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Illustration by Mitz Vah

That Time I Got  
Reincarnated  
as a SLIME

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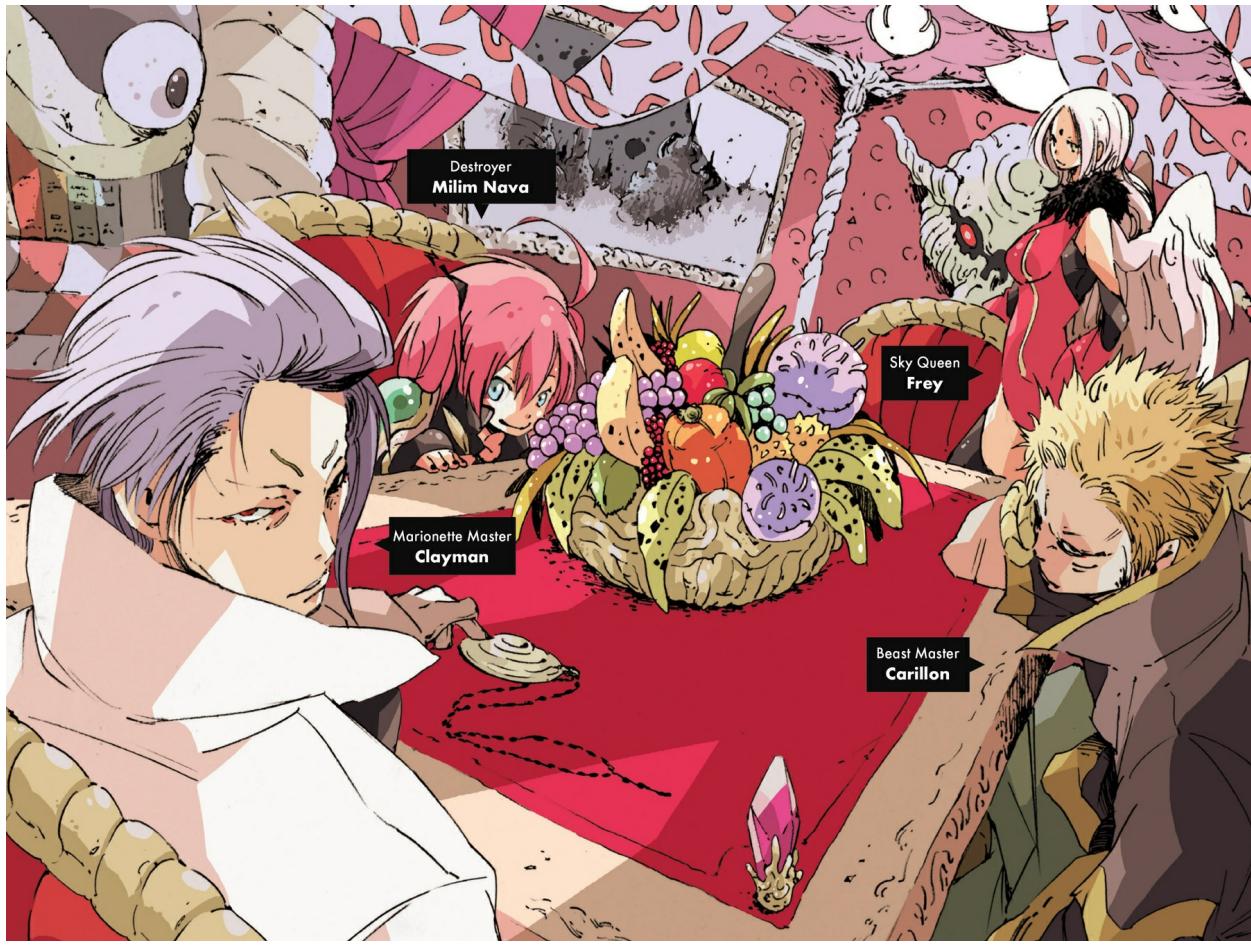
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**“Hello, hello!**

I'm the demon lord  
Milim Nava. You looked  
like the strongest hombre  
in town, so I wanted to  
come 'n' say hi!"

# That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME

(3)

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Illustration by Mitz Vah



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That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime, Vol. 3  
FUSE

Translation by Kevin Gifford  
Cover art by Mitz Vah

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TENSEI SHITARA SLIME DATTA KEN volume 3

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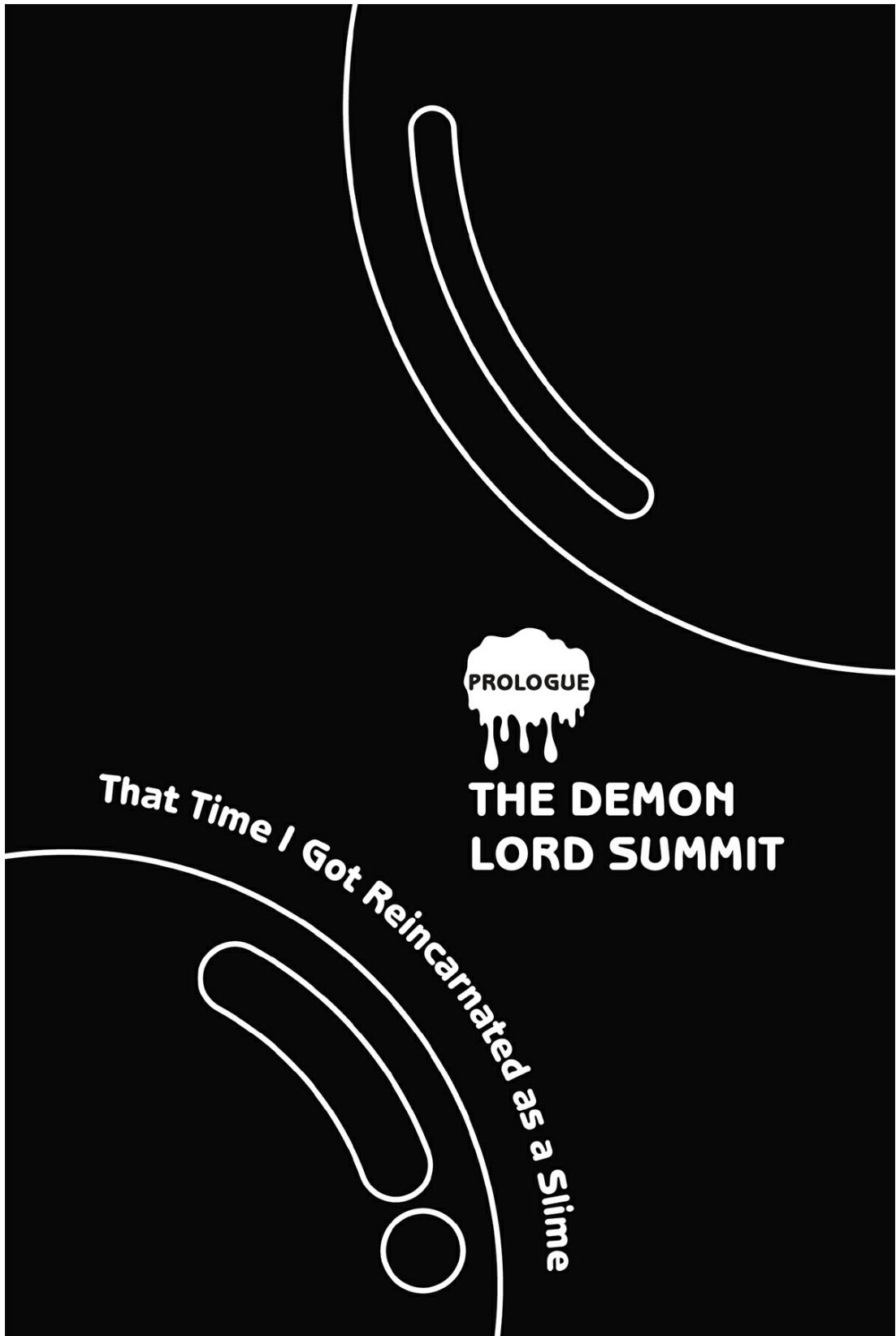
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## PROLOGUE

# THE DEMON LORD SUMMIT

It was a vast, gorgeously designed chamber, the floor covered in a luxuriant carpet that must have taken a team of artisans several years to weave.

The table in the middle featured wood carved from a fragrant tree, providing a pleasant, woodsy smell. It was large, round, and could comfortably seat a dozen or so—but despite the size of the room, only three chairs were placed around it. They were all the height of luxury, of course, the sort that even higher-end nobility would have difficulty procuring.

One wall featured a mural of a fantastical scene—but was it really a mural? The elegant, deliberate artwork for the otherworldly creatures on it almost made it seem like they stirred slightly in their poses, from time to time. It was as if they could leap out from the wall and manifest themselves in this world at any moment. Which made sense—it was all the work of Bismarck, one of the great artists of the demon lord-controlled realms. He specialized in creating so-called Artifacts, visual masterpieces that were so realistic, it was as if his brush literally trapped these mythical beasts in a living state on the wall.

Selling even one of the items that adorned this room would allow someone to live like nobility for a decade or so. Such was the quality instilled into each piece, enough to overwhelm anyone that walked into the chamber. But even as it did, the sort of person to visit this place knew the power of money—they had enough to buy any high-grade magic weapon they wanted or hire the best mercenaries in the land. They reveled in the assets they held, and a room like this was meant less to impress and more to rob the visitor of any desire to resist the will of their host.

That was the role of this chamber, but the invitees assembling in the space in a few moments were not the type to be fazed by such public displays of wealth.

This room was owned by a handsome man. He was thin, slender, and his eyes exuded intelligence even as they suggested he was rather high-strung. Even so, the demon lord Clayman had the force of will to make almost anyone follow his orders.

His eyes slid across the room before he gave a satisfied nod and sat upon one of the chairs provided. There was a mask on the table with a smile molded on it; he picked it up, ran a hand across it lovingly, and placed it carefully away in a pocket. Every movement betrayed the methodical approach he took to all aspects of his life.

He knew that his guests would be coming soon. Demon lords, the same rank as himself. And Clayman's goal today was to rein in these self-willed, wayward creatures, showing them enough of an enjoyable time to bring them under his full control. He had selected an ostentatious-looking white dress suit for the occasion, and now he was checking the time on his pocket watch.

Just as he thought that the appointed hour was near, he suddenly realized that someone was occupying another seat.

“Yo, Clayman. Gelmud doin' well for you?”

He had his legs crossed as he calmly leaned his large, muscular frame back into his seat and casually engaged Clayman. But every move of his was just as supple and elegant as Clayman's. This was no muscle-bound dolt—he presented the air of a battle-proven military hero. His own formal outfit was obviously a tad worn, but it didn't make him seem unclean at all. If anything, it emphasized his wild side, building an atmosphere that made one hesitate more than a little to go near him.

His unrefined manner of speech would seem to be a poor match for that, but it only served to make the man all the more charming. His well-maintained short blond hair, meanwhile, paired perfectly with the masculine contours of his face. His sharp, hawk-like eyes were burrowing into Clayman—he was keenly focused, perhaps out of distrust for his fellow demon lord.

“Carillon?” Clayman asked. “You're early, eh? I was planning to brief you on that today, actually. Certainly wasn't expecting you to arrive first,

though.”

The man called Carillon shrugged. “No need for that treatment, now. I’m sure our little lady is busy with her own preparations,” he said with a smirk.

Carillon was, indeed, a demon lord—perhaps more often referred to as the Beast Master, thanks to being king and leader of the lycanthrope race.

“Heh. ‘Lady,’ now, is it? Hmm... Yes, maybe so. Ah, but we’d better not say any more of her for now. After all...”

“She’s rather sensitive to people bad-mouthing her, yes.”

The two gave each other a look, exchanging a slight laugh. Just as they stopped, the door to the chamber was suddenly thrown open. A single young woman stood there, looking around the room for a moment before realizing only Clayman and Carillon were there.

“Were you guys just spreading rumors about me?”

She was young, very young, oddly so for someone participating in a summit like this. Fourteen or fifteen, perhaps, and while appearances were often deceiving for magic-born people like her, she looked woefully out of place.

There was a brace on her right shoulder, shaped somewhat like a dragon’s claw. But not “on” it, exactly—it was actually floating in the air, leaving a slight gap between it and her body. Said body was, for the most part, barely clothed—just a loincloth and pair of undergarments made of thin cloth, along with a chest piece to cover the faintest suggestion of a still-developing pair of breasts. Whether meant for ease of movement or some other purpose, it exposed as much skin as the typical swimsuit would.

Her large, strong-willed eyes shone blue, even as they revealed a bit of the immature youth left in her. The strength in them proved to the other two that this was no woman to be trifled with. Her platinum-pink hair was tied into two flowing pigtails on either side of her head, and there was a bold, dominant smile on her face. Jutting her modest chest outward, she glared at the demon lords she shared the chamber with.

“Yo, Milim!” Carillon said with a hearty laugh. “No, no rumors. You’re usually so punctual with these things, is all. We were worried about you!”

“Exactly, Milim,” Clayman added as he elegantly ferried a cup of tea to his lips. “Of course, I would never worry about you, myself.”

They were both used to her, enough that they knew making bald-faced excuses was pointless. It would just rile Milim up even more. Instead they

took pains to relax their approach, ensuring they prodded her no further. The two shared a slight sense of nervousness with each other over her, and nervousness was what it clearly was.

There was a reason for this: Despite her looks, Milim was powerful. This sweet young demon lord, Milim Nava, was a member of the dragonoid race—one that bore the simple but effective nickname of Destroyer.

With an annoyed sniff, she gave Carillon, then Clayman a dirty look. “Well, so be it,” she muttered when neither reacted. In the next moment, she was sauntering into the chamber—and someone else was behind her. A harpy—one with large, eagle-like wings.

“Well, well, Milim,” Clayman admonished, eyebrows arched downward. “I believe I’ve made it clear that none besides demon lords are allowed in here. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to have your attendant accompany you inside. Even for you, there are certain rules that have to be—”

“It is good to see you again, Clayman,” came the dejected reply. “I am not Milim’s attendant. I’m not here because I want to be, but if it’s a demon lord you want, then it’s a demon lord you have.”

The harpy stood strong, not at all cowed by the powerful beings before her. She looked like a graceful woman, but anyone near her would immediately pick up on the unnervingly substantial aura that she exuded at all times.

She was, after all, a demon lord herself—

“Whoa, what are *you* doing here, Frey?”

—Frey the Sky Queen, ruler of the harpy race. Just like Clayman, Carillon, and Milim, she was one of the pillars of strength that supported the entire world they lived in.

“Hello, Carillon. And yes, you are correct. I had turned down the invitation because I was busy, but Milim...well, you know...”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, what’s the big problem? She was acting all moody and grumpy about something, so I brought her over to let off some steam. You don’t have a problem with that, do you, Clayman?”

“No, not if that is the case...”

This was the Milim that Clayman knew—eternally pushing her own desires on other people. But there was no reason to openly defy her. In fact, the optimist in him saw this as something to be welcomed. Once he told everyone about how his efforts with Gelmud were a complete failure, he was

sure Milim would suddenly be quite a bit less cheerful. Frey should help smooth things over a little once he had to drop the bomb.

So Clayman began to devise a new strategy.

“Well? Can we have another chair for Frey, please?”

Clayman nodded at Milim’s order. With a flick of a finger, a chair materialized where none was before—a perfect match for its surroundings, as if it had always been there and everyone just failed to notice. Milim and Frey each took their seats, sensing nothing unusual about this.

There were four demon lords assembled around the table. Now it was time for Clayman, the Marionette Master himself, to flex his muscles a bit. He had a gift for controlling people, making them do whatever he liked, and now there was the hint of a smile on his face as he began to speak.

The demon lord summit had begun.

\*

Clayman opted to kick things off with a plain and frank rundown of events. Gelmud was dead, killed by someone or other, and his plan had failed.

“That bastard wanted things to go too quickly for his own safety, hmm?” Carillon offered. “Even if Veldora is gone, was there any need to move this operation up, really?”

“You may say that, Carillon, but mayhem was bound to result sooner or later with Veldora, the supreme ruler of the forest, out of the picture. If a promising new seedling was fated to be plucked from the ground, wouldn’t it be far more satisfying for all of us if we were the ones who controlled that fate?”

This made sense to the large man. With all the assorted influential races calling the forest home, there was never any guarantee that their own pawns would win the match. They also knew that actively cultivating an orc lord gave them the greatest possibility of victory.

Another among them, however, was more dubious.

“What?! So what happened to making the orc lord into a demon lord next?”

“What I’m saying, Milim, is that we’re back to the drawing board on that. We needed Gelmud to control the orc lord, and now he is dead.”

It hurt Clayman just as deeply to abandon this strategy. But as long as

nobody noticed the connection between him and Gelmud, he would never hear about it later. At this point, the idea of hatching a new plan to handle either the orc lord or the magic-borns—whichever had survived—sounded far more interesting to him. And if he could interest the other demon lords in it, he could use that to add another effective card or two to his hand.

Carillon sat silently, eyes closed, as he listened on. He must have his opinions, Clayman knew, but was apparently ready to listen to the entire story before making a final judgment. He was much more careful about these matters than the short-tempered Milim was.

And it turned out, much more prudent.

“But that’s so *boring!* And here I thought we’d have a new toy to play with before long. And remember all that bragging that bum Gelmud gave us, once upon a time? Too bad he turned out to be such a profound dolt, isn’t it?!”

“Now, now, Milim, no need for such anger. Clayman hasn’t finished his story yet. Why not wait until then before you shout at him?”

Just as Clayman expected, the sad news was enough to make Milim seethe at him. He was expecting to expend a great deal of effort soothing her from now on, but Frey seemed to be doing a good job at it. It came as a relief.

*Thank the heavens she brought Frey along with her,* he thought, maintaining a breezy smile the whole time. And he meant it. As her Destroyer nickname implied, once Milim broke into a violent spree, there was no containing her. It would require Clayman to expend his full energies in response—and by that point, any dream he had of manipulating these demon lords without a fight would be lost. Milim’s behavior was easy to predict, at least, which meant he could steer her. But to Clayman, she was a double-edged sword. Steer her in the wrong direction, and he knew he’d face the brunt of the fallout.

At least Milim bringing along her own tranquilizer in the form of Frey should make things much smoother for him. Plus, not only did she have no hand (or wing) in this operation, but she seemed to have no interest in it at all. That was key. Any other demon lord would’ve demanded a detailed rundown of the plan, from start to finish. Frey, meanwhile, was much more cooperative.

“Milim,” Clayman said, “I feel Frey is correct. Take a look at these first.”

He took out four spherical crystals, an eerie light burning in his eyes. His

lips curled into a smile, anticipating how this would astound his fellow demon lords. Then he projected images into all four spheres, watching their reactions carefully as he did. Just as he thought, they were all enthralled by what they saw. The final crystal in particular—showing Gelmud's perspective—captured their complete attention.

“Very impressive indeed, Gelmud, leaving these fancy baubles behind for us!” Milim happily shouted, voice booming across the room. The images left no clue about the orc lord’s final fate, but the way they suddenly cut off indicated to them all that Gelmud was gone.

“All right. So this means Gelmud screwed up and got himself killed, yeah? Just like you said. But you didn’t tell us about these magic-born on purpose, eh?”

Clayman nodded at Carillon’s observation. “Fascinating, isn’t it? And with Gelmud dead, there is no telling what may come after. But with all these high-level members of the magic-born races in one place, I feel it is safe to say the orc lord met his match, too. However—”

“However,” Frey interrupted, “if he survived, he totally evolved into a demon lord, right?”

She had taken the words right out of his mouth. Clayman knew she couldn’t have known about the plan, but she was intelligent enough to guess most of it.

*Well done, Frey... I must be careful around you, unlike these two simpleton warriors.*

He eyed Frey carefully, squinting a little. She acted distant, unaffected, but she was looking into a crystal sphere, as if pondering something. He couldn’t tell what was going through her mind, but it was clear she was no longer annoyed at Milim forcing her to tag along.

*This is a threat...but Frey looks like she has her own troubles to consider. She acted completely uninterested a moment ago, but now...*

Now Frey was starting to interest him. As far as their positions went, Clayman was right—she was more of a tactical leader than an on-the-battlefield fighter. Controlling her would be far from simple. She was too smart to be deceived that easily. But if whatever troubled her could be used to exploit some weakness... A new and sinister plan quietly unfolded deep in his mind.

“Okay, so what now? You want one of us to go down and check it out?”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! First come, first served, is it?”

“First come, first served for what, Milim?” Clayman interrupted. Figuring out what to do with the magic-born had to come first. He turned his thoughts elsewhere. “I doubt you would be satisfied simply with observing the scene, hmm? Everyone, calm down for a moment. We are dealing with the Forest of Jura, a region that is strictly off-limits.”

“Oh? What’s that matter? It’s not like we’re actually *doing* anything in there. You just want to hop on over and scout out any magic-born who look decent enough to join our team, don’tcha? Though who’s to say what kind of unfortunate accidents may befall anyone who refuses. Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“No getting a head start on this, Carillon. If what I have been hearing from you all is true, your aim was to create a new demon lord that you could use as a faithful pawn, yes? And if you’ve failed at it once, then why not just recognize one of those magic-born as a demon lord and have it serve us?”

“Wow, Frey! You saw right through our scheme!”

She had demystified the core of Clayman and his fellows’ plan—to birth a demon lord that was putty in their hands. And Milim just went and admitted it. Now Frey would think she was right—and that was fine. It was still within what Clayman expected. If Frey was part of today’s summit, he had already assumed it would happen. No point hiding things, if Milim was wholly incapable of subterfuge.

“But we do need to investigate, yes,” he ventured. “Not to speak for Carillon, but there is no guarantee they will be cooperative with us. If the orc lord *did* win, however, he might be rampaging out of control now that his father Gelmud is gone.”

He wanted to keep the other demon lords from traveling over there before he was ready. Now, he watched them mull it over.

An investigation did seem to be necessary. Whether it was the orc lord or the other magic-born, the side that won the battle would now be more powerful than ever. It’d be nice if the demon lords could make them swear fealty, but losing any chance at that with some untoward gesture was out of the question.

They needed to assume that, at the very least, something at a sub-demon lord level of strength was now born. If they were to set up the board so they were guaranteed to dominate it, that was a tall order even for them. It would give them a leg up on the other demonic rulers of the land, but they also had

to consider the substantial consequences if it didn't work out. And if whoever survived the fray decided to call themselves a "demon lord," there would be no choice but to give it up and punish that insolence. But now wasn't the time for that.

The four demon lords glanced at one another, attempting to read one another's minds.



Carillon, the Beast Master, had a good feeling about this.

He had spent several centuries ruling the lycanthrope race, waging several major battles that went well enough for him to expand his influence. That performance had earned him the endorsements of the dearly departed Accursed Lord and the demon lord Milim, ensuring his own promotion to the demon lord post. Leon, the one who defeated said Accursed Lord, assuredly had some objections about that, but he seemed to bear no anger or disgust toward the appointment. Survival of the fittest was the only ironclad rule here—and it had just been applied once again. Leon had no right to protest.

Besides, Leon was more than strong enough himself. Even after attaining his current post, he had never ceased to hone his skills. Carillon understood that Leon had several new, and powerful, allies on his side as well. Even as a newcomer to this echelon, there was no underestimating what this relatively recent demon lord could do.

Carillon had a taste for power—and powerful people. That was why he so readily accepted Leon. But that didn't mean he stood by idly while Leon accrued more and more force. As a demon lord, he felt an obligation to retain an ample supply for himself. Enough that he didn't have to submit to anybody else. Enough to protect the kingdom he controlled and smash anyone who dared to oppose it.

This was less about Carillon being nervous about his position and more him following his natural instincts toward increasing his strength. But the end result was the same. It made him a force to be reckoned with. One who constantly sought to take in more strength, never satisfied with what he had now. And now, Carillon had a very enticing offer dropped in front of him.

He had accepted Clayman's invitation to the summit, figuring it would be a good way to kill some time. Three demon lords working in collusion could certify a new demon lord anytime they wanted—and if this new lord was willing to do all their bidding, it would grant them a decisive advantage over any other demon lord out there.

So Carillon was more than willing to go along with Clayman's guidance. There were several reasons for this, but the main one was the absence of any rule stating demon lords needed to be friends. There were always disputes among them, and everyone knew that Clayman and Leon's ran particularly deep. It was a given that they constantly schemed to undermine each other, taking pains not to leave any evidence behind. Their public faces were one thing, but under the surface, they were constantly trying to check each other's movements.

