you could "train up" something like that, but oh well. I already knew Veldora was a weirdo, so I could just let him do what he liked.

"Okay. Let's go with that."

Then for Ranga.

"Master, the fox spirit I have been tending to has awoken and claims to be gifted at clearing out forests in any way requested. I would suggest accepting the offer, perhaps," he said, poking his head out from my shadow.

And sitting between his ears was what looked like a fox pup with four golden tails swaying behind it. *So cute.*

"Wanna try it?"

"Indeed, I do, sir!" The fox nodded, eyes gleaming at me. Again, *sooo* cute.

Essentially, this kit's offer was to blaze animal trails through the vegetation, creating a sort of maze with them. If that was what it wanted to do, I saw no reason to say no. If it proved not up to the task, I could just raze the forest then.

"Okay. So..."

Then I noticed a problem of my own. This fox, nicknamed Nine-Head back when it was under Clayman's control, still didn't really have a name.

"Well, wait. Before that, lemme give you a name. From this day forward, your name is Kumara."

It was totally casual, like giving a dog a name. But I wasn't stupid. I had learned my lesson by now, and I wasn't gonna have all my magical energy sapped away *this* time. No, *this* time I could control— Wait, *whooaaaaaa...*

I was suddenly seized by a flooding sort of lethargy. This was soon followed by panic.

Report. This is the effect of the naming. Since the subject, Kumara, held a vast amount of magicule energy, more energy is being consumed than...originally surmised.

I was tricked by this tiny fox pup in front of me, but... Yeah, it's actually one of the rarest, most high-level monsters out there. I, um, *may* have dropped the ball there. Plus, the moment I uttered the name, Kumara started growing fast—not in size, really, but in number of tails, which went from four to nine in a hurry. It had only three during the fight with Ranga, and each of those tails had its own special ability.

In a way, what I had done...I suppose...was summon not one, but nine different magical beasts at the same time.

"My deepest thanks, Sir Rimuru!! I shall do all I can!!"

Ah well. No point dwelling on the past. I managed to avoid slipping into unconsciousness, so I guess Raphael's calculations were close enough, even if it wasn't quite as expected. Not much surprise in its voice anyway. It must've assumed it'd hand over this level of magicules to the little fox from the get-go. Otherwise, Kumara wouldn't have grown exactly nine tails like that.

.....

C'mon, don't play dumb with me! I can see through you well enough.

Thus, I decided to leave Floors 81 through 90 to the overjoyed, scampering Kumara. It's not like this zone would see a swell of adventurers from day one; I bet Kumara solo would make a fine boss.

That wrapped up Ramiris's and Veldora's issues.

I was glad to see the rest of my staff was pretty excited about the Dungeon, too. Its success was really important to me; I wanted to be sure its operation

started on the right track. I gave Kumara a pat on the head.



With all the reporting on the Founder's Festival done, I wanted to listen to Soei's recent findings.

"All right, Soei, the stage is yours."

"Yes sir..."

What he had for me was quite a surprise. It turned out that a Hero had taken down the entire Orthrus Slave Market organization. Its exposure and downfall had already led to severe consequences for certain nobility around the world—including that Viscount Cazac guy, who was now in the custody of the Blumund authorities.

"Even Englesia is alive with rumors of the affair. Orthrus had connections with virtually every nation in the world; it was an armed group who held possession of a great number of battle slaves, including magic-born and magical beasts. Their military power was equivalent to that of a small country, but it's said a Hero's band was all it took to destroy it..."

Soei smiled a little. This Hero—Lightspeed Masayuki, a name familiar to me—was now being lauded as the strongest man in the Western Nations, a reputation no doubt buoyed by the news of my victory over Hinata. Did this mean anyone who lost to a demon lord wasn't worth pinning the hopes of humankind to? I felt like I did something bad to her now. Hope she doesn't take it personally.

But back to Masayuki. There wasn't a lot of hard intel on this guy, so we didn't know much about him. However, he was confirmed to have destroyed Orthrus—and freed the elven slaves they were holding.