Thus, Carillon was sure, there was no need to worry about Clayman going turncoat. Whether he could *trust* him was another matter, but in terms of using each other for the common good, he thought they had a nice give-and-take going. Clayman wasn't dumb enough to lay hands on a cooperative demon lord, and the same could be said of Carillon.

As for the other two in the chamber? Carillon didn't see much to worry about there. Frey, queen of the harpies, probably wasn't interested. She had to be dragged in here by Milim, and she wasn't even part of this plan from the beginning.

Besides, harpies were unique. Their society was completely classist, with winged creatures up top and everyone else down below. No matter how powerful an upper-level magic-born one may be, if they were wingless, they could not expect preferential treatment over there.

It looked like there was one winged figure among the magic-borns in the crystals...but Carillon didn't think that would be enough to make Frey take action. *Besides, he thought, if it's just one, Frey can have it for all I care. Assuming it's still alive.* There were other fish to fry, other magic-born to lure. They didn't know what had happened to the orc lord, but Carillon was pretty sure he lost—hell, if Frey wanted one of those guys, she could have them.

That just left Milim. Carillon thought about this for a moment. In terms of their personal interests, Clayman likely thought of her as an enemy, but what about Milim? She had a short fuse and you could read her like a book, but she

was just as cunning as any other demon lord. But more than that, she was ever faithful to her own desires. She let her emotions carry her, making decisions practically on a whim. In a way, it was difficult to predict her next move.

Carillon did owe her, perhaps, for recommending him to the demon lord post. *But, he thought as he gave her a look, I don't know. I just can't read her.*

Milim appeared to be bursting with confidence, looking in utter awe at one of the crystal spheres. She was undoubtedly the demon lord most interested in this tale. It was apparently the magic-born Gelmud who approached Clayman with this idea of crafting a new demon lord—Carillon didn't know if that was true, but it didn't matter anyway.

Basically, if something piqued his curiosity, he leaped at it, and Milim was likely the same. She had been alive for a long time, and she hated tedium. If an enticing prospect came along, she'd greedily jump on it, not caring if the story were true or not. Plus, her power was the real thing, enough to let her avoid a certain level of countermeasures simply by steamrolling over them.

“Destroyer” was right—as a demon lord, Milim was the personification of pure force, almost unfairly so. And because of that, no matter how simpleminded she was, her moves were still hard to read. It was obvious she wanted to go off to investigate the scene. Her opponents’ strengths, and the danger involved, was no big deal to her. If whomever survived that battle won her heart, she’d be recommending them as a new demon lord—and if they didn’t, she’d kill them.

But she couldn’t do that this time. This was all unfolding in an inconvenient place. Simply entering the Forest of Jura presented political problems. Even Milim would have trouble indulging her curiosity if every other demon lord in the world was against it. A full investigation would be coming first.

Carillon knew that Milim didn’t give a fig about boosting her own powers. The question was what Clayman would gain out of this. In his eyes, Clayman used his gentlemanly demeanor to hide his true intentions at all times. It was hard to tell what he was thinking—and even harder to trust him completely.

This would be a battle of wits, and on that score, Milim was too easily

deceived to be much of a concern. Frey would follow whatever Milim did, so no point fretting over her. That just left Clayman. It was the natural conclusion for Carillon to make.

He licked his lips as he thought over his strategy.

*Now, how to kick this off...*



Frey, the queen of the harpies, had had enough of this. This wasn't a conference she had any reason to be in. Milim had just forced her along for some inscrutable reason. "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You need to relax a little bit!" she had said, not bothering to ask what Frey thought about it—to say nothing of the other demon lords.

Frey knew there was no point worrying about that, since it wasn't like Milim would. But she didn't like how she had been silently appointed as the demon lord to clean up the messes that followed wherever Milim went.

Besides, the timing couldn't have been worse. One of the harpy priestesses had just prophesied the revival of a long-past calamity. A prophecy by name, perhaps, but it had already been confirmed. Reading the flow of magicules and the twisting and warping of space, she had confirmed the coming arrival—the arrival of the harpies' natural enemy. The revival of Charybdis, the calamity-level monster that a long-lost hero had sealed away in time immemorial.

Charybdis was a great magical creature that ruled the skies in antiquity—one that could summon the shark-shaped megalodons to execute its bidding and make its tyranny complete. It would die and be reborn on a cycle of every few centuries, and Frey had been a demon lord for only a short time when it last resurrected, laying waste to a hefty chunk of her territory. In the end, thanks to the "hero" who wanted to put a final end to the cycle, Charybdis had been spirited away to a locked region of space, somewhere inside the Forest of Jura...and now that seal was about to come undone.

Having a hero's seal unravel like this was unnerving enough, but Frey couldn't shake the thought that Veldora's disappearance was intimately related. Charybdis was a different creature from the norm, a so-called "crystallization" of evil thoughts. A sort of spiritual form created from a

cloud of magical energies that sought to sow the seeds of destruction.

As the legend put it, it could resurrect itself temporarily inside a corpse whenever a great die-off occurred across the land—or so the legends went. In other words, it needed a bodily receptacle in order to be reborn...

*Ugh, this is so annoying. Spreading chaos across the Forest of Jura and using it to give birth to a new demon lord? If I'd known about that, I would've put a stop to it before this happened...*

She didn't know what caused it, but Frey reasoned that the conspiracy Milim had engineered with the others was one primary factor in this. It irritated her to no end, thinking about it—but could she have stopped Milim, even if she tried? That wasn't easy to answer, and there was no point dwelling on the question.

Frey had to come up with a response. Even a megalodon was an A-minus in terms of the danger it presented. The Charybdis it served was on a whole other level. It was far beyond what an A grade could even express, a force truly worthy of being called a calamity. Even the human nations had awarded it the rank of S, terming it the equivalent of a demon lord. It had no mind of its own, simply acting on its instincts, and that was really the only reason why it wasn't called a demon lord itself.

And all right, maybe these were mere humans awarding these rankings, but it still annoyed Frey to be placed on the same rung of the ladder as this thing. But there was a reason for that rank. Those "instincts" were painful. It floated freely around the sky, randomly killing anything that grabbed its attention. Whenever it grew hungry, it would attack a city and eat its way through, consuming both human and monster at once. It was a menace on a level beyond what any orc lord could present.

The harpies were the rulers of the skies, and Frey had enough force to be termed their Sky Queen. Her magic was a force to be reckoned with, and her skills in aerial combat were outstanding. She was proud that she had never lost to any earthbound foe.

Combining these skills with Magic Interference—an ability unique to her race—she had the ability to annul any flight-based magic on the battlefield. That alone meant any foe not flying with physical wings would immediately be sent plummeting to their deaths. Even that may not be enough to kill a higher-level monster, of course, but for a human, the chances of survival were pretty slim. Even if one did, they only had so many ways of attacking a

target that was high up in the sky. Meanwhile, she could rain down attacks upon those helpless ants below—an obvious tactical advantage.

Anything that couldn't fly was no threat at all to her. Except for Charybdis.

It was massive, dozens of feet in diameter, and Magic Interference didn't work on it. To put it another way, Magic Interference was an intrinsic skill to it as it was to harpies. The race's flight skills gave it an insurmountable advantage in battle—losing that advantage was a telling blow. It made sense that the harpies saw Charybdis as their natural nemesis.

Of course, simply lying low and praying that this threat would never come to greet them grated on Frey's pride as a demon lord. She wanted to do something about it, but attempting a full-frontal attack would result in unacceptably heavy casualties. That was what troubled her, and it was why she arrived at this summit in such a foul mood. If it weren't for that resurrection, maybe she'd be a bit more eager about the whole-new demon lord plan, but...

She had noticed one winged figure in the crystal spheres. It made her think about the possibility that the magic-born had survived and grown more powerful, but she quickly dismissed it. *Having one more magic-born means little*, she thought. *We have no idea how powerful it is in battle. A high-level magic-born has no chance against a demon lord-class foe. Even if it's grown into a sub-demon, there's no guarantee it'll be friendly to our advances. What a pain. This would be so much easier if I could fight without all these...things holding me down...*

Frey let out a dejected sigh. As a demon lord, she could no longer personally lead her armies into battle as queen. She had a responsibility to keep her land and people safe, and that meant more than simply racking up victories on the field. No matter the sacrifice involved, Frey was strictly prohibited from joining a battle. Only when victory was assured could she take center stage.

There was just one sure method of defeating Charybdis. It was the first thing she thought of after receiving the prophecy she dreaded so much.

But...that?

Frey took a peek at Milim.

She was eagerly peering into a sphere, this demon lord on such a different level from the towers of strength around her. *Carillon and Clayman don't*

*know what she's really like. They're too deceived by her external youth to read her true nature.* And while she was technically a demon lord just like them, Milim was inherently different.

Milim Nava was special. Not like Frey and the other demon lord newcomers. She was one of the most senior demon lords out there, and she was from the dragonoid race. A dragon-born. Which made her a special S grade. The “Destroyer” name wasn’t just window dressing—it was said she literally destroyed a kingdom single-handedly, in the past.

She could fly, as well, using her own wings that she normally kept stowed away. Her body was strong—naturally, not by magic—and her skills in battle were almost unfair. Something like Magic Interference would never work on her. Milim was just as much a nemesis to Frey as Charybdis—and once again, she had dragged her over to something she wanted no part of. Frey just couldn’t defy her.

The whole summit was a distraction as she racked her brain for some way to deal with Charybdis. She provided a few hollow observations along the way, hoping the conference would end soon.

But at the same time, she had another thought: If Milim could work with her, would that be enough to defeat Charybdis? She was impervious to Magic Interference, after all.

But it wouldn’t be easy. Demon lords were hardly one big happy family. You couldn’t just saunter up to one and ask a favor like that. They were more about using and abusing one another than asking nicely. They say the rich are smart enough not to get into street fights, and while that didn’t describe them exactly, they couldn’t be overtly hostile to one another. It’d just give space where the other demon lords could drive a wedge. It wasn’t worth the risk, and it could even provide that moment of weakness that would lead them all to their doom. That was the whole reason the demon lords had signed nonaggression pacts with one another in the first place.

Under those circumstances, there was no way she could ask a fellow ruler to slay a demon lord—class monster for her. And it wasn’t realistic to expect Milim to agree to that. There was never any telling where her own desires lay. There was a nation of people who worshipped her as the child of a dragon, and she granted it her “divine” protection. It was a peaceful, bountiful, and also deathly boring place. They had no military might, but Milim provided all the power they needed—no nation was brazen enough to

challenge a kingdom under the direct protection of Milim.

In other words, Milim already had it all—power, riches, glory. She had no interest in conquering new lands, no motivation to forge alliances with other nations.

*If I could just find something to make Milim take action, Frey thought, I think I could find a solution to this...but that's easier said than done...*

What Milim wanted more than anything was something to make the boredom go away. And Frey had no idea what that could be. But look at her now—her attention was wholly captured by what she saw in the sphere.

*Maybe I could take advantage of this.*

Maybe she could move Milim after all.

*No. More than that. I have to take advantage of this. Charybdis needs to be out of the picture.*

She took a deep breath, her decision finally made.



With a polite smile, Clayman observed the three demon lords before him.

Clayman was the one who had directed Gelmud throughout the entire operation. If that became public knowledge, it wouldn't be very good news for his position—but that was no concern now. The moment Gelmud breathed his last, all traces of evidence disappeared with him.

Carillon had his suspicions, maybe, but he wasn't one to verbally pursue them very much. He was safe. Frey provided other concerns, but with no evidence at hand, he could talk his way out of whatever she said.

This was an attractive offer to the other demon lords, besides, and Clayman was hardly the only one to blame here. The scheme didn't work, but it wasn't like anyone was terribly hurt as a result.

Now was no time to think about the past. Instead, Clayman focused on a new plan. Some way to investigate who survived—and find a way to use them. Was that the best thing for him? It gave him pause.

Fortunately, the other demon lords were showing a clear interest. To Clayman, the fates of the surviving magic-born really didn't matter much at all. If they fulfilled their potential as bait to lure in the other demon lords, that's all he needed. Certainly, if there was a sub-demon lord among them,

recruiting the lucky bum would be quite the boon for his own forces. But if force was all he wanted, Clayman had other outlets for that. He had the money to hire any mercenary he wanted.

A full demon lord who faithfully did whatever he wanted was one thing—but your run-of-the-mill high-level magic-born? Clayman had no need for them. Thus, placing his own priorities on the scales, he decided to change his mission. He wanted to have Milim and Carillon owe him a favor, and he wanted them to trust him. In addition, he wanted their backing just in case something happened later on.

Or so he thought. But...

*Milim and Carillon respect my strength, like I figured. They've happily taken the bait. But Frey is proving to be a wild card. She seems concerned about something; perhaps it's some weakness that I can grasp. It might be interesting to examine this.*

Clayman had to chuckle at the unexpected results. He was hoping to get Milim and Carillon on his side, but now, perhaps, he could take advantage of a weakness on Frey's part. Having full sway over even one demon lord would be a wonderful consolation prize after losing the orc lord.

Demon lords were shrewd, observant people. They knew that Milim and Carillon had the simplest personalities among their kind. But the two were also gifted fighters. While most found it prudent to hide the full extent of their powers from one another, these two never hesitated to show it off.

Given their battle-oriented specializations, winning their trust was never a bad idea. And having a guaranteed three votes (counting his) at Walpurgis, the grand meeting that all demon lords attended, was huge. Adding Frey to the equation meant that Clayman could make nearly any vote, any proposition, go the way he wanted.

*Heh-heh... Excellent. Not exactly my original plan, but this is almost as ideal. It would have been interesting, having an orc lord serving as my puppet demon lord...but this works just as well. And I can even have Frey join in—*

Clayman had to stifle the laugh bubbling up in his throat. It was time to show off his skills as Marionette Master. Frey would come first; then Milim and Carillon. Then, Walpurgis would be like a personal court to him. Everything in the world could be his, in fact. It was no longer an idle dream.

The Forest of Jura was forbidden territory. No demon lord was allowed to

send an expedition inside. He would need to bring on another unaffiliated high-level magic-born, like Gelmud—and he'd have to ensure this agent wasn't aware that Clayman was pulling the strings. It would be a delicate operation. But this kind of under-the-table exchange was Clayman's specialty, something Milim and Carillon weren't suited for. That's why he was the one who "handled" Gelmud in his last scheme.

And it'd be just the same this time. Milim seemed to have an extraordinary interest in all this, which was a concern, but it'd likely be Clayman handling the expedition anyway. The situation inside Jura was a total unknown, so he figured his role would be a foregone conclusion.

*In fact, I could have this person spy on Milim and Carillon for me before he goes into the forest. Now this is getting interesting...*

Clayman smiled a little as he pictured it. He knew he shouldn't be too greedy. Depending on how things went, it wasn't impossible. Finding Frey's weakness was priority one, and if possible, he wanted to take the lead on the Forest of Jura expedition.

His objectives clear in his mind, he leisurely began to gauge the rest of the table.



Milim Nava, the demon lord whose platinum-pink pigtails suited her perfectly, was lost in thought.

*If I leave things to these doofuses, I just know they're gonna let my new toy go to waste. They're all still newly hatched rookies—they've got no way to see how things really are. I'm cool enough and smart enough to take the lead here.*

Thanks to her easy comfort as one of the oldest demon lords, Milim felt herself taking a role as leader for the younger generations of rulers, who had only a few centuries' worth of experience. It was ironic to think that the youngest-looking among them was also the most cunning, but it was the undeniable truth.

After a moment of thought, Milim opened her mouth, then exhibited her full majesty as both the only dragonoid at the table and the most wizened of demon lords.

“Right!” she began, practically bursting with anticipation. “In that case, I’m heading out now and negotiating with whoever survived!”

The demon lords met her with silence. Which made sense. With the current pact covering the Forest of Jura, there was no way to go in without making certain arrangements first. Simply stomping right over, as Milim suggested, was unthinkable.

“Um, Milim... We can’t do that, can we? We have that nonaggression agreement.”

“Yeah! Where’d that idea even come from?”

“Milim,” Clayman interjected, “please take a moment to calm yourself. I will send a full expeditionary force to handle this, and I promise there will not be long to wait.”

She laughed all of them off.

To the demon lords who knew Milim, she was regarded as someone with muscles all the way into her brain. A lunkhead, in other words. But the truth lay elsewhere. She was actually extremely intelligent, and it was only her short fuse that made people think otherwise. She had the full ability to sort right from wrong and process matters strategically—something that often made her leap directly into action, making her seem impossibly imprudent. She was one of the top geniuses among them, in fact, but sadly, very few people noticed this. If anything, they thought she was the simplest, most ill-tempered one.

Utterly ignorant of all this, Milim confidently put her chest forward and revealed her own thoughts to the world. “Who cares about that nonaggression pact?” she said, a world-beating smile on her face. “We should just abolish that thing right now. We got four demon lords here, so it’s easy, right?”

The rest seemed at a loss. They chewed over her words, as if the blinders had just been taken off their eyes. Yes. This *was* realistically possible. They tried to deny it, but they couldn’t find anything to refute it with. At that moment, every scheme and plan in their minds vanished into dust.

Of course, to Carillon, trying to think up a reason to join the expedition, this was a gift from heaven. It meant he could send his own forces into the forest without bothering to hide them. Too easy.

“Makes sense,” he agreed. “With our signatures, we could provide notification that the agreement’s null and void. It should be accepted, as long as nobody objects to it. I’m up for the idea.”

“I’m with you on that,” Frey said. “My territory abuts the forest, and being forbidden from entering it was never exactly convenient for us.”

To her, agreeing with Milim was the simplest way to get the old demon lord on her side. The bountiful feeding grounds inside the Forest of Jura would also provide good hunting for her own cherished daughters. The wardens of the forest may have issues, but they could worry about that when it occurred.

Milim was beaming at both of her new allies when Clayman spoke up.

“Would it go that easily, though, do you think? Would the other demon lords be so ready to agree to it?”

Risking Milim’s rage wasn’t normally a good idea, but the way Clayman saw it, this wasn’t something he could readily agree with. He didn’t intend to personally join the expedition, but he simply didn’t want the other demon lords griping at him about the whole thing later. The agreement of four demon lords made the annulment a given to pass, but that nonaggression treaty had held over the forest for centuries. It didn’t seem like something that should be abandoned with such impulsive gusto.

*If we could rip it up that easily, he reasoned, we wouldn’t need to expend all this effort staying undercover. Is there some reason for this outburst? Such as...Veldora’s disappearance, of all things...?!*

Just as the thought occurred to him, Milim grinned once more and nodded. “Mm? Oh, did you notice? Well, you’re right. The whole reason behind that pact was because the territory belonged to this big, mean dragon. We all signed it when Veldora the Storm Dragon was sealed away three hundred or so years ago—just to make sure nothing we did wound up undoing the seal by accident. You guys became demon lords right around the same time, so I guess it makes sense you weren’t aware of that. And I’m pretty sure the first person to back it was...”

Thus began a long, meandering tale of demon lord politics from centuries ago. Milim clearly enjoyed recalling it, and as he ignored it, Clayman realized she was right all along. Veldora was the real problem, and if he was gone, no demon lord would lodge any complaint about abolishing the pact. Even if one did, it seemed unlikely that three would—the number required for a quorum in these conferences.

*Perhaps, he thought, instantly casting away his original reasoning, it would be easiest to do what Milim says.*

"If that is the case, then I have no objection. We may as well begin selecting our expeditionary force at once for deployment into the forest."

"Whoa, Clayman." Carillon flashed a scowling, aggressive smile. "D'you mean we all work together? Or first come, first served, like what Milim said?"

"Um," Frey said before Clayman could respond, "I was thinking... How about each of us deploys our own forces, and we could have them compete against one another? I could even have my own daughters go in my stead... and besides, isn't this a rather silly thing to quarrel over?"

The somber way she put it indicated the pointlessness of fighting over an expedition that was meant to boost all their forces. It made total sense. The other three froze for a moment. To all of them, working separately seemed much more palatable than working together. A competition meant not having to consider the needs of anyone else.

They gauged each other's faces for a moment, then nodded.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! First come, first served, then! No hard feelings!"

"Very well. But I don't care about some slow, plodding expedition. I won't hinder any of you guys, but I ain't helping, either. We got that?"

"Well, so be it. We don't know who survived the battle, but I suppose we'll find out soon enough. You participate at your own risk, keep in mind."

It was decided. The Forest of Jura would soon be the scene of not one, but four different interventions.

"Let the competition begin, then! But no meddling with one another, all right? That's a promise!"

"Certainly. I will be sure to tell my daughters not to interfere with anyone else."

"Fair enough. I swear by my name as Beast Master that I'll abide by it!"

"Understood, Milim. I, Clayman, will not break this agreement."

"Great! So all the arrangements are made, then. Now let's get that nonaggression pact annulled once and for all," a beaming Milim chirped.

Thus, four demon lords agreed to not have their forces meddle with one another inside the forest. Their four signatures, the keys to annulling the treaty, were quickly sent by hidden courier to the other demon lords. The Forest of Jura was no longer neutral territory. Now it would be the stage for some demon lord wargames.

“Well, off I go!”

Milim tore out of the room the moment their declaration was completed. It came so quickly, her final good-bye was still echoing up high in the chamber by the time she was out of sight.

“Looks like we’re already left behind,” an exasperated Frey observed. “Just as self-centered as always, I see.”

Carillon laughed and shrugged his agreement.

Clayman flashed a wry smile of his own, refraining from any verbal comment at first. Then, a thought occurred to him.

“But if the nonaggression pact is a thing of the past, won’t the Forest of Jura require a new ruler?” he whispered.

“Yeah?” Carillon replied. “You want me to take up the role?”

“I would think that was part of the reason why the treaty was signed in the first place,” Frey countered.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha! Aw, c’mon. Look, if we find out that the survivor’s up to sub-demon lord class, at least, I don’t see why we can’t have him be king. Then we can resurrect our plan to create a puppet demon lord, yeah?”

“True enough,” Clayman said.

“Well, given that we apparently already got someone with eyes on ruling the forest, guess we better get movin’, huh?”

There was not much planning to be made until they explored Jura. The rest of the demons decided to follow Milim’s lead.

With another pleasant laugh, Carillon opened up a Warp Portal, one of the elemental magics, to return home. Frey was soon gone as well.

Clayman, left alone, smiled weakly as he began to formulate a plan for the future.

“Milim, Carillon, and Frey. Let’s see, then...”

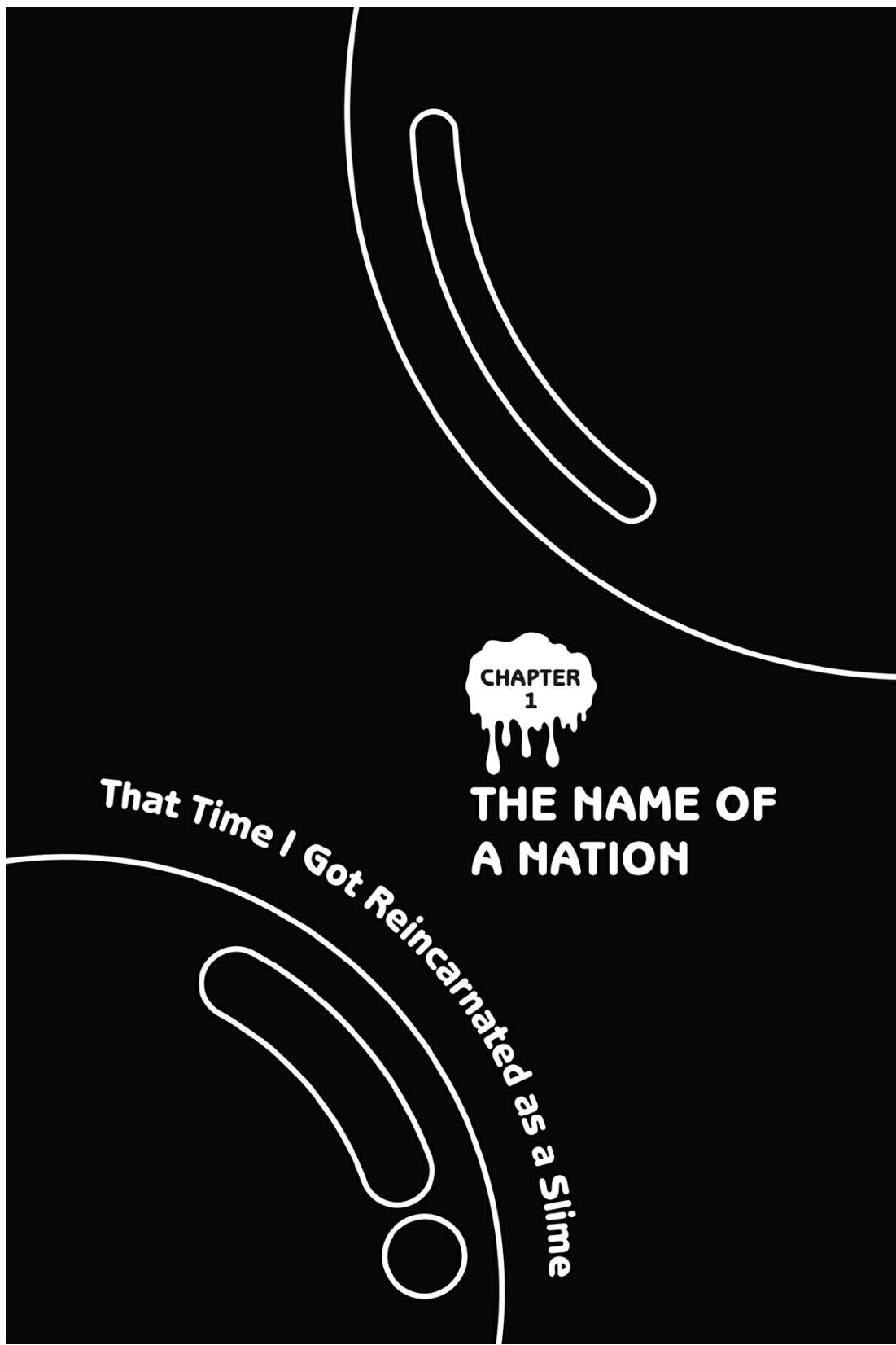
The anticipation was clear on his face as he fantasized to himself, alone.

All too soon, a new threat would be visiting the town Rimuru and his followers called home.

**ROUGH SKETCHES**



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## CHAPTER 1

### THE NAME OF A NATION

Recalling the report from his covert informant, Gazel Dwargo, king of the dwarves, pondered the information. He had asked this spy to observe a certain slime he was concerned about, but the briefing he received seemed far too preposterous to believe.

*The monsters are building a full-scale city.*

The dossier handed to King Gazel began with that sentence. The rest of it only confused him further. He thought it was some kind of joke at first, but his team was not one to play pranks on him. This spy was giving him the clear, unvarnished truth, and so he remained calm and ran his eyes across the rest of the report.

It read as follows:

*Orc hordes have begun to rampage.*

*Number: approximately two hundred thousand.*

*The ogres, a prominent race in the forest, are reportedly eradicated.*

*The lizardmen are galvanizing their military installations to prepare for war.*

*Existence of an orc lord confirmed. Danger level: estimated at A.*

*A major confrontation in the Forest of Jura is unavoidable.*

—Overall danger level: Special A (estimated).

All this was accurate as of their delivery the other day—the results of his covert team's investigations, relayed to the king by magical means. This team, sent to keep an eye on the mysterious slime, had discovered a gathering of monsters constructing a town. As they kept surveilling them, the team discovered other unusual events around the forest. With Gazel's permission, more men were added to the covert team to more effectively perform operations across the forest...and this was the result.

The birth of an orc lord couldn't be ignored. King Gazel immediately declared a state of emergency. Not because of this uber-orc alone—depending on how the battle in the forest worked out, the Dwarven Kingdom could very easily be exposed to hostilities before long. If an army of orcs numbering in the six figures knocked on their door, the very fate of the kingdom would be at risk. The king's spies reported that the orcs were advancing away from the Dwarven Kingdom, but that was little comfort.

So by royal decree, he summoned the Pegasus Knights—a group of stout fighters, armed with the best weapons their artisans could forge, each mounted upon their own winged steed. Together, each knight worked as one with their ride in the skies, making them easily A-ranked opponents. They numbered five hundred in all, and within the Armed Nation of Dwargon, they were praised as the strongest corps of knights.

If worse came to worst, these Pegasus Knights could buy the kingdom time for the general infantry to prepare for battle. It was a last resort, one that pained King Gazel to opt for, but even an Armed Nation required time to fully mobilize itself.

Soon, Dwargon had transitioned into a wartime economy, quietly preparing itself for conflict. The air was tense around the kingdom as King Gazel awaited further reports. When it finally came, it told him this:

*—The war is over, thanks to the intervention of several high-level magic-born.*

*Our surveillance efforts were discovered and interfered with, so details remain unknown.*

*The magic-born are believed to be under the rule of the slime from before—*

*Addendum: In order to carry out our mission fully prepared, we hereby request that our equipment be replaced with the highest level available.*

King Gazel used a nearby candle to burn the sheets.

“What do your spies tell us, Your Majesty?” his knight captain asked as he took a moment to ponder this, eyes closed.

“...We seem to be out of danger. The war has ended.”

“It has?!”

The captain couldn’t hide his surprise, and the Pegasus Knights behind him were already murmuring among themselves.

“—Wait. I am not fully ready to believe this yet.”

The knights fell silent, straightening up at the king’s words.

His covert team reported that one of the magic-born had rooted out their surveillance network. The fact that a team so gifted in the art of camouflage would be discovered was hard to swallow, but they had apparently managed to dodge their pursuers.

However, the spy leader, judging any further approach to be too dangerous, had sent a request for access to all levels of equipment, reflecting the added level of danger to their work.

They were right. Gazel needed more details. Another investigation would be in order once the postwar chaos had settled down.

“I will have further orders later. For now, I want the Pegasus Knights to stand by and remain in a battle-ready state. For the rest of the forces, I will lower the alert level to a state of elevated battle preparedness. We must prepare for every contingency.”

“““Yes, my lord!“““

The news that all was calm in the forest was good, but now was no time to breathe a sigh of relief. Thus, King Gazel decided to accept his covert team’s request and enlist them to conduct a more detailed investigation of the area.

\*

Three months passed.

The leaders of the kingdom were assembled in the king’s receiving room,

waiting for word from him. Whatever he had to say would mark the final conclusion to the past several days' worth of debates and discussions, conducted with barely even a break for sleep.

For the moment, at least, any damage caused by the sudden onrush of monster activity in the forest was surprisingly light. Things were stable around its boundaries, giving no clue that any war had taken place at all. There were a few more monsters around than in the days of Veldora, perhaps, but no more than what would be considered a "busy" year for Jura. Dwargon was expecting at least twice as much damage as this.

The slime, they all believed, was more than tangentially related. As was the massive orc army that dominated, then disappeared. And the presence of high-level magic-born of mysterious origins who were powerful—and observant—enough to realize the kingdom was watching them.

And now, according to reports, this horde of two hundred thousand were dispersing across the forest—peacefully. That, and they had evolved into high orcs—a state of affairs completely beyond King Gazel's comprehension.

This town the slime was building featured a largely hobgoblin population, all born from regular goblins, and Gazel knew the mysterious ball of jelly had to be involved in this sudden rash of evolution.

*I cannot ignore this*, he thought as he reread the report. *Special A is one thing, but this could easily be classified as an S before long—*

In other words, yet another danger that struck at the core of Dwargon. As king, he could not simply sit here and wait for things to happen.

Levels of danger were assigned based on the level of damage that could result from them, as follows:

Special S: Also known as catastrophe level. This could be applied to some demon lords, as well as dragons and their kin, and reflected the kind of threat that no single nation could handle. It would require international cooperation to give the human race even a chance at survival.

S: Also known as disaster level. Normally applied to demon lords. Small nations would have no chance against such a threat, and a larger one would need to expend all its resources

to handle it.

Special A: Also known as calamity level. A threat that could topple a nation's government, caused by the maneuvering of high-level magic-born and demons.

A: Also known as hazard level. A threat that could potentially cause widespread damage to a single town or region.

These were simply general guidelines, of course, but they had been widely adopted as a handy way to quickly reference the strength of a given monster. And Gazel's covert team had already applied a Special A rating to this group.

An orc lord by itself was an easy A—nothing to sniff at, but also nothing a team of Pegasus Knights couldn't feasibly handle. But if a massive crowd of armored, frenzied orcs stampeded into a city, the casualties would be unimaginable. A smaller kingdom would be swallowed whole.

There was no saying if, or when, the potential threat's attention might shift focus to Dwargon. It wasn't a problem that could be solved merely by hoping for good fortune. Along those lines, Special A sounded about right to the king.

But in a way, this wasn't even the issue. The *real* concern was this person, or presence, that stopped such an overwhelming threat. One who had several powerful magic-borns at his beck and call—creatures powerful enough to see through the king's A-level spies and their concealment magic—and enact some mysterious evolution process on all his subjects. The conclusion of the staff assembled in the king's chamber was that the true nature of this presence needed to be uncovered, and quickly.

*If we make an error in handling this, it might spell the end of the kingdom.*  
Thus, he concluded that he needed to gauge matters with his own eyes.

The chamber was shrouded in silence. Everyone inside swallowed nervously, waiting for the king's speech. Gazel looked down upon their impassioned faces for a moment, then solemnly began.

"I feel that I must meet their leader."

The declaration visibly shook the others in the room. But no one spoke up. The king's word was final, and they knew there would be no defying it.

Instead, responses sprang up from four people among them.

“Allow me to join you, then, my lord.”

“—And I, as well. I could hardly allow you to shoulder the burden alone.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Perhaps a little outing once in a while would be nice, yes.”

“In that case...allow the Pegasus Knights to personally guarantee your safety.”

They were, in order: Henrietta, fetching knight assassin and leader of Gazel’s covert team; Vaughn, admiral paladin and the nation’s top military officer; Jaine, arch-wizard and a crafty old woman; and Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights and an officer who reported directly to the king. Together, they led the strongest of Dwargon’s military forces, and it would be the first time that all four would leave the kingdom together since Gazel’s crowning as Heroic King.

“Very well. Then allow me to see this through...personally.”

Upon their king’s words, everyone in the room sprang into action.

Which way would the pendulum swing on this? Gazel wanted to avoid making needless enemies, but if their intentions were evil in his mind, then this was one noxious weed that needed to be plucked out sooner than later. Such were his thoughts—and either way, this potential root of evil could no longer be left unaddressed.

His decision made, the king began to take action.



I have to say, this town was really starting to look nice. A lot nicer than I had thought it’d be.

Thanks to planning the city out from scratch, the buildings had all been arranged in very neat order. Nice to see my efforts didn’t go to waste. Though all I really did was yell at people to do my bidding.

The homes were in such orderly rows, like pieces on a checkerboard, that things could get a bit tricky if you lost your bearings—but that didn’t really matter, I felt.

My main concerns were things like toilets, water supplies, pest prevention, and bath equipment. I know what the standards were like in

Japan, and I had no reason to lower my expectations over here. I knew the levels of civilization I was working with, among all the monster races, and I had every right to ignore their standards. So I planned things out the way I wanted, from the start.

This was about where I pictured things would be, once we had water and sewers worked out—but really, it was even more perfect than I was planning for.

Just look at the toilets, for one. At first, I had a toilet stall carved out of wood—which didn’t work at all, so I had it changed out.

A wooden toilet, unlike the squat toilets you see across Asia, made cleaning a nightmare. Splatter them with waste, and you’re never getting that smell off, trust me. Let the cleaning slide a bit, and they’d start to rot. You *shouldn’t* let the cleaning “slide” in the bathroom, of course, but either way, going with pure wood presented too many longevity issues to be acceptable. Steel or metal were ruled out—we had far too few resources for that, and expending them on such luxuries was bound to be frowned upon.

So I decided to go with a toilet made out of something close to the porcelain I recalled in my memory. Good ol’ Thought Communication helped a lot with this. I was able to use it on anyone I liked, which made getting my point across child’s play. Concepts too difficult to impart with words or pictures could be “imagined” in my mind and transmitted without any discrepancies creeping in.

The rest, I left up to our dwarven artisans. Porcelain did exist in this world, and a number of daily necessities were even made from it, so the seat itself wasn’t hard to make. We just had to select the right kind of soil from the local area, then cook it up to high temperatures with the furnace I prepared. It was a trial-and-error process for them, but once they hit on the right formula, the rest was easy. In a flash, they recreated the exact sort of sit-down toilets I recalled from Earth. Combine that with the wooden seats we had already made, and we were all set.

So with that, every home now had a working toilet and drainage system. It never failed to amaze me how handy these dwarves were. But that was only the first surprise.

For example, running water. I had projected into their minds the image of turning a knob to make water run out of a faucet, but I had all but given up on them managing to implement *that*. They spoke of devices that used highly

refined magical stones to collect water from the atmosphere, but they were both expensive and bulky. Procuring such stones was an avenue that only the filthy rich could afford anyway.

By the way, not even the dwarves had ever seen a flush toilet in action. The idea of using magic stones and other high-end equipment for something like that must've seemed silly to them. Outhouse-style numbers were the norm around Dwargon, and even that was considered the peak of bathroom technology by this world's cultural standards.

Still, the concept of a clean-water transport system was clear enough to them, even when imparted through the eyes of a "foreigner" like me. So they began development on it—without telling me. They never asked for budget approval, so I was caught totally unaware.

Thinking about it, building a new water and sewer system from scratch would've required a ton of cash. We couldn't just snap our fingers and put one in because it seemed useful or whatever. I was expecting a gradual implementation, perhaps over several decades. But my common sense didn't apply to this town. We started with bare land, after all, and I was the leader. I could develop this city any way I wanted to. We had already laid out the design for the water system; pooling the dwarves' knowledge together to install pipes and such was a cinch after that.

But it wasn't flawless. Providing a constant water pressure, like in my world, was a thornier issue. So we took advantage of gravity instead, like the rooftop water towers you see on high-rises. We had no pressurized pumps, so these rooftop tanks would need to be refilled with water manually. This, thankfully, wasn't much of a problem for a monster. If you had a Stomach like mine, or Spatial Storage like some others, then transport was never going to be a problem.

Still, these newfangled structures were restricted only to the buildings we had in the center of town. Your average home-owning monster family would still need to trek over to the well for water. We did have smaller-size tanks positioned by each home's toilet and water-driven facilities, though—fill those up and you were all set. A specialist had to stop by once a week or so to purify the tanks in each home, but by and large, things worked as I pictured them.

I had to hand it to Kaijin and Mildo. I thought they were just a bunch of anvil-hammering blockheads at first. Guess you never know until you ask.

Our water system was going to be a long-term headache, I once thought, but it wound up being addressed in record time.

After that, we needed to get the monsters in the habits of keeping areas around water clean, as well as handwashing and gargling. I had no idea if germs could survive long on monsters; I might have been wasting our time with that. But it was a just-in-case kind of thing.

Kaijin told me that most adventurers either quickly required someone who knew the Clean Wash skill (allowing them to purify items or people near them) or learned it themselves. Hygiene was a top priority among them, to the point that failing at it made embarking on a quest impossible. Long journeys mean running into some filth now and then, I suppose, and around here they tackled that with magic. I can't imagine it had more than a placebo effect, though. Even the goblins were aware of Clean Wash, so I figured it was safe to assume monsters could catch illnesses here.

So there you have it. We had realized my dreams of flush toilets, and as long as your home reserve tank was full, you could turn a knob and get water from the faucet. We were truly a city of culture, as much of an ill match it may've been with the rest of the world.

The next issue to tackle was bugs.

We were in a forest, and there were loads of them. They needed to be addressed, or else all the stinging alone would be incredibly painful. It didn't bother me, but the hobgoblins seemed pretty distressed.

A bigger concern was insects as potential disease carriers. No matter how hygienic we were, it wouldn't matter if some mystery virus was literally flitting around in our midst. Keeping things clean naturally kept insects at bay, but there wasn't much we could do for our winged visitors from the forest.

So we had an issue to address, and my first idea for it was window screens. The homes in this town were Japanese-style wooden affairs made from natural materials, and we needed a way to keep bugs from getting in through the gaps.

We used some processed spider silk to create screens. The result not only kept insects at bay—the silk even provided a bit of an anti-theft system, repelling low-level monsters entirely. An unexpected, but welcome, side

effect.

Word was that human-built towns used a magical barrier or the like to keep insects out—one per town. Building one for each home would be financially unfeasible, and homeowners wouldn’t have the funds to keep them in service anyway. Along those lines, having an anti-home invasion system in every single house in town certainly wasn’t the way of doing things on this world. But hey, I didn’t care.

Finally, we needed to bathe—an integral part of civilization.

For our own house, in the center of town, we had a bath with water piped in from a faraway volcanic hot spring that I could use at any time. Soei and I used Shadow Motion to install the necessary plumbing—Shadow Motion retained the original temperature of whatever it transported, so I was always guaranteed perfectly heated water, fresh from the spring.

I had left the design of the bath itself to the dwarves, and they had come up with a wonderful marble piece. The entire facility could hold ten or so people, and really, it couldn’t have been more luxuriant and comfortable. More than satisfactory work, I figured, for someone like me, working hard as the big boss around here. The bath was divided into male and female sections, allowing one to use it anytime without worrying about other people—another plus. Some of the monsters were apparently ignorant of that, but that’s what they get for not using their brains a little.

So I had the ideal bath at our own headquarters, but that didn’t solve the bigger problem. It’d be easy to install baths in each of our residential homes, but providing warm water to them via pipes was a bridge too far for us. Even if we wanted to branch out the plumbing from the hot spring, the Shadow Motion trickery involved would be too convoluted to be practical. We’d be building more homes going forward, no doubt, and it just wasn’t realistic for Soei and me to be doing home bath installations for them all. (It also went without saying that, deep down, it sounded like a supreme pain in the ass.)

If the act of bathing grew more popular and people began to demand warm water in their own homes, I suppose they could learn Shadow Motion for themselves. Let it be their problem, not mine.

So I had given up on that idea, but I had to admit, it would make winters pretty tough. I had to think of a way to provide *some* kind of hot water.

Part of my motivation for this stemmed from the fuel problems we were facing. The goblins hadn't had much opportunity to harness fire before in their lives. If they used it for anything, it was for roasting meat. Now, with all those high orcs joining our ranks, it was becoming vital.

For now we had an ample enough supply of cast-off wood and such to work with, but it wouldn't last forever. Chopping down trees in the forest and cutting the trunks into firewood would take a massive amount of labor. We just didn't have the time to think about securing a more stable fuel source, and applying any kind of practical plan would require more investigation. In the meantime, though, I couldn't just let people burn whatever they wanted.

Just when I thought it was time to do something, Dold, the middle of the three dwarven brothers, stepped up. He had been devoting himself to crafting dyes and accessories, but once most of the town was equipped well enough, he had some free time on his hands. So I asked him to make some tools using the inscription magic he was adept at.

These were generally known as magitools, and unlike most magic items and their high prices, these were made for general use. These magitools ran on magic stones, which were extracted and processed from the magic crystals taken from the cores of monsters. Magic stones were mostly created by humans, who used spirit engineering to produce them; they also existed in nature—but were quite rare.

A pure enough magic crystal was, according to Dold, much more effective raw material for crafting a magitool than run-of-the-mill magic stones, but any monster who could offer that level of purity would have to be A rank or so.

As he put it, there just weren't many avenues for obtaining magic stones in the first place. Their production required a large-scale workshop, and only one of those had ever been built, at the central Free Guild headquarters. Guild branches would take the magic crystals harvested on rare occasions from monsters and send them to the home office—which, in turn, provided support payments in exchange. That kind of system. Which meant adventurers fought monsters for commercial reasons, too, not just to prevent harm to others.

This was the way the dwarves put it to me, and it sounded pretty darn efficient, really. I tried cutting to the chase.

“So you don't think we could build a workshop like that here?”

“Ooh, no, no, boss, that's just asking too much...”

So much for that. We'd have to purchase magic stones with cold, hard cash, then?

*Understood. It would not be a problem to directly harness the energy from a monster's core. Through the use of certain revisions in carving methods—*

The Great Sage suggested a pretty startling idea out of the blue.

It wasn't a problem? Huh. I was pretty dubious, but I told Dold about it anyway. So just as doubtful himself, he began crafting a tool.

"So just change the carving right here?"

"Yeah. Apparently, that's all."

"Apparently, boss...?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Don't worry. It'll be fine!"

I tried to laugh off Dold's concerns as he created a showerhead and applied a carving to its handle. Grasping it triggered a magic response that would warm the water flowing through it. It'd use magic from the user's body, but no more energy than would be used for other household spells. With just a little magic, anyone could use it, and that went double for monsters.

It was a groundbreaking magitool, and with a little effort, you could also modify it to draw a hot bath whenever you wanted. With the right temperature-adjustment carving on the tub, you'd just fill it with water, apply magic for a bit, and *wham*, it would be heated to a lovely temperature.

Ironically, it was the creator himself who was the most shocked at this.

"Whoa, is this for real? I know I'm not one to speak, but this little method was all you needed? I mean, equipment like this installed in every home? I don't think you'll find another town like that, boss..."

Plainly, though, this invention had stimulated Dold's creativity. He was curious about what else he could research—and along the way, we could create an environment that used a limitless supply of magicules to ensure we never ran out of fuel. Only a monster town could pull that off, and soon, we'd have a litany of magic stone-free magitools at the ready. *I'm sure he'll develop a ton of other useful things for us soon.*

So basically, all of my biggest hang-ups were already taken care of.

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Our homes for everyone had been completed. And that, of course, meant we now had to focus on the residents' own issues.

Compared to before their evolutions, the monsters' reproductive rates had shrunk down to around the same as human families. You could expect five to ten offspring per live birth before, but now it was just one or two. That wasn't a bad thing at all—they were high-level hobgoblins from birth, which proved that these really *were* evolved creatures I had "created." But it meant I had to come up with a formal marriage system before long.

When it came to goblins and orcs, the stronger members of the tribe reportedly had the right to select any partner they wanted. It was a custom meant to ensure their children were as hardy as possible.

The question, though: Should I be allowing polygamy, or what? It seemed practical in the case of (for example) female widowers who lost their husband, but I didn't want the alpha males hoarding all the ladies exclusively for themselves. That would cause all kinds of discontent. The ogre mages told me they could procreate with one another, although they chose not to. But if, say, Benimaru or Soei decided to start a harem, I wasn't sure too many of the females would turn them down.

However, as Benimaru put it:

"You know, Sir Rimuru, you're about the only creature in the world who doesn't have to worry about exhausting their magicules. A monster's magicule count is similar to a human's life force, you could say. Sometimes, giving a name to one of your disciples would sap your magicules to the point that you never recovered. You wouldn't even see a demon lord-class creature tossing out names to everyone, you see? And if we do something like sire children, my lord, that would affect our strength gravely."

This shocked me. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! I've given out, like, a zillion names, man! Don't tell me that *now!*!"

"Y-you didn't know, Sir Rimuru...?!"

I hated it when Benimaru gave me that disgusted look.

Maybe I should thank my lucky stars that my magicules have kept refilling up to now. Going forward, I'll really have to start thinking about who I name and when. I thought it was a given that you recovered your magic force over time. I was sure it was fine, but... *Yeah, let's be more*

*careful.*

Anyway.

Apparently, with monsters, there were two different ways of creating offspring. The normal way, where you simply impregnated the female, and then the “let’s do it for *real* this time” way. With the former, the child would have some of the parents’ abilities, although it’d start out pretty weak. This method consumed very few magicules, so a male could have at it pretty much all he wanted, although the threat of bottoming out his magicule count still loomed with too much activity.

The latter, meanwhile, made the resulting child quite powerful and a bearer of all the parents’ skills—but doing it “for real” could even affect the father’s life span.

To quote Benimaru: “I’m fine with being single. Evolving added more than a few years to my life. I don’t care about leaving any descendants anyway.”

“More than a few” didn’t begin to describe it. A run-of-the-mill ogre had a life expectancy of around a hundred years; for an ogre mage, it was over a thousand. No kidding, you didn’t need kids. I could see why Benimaru was so disinterested.

With ogre mages like Benimaru, at least, I wouldn’t have to worry much about population control. But what about the stronger of the hobgoblins? I decided to ask them, and while they weren’t quite as adamant about it, they largely shared the ogre mages’ views on parenthood. Monsters didn’t work like humans—produce a child, and it’d rob you blind of your magicules. Sometimes, beyond what you could recover.

So basically, nobody was stupid enough to just go mating willy-nilly. Childbirth didn’t affect the regular goblins as much—they had to produce a *lot* of offspring if they wanted the tribe to survive another generation—but for hobgoblins, it took up a huge amount of magic.

As they rather bluntly put it, the moment you consummated the act, you knew right then and there whether the impregnation “worked” or not. Kind of graphic, but it was the truth. If a healthy pregnancy resulted, it would cost the father around half of their maximum store of magic. This would fill back up over time, but not if you kept at it repeatedly—that might permanently dent

your magicule capacity.