"Several elves were among the slaves, and it seems Masayuki is now accompanying them back toward our nation."

Sounds like I owe him a word or two of gratitude.

...But there was a problem.

"What should we do, Sir Rimuru? If you like, I could dispatch him before he

causes any trouble for us..."

"...No, better not. Let's try talking with him first."

"All right. Anyone who professes to slay a demon lord needs to be taught a lesson, in my personal opinion, but..."

...Yes, as could be surmised from this conversation, there were rumors in the Western Nations that Masayuki intended to topple me. Soei already had an inhumane-looking smile—just *imagining* what he'd do with the guy, no doubt—but he still followed my orders.

But...man, I *really* didn't wanna have to face a Hero right in the middle of the Founder's Festival, one of the most important events in the history of Tempest. I was worried the battle-obsessed members of my staff—Shion and Diablo, to say nothing of Soei—would defy orders, run off, and do something terribly unwise.

"Let me take care of Masayuki. Absolutely no touching him, you got it?"

"""Yes sir!""""

Well, at least they knew how to say "yes sir" in unison.

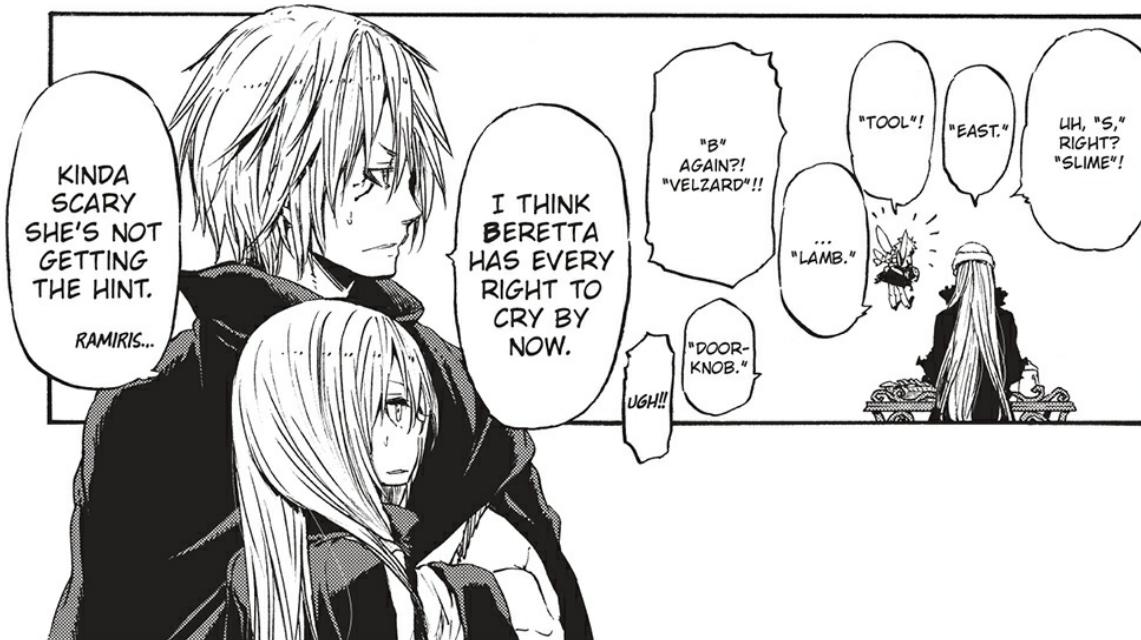
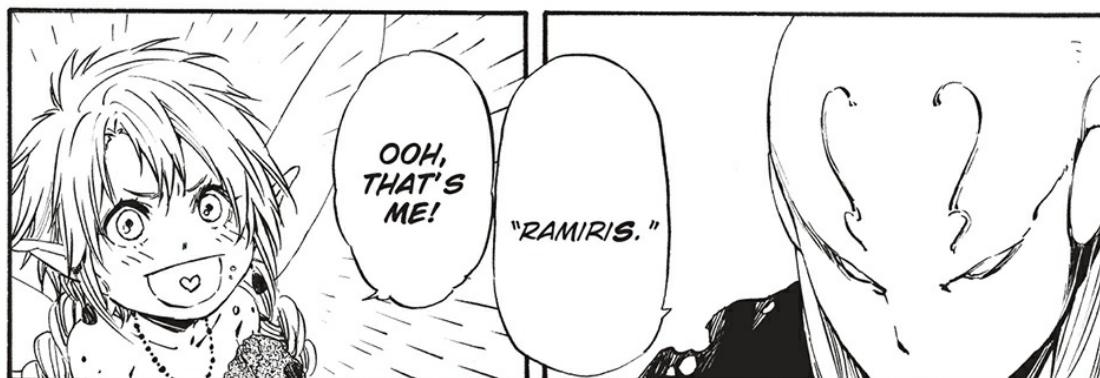
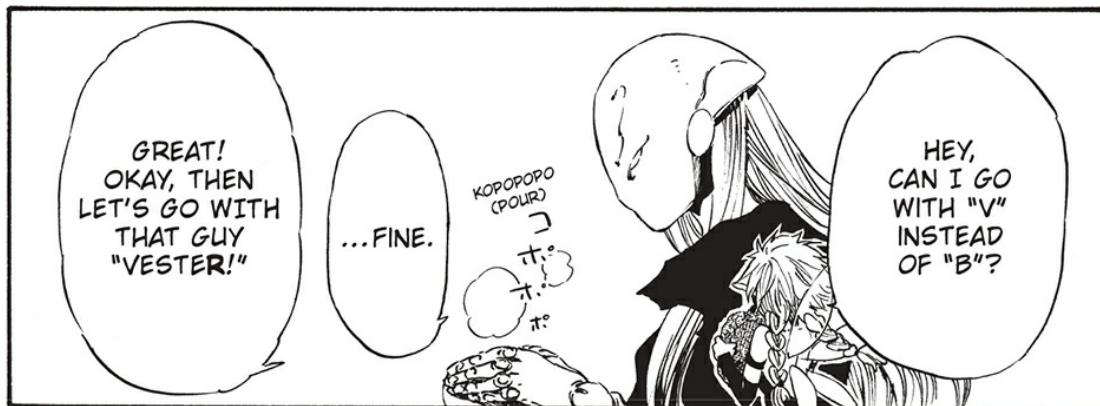
But with three days to go until the Founder's Festival, I now had a thorny problem at hand. It was like rain on my parade, and it made me feel a lot gloomier about the future.