Thus, I suppose, even if you had a bevy of girls to choose from, you couldn't just go and sire a huge herd of children. Realistically, a man would take multiple wives just so he could protect them, not to build a family.

This didn't apply to the females, by the way. In fact, the way they put it, they were capable of willfully refusing impregnation, unless the sheer strength of the seed overpowered their bodies.

Therefore, if an undesirable partner violated ethical boundaries to commit the act, a child still wouldn't result. Only those whom the women deemed worthy had the right to become fathers—and this was also true for other high-level monsters and magic-born.

You could say, surprisingly enough, that monsters mated strictly out of love a lot more than you'd think.

Sub-race demi-humans who crossbred with the human race didn't quite have this level of influence over the outcome; they were hardly different from humans that way. I suppose, if you asked me which way was better, I'd have trouble providing a comment on that.

So I decided to make a rule:

“With regards to leaving behind descendants, polygamy is allowed strictly with widowed females seeking children.”

Widowers who *didn't* want offspring could receive subsidized care from the nation, I figured. If this caused problems, I could always change it later. Like, maybe have a kind of ceremony at the start of each month where residents could confess their love to one another, and then we'd give out homes to the couples it created. That'd be a nice tradition to start. Single men or women could live in the dorms, although those with higher posts could have the right to a freestanding house, too.

These were the kinds of things I thought about as I watched a few intimate monster couples pass me by. *I can always fine-tune things later*, I thought. *Gotta make sure everyone stays happy.*

With our homes in place, my initial goals were all but complete. We had food, shelter, and clothing.

Shelter, I just got done explaining. For clothing, meanwhile, the goblinas apprenticing under Garm and Shuna were cranking out new clothes like no one's business. Our recent upswell in population, meanwhile, made food a bit chaotic. All the new high orcs made procuring provisions for everyone rather difficult.

Fortunately, during his outer patrols, Rigur—the captain of our security force—had bagged a fairly massive amount of prey for us. He had beefed up the number of units under his control, and by now, he had roughly a thousand hunters procuring supplies in every direction. Growing vegetables and such, meanwhile, was Lilina's jurisdiction, and it was going well. Shuna was also evaluating the wild grasses and such that Rigur's teams brought in and making seedlings from them, producing even more edible goods.

The next job for our construction crews, meanwhile, was developing the area at the outer limits of town. Our fields grew at a dizzying rate, doing wonders to improve our food situation. Barring disaster, we no longer had to worry very much about famine.

We now looked, by and large, like a real town.

\*

There's one other person I ought to mention. Gabil.

About a month ago, that fool traipsed into town like he didn't have a care in the world, eating our food like it belonged to him.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, you see, Sir Rimuru, I, Gabil, hurried over at once because I wanted to serve you!”

“*What are you doing here?*” I implored at his shameless attempt at sycophancy.

“Shall I kill him?” Shion asked, face serious enough to even give me pause. She absolutely, completely meant it. You joked around with her at your own peril. *Even a slight nod from me right now, and she might really slice up that dude.*

Gabil, perhaps sensing this, turned pale and promptly prostrated himself before me. “I've had hardly a decent meal for weeks, and I let my arrogance corrupt my head. Please, have pity upon me! We would do anything to become your loyal servants, Sir Rimuru. I promise we will be of great assistance to you, so *please!!*”

On cue, the hundred-odd fighters he had with him kneeled before me. That was enough to make Shion resheathe her longsword, a satisfied look on her face. Now, at least, we could get to talking.

It would seem that Gabil's father disinherited him, leaving him with nowhere to go. It was such a pathetic tale that I agreed to his request. Besides, given the way he freely ate our food, without looking out of place at all among the hobgoblins, I figured he had a talent that I shouldn't make light of.

We currently had no defensive wall in place, since it'd only hinder our construction efforts. It must've been easy for them to breach our boundaries, but I could only guess that he convinced our patrols that he was one of my men.

“This was your plan from the start, wasn’t it?!”

“Well, I hardly had anyone else I could call upon...and besides, I had not the least intention of serving any master besides you, Sir Rimuru...,” Gabil breezily replied.

“It may not seem so, but he does regret his actions. Please, if you could grant him the chance to atone for himself...,” added another member of Gabil's entourage.

Looking more closely, I realized that it was the captain of the lizardmen's royal guard—the team that guarded Abil, their chief. Abil's daughter and Gabil's younger sister, if I recalled correctly. I was pretty sure she was acting as an adviser to Abil when I christened him.

“Oh? Why are you here, too, Captain? I thought you'd be involved with building whatever new system of government Abil was working on.”

“Indeed. Unlike my brother, I have not been banished from our people. I come here by my own free will.”

The name I had given Abil, she explained, had the effect of extending his life quite a bit. For lizardmen, the average was fifty to seventy years—for dragonewts, two hundred or so. And even that figure was just from the reference books; nobody was sure exactly how long he may live.

Just like with Rigurd and the rest, I had basically turned back the clock for him. Any squabbling over his successor would thus have to wait at least a few decades. So he agreed to have his daughter travel the land, perhaps to

teach her more about the world she lived in.

“My father wishes you well,” the captain closed by saying.

“What?” Gabil shouted. “I thought you had joined me out of care for my well-being!”

“I do respect you, my brother,” she countered, “more or less. But if anything, I am more enthralled by Sir Soei. If possible, I would love the chance to serve him directly.”

“Whaaa?!”

“Is this a problem?”

They really must have been related. The guard captain was just as odd as Gabil was.

Most of Gabil’s own retainer was more obviously loyal to their lord. But some of the royal guard were among them—no doubt at their captain’s request. *Huh. Well, if they wanna help out Soei, let ’em, I suppose.*

“If that’s what you want, I could talk things over with him. But he’s more of a covert agent, you know. Do you think you’d be of help?”

“Oh, certainly! Unlike this spoiled brat, I’ve got spirit for miles!”

“Wha?! I have sat here and put up with your carrying-on for too long! You will not berate me, you little girl!”

Not the best relationship, then. Or is it one of those deals where they fight because they love? The guard captain must’ve resented how she was also captured when Gabil hatched his coup.

She should’ve just left him alone. It was no story I wanted to get involved with, so I didn’t.

According to the story I heard later, though, there was another reason for this. It seems Abil, out of concern for Gabil, asked her to monitor the guy for him—hence why it was better for their group to travel undercover. Depending on his actions, the lizardman chief was apparently ready to welcome him back in.

That was all kept secret from Gabil, though. He’d let it go to his head the moment someone told him. Best to let him feel sorry for a while longer.

\*

So we now had a small lizardman team on our side.

And hey, if they’re going to be working with me, they’ll probably need

some names. (Benimaru hadn't warned me off reckless naming at this time, so I was still pretty unrestrained about it. A little knowledge—or lack thereof—can be a dangerous thing.)

I started with the guard captain. "Well," I said, "if you're gonna be serving Soei, maybe Soka would work?"

She had four guards with her, two female and two male. For them, I went with Toka, Saika, Nanso, and Hokuso. Each received one cardinal direction in their names—east, west, south, north, in that order. To this I added "ka," or flower, to the female names and "so," or spear, to the males.

No particular meaning to it. Just seemed nice.

The moment I was done, the evolution began. Gabil looked on, clearly jealous, but he had a name and I saw no reason to add another.

"Quit acting so envious," I said as I rolled by him. "'Gabil' is a fine enough name, wouldn't you agree?"

But before I was wholly past him, I could suddenly feel my energy draining. *Oh, crap, did I just do what I think I did?* I turned around. Now Gabil was looking right at me, eyes sparkling. His body was already starting to glow—wait. Is this...evolution?

Thus I managed to inadvertently name Gabil...Gabil.

I had no idea that you could, um, overwrite them like that. Maybe the fact his original christener was dead meant the wavelengths were aligned with me instead, or something. I couldn't know why, but either way, I named him. I was hoping to make him dwell on his crimes a bit longer, but what's done is done.

Maybe I could have him follow in Gobta's footsteps and show him hell at the hands of Hakuro. Otherwise, this new evolution would just make him more self-absorbed and prickish than before.

*He'll definitely need to be assigned a job later,* I thought as I drifted away into my now-familiar sleep mode.

The next day, I set out to naming the other hundred lizardmen. I had spent my immobilized time thinking up names, mostly random bits of alphabet strung together. As high-level a monster as the lizardmen were, I had to take a break after around twenty of them. The while process thus took five days.

Now they were all dragonewts.

A dragonewt was classified as a sort of demi-human with dragon's blood. Surprisingly, you could far more easily tell the males and females apart. The males didn't look much different from lizardmen, save for the dragon-like wings, the horns, and the firmer scales. The biggest difference was the color of those scales—changing from a greenish-black to a purplish one.

The females, meanwhile, looked practically human. Rather pretty, even. They did have those dragon horns and wings, though, and with the dragonewts' Scalify skill, they could transform their skin into leathery scales at any time—or for that matter, look even closer to a full-blooded human.

It was a bit like my Universal Shapeshift in practice, but it's too bad they couldn't look 100 percent like human beings. Maybe with practice, though? I suppose the males had less interest in looking human than the females, but that skill must be invaluable when conducting undercover operations in human kingdoms.

The transformation also affected their strength, not just their appearance. Their already-honed bodies would be covered in solid, protective dragon scale, which automatically projected a Multilayer Barrier that protected them from melee and magical attack.

Dragonewts also had Resist Magic, something I discovered when the Receive part of my Glutton skill granted it to me. It made me regret expending all that effort to "Provide" them with Multilayer Barrier, but all the same, I felt like I got something out of the deal.

I probably gave them a few more skills as well, but we'll find out what they were later. It kind of annoyed me that I couldn't control that unless I deliberately restricted a skill from Glutton access.

Which was fine and all, but I was starting to wonder what kind of defensive skills Gabil enjoyed. *Time for an experiment.* Transforming into human form, I mercilessly fired off a ball of magic at him—a skill I had just learned.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" he asked, a bit shocked as he was blown several yards away.

"You dumbass!" I spat at him, making him stare blankly at me. "I'm making you pay for stabbing your dad in the back. And remember, I'm not giving you a second chance!"

It was my warning for him not to screw around with me, but it was needed, I thought, to make it clear that I would not tolerate any further

betrayal. Just a little add-on to the experiment, but I didn't tell him about that. Gabil seemed to accept it well enough. He was a dumbass, definitely, but I couldn't hate him for it. He'd give Gobta a run for his money.

The ball of magic, by the way, didn't seem to affect him at all. I just fired it all casual-like, so I figured it was about five times the force of me punching him with all my might, but... *Well, maybe he's too stupid to feel pain, or he's managed to inherit my Cancel Pain skill.* Dinosaurs were pretty dull to pain, too, I read somewhere, and maybe that applied to this species, as well.

Either way, I had made myself clear with him, and I think Gabil was okay with it.

So really, Gabil had gotten a fair bit stronger—from a C-plus lizardman to a straight-on B-ranked dragonewt. He still retained his previous skills as a warrior, but they were all much more powerful now, without a doubt.

But these were no ordinary lizardmen, it turned out. Soka was now an A-minus, the rest of her team B-plus rank. And Gabil had broken through the wall and reached A level. Now he would've been able to take on Gel mud and had a shot at whipping him.

With the right training, they might grow even stronger, albeit not up to the ogre mages' level. I figured I'd ask Hakuro to devote particular attention to Gabil's practice sessions.

I introduced the royal guard to Soei and left them in his hands. Under his tutelage, they could all be talented ninjas before long. He was never one to show mercy, after all.

\*

As I expected, Soka and her team immediately pushed themselves toward Soei.

"I can use them as I like?" Soei confirmed with me as he watched them like a deer caught in the headlights. His voice was cold, enough to make me even more scared. But the royal guards didn't mind one bit, smitten with Soei as they were, waiting expectantly for me to give the word.

"Sure," I answered, "go ahead. Train 'em however you want, Soei."

"As you wish, Sir Rimuru," he replied, formally agreeing to the request.

A smile instantly erupted on Soka's face. I couldn't really understand why, but if they were all happy about it, I didn't mind.

Now I had to deal with Gabil and his army.

Soei seemed to have ample control over Soka and the royal guard, but Gabil's crew was entirely my problem. They were my forces now, so I had to give them something to do—but before that, getting them situated was the first thing.

Food wasn't the problem, but clothing and shelter were.

The only armor they had was half-broken scale mail. They were equipped with spears, but the tips were nicked and scratched, making them almost useless. I asked Kaijin, our de facto minister of production, to prepare some new gear for them as soon as possible.

Considering their natural habitat, someplace near water would be nice for them to live in...but all we had was the river that flowed nearby, and I didn't feel like banging together a new riverside hamlet just for the sake of a hundred people. Then, as if a light bulb went off in my head, I recalled the underground lake. The place where Veldora was ensconced, which I had used as an experimental proving ground for my skills. *That would be big enough*, I thought. Not too many people could make it past the sealed door at the entrance, and as a place to sleep, it would be perfect for Gabil and crew. The lack of light could be an issue, but I could teach them Magic Sense and they could work out the rest.



<https://mp4directs.com>

When I first encountered the lake, it was so densely packed with magicules that fish couldn't even survive in it. That had thinned out quite a bit since. Maybe enough that a B-ranked monster could just barely withstand it? I was hoping we could use that magic to cultivate some more hipokute herbs, which would be the perfect job for the dragonewts. Shelter and a work assignment, just like that—two birds with one stone.

My final worry was whether they'd be strong enough to venture in and out of the cave. Gabil was in A-ranked territory—nothing could stop him in there—but the B-grade dragonewt warriors would still run into several monsters they'd have trouble with. The evil centipedes, at B-plus rank, were a powerhouse.

If I tossed them in there and they wound up being prey for the monsters, I'd sure have a guilty conscience about that.

*Understood. In terms of simple rankings, the evil centipede would outclass them, but if five or more dragonewt fighters worked together, victory would be easily attainable. That was calculated using their current weapon set, so once they have more decent gear on hand, that will boost their chances at victory. With healing potion on hand, the odds of anyone dying would be extremely low.*

The Sage chimed in with the perfect advice. Dragonewts had wings and flight-based abilities. Evil centipedes were strong, yes, but apparently weak against aerial attack. The centipede's breath would need to be watched out for, but with Multilayer Barrier, no one would be critically hurt.

So trusting in their skills, I formally gave the contract to Gabil's force.

“Gabil, I want your people to cultivate hipokute herbs in the cave for me.”

“Leave it to us, sir!” His eyes clouded up as his heart soared with emotion. “I, Gabil, will work my fingers to the bone for you!”

*Perfect. I'll do that. He sounds motivated enough.*

With them living in the cave, they could serve as guards, too. I wouldn't have to be so wary of the cave all the time, like I did now. I also made sure to forbid them from working in the cave unless they were in groups of five or more. It'd be a boon for their training, too.

Finally, I gave each one a generous supply of healing potion, in part to

provide motivation for their task. They all had permission to use it whenever the need arose. Even if they were caught unawares and faced critical injury, this should save them from danger.

\*

Gabil and his crew seemed to get the hang of things after a month or so, able to freely navigate the cave without any personal danger. With Garm's and Kurobe's new weapons and armor, their strength was more polished than ever.

I went down there just to check on them, but things seemed to be going great. Their eyes did nothing for them in the dark, but with Magic Sense and Sense Heat Source safely taught to them all, there were no issues. They had formed teams of five, with three teams working in tandem at all times and staying in touch with Thought Communication. Whenever trouble came along, they could respond quickly.

When it came to leadership skill, at least, Gabil was a born genius. They grew used to life in the caves far more quickly than I had thought—and living in an environment where battle was a near constant seemed to be growing their experience and strength. It sounded like with five of them at once, they could stop an evil centipede without having to rely on potions at all.

They couldn't be more reliable.

It might be fun to have them engage in a mock battle with the goblin riders. A starwolf was ranked B alone, but with a seasoned hobgoblin on its back, you could add a plus sign to that. They were a seasoned unit at this point, so the goblin riders might even be above them...but with the advantage of flight, I thought the dragonewts could put up a surprisingly tense fight.

That was the sort of thing that occurred to me as I observed the dragonewts' growth.

Now Gabil's team was devoting itself to cultivating hipokute. About ten, relieved from cave-patrol duty, were observing the herbs' development and changing their horticultural approach in different regions to see which one produced the highest quality.

The plan was to go with whatever proved to work best; then I could make

recovery potion with it, sell it off, and earn some much-needed foreign currency. It was one way I figured I could earn some coin before I set off to observe human society.

I called for Gabil.

“Right, how’s it going?”

“Heh-heh-heh... I am *so* glad you asked! It couldn’t be better! Behold, the fruits of our labor!”

He handed me a few weeds. Yes, weeds. I gave him a look, then a taste of Dark Thunder. Oh, don’t worry, he wouldn’t die. I can adjust its intensity perfectly fine now.

“Gahh! What was that for, sir? What did I do?!?”

“You dumbass! These are just weeds! What are you growing down there anyway?!?”

“Wh-whaa—?! A thousand pardons! I, Gabil, have perhaps been hurrying ourselves along too much.”

“You don’t get this just by ‘hurrying’ a little... Ugh. Could you be more careful? With that dense lake of magicules, managing to grow weeds around it is a feat in and of itself.”

Our exchanges grew tense at times, but really, it was largely going as planned. Hipokute was a rare plant, and the dragonewts were, indeed, making steady progress. The hardest part, in a way, was teaching Gabil the difference between the herbs and plain old weeds—but it couldn’t have been easy, relying entirely on touch instead of sight for the job. I had my analysis skills to work with, but Gabil and his team had nothing as convenient as that.

Only experience would make up the difference, and trying to hurry that along was pointless. *It’d be nice if there was some light down there...but we can tackle that issue later.*

Gabil, for his part, acted like the de facto master of the caves these days, walking around like he owned the place. The mere sight of him made the monsters flee, and some of Gabil’s personal entourage could even whip an evil centipede singlehandedly. Part of the cave was *their* territory now.

I was impressed, but I definitely didn’t offer him any praise. It’d go right to his head, and then he’d screw something up. Kind of like me, in a way. Takes one to know one. That’s why I trusted him to step up and perform the work I assigned him.

We were still busy with cultivation for the moment, but once that got on

track, we'd have to think about mixing next. I could produce oceans of potion with my skills, but I didn't want to. I wanted a system that could manufacture this stuff without me.

I wanted to avoid creating a town that was incapable of anything if I wasn't around.

*You can make all the mistakes you want, so give me at least one solid success...*

Thinking to myself, I left the cave.

\*

The dragonewts were well situated now, and Gabil and the rest were fully used to life with their fellow townspeople.

A long series of peaceful days followed. *Ah, nothing like peace*, I blithely thought as Shion carried me around, her breasts bouncing against me in a steady rhythm as she walked.

*Boing, boing, boing, boing. Ooh, this feels great...*

I was just letting myself descend to ever-lazier thoughts when—

*Sir Rimuru, we have an emergency. Several hundred winged horses are headed for the direction of town.*

Soei sent me a cold, to-the-point message via Thought Communication.

“Shion, it’s an emergency. I’ll call for Benimaru and Hakuro, so get Rigurd to alert the townspeople for me!”

“Right.”

She lowered me down, then briskly ran off.

Thought Communication wasn’t enough to broadcast a message to an entire city. We needed to ring a special alarm bell to make everyone gather at the public square. I ran down the situation with the ogre mages, then turned my attention to the sky, turning my Magic Sense all the way up.

It let me detect something coming from the Dwarven Kingdom. A force of around a thousand. None ranked an A alone—or I should say, an A as a rider and mount alone—Wait, they had knights on flying horses?! It had to be a well-trained force, whoever they are.

*Understood. Using Analyze and Assess, I have determined the*

*knights' rank to be A-minus. Their flying mounts are also appraised at A-minus. However, their minds are synchronized to the point where one could treat each one as a single creature, ranked perhaps slightly higher than A.*

*Right. So we're talking five hundred mounted, flying knights—A-ranked cavalry, as the Great Sage put it.* Even with all our forces pooled together, we couldn't hack this one.

Gauging each mounted knight by itself, they seemed weaker than Gabil when he had just attained A rank. Let three of them surround that dragonewt, though, and I doubted he stood a chance. In a way, this was an even greater threat than two hundred thousand orcs at our doorstep.

Shion came back with Shuna, with Benimaru and Hakuro arriving simultaneously. Soei had somehow appeared behind me, too.

Geld was busy calling for the high orcs, currently handling construction and resource-gathering work in the forest. He was running all over, trying to get his battle equipment organized, but I doubted any of it would be in time. A force of C-plus high orcs would just get razed to the ground.

“Your orders, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru asked. I couldn’t give him a clear answer.

“My orders? Well... We don’t know who they are or what they want. It’d be a losing battle if we fought them, and I’d like to avoid that, but...”

*Understood. The advancing force's destination is this area, beyond a doubt. They are traveling in a straight line toward here.*

I didn’t need the Sage’s commentary to know that lying low and hoping it’d all blow over wouldn’t work too well.

“This is no problem! All we have to do is rout them all!” Shion optimistically shouted, blowing my pessimistic thoughts away.

I wanted to call her stupid, but I doubt she’d understand why. She and I had two different definitions of victory. If we could expend all the sacrifices we wanted to smash this team of five hundred, that would make things simple. If you asked me whether that was possible or not, then, sure it was.

But if you want to avoid civilian casualties, I had to conclude that was impossible.

Based on the Sage's calculations, the greatest chance of survival came if all of us immediately fled in another direction. That provided a survival rate, apparently, of around 90 percent. Staging a frontal counterattack would kill off half of us, and as the Sage put it, only luck would decide whether even I or the magic-born would make it through. And that assumed we fought with everything we had. *Routing* them, the way Shion wanted us to do, was not a word I wanted to bandy around.

Either way, we'd lose people. To me, the moment hostilities began, we would've already lost. Damage to the town, I didn't mind, but I couldn't abide the thought of personal injuries. That's why I wanted to avoid battle, if nothing else.

"Well, what happens, happens. If this turns into a fight, our first priority is evacuating our residents. We'll buy the time to make that happen."

"You got it. And indeed, this could be an easy win once we're in the thick of it!"

"I'll handle the magical support!"

"Heh-heh-heh... My longsword is seeking blood."

"—I am only here to serve you, Rimuru."

Good to see the usual gang was in on it, then. I assigned Hakuro and Kurobe to stay on point if we had to evacuate. Now that Rigurd was here, I also explained matters to him, ordering him to regroup with Geld's team outside of town if we failed to talk things out with our foes.

"Wait a second," I heard someone mutter in the group. Turning toward the voice, I saw Kaijin lost in thought.

"What is it, Kaijin?"

"Well, if these are flying knights, I've heard rumors about a top-secret force under the direct control of the dwarven king. Just rumors, but..."

"Huh? I thought the Dwarven Kingdom's military was all about heavy infantry and high-powered magic corps. And you're an ex-military officer—what kind of top-secret force wouldn't *you* know about?"

"Yeah, well... The rumors came from a bunch of retired old generals. I mean, yeah, we were officers, but we were still young. I couldn't really boss around people who had several centuries' more experience than I did...," Kaijin explained, grimacing.

So just like I expected, the long-lived, hard-drinking dwarves at the top of the military ladder still had a pretty heavy impact on the force. The rumors no doubt began their spread from them, at any number of taverns. A good wine can loosen anyone's lips.

According to Kaijin, this top-secret personal army of the king's, independent of the seven official armies, was known as the Pegasus Knights.

"The winged horses they fly are normally C-ranked magical beasts. Dwargon's been breeding them for their flight skills. You won't find too many A-minus ones in nature. I guess the rumors were true, huh...?"

What Kaijin said seemed to make sense. Whatever could upgrade those creatures so dramatically must have been kept under tight secrecy. Even an ex-officer would've only heard half-told rumors.

So was *this* was what we had to deal with...?

"Kaijin, if what you say is true, do you think there's a chance the dwarf king himself is among them?"

"Per...haps? King Gazel almost never leaves the royal palace these days, but he was lauded as a hero in his glory years. If he thought it necessary, it wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility for him to personally lead a force like this."

"Can you think of any reason why he would?"

"Well... Maybe because of the orc lord? But that's all settled now."

*Hmm? The orc lord...?*

"Hey, Rigurd, can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"I told Kabal and his party to spread some rumors around their fellow adventurers, but did we ever tell them that it's over?"

"Ah...?"

"Oh, man, I forgot... Better send a message to 'em."

"I apologize for this oversight, Sir Rimuru..."

It wasn't just Rigurd's fault. I forgot, too, so we were even, pretty much. I could get the message across through Soei in a flash, so I didn't see it as a fatal mistake. And while I wanted Soei to take care of that ASAP, I had to deal with our new visitors first.

"Do you think the dwarven king heard about this and came to help?"

Kaijin was awfully optimistic, but it didn't seem that way to me. But there was no point speculating on what we didn't know anyway, so I closed the

subject. All we could do was wait for these uninvited guests, debating with one another about what to do should the worst happen.

\*

A herd of winged horses was flying above town. They took sidelong glances at us as we watched them, looping around the city airspace a few times before landing in an open field just beyond its borders. We had some open space in town, too—the areas where we planned to build most of our central facilities, for one—but I suppose they didn’t immediately touch down in the city out of politeness. That’d be pretty much a declaration of war, wouldn’t it, if a nation did that to another? International law probably didn’t apply to monsters, though, and I wasn’t even sure such a thing existed in this world in the first place...

No point thinking about it.

More pertinently, we now had confirmation that the dwarven king was leading the pack. That was a tad more important, as was the reassurance that he didn’t want to attack us on first sight. He would have without hesitation if he saw us as foes.

*Maybe Kaijin was right? Are these just reinforcements or something? Not if this is supposed to be an undercover force, though—and not if the king himself is on the field.*

Leaving the evacuation efforts to Hakuro, Kurobe, and Gobta, I headed out of town to greet them. Accompanying me was Rigurd, who insisted that negotiations with the outside world were in his jurisdiction. Assuming we had any room to negotiate...

Obviously, Kaijin and the three dwarves were with me, too.

The knights were lined up in neat rows in the field beyond the city. In front was one whose force of presence dominated over all of them. He was flanked by four bodyguards, each obviously several times stronger than the rest of the force.

Counting King Gazel himself, that meant five incredibly powerful dwarves were before us. I couldn’t know exactly what kind of threat they were, but well into A territory, at least. Considering the aura of danger I felt

when I was last placed in front of him—and considering that aura was still there now—his powers had to be on another dimension. If I had to guess, his four compatriots dated from his days on the road as Heroic King. No wonder their kingdom was so strong. If you ever bumped into these guys on the road, running was your best bet at survival, for sure.

*We really have to avoid combat now. Otherwise, it'll get ugly.*

“Well, well, Your Majesty. It has been a long time—and quite an impressive showing, as well! May I ask what brings you here today?” Kaijin stepped forward and took a knee before Gazel.

*Come to think of it, I've never directly conversed with Gazel before.* I wasn't allowed to back in his kingdom, in keeping with dwarf tradition. Instead, unable to defend myself, we were made into criminals (Kaijin *did* punch out the nobleman Vester, but still) and almost made into forced laborers. Their king was a fair and upright enough ruler that we managed to avoid that, so I imagined he wouldn't spring war upon us without a fair explanation—but if he did, I was prepared to give him a piece of my mind.

“A pleasure to see you again, Kaijin...and you as well, slime. Do you remember me?”

The king was surprisingly casual with us as I sized up his approach.

*Are we doing away with the obnoxious formalities?* I blithely wondered as I felt something dark and ominous from behind.

In a flash, Benimaru's smile vanished and he had a steady hand on his sword, apparently not a fan of the king calling me just “slime.”

Soei, on the other hand, kept it supremely cool—the faint smile on his face told us all how he felt. He was *pissed*. He normally had no expression at all, but get him mad, and he'd smile back at you. A dangerous man to trifle with, and it was pretty funny how the only way to make Soei smile was to basically bait him into killing you.

Benimaru might've had a short temper, but by ogre mage standards, he was showing remarkable restraint.

Meanwhile, the aura I felt from Shuna and Shion was nothing to sniff at, either. They were showing the opposite of restraint, actively exuding danger with every fiber of their being.

This was *ugly*. They still respected my orders enough to stick to them, I supposed, but if anything else happened, they'd be liable to blow their top at any moment. I needed to get this squared away before they went beyond my

control.

As I fretted over this, I realized that Kaijin, himself, was deeply disturbed by the king's greeting. "M-my liege?!" he stammered, eyes ready to pop out of their sockets.

Apparently this wasn't the Gazel that Kaijin knew—but to me, this was a good sign. It meant the lord of a kingdom had taken the time to come here himself, do away with all the procedural BS, and get down to brass tacks with me. The fact he didn't immediately sic his knights on us was, in itself, a victory. Regardless of how much it rankled the ogres, I had to take advantage of this chance.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" the king boomed. "I see your head is unbending as always, Kaijin. Can you not see? I have come here strictly as a private citizen. At least, on paper. Otherwise, I hardly would be allowed out of my own bedchamber."

Kaijin, still flustered, exchanged looks with his king and me. Realizing that nobody on the scene had any further comment, he took that to mean Gazel was telling the truth. It was hard for him to swallow. He froze.

So. The dwarven king wasn't paying us a state visit but just doing a little private tourism? So what were all those ominous-looking knights behind him for? Hmm. Thinking about it, they'd never allow a king to just walk around in the forest alone. They had to be guards sent with him to appease the elders and bureaucrats who formed the core of dwarven government.

*Well, if we're doing away with procedure, I don't see any reason not to address him directly.* Trusting in my hunch that Gazel meant no conflict, I decided to take a bullish approach.

"Which means, sir, that I'm free to speak as I wish?"

"By all means. This is no place to allow ourselves to be bound by formal ceremony."

"Right. Well, lemme introduce myself first. My name is Rimuru. You're right that I'm a slime, but I'd prefer if you didn't call me that. I mean, I'm kind of the leader of the Great Forest of Jura Alliance, so you could say things have changed a bit since last time." I took this moment to turn into my human shape. "This isn't exactly who I *really* am, but it's probably easier for you to talk to."

I grinned, waiting for his reaction.

"It... It transformed?!"

“A magic-born...and such a high-level one.”

“Hmm. I sense magical force but no casting of magic itself. A skill-based status transformation, I would say. I sense no sudden burst of magicules, so it is likely as it said—simply a change of appearance, not of nature. But this could change its method of battle. At the least, being able to wield equipment like our own could boost its own offensive and defensive powers.”

“Sounds like trouble... I haven’t seen a rare variant like this in quite a while. And the monsters behind it are rather strange in themselves!”

“Hmm,” said an old woman among them. “Those, I can identify. They are ogre mages—a race just as rare as orc lords.”

“They are? That’s the evolved form of an ogre, is it not? Should we not dispatch them before they grow too strong to handle?”

“—You think it’d go that smoothly? Four of them bear horns. We would have to prepare for a bitter fight.”

“I hate to sound timid, but yes... Best not underestimate them.”

The king looked on silently, but his personal companions seemed fairly unnerved. They even guessed what Benimaru and his kin were. That old crone must’ve used some kind of magic to prod us for data. I didn’t like being evaluated like that, but it was largely out of my hands. I needed to show off a little strength, or else they’d stomp all over me. Even if we survived, I sure as hell didn’t want to be subservient to these guys.

“Silence!” the king suddenly bellowed, never taking his eyes off me. “Enough of this racket. This slime and I are speaking right now. Excuse me—Rimuru, I mean. I will evaluate him for myself, and I would appreciate it if all of you held your tongues in the meantime.”

It was a pure show of force, and it stunned them all into silence.

“Yeah, uh, sorry if I scared you all. I just transformed because I thought this’d be more natural for you. Just like that lady said, this is the work of my skill, Universal Shapeshift. A form of mimicry, is all. So you don’t have to freak out about it.”

“I will be the judge of that. I would hardly believe the words of someone unless I was reasonably sure they were a friend...or foe.”

*True enough. Friend or foe, though, huh? That might be why King Gazel’s here, then—to figure out exactly who the heck we are. If I had to guess, he knew about the orc lord’s defeat, and that compelled him to move. As long as I could gain his trust, there was no need to be hostile.*

“Well,” I ventured, “you can doubt me all you want, but we can’t really sustain a conversation that way, can we?”

“No need to worry. Words are not what I need to judge your character. Instead, I will use my sword to divine your true nature. If you insist on such ribald boasting, calling yourself the ‘leader’ of this forest, it may be about time to show you your place. If that sword of yours isn’t mere decoration, I ask you to accept my request.”

With that, he handed the halberd he carried in his hands to an attending knight on his side. My katana-style sword must have set off his battle lust or something.

“Y-Your Majesty, surely...”

“Ha! What faster way to settle this than with a man-to-man duel?” The king laughed, ferocious.

Judging by the shocked looks on the knights and Gazel’s companions, their monarch was seriously looking for a fight. I had no reason to turn him down. We were still evacuating the town, so it’d be a helpful way to buy some time.

“I accept the request. And I’ll make you regret calling me a boaster,” I said, looking King Gazel in the eye.

We both took a step forward, the ogre mages keenly looking on. I’m sure they didn’t think I could lose. The king’s side seemed intent on letting him fight as well; nobody dared to dissuade him from the idea. The crowd had already formed a ring, with us facing each other down in the middle.

“Regarding the rules,” Gazel said, “if you can block a single string of my attacks, you may call yourself the victor. Not that it has to be said, but you are free to attack me at any time, too. But remember: I am Gazel Dwargo, Master of the Sword, and my blade shall not be taken lightly.”

He took his weapon in hand and aimed it in front of his eyes. It held a single edge, with a bit of a curve to it, and pretty patterns were etched up and down its length. It resembled a samurai sword but had its own unique design—certainly, a very well-made weapon for the Master of the Sword to carry.

Just when I was preparing to draw my own blade, a clear voice penetrated the ring.

“Allow me to watch over the match!”

As it did, I felt the presence of three more among us, hearts pure and bereft of evil. One had spoken—Treyni, a dryad I was familiar with. As

always, she had a knack for appearing and disappearing whenever it suited her. The other two resembled Treyni, so I assumed they were among the “sisters” she spoke of.

“Dryads?!” exclaimed the elderly woman who scanned us earlier. I couldn’t blame her surprise. Anyone would be alarmed at a monster teleporting in from out of nowhere.

Treyni smiled as she gave both of us a quick glance. “Dwarven King, you are being terribly arrogant to our forest leader. Calling Sir Rimuru a boaster tells me you are willing to make every denizen of this wood your enemy. Is this right? However, if Sir Rimuru has accepted this challenge, it is my role as his subject to allow it. I will close my eyes to it this time. But relent on your promise, and do not expect mercy from us.”

She was willing to accept no back talk against this. My companions nodded at one another—it was like Treyni said what they all were thinking.

The dwarves, on the other hand, didn’t look well at all.

“The loftiest presence in the forest,” one whispered, “siding with a single force?”

“They are as powerful as high-level elementals. And three of them! I hope you are all ready for this, my friends...”

The mood was grim among them.

*This was exactly why I wanted to avoid combat...*

“Ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So ‘leader of the forest’ was no boast, after all. I apologize for branding you a liar, Rimuru. And I think I have a vague understanding of the situation here. But I still seek to gauge your true nature. And if we have a referee for this contest, all that remains is to cross swords!” Gazel seemed completely unmoved.

He had been watching me the whole time, without wavering.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll have a quick match, and then we can talk about what has brought you here.”

“Heh-heh-heh... And if you can beat me, I will do what I can to answer.”

There was no longer a peep from our audience.

Treyni, face tensed, stood between the two of us as we confronted each other. The match was on.

\*

“Begin!” came the dryad’s shrill voice over the still field.

And with that, Gazel and I instantly took action.

My Magic Sense skill allowed me to read all available information within the local range and replay it in my mind. Using it, I had a full grasp of the ring, as if I were looking down at ourselves from overhead. Speeding up my thought process by a thousandfold, I began to consider my tactics.

It had been a long while since I had given my all in battle. Since my fight with Geld, the Orc Disaster, I hadn’t skipped a day of practice with Hakuro—but the fact that none of it was “for keeps” had prevented me from really treating it seriously, in some corner of my mind. I honed every sense in my body as I sized up my foe.

At the moment, my height was around four and a quarter feet. Consuming the Orc Disaster had expanded my own magicule storage, so I had more all-purpose slime tissue to work with. King Gazel, meanwhile, was around five and a half feet, a bit larger than the dwarven average. Over a head taller than me—and in my mind, he loomed like a mountain. His role as king undoubtedly contributed to that.

Still, I kept my heartbeat calm as I observed him. He had his beautiful sword up to his eyes, taking a full-frontal approach and not moving an inch. He was ready to deflect anything I could dish up for him—and really, I couldn’t find any gap to exploit at all.

I was stricken by a sense that I was facing Hakuro. Master of the Sword was right. Or maybe I should be more amazed at Hakuro, given how he was the first person who sprang to mind when as a comparison to Gazel.

Regardless, this wasn’t training. I couldn’t afford to call time-out. *Let’s test him, then.* Gazel only talked about “a single string of attacks,” and I was free to try attacking all I wanted in the meantime. Or defeat him, even.

The more masterful the fighter, the better a gauge they had of the space around them. In that case...

Using Strengthen Body to boost my leg muscles, I zoomed forward and slashed at the king. He was free to take the blow; if he tried to respond to it, he was right in my trap.

I was sure I’d given him enough data to work with before I sprang into action, and I was sure he read it all accurately and factored it into his own approach. Which meant that, if I could just stretch my arms out four inches or so more as I slashed, that’d be enough for him to misjudge everything. Not

too much—just enough.

Maybe this strategy sounds petty, but it definitely works. One of the most important rules of close-quarters combat is not to let your foe gain a solid sense of distance. I used the same trick to land a blow on Hakuro once. It never worked again, and Hakuro truly lived up to his ogre name as he showed me hell the rest of the day, but there it was. One point for me. And if it deceived a master like him, would it work on this one?

But betraying my total confidence, Gazel executed a precision move to deflect my hand away, as if expecting it the whole time.

*Dude! You've gotta be kidding me!* I thought as I readied my sword again. Gazel showed no interest in countering, still just watching me quietly. I tried a few other attacks, switching out my tactics each time, but he breezily shrugged away each one. I should mention that I wasn't going easy on him. I had potions on me, so I could heal him as long as he survived.

But my full force wasn't enough to work on him. Lightly, gently, he was handling me with just the right amount of power, ensuring he didn't nick his sword in the process. It seemed there was a clear, and overwhelming, difference in skill between us. I was so helpless against him that even I had to admit it.

“What? Are you done? Is that all the power you have, Rimuru?”

Come to think of it, he wasn't restricting me from using my skills at all. It wouldn't be breaking the rules, I reasoned. But relying on such skills seemed basically the same as admitting defeat. It peeved me. I had to get a clean blow in, no matter what. This whole match had lit a spark under the competitive streak I've had since before.

“Shut up!” I spat. “I haven't come at you for real yet, so don't hurry me!” But I still didn't have any new ideas. I didn't want to lose, but I had nothing to work with. And as if reading this state of mild panic, King Gazel started to move, confronting me with terrific fighting force. Exposed to this aura, my movements were fully held in check.

*Oh, crap. I'm leaving myself wide open to him!*

*Report. Analysis complete. This force is Heroic Aura, an extra skill that is a higher-level version of Coercion. Its aim is to make the target cower and become unable to move. Targets with low resistance will*

*find themselves submitting to, and even adoring, the wielder.*

Just as I feared the worst, my reliable partner gave me a report. *Now that's what the Great Sage is for. So how to counteract?*

*Understood. As with Coercion, the correct way to resist the skill is via fighting spirit.*

*Um? Fighting spirit? Come on...*

Talk about unreliable. I had the feeling that the Sage was starting to phone it in sometimes.

But no time for that. I need to get out of this. How do I conjure fighting spirit? Shouting could help, maybe. I couldn't move, but I could speak. If it didn't work, I'd think of something else.

*"Uh... Oraaahhhhh!!"*

I screamed as loud as I could. It wound up firing a Voice Cannon, one of Ranga's specialties, right at Gazel. I also released a bolt of Coercion of my own, hoping it would neutralize Heroic Aura.

The king dissolved the Voice Cannon without bothering to dodge it. But it still distracted his attention enough that his aura disappeared. Now we were back to square one. The two of us glared at each other, swords ready.

If this was how it'd be going, the only way to win was via the conditions he offered. See through his attacks and block them. But I wasn't expecting such an expert fighter. The depth of his strength was unfathomable. It really was like fighting Hakuro. If he wanted to kill me, he probably would've struck a fatal blow long ago. He didn't because, as he declared earlier, he wanted to see what I had.

But I wasn't ready to accept defeat that easily. I had proclaimed myself leader of the forest, and I had to go all-out to win this. At the very least, I would never allow myself to fight like a wimp in front of all these people.

Shaking the cobwebs off, I quietly brought my sword up to eye level, facing Gazel—ready to take his instruction, like I did with Hakuro. *If I can deflect his moves, I win.* Banishing all doubt from my mind, I focused on becoming one with my blade. Turn an ear to its sound, and become one with it—that was Hakuro's advice to me. I had no idea what he meant, but I

meekly tried to follow it.

Watching me, Gazel grinned.

“Yes. That’s it. Now, it is time for me to move!”

*You don’t have to telegraph it that much,* I thought. But just as I did—he disappeared. Not a single one of my search skills could find him.

*What on...?!*

It was only luck and coincidence that let me deal with it. Somehow—I had no reason for it—I had a feeling that danger was coming at me from below. I had never trusted my fate to such vague premonitions before, but this time, I decided to follow my gut feeling. Maybe it was the “voice of the sword” I felt—what you hear when you’ve fully mastered your craft.

But it wasn’t the end. Because this... This skill...

*Oh, crap!*

The moment I thought it, I held my sword aloft.

A loud, sharp *tiiing!* echoed. The battle was over. I had successfully stopped King Gazel’s sword strike.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh... Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! You’ve stopped me!!”

“Y-yeah... So, uh, if you admit it, does that mean I win?”

“It certainly does. You don’t appear to be at all evil to me.”

With another bellowing laugh, Gazel removed his sword.

“This fight is over! The winner is Rimuru Tempest!!”

With Treyni’s official notice, my victory was complete. I sat down on the ground, relieved. The battle had taken more out of me than I had thought.

So this was Gazel Dwargo, the dwarven king. Somehow, I felt like I had been granted a glimpse, just a glimpse of this hero’s full force.

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Treyni’s voice was immediately followed by a chorus of cheers from the monsters assembled in the field. The dwarves, meanwhile, were already grumbling about the result.

“He stopped the king’s very sword?!”

“Ridiculous! It’s simply not possible!”

“Did His Majesty relent at the last minute?!”

And so on.

Though, really, King Gazel was trying to test me. Anything else, and I

would've lost any sword battle against him. *Relent*, however? *I know me winning doesn't exactly fill you with delight, but isn't that going a little too far?*

"Silence!" shouted one of the knights, clad entirely in white. "Have you no shame, my fellows?! How arrogant for anyone to accuse His Majesty of relenting on any foe! Are you saying *you* could follow his movements with your eyes, when none of us even could?"

"He's right," spoke another, a warrior-type dwarf dressed in jet-black. "Gazel did not relent. The Master of the Sword fully deserves his title. This was no duel to the death; it was focused squarely upon gauging each competitor's true nature. Do not forget: We are not here to create enemies!"

How nice of them to plead my case for me. It also proved, for good, that the dwarves were here not for war but to judge my character.

The other dwarves scowled at this dressing down. "Forgive our impropriety," they said to Gazel and me. I'm sure they weren't trying to throw mud on the match—they simply didn't want to admit that their beloved king was fallible.

The apologies sounded sincere enough, so I accepted them. Besides, I could understand their thoughts. Not to be blunt, but I blocked that last attack out of sheer luck. I should know, because I was there. I knew the stance that strike of his required, and it seemed like it'd be pointed at me in the same way, so I just followed my instincts and held my sword aloft—and I turned out to be right.

"Well done, though! You saw right through my Haze of Rumbling Heavens move. Impressive!"

"No, no, it was sheer coincidence. I saw my instructor use that skill before."

Well, not "saw it" so much as "was beaten to the ground by it" in training. Just the other day, I managed to dodge his first slash, only to be smashed right on the crown by his *real* strike. Talk about a disappointment.

A piercing blow from the ground to the heavens like that is mainly meant to throw one's foe off guard. It was the strike that followed after this blow that displayed the true worth of Haze of Rumbling Heavens. It was one of Hakuro's beginner-level moves, but I was *juuust* about in a position to deal with it by now. I only stopped it because I was familiar with it. Nothing worth praising me for.

“What was that? Could this ‘instructor’ of yours be...?” Gazel asked, looking down at me in excitement.

*Hmm. Could it be, indeed? The same skill and everything...*

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Well performed, Sir Rimuru. Glad to see you are hearing your sword’s voice!”

Hakuro, who was aiding the town’s evacuation, chose that moment to sidle up next to me.

“The women and children have been directed to safety. I left the rest to Gobta and came here, but what a sight awaited me!”

He gave me a smile, clearly enjoying this. I guess he must’ve thought I needed some help over here.

“If I may...,” Gazel said, suddenly humble. “Are you the Sword Ogre?”

Aha. So they *did* know each other.

“...Hohh. The child from way back when, is it? I hardly even recognized you. Well, forgive me for being so rude, Your Majesty. I was wondering what kind of stalwart warrior could use such a sword move. How splendid to see you have grown to be a better swordsman than I!” Hakuro gazed upon the king with a smile.

“It is an honor to hear such words, Sword Ogre.”

“Mmm. Three hundred years, is it? Since I found you as a child, lost in the forest, and began teaching you the way of the sword on a whim? A fond memory, nowadays. And now you are the dwarven king!”

So he instructed Gazel at some point? No wonder they had a similar style. Which meant the king was kind of my fellow student. Still, three hundred years? How long has Hakuro been around anyway? Talk about a man of mystery. And talk about never knowing who you’ll run into from your past.

We decided to talk in more detail elsewhere.

Gone were the provisional tents from before. Now, in the center of town, we had a dorm full of rooms for everyone who held central posts related to keeping things running. There was a government building of sorts next to it filled with offices and meeting halls, and we all went inside to hold a little catch-up meeting. The freshly returned town residents could take care of the knight corps—this meeting was just for the top brass, and it began as a rather relaxed affair.

The mission of the dwarves was to investigate the mystery team of monsters that defeated the orc lord—in other words, us. As they put it, they needed to see if we were friend or foe, just like I thought.

Between the dryads and running into the king's old sword master, any potential hostilities (that duel notwithstanding) were a thing of the past. The dryads were known to be a kind and fair race, and the dwarves believed they would never lend a hand to anyone with evil intentions. If they liked us, then they didn't even need that duel to know we were okay. I guess that fight was just out of curiosity, then?

Once the dwarves gave their story, I gave ours—from the first rumblings of the orc lord to the Jura alliance we forged. I didn't mention how the orc lord had evolved into a full-fledged demon lord—it's all solved now, so I figured I didn't need to.

Somewhere along the line, the meeting transformed into a sort of banquet. The tension between us dissipated as we spoke, and by the time night fell, Shuna had offered us all dinner. We had a pretty bountiful food supply in town, so she was capable of some pretty decent eats. Nobody was better at it than Shuna, either, so I guess I should have expected this would devolve into a feast sometime.

It was dangerous for the Pegasus Knights to fly in the dark, so we would be hosting them tonight.

We had them all kick back in our public assembly grounds. Staying in regular contact with their home kingdom was no problem, they told me, so I thought I'd build a little amity and bust out some of the wine we were developing. Then the good times started rolling.

In the midst of this friendly affair, I thought I'd ask about something that bugged me.

"I have to admit, though, you guys work pretty fast. We informed the adventurers' guild about this three months ago, so it couldn't have reached you that long ago, could it?"

"Ah, our covert team—our intelligence gatherers—I had them keep tabs on you."

For a king, Gazel seemed awfully forthcoming about what sounded like top-secret stuff. Maybe it was the wine talking.

“Uh, you sure you want to blow their cover or whatever?”

“Oh, what of it? You spotted them anyway.”

“Ah yes,” Soei coolly replied. “We did find someone sniffing around rather suspiciously. We had orders from you not to kill anyone, Sir Rimuru, so we simply chased him away. We thought it of little importance, but perhaps we should have taken him into custody?”

It barely even registered in Soei’s mind, so he didn’t think to brief me about it. I told him to just tell me next time instead of making judgment calls on his own.

“Well, that’s a rather hard pill to swallow. Yeah, my team isn’t too well suited for direct combat, but...”