But not long from now—a massive, intense party was about to kick off and throw all my trivial worries to the wind.

←READ FROM RIGHT TO LEFT!

His Name Is Beretta

Art: Taiki Kawakami



AFTERWORD

Thanks for your patience. Volume 8 is finally here.

I think at least some of you have already read the web-series version of this content—it's actually part of the Demon Capital Opens arc. Why did the title of this volume change? Well, there's a good story behind that...

“Don’t worry! I promise I’ll keep it nice and compact this time!”

“I’ve heard that one before. I don’t bother worrying much about the length by this point.”

That’s how I kicked off this volume, and then when the deadline drew closer...

“Um, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, yeah, what is it?”

“Well, it’s starting to get a little long, actually...”

“It is, huh? I figured as much.”

My editor, Mr. I, was wholly unmoved. But my turn wasn’t over yet!

“Could we make this a two-volume story arc?”

“Huhh?!”

“Because I could write a hundred more pages, and it’ll still end in kind of a half-assed position. How about we shake things up and go with a two-parter?”

“No! Why’d it come down to this?!”

It was a very heartwarming conversation, one that ended with Mr. I’s eyes rolling all the way back inside his head.



So yeah. I have some regrets.

Not even I am entirely sure why it turned out like this, but lately I've started to think it's a little impossible to condense this story. Thus, I'm working hard to finish up the Demon Capital Opens arc in Volume 9. I'm trying to make sure this doesn't turn into a trilogy, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

See you in the next volume!

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