This was Henrietta, a beautiful woman but apparently a bit of a mean drunk. One of Gazel’s close associates, she was a knight assassin who ran all the kingdom’s intelligence-gathering operations. I suppose Soei just hurt her feelings, but a serious-looking man in the white armor of a knight stepped in to assuage her. That was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, as he said—a man who adored Gazel, and one of the dwarves who apologized to us after the duel. Running a covert force as he was, he was more honest and upright than I originally thought.

After intervening between Soei and Henrietta, Dolph quickly fell into a deep conversation with Benimaru about aerial combat. I suppose not even someone as magnanimous as Dolph wanted to hang around those two for long. They had stopped sniping at each other, but the air was now silent and frigid between them. I’m sure anyone would rather talk about their favorite battle strategies instead.

Jaine, the old woman so curious about my own skills, was an arch-wizard and one of the most gifted dwarven clerics in the kingdom. She was now debating this or that finer point about magic with Shuna, and it seemed like Shuna was willing to learn from her, perhaps picking up on Jaine’s investigative magic. The crone also discussed the concept of “legion magic,” a kind of spell that could be cast on an entire military unit to annul the abilities of a rival force. It made me shiver a bit. If Benimaru decided to cast Hellflare on the knights, it probably wouldn’t have damaged them much at all.

This arch-wizard was decent enough in battle against individual foes, but apparently her true expertise was in strengthening entire units with magic. A

much more dangerous lady than she looked.

Meanwhile, Kaijin was in friendly conversation with a dwarf clad in heavy black armor. This was Vaughn, arguably the strongest warrior of the entire Armed Nation. An admiral paladin, he said, and second only to Gazel in his field. He used to be Kaijin's boss, and while his post meant he couldn't play favorites, Vaughn still dearly regretted losing Kaijin. If we had come to blows today, he was prepared to make sure Kaijin and the other dwarves were escorted to safety. Nice guy. Bit scary-looking, though.

So that's how we managed to break the ice with them all. And here's King Gazel himself, reminiscing about the old days with Hakuro.

"Well, you may call me Hakuro the ogre mage now. I have taken on the post of instructor for Sir Rimuru."

This comment of Hakuro's made the good king promptly request his tutelage as well. His friends had to talk him out of it. The king of a nation—a superpower of sorts, even—leaving it all to go become an apprentice martial artist in a foreign country was gonna be tough to win approval for. So he glared at me instead, green with envy. Yeesh, could you knock it off? It's not *my* fault.

It was funny, though. Gazel claimed to be visiting as a private citizen, and right now, that's what he was. None of the grandiose atmosphere he presented in his royal chamber. Now he was more subdued, all the pomp and circumstance toned down. *Or maybe that's the real Gazel I'm seeing now?* Watching him practically ooze delight as Kurobe praised his sword training, I couldn't help but wonder.

There was Gazel the Heroic King, and then there was Gazel the fighter. He had seen what I was made of, and I felt like I had done the same with him.

\*

Just as the feast got into full swing, Gazel suddenly turned to me, his expression grave.

"Rimuru...I want to ask you something."

"Sure! Anything you need."

"D'you want to forge a covenant with me?"

This body of mine didn't allow me to feel buzzed, but I still felt like I had just snapped back into stone-cold sobriety.

“I ask you not as a fellow student of Hakuro, but as king. If you are the leader of this forest, that would put us in equal position—and if you’ve been able to hold this entire vast forest under a single government, I am sure you will be rewarded with riches and bounties that not even my kingdom can enjoy. We observed this city from the skies, and let me tell you, it is a beautiful one. That, and you have built great roads through the forest; I could only guess at the logistical and technical skills required to build them. They may yet be incomplete, but I can easily see this town becoming a vital trade center in due time—a vast new market, one that will take on great strategic importance. And when that happens, having another nation to back you would help in various ways, would it not?”

Some of that royal coercion was coming back again. He was pressing the offer at me, eyes dead serious. Ignoring that “fellow student” nonsense for a moment, he was basically recognizing that we were a coherent organization. A group he wanted to support, even. What a coup!

“Are you sure? Because this is the same as admitting that we—this group of monsters—are a full-fledged nation.”

A coup, but not something that King Gazel could decide upon by himself. If he was speaking as a king at the moment, this was his last chance to take it back.

“Of course! And since we may perhaps see this differently, let me say this: A covenant would be of great help to us, as well. This is no charity mission, Rimuru. We could both stand to benefit!” He told me all this with a grin, then offered his terms, dead serious.

These were as follows:

1. A nonaggression treaty with each other.
2. Assistance whenever one nation is endangered.
3. The building of a road to Dwargon, in exchange for their backing.
4. Guaranteed safety for dwarves in the Forest of Jura.
5. Promises of technology sharing between us.

There were a few other details, but those were the five main points.

The nonaggression thing went without saying, and safe passage for dwarves seemed suitable enough. In terms of military assistance, it seemed

unlikely that we'd suddenly be tapped for that, just because we were getting along a bit civilization-wise. Dwargon shared a border with the Eastern Empire, but given that the dwarves were strictly neutral, the Empire wouldn't be dumb enough to pick a fight with the Armed Nation. If they did, it wouldn't really be our business to intervene.

If we were going to build formal trade links, a road would obviously follow along shortly. Having accessible trade routes is an indispensable part of encouraging trade, after all. But making us foot the bill for the whole thing? That would normally be a bit hard to accept. I suppose that was Gazel being as sharp as ever, but still, this was an extraordinary deal.

Recognition of monsters by humans like this was, in terms of common sense, just something you'd never see too often. I was picturing it happening over a long period of time, gradually. If I could get some real interaction with other nations going within, say, a few decades, that would've been fine by me. And here we were being offered the backing of the Armed Nation of Dwargon. Priceless. We couldn't snag that even if we tried negotiating with one of the smaller kingdoms around us. It was such a stroke of good luck, I couldn't help but shiver a bit.

"I would be glad to take this offer," I told him.

Rigurd, Benimaru, Treyni and the others had no objections, willing to let me have the final say on it. As Treyni put it, none of the dryads disagreed with naming me leader of our alliance, and none of the monsters had any innate aversion to interacting with humans or dwarves.

So now we had an alliance.

"Let's relay this to the kingdom," the king told Henrietta. The head of Gazel's undercover team would transmit the message back home by magic. To her, it was as casual an operation as making a phone call.

"What do you call this nation anyway?" he asked. It was a natural question, but one that made me freeze. We all gave one another surprised looks.

*Our name...?*

I mean, yeah, if Gazel was calling us a nation, we'd need a name like any decent one. But wow, a nation, huh...? I was happy enough with a town, so I hadn't really thought about that. I thought it'd be neat to have a nation of monsters sometime, but I figured that was a while in the future.

"Well... I don't think we're really at the 'nation' point, yet. I mean,

there's the Alliance, but that's just a bunch of different races that accepted me as their leader, is all. I don't know if everyone in the forest is ready to accept that."

I knew from the start that it sounded weak. Everyone in the room shot me down.

"If anyone refuses to recognize you as their lord," Shion declared, "I promise I shall slay them where they stand!"

"Well," Benimaru added, "it's a monster's natural instinct to follow the power chain. But I think it's a little different with you, Sir Rimuru, at the core of it. You know? Nobody's being forced to follow you, and I don't think you'll find anyone against it, either."

It seemed to be beyond questioning for either of them, at least.

"Hee-hee-hee! Right now, Sir Rimuru, you hold control over approximately three-tenths of the forest. The other advanced races have decided to watch you carefully for the time being. However, the middle levels among them have already expressed interest in aligning with you, and I am sure the lower-level races will come flocking to this town for protection. We are united under a so-called alliance for now, but it is an alliance based on a common will, one that I believe will birth a full nation. One with you, Sir Rimuru, at the center."

Way to stab me in the heart, Treyni.

Even in these circumstances, the old survival-of-the-fittest rule held true. Now that Veldora, the guardian of the forest, was gone—whatever that dragon thought about it—it meant the local monsters needed to band together before greedy humans or ambitious demon lords came in first. If not, the whole wood would either be exploited or demolished.

I had said it myself: *We will form a great alliance among the peoples of the Forest of Jura and build cooperative relationships with one another. It'd be pretty neat if we built a nation composed of multiple races, I think, but...*

Treyni and the others had run with it, apparently, and that little quote had been causing a huge stir from one end of the forest to the other. Things had been moving really fast, and growing, while I wasn't paying attention.

Guess I'd just have to live with it.

"All right. Let's think up a name, then..."

Gazel gave a distressed laugh in response.

Leaving him behind, we took up a separate room for the debate. The

dwarves hadn't had enough wine yet; they wanted to keep it going all night, so we promised that we'd officially enact the covenant (really, an international treaty at this point) tomorrow and left them to their devices.

Over the previous night, we had hammered out a name, assembling our top officers and staying up late discussing it.

The result we came up with: the Jura-Tempest Federation. Tempest for short. They were almost ready to name it Rimuru at first, but I was too embarrassed to allow that. I can just barely put up with Tempest—it didn't really sound like a name unique to me, and it had a nice ring to it.

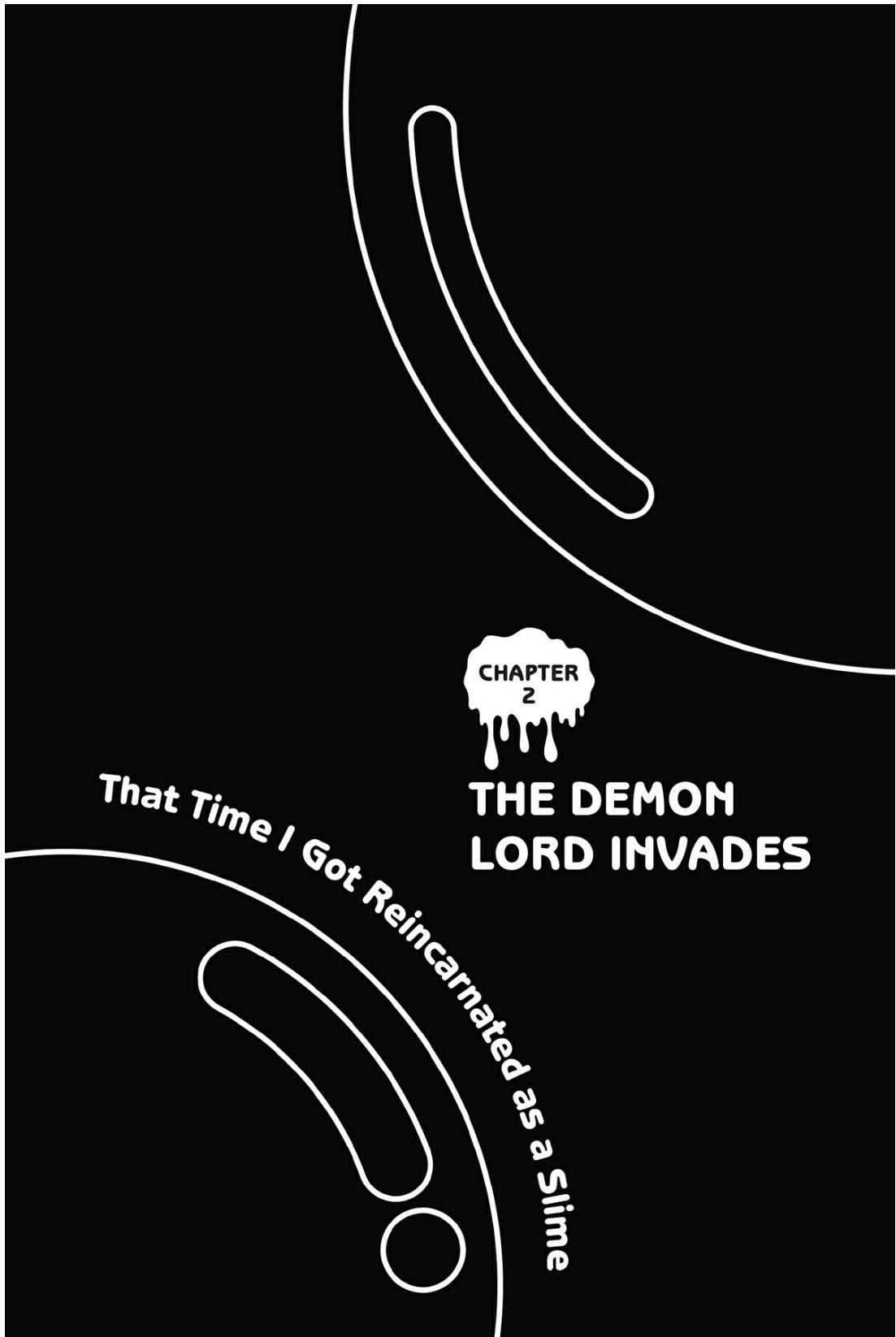
Of course, while I had my guard down, they went and named this town Rimuru on me. Ugh. The Central City of Rimuru, officially, but you *know* they're gonna call it Rimuru or the town of Rimuru. Just thinking about it makes me want to crawl into a hole, but their conventions were simply too firm to let me turn it down. I just hope I get used to it quick.

We also talked a bit about what direction our fledgling nation should take. It was nothing we could settle upon in a single night, of course, so we planned a series of conferences to discuss it. I would be the sovereign ruler, more or less, but over time, I'd like to shift toward more of a republican form of government. You know—employ intelligent monsters, whether they had physical strength or not, and get them involved with politics. The right person in the right job, that's my motto.

It was a long way from what you could even call a framework, but for now, we were good. Besides, this covenant came out because King Gazel and I trusted so much in each other.

This current covenant between the Armed Nation of Dwargon and the Jura-Tempest Federation took the form of a pact between the two nations. It would take effect after representatives from each side applied their signatures. It would then be kept in safe, magical storage and announced to the world.

And so the term Jura-Tempest Federation appeared in the public record for the first time.



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## CHAPTER 2

# THE DEMON LORD INVADES

On a flying horse, the trip from Dwargon to—ugh—Rimuru apparently took just one day. They were soon off, with Gazel promising to visit again soon.

And he did.

“Well, Rimuru!” the king half shouted as he dismounted. “Here I am, as promised!”

“Uh, didn’t you just leave two days ago?” I couldn’t help but point out.

“What are you talking about? Your fellow swordsmanship pupil is here to visit! I thought you would be happier!”

I hate people who obviously never listen to anyone else. And that “fellow” crap again. He wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that he wanted to be my big bro at the sword dojo. It was really starting to affect his majesty as a dwarven king, and I didn’t think I was imagining that, either. And he came *alone* this time! Did he even have the time for this?

As I silently stewed over these doubts, Kaijin came running up to me. “Your Majesty!” he shouted. “You didn’t sneak out of the castle, did you?!”

“Pfft! Can you believe it? A hundred-man security detail, and not one noticed me escaping! Such ignoble slackers! It’s right back to hard drilling for them when I return home.”

“Well...I mean...they can’t handle someone like you, my liege...”

“Mm? Did you want to say something, Kaijin?”

“N-no, Your Majesty...nothing...”

“Oh? Capital, then.”

Considering the speed at which he sprinted up to us, Kaijin was surprisingly weak against his king. He was refuted before I could even get a

word in edgewise.

But—a king sneaking out of his castle? What's with that? Was the Dwarven Kingdom going to put up with this?

“Er, so what brings you here this time, Your Majesty?”

“Well, simple, really. You recall how I exiled you both from Dwargon based on my own personal judgment, so that's why I had to come here. And you will recall how our covenant included the sharing of technological expertise? Well, I've brought along the perfect man for the job.”

He tossed the bag he was carrying on the ground. It began to wriggle around.

“What on...?!”

Flustered, Kaijin opened the bag, only to find a skinny, pallid man flying out.

“Oh, geez, Vester?!?” I couldn't help but shout. The very bastard who had trapped us. Why *here*?

“Heh-heh-heh...precisely! I banished him from the palace as punishment for his scheming against you, but it'd be a waste to let him just play around for too long! So I brought him here.”

I had no response to that.

“My—my liege, what do you mean by ‘so I brought him here,’ exactly?! Do you even understand what it would mean, having Sir Vester work here...?”

“Mm? Don't want him?”

“Of course I don't, Your Majesty! You would be leaking all his knowledge to us!”

Kaijin was impassioned about pleading his case. *Deep down, I guess he's more serious-minded than I had thought.* Vester, meanwhile, didn't seem like he knew what had happened yet. I guess he was in that bag for the whole previous evening, on a winged horse, so I couldn't blame him.

“Leak, you say?” Gazel returned Kaijin's look of concern. “Well, a bit late for that now, is it not? It was already leaked the moment you left us! I honestly considered asking my covert team to assassinate you, do you realize?”

It didn't sound like he was joking.

“My... My liege, is that—”

“It's true! I called it off, though, after quite a bit of thought. There is

nothing I hate more than wasting good talent. And that's why I want Vester working here!"

Vester's eyes sparkled at the words.

"Your...Majesty..."

"And don't you get the wrong idea, Vester. I have not absolved you—but as I said, I have great expectations for you. You may no longer serve me, but I hereby grant you the right to pursue your duties here. Make use of your natural talents and show me you can live an honest, fruitful life for a change!"

"K-King Gazel?!" Kaijin sounded like he was beside himself. "Should I take this to mean you're fine with letting us take every piece of dwarven technology you have?"

The king laughed, like it didn't bother him in the least. "Pfft! Let me give you this request, then. I want you to take this land we stand upon now and harness it to create technology like none seen before. You understand me? Your research should not rely on previous perspectives—you must work more freely than that, as you conceive new ideas. That is the whole reason why I have allowed the free exchange of technology between my nation and yours."

*So this was his aim the whole time,* I thought as Gazel pressed his full royal authority upon them both. He wasn't just looking at my skills—he had his eyes on Kurobe's forging abilities, Shuna's weaving, even our top-secret potion development. His keen sense of self-interest let him sniff out what we were doing here, to some extent. No wonder the Dwarven Kingdom had been so prosperous for so long. In some ways, I was less than thrilled by it. He just kept leading us around by the nose—as if he was reading my mind...

I was interrupted before I could continue this train of thought.

"Rimuru, listen to me. You failed to detect Haze, the deepest level of our concealment magic. Magic Sense is a powerful skill, but there are a thousand ways to outwit it. That lies at the core of any battle—guess how your foe will scope you out, and get a leg up before he can. Relying on one's skills prevents real growth. And politics, you see, are just the same. You must read what your opponent is thinking and work beyond that. Fail at that, and you have no future as a politician. You must remain diligent."

See? Reading my mind. Good advice, though.

*But really, this has to be—*

*Understood. There is a high probability that the individual named Gazel possesses mind-reading skills.*

Yep. That was the only explanation. In fact, that explains the whole thing. Dodging every single move of mine *did* seem a bit unnatural. His evasion was a little too spot-on, like he knew what I would do each time.

“Hey, are you—”

“Oops! Bet my covert force has caught up to me by now. I’ll be on my way, then!”

As if waiting for the opportunity, Gazel grinned and took a fist-size crystal from his pocket.

“Let me give you this,” he said. I took it without objection. “This communication crystal will let us keep in contact. Vester should be able to set it up for you. Use it to call us in case of emergency. Farewell for now!”

In a flash, he was on his horse.

“Vester,” he said with a final nod, “may you strive as much as you can to succeed in your research!”

“Y-Your Majesty!” Vester nodded. “This time... This time, I promise I will not let you down!”

“I am off!”

Then he flew away. A very sudden arrival, and a very hurried exit. The man was like a living thunderstorm.

\*

The king had left Kaijin and me staring at each other.

“Kaijin, are you sure your nation’s safe with such a freewheeling man ruling it?”

“Who can say...? He’s been ruling for centuries, so I imagine we’ll be fine, but... Certainly, he was not so flighty when I served him in the palace.”

“Ah, well. I’m not one to speak, I suppose.”

And I wasn’t. I was planning to hang out in some human towns before long. No need to voluntarily put my foot in my mouth.

With that hazy end to the subject, we were walking away from the main

square when we heard a voice behind us.

“Sir Rimuru! Sir Kaijin!” Vester was there, head bowed downward. “I deeply apologize! Please, let me atone for matters first. And if you will forgive me, please, I hope you will let me work here!”

I hadn’t forgotten the trap he almost sprang on us. But Vester’s eyes were clear now, not filled with the avarice from before. *I can trust him*, I thought.

“Well, let’s get one thing clear first—you’re following my orders, you got that? No more dissing me because we’re all monsters here. You think you can manage that?”

“...Of course. Looking back at my behavior fills me with shame. It began with this terrible jealousy I had for Sir Kaijin, but every time I think about it, it makes me feel like a fool.”

He sized me up, looking me in the eye.

“I’ve been given the chance to restore my good name, and I would never want to lose it. And I can assure you that I really do want to devote myself fully to the research I so enjoy!”

Kaijin responded by patting him on the shoulder. “To me,” he said, “it’ll be great just to have another talented researcher on hand. So you think you can give him a chance? You can yell at me about it if he gets up to anything bad, Rimuru, so trust me on this one and let’s let bygones be bygones!”

*I’d say Vester was more of a threat to Kaijin than to me, but...* Ah, well. He seemed pretty ready to believe in him, and if he was willing to let it slide, I had no reason to object.

“Well, no complaints from me, Kaijin, if that’s what you want. Welcome to town, Vester!”

“Y-yes sir! I am unworthy of your forgiveness, but I promise you that I will work as diligently as I possibly can!”

“Good news, eh, Vester?” Kaijin added. “I guarantee you, you’re never gonna be bored around here. No time to worry about stupid stuff, let me tell you that much!”

\*

Vester needed a job—and quickly. This time, I actually had just the thing.

Our hipokute-growing operation was finally starting to gain some steam, so I figured we could move on to the actual production of healing potion

next. I was anticipating having to teach Gabil the process from the ground up, given he had no real relevant knowledge—but with Vester and his spirit-engineering experience, now it was a different story. I figured the two could work together on the project, with Gabil serving as Vester’s assistant and cave bodyguard.

Before anything, though, I had to introduce them to each other. We headed to the Sealed Cave, Gabil hurriedly trotting out when I called for him.

“Hello! My name is Vester, and it sounds like we’ll be working on this research together.”

“Mmm. Gabil. I am tasked with cultivating hipokute herbs, but if there is anything else I can do, please tell me. Let us both work together for Sir Rimuru’s sake!”

The two of them shook hands. I was concerned the sight of Gabil would unnerve him at first, but I didn’t need to be. So I asked Gabil to guide him into the cave for me.

“Sir Rimuru, look at this. All of this is freshly cultivated hipokute!”

I had to nod my approval. The operation was really starting to go well. The open space beyond the cave’s door seal was awash in green, thriving hipokute, as far as I could see.

We had a problem, though: Gabil and I were one thing, but Vester didn’t have any way of seeing in the dark. Light, whether from a torch or via a magic spell, still wasn’t enough to let you even see where you were standing. There were some dimly lit parts of the cave, but not enough to really work with.

I recalled when Kaijin first entered the cave. His reaction: “Boss, I can’t see a thing in all this darkness...” And he was right. I had forgotten since I had no problems seeing in there, but no way could anyone perform real work in this pitch-blackness.

In the midst of this, it was Shion—my self-appointed secretary, and someone who hadn’t joined the conversation at all until now—who offered a solution.

“So do we just need some light, then?”

“Yeah. Any ideas, Shion?”

“Yes! We can open a hole in the wall to bring in some light...”

“No, you idiot!”

Shion scowled at my immediate refusal. This was called the Sealed Cave

for a reason. The walls were incredibly solidly built. Maybe you could smash a hole in them if you applied all your strength to it, but that ran the risk of a massive cave-in—and losing all Gabil’s noteworthy cultivation progress. I hated to pop Shion’s balloon like that, but I had to.

“It’d be nice if we could run some electricity through here,” I muttered to myself.

“What’s that, boss?”

“Could you tell me what you mean by that?”

It seemed to grab Kaijin’s and Vester’s attention. So I gave them a basic rundown of how electricity worked back in my realm, projecting the image of a light bulb into their minds.

“I see... Apply heat to a metal filament to generate light, then?”

“Hmm. Yes, it is quite astonishing. The luminescent moss here won’t provide enough light to work with. It is certainly something we need to develop.”

I was expecting to generate the required heat via electrical resistance. Instead, they proposed a solution involving a magic circle to compress magicules inside. Much like how a magic-imbued sword emitted a faint glow, applying a little magic engraving to metal would apparently let it light up. We’d be using magisteel for the metal, I assume—the best kind of raw material for swords, and very compatible with magicule usage. It’d generate a lot of light, as well as provide heat resistance and durability—and the way it readily soaked in inscription magic meant there was little need to test anything else. It’s pretty valuable stuff, but I had a vast supply on tap—a supply that I kind of mined from this cave, so I might as well use it.

Metalwork and carving work were mostly done in Dold’s wheelhouse, so we decided that Kaijin would discuss matters with him afterward. I gave Kaijin the necessary materials, and with that, my role in the project was over. The three had what they needed, and I figured I’d leave it to them.

“You know,” I ventured, “if we’re going to have some light soon, why don’t we just build a laboratory in here?”

“Could we?!” Vester excitedly replied. “I do rather like the relaxed atmosphere in this cave. Having such a ‘secret lab’ is a concept I always enjoy.”

I guess Vester was more childlike than I thought. His eyes sparkled as he said all this, so I couldn’t walk it back. For now, though, I thought it best to

remind him of the local dangers.

“You sure about that, though? There are evil centipedes all over the place. That’s like a B-plus right there.”

“Hmm? Not a problem, I would say. I have dabbled in magic myself a little, and I actually have quite a bit of skill at it!”

I looked at Kaijin. He responded by shaking his head. *Guess we can't rely on that too much.* I pressed on, a little concerned for his safety.

“Well, I could set one up for you, if you’re sure you won’t regret it...?”

“Oh, absolutely! Besides, I have Sir Gabil to back me up. Oh, I do hope you could provide that!”

True. Having Gabil around probably meant no attacks were forthcoming. With those concentrated levels of magicules, too, normal monsters couldn’t even approach the place. Gabil and his team just barely got a pass, and even then, that’s thanks to the magicules dissipating a fair bit after I swallowed up Veldora. Humans and demi-humans had no issues, though, and the dwarves and hobgoblins could come and go freely, too. It seemed to me like natural-born monsters were more easily affected by magic, somehow. That seemed to explain it.

“Can I leave Vester in your hands, Gabil?”

“You certainly may! I am here, and I have two of my people on watch at all times!”

Gabil had certainly become a lot more reliable as of late. He got carried away far too easily, which worried me, but he certainly had skill. I could tell he was getting used to his new life here, and he and Vester seemed to hit it off. I thought I was safe leaving things to him.

So before I could work on developing potions, I wound up having to devise a home and laboratory for Vester.

\*

I had both of them wrapped up in a few days.

It’s worth noting that Gabil and the other dragonewts slept immersed in water, so they didn’t really need living quarters to speak of. They could handle a bed just fine, but apparently the wings got in the way, so they were more comfortable underwater. Soka and the other females could fully put away their wings, so they slept in rooms, but I suppose even dragonewts had

their own likes and dislikes.

For Gabil's room, however, he had several of his men dig out what looked like a pretty comfy personal space for him. There was a ventilation duct and everything. He had brought in all the stuff he needed, and it sure didn't look lacking at all to me.

Now we just needed a way for Vester to safely travel between here and town.

"Sir Rimuru, is it all right if I install a magic circle in here? Summoning magic's going to be pretty rough on this side of the door, but it appears to be possible outside of it. I'd like to build one here, if possible."

Vester's chosen location was the spot where I defeated that first black snake way back when.

"What kind of magic circle do you mean?"

"A teleportation circle, sir. It would let me travel instantly to any location I associate it with. Activating it takes some time, but no more than a few minutes, so I think it would do wonders to reduce travel times..."

He was talking about a Warp Portal, a type of elemental magic. The caster made them work by drawing the same series of symbols at the entrance and exit. These symbols worked strictly as pairs, so stepping into a Portal would always bring you to the same destination, but linking this cave with someplace back in town would still be a great timesaver. Maybe Vester really *did* know a thing or two about magic. It came as a total surprise to Kajjin, who knew nothing about it.

The required symbols for a Warp Portal would normally be drawn with intricate, and expensive, magical potions. Here, however, we'd be using carvings made on magisteel—which technically was even more expensive, but it meant we could reuse them many times without having to draw them repeatedly. This, we could use to link up top-secret facilities within our own nation.

Elsewhere in the world, magisteel was too precious to last very long without being stolen. Carving-based Portals could only be built in areas where theft wasn't a concern—leave one out in the open, and it'd face the full brunt of the elements, along with the potential for breakage or robbery.

We didn't have to worry about cave monsters teleporting themselves into town with it, either. The user needed to exercise a few magical muscles to activate it, focusing on the destination in their mind.

It all sounded good to me, so I gave Vester the nod to go ahead. *Magic teleporters, though, huh? Pretty useful. I'll definitely need a primer on those soon.*

Vester was proving to be a much more useful man than I had thought. Having total freedom to pursue his research made him a much less wily, treacherous fellow. He seemed to really love life now. And recalling my time in Dwargon, he didn't seem particularly happy over there, constantly struggling for power. Research probably suited him more than ladder climbing. Having greed and envy rule your life, instead of the stuff you *really* want to do, would change anyone for the worse. It's best to just do what you like, I think, as long as you aren't bothering anyone.

So either way, we were all set to go, and before long, Gabil and Vester's tandem research efforts were under way.

\*

It had been a bit of a hectic time with King Gazel visiting and Vester joining my crew, but we were receiving quite a few other guests in the meantime, too.

Just as Treyni warned, the town was now playing host to a wide variety of races. The kobolds came first, stopping by in their usual trade caravan, and they must have been taken aback seeing all the massive changes to the forest. We were, after all, chopping down trees to procure more empty land to place buildings on, and once we wrapped that up, we kept ourselves busy widening the road to the lizardmen's homelands around Lake Sisu.

“Wh-what is going on in here?!?” one shouted at me. They knew something was changing near their own lands deeper in the forest, and now their finely honed nose for business had led them to brave the risks and check things out.

But the changes these kobolds experienced weren’t just to the scenery.

“Well, hello there, kobolds. I do so appreciate your business!”

“...Er, who may I be talking to?”

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s me. Rigurd!”

They need more of a hint than *that*, dude... And once we explained that Rigurd used to be chief elder of the goblin village, that made the kobolds yelp in surprise even more.

These kobolds, however, were pretty nice guys. The ones here spent their days wandering across the vast forest, covering their own sales territory, and one of them had been the main merchant handling Rigurd's village. He was now talking cheerfully with several hobgoblins on the road.

"Would we be able to have your permission," the kobolds asked me, "to build an inn and storehouse to serve as our base of operations?"

I gladly accepted the offer, and with that, I now had a kobold HQ in town, along with an entire clan of the guys to staff it. The old wandering-caravan days were over; instead, they used the town as a base to fan out and tackle all the other settlements they sold their wares to.

Some of our other visitors included halflings and merfolk. The halflings swore their allegiance to us, and I had them work on our farms. The merfolk, meanwhile, were seeking protection. They lived nearby a large lake that had recently become infested with a growing horde of amphibious monsters. I ordered Benimaru to send a cleanup force their way. Most of the trade between us and the Dwarven Kingdom would involve traveling along riversides, and I was sure the merfolk could provide some assistance with that. If they were willing to work with us, they were more than welcome.

As far as more uncommon visitors go, one time, while exploring in the woods, I came across an insectoid—an insect-type monster—that was near death. It was maybe a foot and a half tall, kind of a cross between a stag beetle and one of those big fighting ones, and I just thought it looked so cool. There was a dead blade tiger next to it, a B-ranked monster, and imagining this small creature defeating such a formidable foe was remarkable to me.

So I decided to take care of it. It was hostile at first, attacking me without a moment of hesitation. That seemed reckless, but I quickly realized the motivation. There was another insectoid behind it—it had attacked me so the other one could make its escape.

I didn't notice the other guy until it spoke up. "W-wait," it pleaded. This one was about a foot tall and looked like a garden-variety wasp. A foot-long wasp would be the subject of horror films in my world, but this one, too, was critically injured. It was intelligent enough, at least, to communicate with me via thought, albeit haltingly.

"...Why do you not flee? I have no way left to protect you. Forgive me," the insectoid who attacked me muttered, resigned to its fate.

The other guy must've been pretty smart, too. And even though the blade

tiger almost killed it, it was using whatever strength remained to confront me. It seemed to be choosing to die a noble death, perhaps realizing that the time was near.

“Strong one,” the wasp asked me, “you...protect us?”

I couldn’t find it in me to just abandon them. Something about that beetle doing whatever it could, even near death, to protect its friend struck a chord. No reason why they couldn’t join the party—

Then an idea hit me.

“Hey, can you guys collect nectar or whatever?”

“Yes... Can.”

I figured they might be able to collect nectar from flowers, and they could. That provided all the reason I needed to lend them a helping hand. They both had lost around half of their bodies, so I lent them a few cells from my own slime form to treat them, using processed magisteel to replace the missing parts of their exoskeletons. That, plus a dose of healing potion, fixed them right up. I named the cool-looking beetle Zegion and the wasp Apito, and now they were my subjects, or pets, or something.

The rarer plants I collected in the forest included those that would only bloom in special environments or places laden with magicules. Apparently such flowers bloomed readily in the treants’ settlement, however. I figured Apito, with its intelligence, could scope out those rarities for me and provide the nectar from them.

Treyni was kind enough to give permission for this, so I ordered Zegion to keep the treants safe while Apito collected the treasure. It would then deliver the nectar spoils to me on regular occasions.

So along those lines, we were starting to find more and more friendly people to interact with. But they weren’t all friendly. Sometimes we’d get small gangs of lower-level magic-born sniffling around and spouting out classic hoodlum clichés like “Whoo, ha-ha! What a fancy-lookin’ town this is! We’re gonna treat it *reeeeeal* good from now on!”

Gobta’s or Rigur’s patrol teams were usually all it took to chase them off, but we’d occasionally run into monsters with some actual strength as well. Such lower-level species always met a tragic end before long.

“Oh, uh, Shion? We’ve got some guests.”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

The idea of talking things out never registered in Shion’s mind. She was much more a fan of *duking* things out. Really more of a bodyguard than a secretary, and she was harsher on her opponents than Gobta or Rigur ever were.

It was the same thing every time, really—no matter how many lower-level magic-born gathered together, there was just no beating Shion. And when they were sniveling on the ground, begging for forgiveness, only then would Shion smile and ask “So how can I help you?” Even the most arrogant of them would never be seen in town again after that—and if they did, Shion wasn’t keen on second chances.

Generally, I asked her to avoid killing if she was able to. Monsters were all about survival of the fittest, and a convincing show of strength would usually be enough to force them into obedience. Any wayward souls who couldn’t listen to reason and decided to be naughty a second or third time, though? Yeah, I gave her permission to execute them. I didn’t have time for monsters who couldn’t show regret for their actions.

There were still a lot of folks out there who looked down on me for being a slime, weakest of all monsters. That, or called me soft for not killing my foes, no matter how much they dissed me. But I figured those stories would disappear pretty fast, in time.

Soei, in particular, was even colder and more calculating than Shion; he tended to expel any would-be attackers only after introducing them to the meaning of fear. He told me he was busy building up a defense network for the town, but I think he was also doling out punishments for anyone who thought they could do whatever they wanted with us.

At the moment, the forest’s native races were most likely testing us, trying to see what this new force in Jura could do. That’s why we were kind of obligated to puff out our chests a bit, so we could get everyone else to recognize us. We’ll gradually roll that out, and slowly but surely, we’ll make ourselves known.

So the city of Rimuru, in the heart of the Jura-Tempest Federation, was doing a pretty roaring business...but then we encountered a guest we weren’t expecting at all. My Magic Sense alerted me to a massive chunk of magic

power flying our way—at a speed I could only call ridiculous.

*Oh, crap!* In an instant, I jumped off Shion’s chest and headed outside the gate at a full clip. I was right to be concerned. The magic force changed its aerial trajectory and landed right in front of me. If it had gone inside town, I think we would’ve seen some substantial building damage. The nearby trees had been uprooted and blown away, and there was a crater on the ground where it landed.

I instinctively realized there was no way I could handle this level of force. Steeling my resolve, I decided to observe my opponent. Just one look was enough to see that this was on a completely different dimension from anything I knew.

A powerful will hid behind her blue eyes, and her platinum-pink hair was done up in a pair of pigtails. She looked around fourteen or fifteen, but there was no telling a magic-born’s age from external appearances—and with the overwhelming amount of magical power that she didn’t bother to hide, she couldn’t have been the age she seemed to be. She was wearing an outfit that left quite a bit of skin exposed, made out of some unknown material. And—more than anything—she was a beauty, the likes of which I may never have seen before.

Before I could ask who she was, she arrogantly puffed out her chest (her breasts only barely developed). “Hello, hello! I am the demon lord Milim Nava. You look like the strongest hombre in town, so I wanted to come ‘n’ say hi!” the beautiful and powerful girl declared.



A few minutes before, Milim the demon lord had spotted the town below her. It was a pretty place—neatly organized rows of buildings, attractive trees lining the city roads. It was a town that seemed to exist in perfect harmony with nature, and she could tell that several high-level magic-born, rated A or higher, lived there.

The biggest surprise of all, however, was that even the rank-and-file residents of town were at least low-level magic-born people as well. Their magic potential varied, but they were all creatures with intelligence, thinking for themselves and carrying out the work assigned to them.

Nothing like these people existed in the Forest of Jura before this point. Seeing such a settlement appear practically overnight would normally be unthinkable. They were all working together, regardless of their differences in strength. Milim couldn't even imagine what kind of leadership skills were required to make them all follow that.

It excited her like little had recently, and she used her truth-revealing Dragon's Eye unique skill to gauge the abilities of people around town. *Amazing*, she admirably thought to herself. Unbelievably, nearly every single resident of the town was a named monster.

*No way—everybody here's got names?!*

For the first time in several centuries, Milim felt a mixture of shock and excitement well forth from her heart. No way could *she* ever bother making something like this—giving away a portion of your own power came with the chance that you'd never get it back again. Any sane magic-born would never try something so hazardous. In a winner-takes-all world like this, there was nothing more distasteful to her than letting her own power flow away from her.

Milim laughed a little. She was happy. *This...! Good thing I dissuaded them all from coming here!*

The moment their summit ended, Milim was already out the door—but instinctively feeling she needed to lay a bit more groundwork, she had also engaged in direct discussions with two demon lords who might present problems. As negotiations went, it was pretty simple—don't lay a finger on the forest, or else you'll have Milim as your enemy—and they ended with a mutual agreement.

Clayman, Carillon, and Frey—they were the younger generation. In Milim's eyes, they could do whatever they wanted; she was sure she could overpower them if push came to shove. But there were a few demon lords that even Milim found to be a pain in the rear. That applied vice versa as well, however, so as long as she made an arrangement or two with them in advance, she didn't have to worry about them meddling in her affairs.

Now, she was happy she made the effort. She had a feeling she was about to meet somebody very special, and nobody was going to interrupt her. *Let's start*, she thought, *by tracking down this magic-born...*

She had signed on to Clayman's proposal for the same reason she always did: a way to pass the time. As long as Milim had breathed, the day-to-day grind was just a bore. Whenever some interesting offer came along, she always snapped it up. Whatever that disgusting low-level magic-born Gelmud was scheming, she didn't care—Milim's only motivation was to see how strong the resulting orc lord would become. If Gelmud raised it up to become a new demon lord, that was fine. Being around for the magic moment, she figured, would add some spice to the usual tedium.

Gelmud failed, of course, and given the expectations Milim had heaped upon him, the letdown hit rather hard. But the images Clayman subsequently showed her were enough of a shock that the orc lord hardly mattered any longer.

Her unique skill, Dragon's Eye, allowed her to view the truth behind whatever she saw—something that worked even through Clayman's crystal spheres. It wasn't a complete picture, but it provided enough information to pique Milim's interest. The mysterious magic-born fighting Gelmud possessed enough power to place it far beyond merely high level. Carillon and Clayman may not have spotted it, but there was no pulling the wool over her Dragon's Eye.

She also had a guess about who killed Gelmud—someone who then gained Gelmud's power for their own, letting them evolve up to pretty much one step away from demon lord status. It must have been an awe-inspiring battle.

*...Wait. Maybe not. The orc lord would've only been able to evolve into a demon lord-level creature. This magic-born's already far beyond that...*

And now she saw that, just as she figured, it was only the mystery magic-born who survived. She scanned the town from the skies, satisfied with herself.

*When did they even build a town like this?*

There were people maintaining the roads, people carrying around the chopped-up wood to and fro, monsters going in and out of construction sites. They were plainly building their own city.

Milim's own castle was made by human hands—the devotees who worshipped her as a goddess. It was built to function as a temple, and really, the people were nothing more than a bother to Milim, but they never interfered with her activities. To her, they were worthless—but to them,

serving Milim had earned them a millennium of peace. Their lands were recognized to be Milim's lands, and thus they were safe from anything up to and including a demon lord invasion. No demon lord complained about this; few even enjoyed the right to complain to her without consequences.

But thanks to that, life among her believers had stagnated. They were drowning in serenity, and none dared challenge themselves to try new things. They just went on, generation to generation, gaining absolute bliss from serving Milim. A thousand-year-long morass.

*The townspeople here are a far cry from those boring old fools...*

She didn't come here because she was searching for new people to worship her. She wanted some new stimulus, something to fend off the boredom. That was the only reason. If Clayman or Carillon wanted more war power, she was willing to hand it over once she was bored. She'd tyrannize the young demon lords, watch them stew in their own juices, and once she was satisfied, she'd think up some new game to play.

That was her original plan...but the mystery magic-born was much stronger than any of the demon lords had guessed. She couldn't just leave this guy be, and she was too old to have anyone tell her what to do. She could fight and kill them, or...

Now the other young demon lords weren't present in her mind at all. She had found him. The one with the demon lord-class powers in this town.

*Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! It really has grown to the point of a demon lord!!*

Then she plunged forward, eagerly awaiting her prey.



I somehow managed to avoid blurting "A demon lord?!" out loud. What was someone like *her* doing here?! I didn't have to ask if she was real—the sheer force she exuded from her every pore was among the strongest I had ever seen. It was just as overwhelming as Veldora was. Plus... I mean, don't these people send their underlings for jobs like these first? Or, like, one of the four sub-bosses? Something like that? I wanted to chide her but opted against it.

How should I answer her, though...? I was in slime form, and I knew my aura wasn't leaking out at all. I had grown used to controlling my magic lately, and I could hold it back to some extent without actively thinking about

it. To the uninformed observer, I should've just looked like a wimpy li'l slime. I knew this because I created a copy of myself and ran Magic Sense on it; the only aura I released was what you'd see from a slime out in the woods somewhere.

If this demon lord saw right through that, she was definitely not one to mess with. No point trying to deceive her. Either way, I had no offense I could hope to use on her. Better not to trip up and do something to anger her.

"Well, good afternoon," I said, eyeing her closely. "My name is Rimuru, and I am the leader of this town. I am impressed that you recognized this slime as the strongest presence here."

Actually, that might have been Hakuro. That's what I thought, but there was no need to say it.

"Hee-hee-hee! That's kid stuff for someone like me. My Dragon's Eye can measure all the magical energy people try to hide from me. Don't try to play the fool around me, you!" she proudly boasted.

She had her chest stuck way out to emphasize her magnificence, although her chest size was, shall we say, disappointing. You could tell from one look that they weren't fully grown yet. The skimpy outfit made it even more impossible to hide. I, of course, was too mature an adult to mention that out loud. I'm not stupid enough to go dancing into an obvious minefield like that.

But she had a skill kind of like my Analyze and Assess, huh? No point trying to hide anything, then. This was a tad dangerous. My own analysis revealed that she had a clear power advantage, and I'm sure her skill levels were far above mine.

I couldn't win. If we got in a fight, I didn't think anything would work on her. I could string my skills together to keep things even and buy some time, but that's about it. It made the Orc Disaster seem like a walk in the park.

"By the way," she continued, "is *that* how you really look? Was that silver-haired person I saw thrashing that bum Gel mud a transformation, then?"

She knew about that fight? Either she heard about it from Soei, or somebody was watching us. I knew Gel mud was, but I didn't even think that someone would be watching Gel mud, too. So his plans were leaked from the start, then—or Gel mud was nothing but another puppet, another character in the grand show. He *did* mention that he had demon lord backing—I thought he was just being a sore loser, but maybe he had some connections in high

places after all. Someone at *this* level, for example.

“Ah, did you mean this?” I said as I transformed. My mask was off; there was no need to conceal my aura.

“Oooh, it *was* you! So you defeated the orc lord? I thought it consumed Gelmud and turned into a demon lord, kind of.”

The demon lord Milim seemed to enjoy this news quite a lot. So she knew Gelmud was dead, but nothing past that, huh? Maybe I *could* hide the truth a little...but that still seemed dangerous. Honesty was probably the best policy.

“Impressive! Yes, the orc lord evolved into an Orc Disaster, but...well, I fought it and beat it anyway, I guess. So...” I tried to change the subject. “Are you just here to say hello today, or could I help you out with something? You aren’t here to, say, take revenge for Gelmud, are you?”

If she answered yes to that, we were doomed. But she didn’t look like the kind to resort to such pettiness. She might insist on me becoming her vassal in exchange for forgiveness, but that’s about it. There wasn’t much merit in rubbing us out right now, besides. Either way, though, I needed to figure out what she wanted, and how she intended to achieve it.

“Mm? Help me? Um, I’m just sayin’ hi, but...”

“.....”

“.....”

An awkward silence. The demon lord Milim and I stared at each other wordlessly for a bit. Then:

“Prepare to die!!”

With a shout, Shion slashed at the demon lord.

All the force this demon lord exuded must have robbed Shion of her composure the moment she caught up to me. She was trying to attack first and gain the upper hand. She was accompanied by a lightning-fast black shade; Ranga, leaping out of a shadow on the ground, similarly lunged for Milim. It was a total surprise attack, timed such that even if one strike was parried, there would be no dealing with the next.

Not against Milim, though.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, did you want to play with me?”

With a teasing laugh, Milim stopped Shion’s sword with her right hand, swinging her left arm as if to swat Ranga away. There was a high-pitched *clang*, like someone hammering at solid metal, and the sword was stopped cold. She took the longsword straight against her skin, and it didn’t hurt her

at all. Ranga, meanwhile, was blown backward by an invisible shock wave, every hair on his body standing on end. I only realized after it was all over that her left-arm swat had unleashed a faster-than-sound shock wave.

“Wh-whoa, wait, guys...?!”

By the time I could tell them to stop, they were already making their next moves.

“Not even a demon lord can escape from this restraining web.”

Using Ranga as a distraction, Soei had used Demonwire Bind to capture Milim. Benimaru, meanwhile, was preparing to encase her in a Hellflare blast.

“And now, the final blow. Burn to a crisp!”

It was a merciless attack, one made with full knowledge that this was a demon lord. They put every ounce of energy they had into it. I imagine that was the ogres’ best idea for dealing with something like this. But...

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Impressive! If it was any demon lord except for me, I’m not sure that kind of attack would leave them unhurt. You might even be able to defeat them! But...”

Her aura began to rapidly expand. Then, another shock wave, as if a volcano had just exploded on the spot. She hadn’t unleashed an attack or done anything, really—all she did was unleash the aura she had been keeping restrained.

“...It won’t work on *meeee!*”

In a moment, the web restraining Milim was shredded to fine pieces. She had her freedom back, and while it was a bit late to say this, the demon lord was just too much. Trying to use cheap tricks or overwhelm her with numbers was never going to work. As King Gazel of Dwargon put it, high-level magic-born were classified as calamity or hazard-class dangers. A demon lord was a disaster, and certain dragonoid types (like Veldora) were feared as “catastrophes.”

Now I could see it for myself. This *was* a catastrophe. The demon lord before me had force like a howling storm of nature, something no human being could ever contest. One person, posing so much of a threat. What a nightmare—but it was our reality.

So now what...?

Right this moment, all four of my allies—Shion, Benimaru, Soei, and Ranga—were on the ground. Not dead, but certainly out of the battle. But

Shion and Benimaru still found it in themselves to try to stand up, giving me a chance to flee.

“Sir... Sir Rimuru... Please, run away...”

“We can take...care of...”

I knew it was impossible, and I knew escape wasn’t an option. Plus, I didn’t exactly have a lot of self-respect, but not even I could toss away my friends and run off by myself.

“You just stay there and rest. I’ll handle this.”

“B-but...”

“If I give up, this is over, so I’ll do what I can, all right?” I shrugged. “Just don’t expect too much.”

That seemed to calm them down a bit. There was no running away, and I had to give it a shot, at least.

“Hohh?” The demon lord gave me a curious smile, beckoning to me with one hand. “You want to take me on? This is fun!”

*Well, sure, if you put it that way. If this is what it’s become, no point trying to be modest. Time to bluff and bluster my way out of this.*

“Of course, as far as I can tell, there’s only one attack that stands a chance of working against you at all.”

“Oh?”

“Think you have the confidence to try withstanding it?”

I knew full well, frankly, that nothing I could do would win this. How should I put this...?

*Understood. The measurable phase indicates a magical energy supply at least ten times greater than yours on the low end. On the high end, it is immeasurable.*

I suppose the Sage put it a lot better than I could. And one’s magicule count wasn’t everything, really, but being outclassed ten times over was a tad insurmountable. No wonder the ogres’ full-bore attacks didn’t work.

So there’s just one strategy for me to try. If it was a given that none of my skills would work, I’ll just have to form a plan using the items I have on me. All this, of course, assumes that Milim falls for my prodding.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! All right. Sounds fun to me. But if it doesn’t work,

promise me that you'll become my servant, all right?"

*Ooh, there's a stroke of luck. She's even more generous than I thought.* The fact she wasn't going to kill us all despite our preemptive attack was a big win. We could just be her lackeys for life instead. *That works.*

"Okay. You got it. But if it does, you're gonna let my team here go unpunished, okay?"

"All right. Let's get this going already!"

Accepting my challenge, Milim gave me an expectant look. I'd better live up to her expectations. With a kick against the ground, I ran with all my might toward her. Without removing my sword, I stormed straight toward her and created a small sphere of water in the palm of my hand. She looked on, full of curiosity, as I approached at full speed. She could tell exactly how I was moving, so I knew no underhanded tricks would work.

"Take this!"

"Mmmm...?!"

I stopped right in front of the demon lord, then threw the sphere of water at her. She seemed breezily nonplussed by this, knowing full well this wasn't much of an attack. That's why she let it splash against her, uncontested... right on her mouth.

This bit of water wasn't an attack at all. It was just there to ensure the item I had for her didn't spill out mid-delivery. Now it was just a matter of whether Milim took an interest in this item or not. Our entire fate rode on her reaction.

"What... What *is* this...?! I've never eaten anything so delicious in my life!!"

She shouted at the top of her lungs, clearly excited. Her cute little tongue was licking at the droplets stuck to her lips. *Whew. Looks like victory is mine.*

"Heh-heh-heh! What's wrong, demon lord?" I grinned as I conjured up another water sphere to show her. "Lay a hand on me, and the secret behind what I just treated you with will be lost and buried forever. But if you accept that I won, I'll give you some more of that. Okay?"

Milim's eyes were fixated on the sphere, following it as I tossed it around in the air. She couldn't have been more enthralled. I was starting to feel like I could talk my way out of this after all.

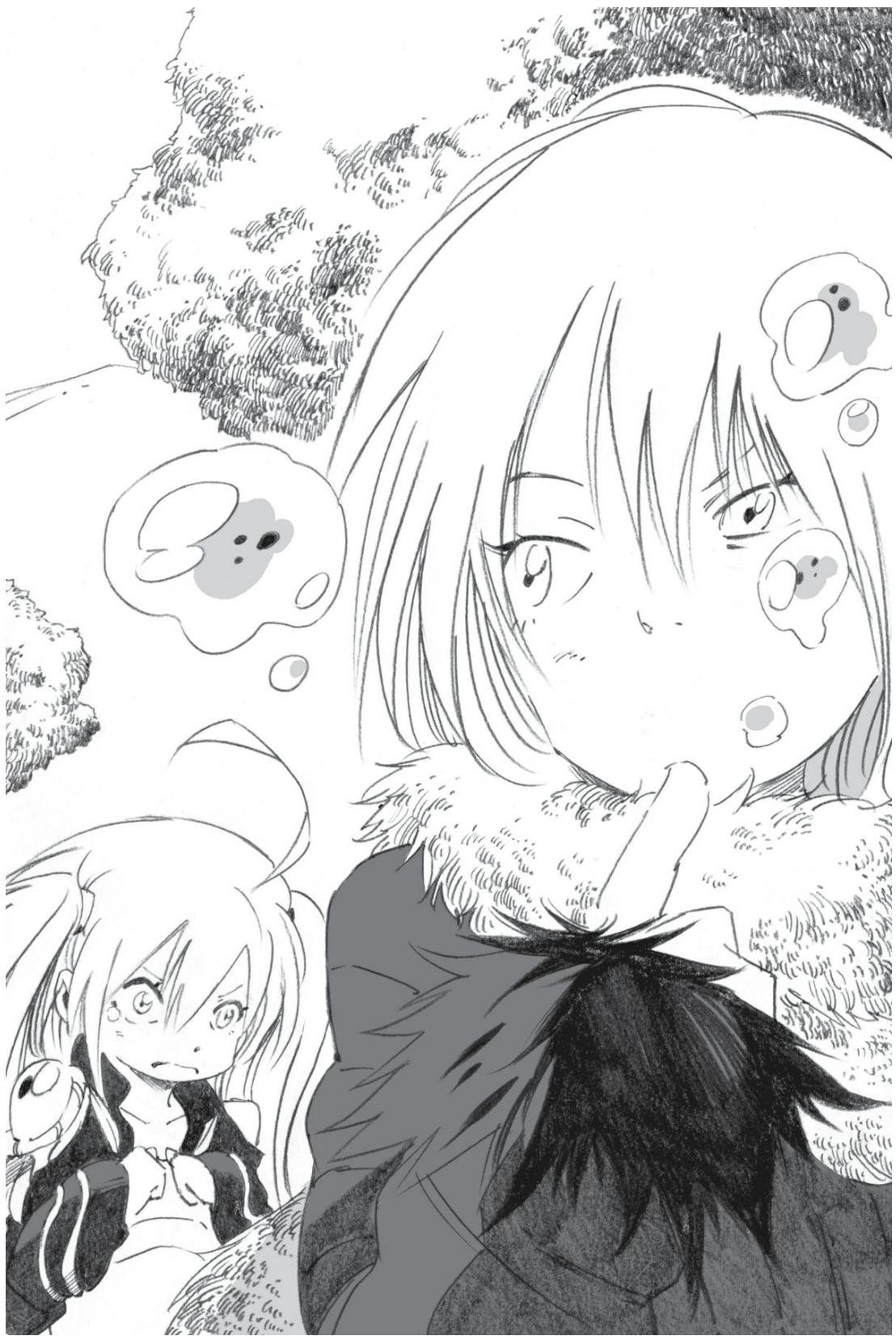
This was actually some of the honey that Apito was collecting for me after I rescued it. I'd be lying if I said I thought it'd come in handy at a time like

this—I just hid it on me because I wanted to eat it later. I hadn't eaten anything sugary at all since coming to this world.

I was finally able to enjoy some decent grub with this body, so I wanted to satisfy my sweet tooth next. *But!* Even when I asked Shuna, she said that sweets are considered mega-luxury items and you almost never run into any. The only way to taste anything sweet at all was, realistically speaking, by eating fruit. The western kingdoms and Eastern Empire apparently cultivated sugar, but only rarely did it leave their borders, and it's at no price the average person could afford.

Well, so be it. I turned my eyes toward honey first, figuring we'd start with something simple. Lucky thing I helped out Apito when I did, in that case. We were still in no shape to be mass-producing honey yet. I had to work hard to gain this small supply of it, so—as guilty as it made me feel about all the others—I was hiding it for myself.

Meanwhile, the demon lord Milim was clearly at an impasse. I could see she was having an internal conflict, interspersed with “Nnnhh... But... But...” and other mutterings. *Let's be doubly sure about this.* I tossed the sphere I was playing around with into my mouth.



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“Mmmm, this is good!”

“Ah!!”

“Whew. *Really* good. Oops! I’m almost out.”

“Whaaa?!”

*This is fun. She’s just like a child, ripe for getting picked on.*

“So you gonna admit that I won?”

“...Wait. I have a suggestion.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Call it a draw. How about we call it a draw this time?”

“And what do I get out of agreeing to that?”

“I’ll forget about everything that happened.”

“Oh?”

“That, that’s not all, either! I swear I won’t meddle with you guys at all! And you know, if you have any problems, you can talk to me about them, okay?!”

I won!

Her strength was overwhelming, but inside, she was every bit the kid that she looked like. Against a grown-up’s negotiation skills, she had no chance. Yep. Grown-ups play *dirty*.

Of course, trying to extract anything else out of her would be dangerous. She was a catastrophe-class demon lord, and if I got on her bad side any further, I ran the risk of my town being turned into ash. I decided to play my hand before she changed her mind.

“Sounds good to me. I accept. We’ll call it a draw, then.”

I had a fair bit of inventory left, so I put a generous supply of honey into a jar and handed it to her. It wasn’t a fancy jar, misshapen and handmade from clay, but Milim still accepted it with a smile, scooping a bit up and sucking at it with gusto.

The danger was gone. She was in a good mood, and the most unprecedented catastrophe to ever hit our town ended before it began.

\*

I had just healed the ogres and started to head back into town when I realized that Milim was following me. Oh, brother. I thought I had talked my way out of this, so I assumed she would be going back home, but already my plans

were failing.

Holding the jar of honey drops carefully, the demon lord stuck right to my side in lockstep. *Does she want more honey?* I had a supply, but no intention of letting her have more of it. I didn't want *my* portion to run away on me.

"Hey," she asked, sidling up to me as we walked. "Hey, have you ever thought about calling yourself a demon lord, or trying to become one?"

*What on earth is she going on about...?*

"Why would I want to put myself through that?" I asked.

She gave me a genuinely perplexed look in response. "Huh? I mean... We're talking about a demon lord, here! They're really cool, you know? You kinda want to...look up to them, right?"

"Nope."

"...Huh?"

"Huh?"

It appeared that Milim the demon lord and I saw things in very different ways. We looked at each other.

"Well, lemme ask you this: Do you get anything good out of being a demon lord?"

"Huh? Umm, well, all these strong guys seek you out to try to start fights. It's fun!"

"I'm already getting in enough fights now, thanks. Not interested."

"Whaaaa?! Well, how do you get *your* fun in life?"

"Oh, all kinds of things. There's practically too much for me to do, if anything. I only just got my hands on that honey a little bit ago. There's lots of other stuff I want, too, so I really don't have the time to be a demon lord. Or is there something to it besides fighting?"

"No, but...you can act all big around humans and magic-born...?"

"Isn't that kind of boring?"

The question caused Milim to make a face like she was just struck by lightning. I guess it *was* kind of boring. I was so on the mark that she had nothing to say.

We were almost back at town again, and if she was that shocked about it, I kind of wished she would go away and leave me alone.

"Well, I guess you know my story now. Be careful on your way back home, all right?"

I thought that was a pretty smooth way to drop the hint. I was wrong.

“Wait! Y-you...?! You’re doing stuff that’s more fun than being a demon lord? That’s not fair! It’s *totally* not fair! Now I’m angry. Tell me what it is! And let me join you, too!!”

I did my best not to call her a spoiled brat to her face. She was a demon lord; riling her could have unexpected consequences. Really, just thinking of her as a child made dealing with her a cinch. Judging by our confrontation just a moment ago, it was super-easy as an adult to talk around her. You can’t try to read someone like this too deeply. Just work around her selfishness and nudge the conversation in your direction—that’s the real key to it, and along those lines, I was already treating Milim like the children of my relatives.

“All right, all right. I’ll tell you. But on one condition. Can you start calling me Sir Rimuru from now on?”

“What? No! You’re crazy! It should be the opposite. You need to call me Lady Milim! Don’t go bandying about my first name like that...”

*Oops. Maybe I got a little too cocky?* She looks and acts like a child, but angering a walking potential catastrophe could be lethal.

“Well, hang on a sec. We just drew our last fight. That’s fine, isn’t it?”

“Nnngh...”

“All right. Let’s do this. I’ll call you Milim, and you can just call me Rimuru. Sound good?”

“Mmmmh... Well, okay. I got it! I’ll allow you to call me just Milim. You better appreciate that, though! Only my demon lord friends are allowed that.”

“Well, thanks. I guess we’re friends now, too, huh?”

“Huh?!”

Despite all the sparks, we had overcome our naming dispute. We’d just call each other by our own names—no honorifics or anything.

“Okay, well, I’ll give you a tour of the city, but no wandering around by yourself, okay?”

“Okay, Rimuru! Ee-hee-hee!”

The demon lord Milim—just Milim to me—was being oddly cheerful.

“Great. There’s a good girl. And no starting fights in town without my permission, either. Promise me?”

“Of course! I promise, Rimuru!”

So far, so good. Easier than I thought, even. I ought to be fine now.

“...Well done, Sir Rimuru. Taming the wild demon lord so briskly...”

“We should expect no less of Sir Rimuru!”

“I will let Sir Rigurd know about this...and to take care not to anger the demon lord.”

The feedback from the ogre mages seemed positive enough, too. No complaints, at least—and if they did have complaints, I thought as I guided Milim toward town, *lodging them to a demon lord wouldn’t do much.*

It seemed, by the way, that calling yourself a demon lord was a good way to make the other demon lords punish you. If you couldn’t prove your strength, they’d boot you right out of the club.

Whew. That was a *real* close one. If I declared myself a demon lord, like Milim was semi-pushing me to do, I’d start to get watched by *real* demon lords. Not that Milim wasn’t one, but either way, I dodged a bullet without realizing it. Hearing that story afterward, I gave myself a mental pat on the back for refusing the bait.

\*

I was showing Milim around town.

It turned out to be much more laborious than I was expecting. If you’ve ever taken a young child to an amusement park, I think you can imagine how it was. Take your eyes off her for a moment, and she’s gone. It was exactly like that.

“Hey! I told you to stop running off!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m over here! What’s this thing?!”

“Listen to me! Just calm down and pay attention.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What’s the big deal? I’m listening!”

She plainly wasn’t. She was running up and down the streets, her tension level so high that it honestly made me wonder about her.

“Ah, Sir Rimuru!”

Just inside town, we ran into Gabil, who was carrying a box.

“What good timing. I am here because our test run is complete.”

*He may live to regret calling it “good” timing.*

“Oooh, a dragonewt! Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s pretty rare. Doing okay?”

“Well, well, here’s a new girl. Indeed, I am Gabil the dragonewt! As Sir

Rimuru's right-hand man, I have been tasked with the development of a secret potion. Are you new to town, too, li'l lady?"

—*Snap!*

"Huh? What did you just say? 'Little lady'—you don't mean *me*, do you? You want me to kill you?"

She was all smiles a moment ago. Now, Milim was transformed. Guess she didn't like what Gabil called her.

Grabbing Gabil's head with a single hand, the demon lord pulled it toward her, then planted a fist in his stomach. I had no time at all to stop her. With a pained exhalation, Gabil had been brought to the brink of death.

*Uh... Wait. What happened to her promise not to start a fight without my permission...?*

"Listen to me. I'm in a *very* good mood at the moment. That's why I'm willing to forgive you now that I've done that...but not next time, so watch yourself, got it?"

I don't think she could've done much more than "that" without causing literal death. Some "forgiveness." It was like she expertly judged the exact amount of force to bring Gabil up to—but not over—the cliff. This girl was *fearsome!* She probably used Dragon's Eye to gauge the strike, but still, fearsome.

Good thing Gabil was carrying a test run of our healing potion. We quickly used it on him. It worked.

"Phahh?! I saw my father waving at me from across the river!" he shouted upon waking up.

"Guess you're fine, then," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "Your father's still alive, isn't he?"

"Er...oh, right. Many pardons. I really *was* rather close to death, however. Who is this girl—er, this esteemed lady before us...?"

"Yeah, Soei's informing Rigurd right now, but I guess nobody told you guys in the cave yet. This is Milim. I guess she's a demon lord?"

"H...uh? Whaaatt?! A demon lord?!"

Gabil was so shocked, he looked ready to piss himself. I could understand why. I waited for him to compose himself, then explained that Milim would

be staying in town for a little while.

“I see... No wonder that was such a powerful punch. I suppose I should be glad to be alive...”

“Yeah, well, she promised that she wouldn’t start any fights, so I doubt she’s aiming to kill anyone.”

“Wah-ha-ha! Of course not! That was just my way of saying hi!”

Hell of a way to do that. I guess I shouldn’t trust her on that promise too much. A little love tap from her would have life-altering consequences for any of us. I’d have to make sure everyone here is sufficiently warned.

“I’ll head to the cave later, so let Vester know, too, all right?”

“Yes sir.”

Gabil bowed as he bounded off. Considering the punishment he just endured, he looked in pretty good shape. Maybe the potion was pretty potent, or maybe Gabil was really that tough, or maybe both. Milim gave him a broad, approving nod, waved, then turned to me like nothing had happened.

“Wow, he’s pretty solidly built, huh? Maybe I oughta turn it up a notch next time?”

*Um, don’t ask me,* I pleaded from the bottom of my heart.

“Hey, um, you know you can’t start punching people just because you’re mad, okay?”

“Hmm? It’s his fault for angering me. Plus, like I said, that’s just a form of greeting!”

*No, Milim. No, it’s not.*

“Well, I’m not gonna let you greet people with a boxing match, all right? No more of that!”

“No? But I gotta show people a little force to start out, or else they’ll think I’m a pushover...”

“*I said,* you can’t! I’ll tell everyone in town to treat you with respect, all right?”

“You will? Well, great. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Yeah, thanks. Just chill for now, okay?”

That was about all I could warn her about at the moment. I had a feeling I’d need to gradually teach Milim some common sense over the next little while. It felt like the demon lord had a couple different triggers that enraged her—I’d just have to pray that Gabil was her first, and last, victim.

We continued our journey across town. It was almost dinnertime, when most people would wrap up their work and gather around outdoors, and I figured it was high time to introduce her.

Soei had been nice enough to spread the word around town about our little tyrant, but it was probably safest to show her around and make sure everybody knew exactly what she looked like. I really doubted anyone was stupid enough to try to make a pass at her, but it paid to be doubly sure.

I sent out the announcement for everyone to gather at the main square. They slowly filed in after finishing work, and once the square was filled up, I hopped up on the podium.

“Umm, so starting today, we’ll have a new friend living with all of us. We’ll be treating her as an honored guest, so I’d like you all to treat her politely for me. She’s also promised to follow all the town rules, so if you see her violating any, please let me know.”

I wasn’t willing to let a ton of things slide just because she was a demon lord...but given her violent force, figuring out how to lay down the law was a thorny question. I did make her promise to play nice to the general public, and she seemed confident that she’d stick to that.

“Aren’t you worrying too much?” she said. “I always keep my promises!”

I had my concerns about that, but I couldn’t just sit here and doubt her every move. I decided to trust in her.

Next, Milim took the podium.

“I’m Milim Nava,” she told the crowd, “and starting today, I’ll be living in this city. It’s good to meetcha!”

*Um, wait. What did she just say?!*

“Whoa, hang on. What do you mean, you’ll be living here?”

“Um, that’s exactly what I mean. I’ve decided to live here, too.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Don’t you already have someplace to live? Aren’t there people you have to worry about over there?”

“Oh, they’ll be fine. I’ll just go home every now and then, and it’ll be no prob!”

*It’s a huge prob to me, you idiot!* I had to mentally keep myself from screaming my thoughts at her. Well, whatever. She was a pretty flighty girl. Once she got bored of us, I was sure she’d be outta here.

“Well, you heard her, so treat her well,” I said, defeatedly addressing the crowd.

Milim was free to do as she pleased, and the residents generally seemed positive about the news—“What?! Lady Milim, the demon lord?!” “My stars, I’ve never seen her royal countenance in person before!” “Well done, Sir Rimuru! Striking such cordial relations with that tyrant!” “Ahh, it’ll be peaceful days for Tempest now!” And so on.

The name of a demon lord had a lot of cachet around here, Milim’s in particular. Nobody accused her of being a fake, either—with my good word to back her, there was no room for doubt.

“So just to make sure we’re clear, starting today... Well, Milim’s one of us. If she runs into any problems, I want you all to help her out.”

“Yes! Rimuru and I are friends now, so if something comes up, I’m your girl!”

I didn’t expect Milim to require help from any of us. If anything, we’d take the brunt of whatever drama she conjured up. That was what I meant from the statement, but that didn’t register with the demon lord. She took it straight, and I couldn’t deny her.

Still...

“Friends, huh...?”

Was that really all right? Befriending a demon lord and all? I mean, in the short time we’d known each other, Milim seemed nice enough and all, but...

The girl herself, perhaps picking up on my whisper, began to blush. “Yeah,” she said, “‘friends’ does sound kind of odd. Uhmm... Maybe not friends, so much as BFFs!”

*Um... BFFs? Milim, when did I give any indication that we were BFFs?*

“Er, BFFs?” I hesitantly asked.

“Huh? Aren’t we?!”

I could see the tears welling in Milim’s eyes already...but if anything, the hostile force in her already-balled fists came even more quickly. *Crap!*

“Hee-hee-hee! Kidding, kidding! BFFs forever, man!”

I quickly corrected myself. Now *there’s* a mine I almost planted my foot on. I was not gonna go down the same road as Gabil.

“Right? Totally! You sure are good at scaring people!” Milim beamed at me, indicating I had made the right call.

*Too easy. Too easy, but still a tough one to handle. No letting my guard down any longer. This had been a real lesson for me. The land of Tempest had a new resident, and she was more dangerous than a warehouse full of*

powder kegs.

\*

With her introduction over, we filed into the dining hall. Food was on the way, and today's main dish was curry.

To be honest, it was a dish that did its best to simulate curry. We had discovered a grass that resembled wild rice well enough, and we were in the midst of improving upon it right now. It wasn't very nutritious at the moment, and it certainly didn't taste great, but curry's great at covering up stuff like that, so the results turned out pretty well. I had Shuna's culinary gifts to thank for that. If we could figure out how to grow some honest-to-goodness white rice, I think it'd be a classic, but either way, this worked, too. We also had some ersatz Indian-style naan bread, so you could choose that instead.

Cooking in this town was the result of a long trial-and-error process. We had a stockpile of recipes at this point, but without any sugar, recreating the dishes I knew on Earth was a challenge. I had monsters scouring the forest for anything that resembled sugarcane. There might be plants with sugar stored in the roots, like sugar beets or whatnot, so I'd been asking our patrols to come back with as many different types of plants as they could. A sample was all I needed to run Analyze and Assess, figure out what was inside, and—over time—extract real sugar from it.

Milim certainly enjoyed the meal. I figured she had pretty childish tastes in food, too, so I asked Shuna to put some extra fruit juice in her curry to make it sweeter. Judging by the way she tore through her helping, I guess I made the right choice.

“Wowwww!! I haven't eaten anything this good in *suumuch* a long time!”

Shuna smiled as she doled out a second serving. It was a darling little scene. One that was ruined by the bombshell Shion had for me.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, I had been wondering—what was that present you gave to Lady Milim outside of town?”

Erk.

*Aw, geez, Shion, why'd you have to bring that up all of a sudden?*

“No! You can't have any! That jar's mine!”

Milim immediately tucked her jar of honey drops out of view. Sheesh.

She could've just tossed it into Spatial Storage, but *noooo*.

"Oh, don't worry, Lady Milim. Nobody's thinking about taking your things at all," Shuna said, smiling.

*Yeah, I'd hope not.* Nobody was suicidal enough in town to try it. And the moment she realized her honey wasn't in danger, she grinned and resumed her meal—so completely defenseless, one would begin to wonder how demon lord-ly she really was, if at all.

Though Milim wasn't really the problem. The problem was that people now knew about my secret honey stash.

"You know," Shuna continued, "I have been noticing a rather fragrant scent around here lately. I had thought it belonged to you, Lady Milim, but was that what Sir Rimuru gave you, perhaps—"

Crap. I did *not* like her leading the witness like that. This was bad. Soei had his head turned aside, pretending not to be involved, but Benimaru was already giving all of us a curious look. There were six of us seated at the table: Benimaru, Soei, Milim, Shuna, Shion, and me. Shuna was the only one not there for my confrontation with Milim, so I couldn't explain my way out of it.

Ah, such was my fate, I guess. I was hoping to keep it under wraps until we could figure out how to mass-produce it, but oh well. I took out some honey from my pocket and filled a nearby cup with it.

"Okay, well, this stuff is called honey. I got this as a substitute for sugar, but I can't make very much of it yet, so I can't give you all a supply."

I directed them all to scoop some up with their fingers and give it a try.

“““Ah...?!”””

The looks on the two females' faces were of abject shock. Soei just raised a single eyebrow, but Benimaru was already looking at me expectantly, hoping for more. Milim, of course, scooped up a bit herself, not that I invited her to. *You already have your own, you greedy brat!*

"So as you see, the honey tastes extremely sweet, but it also has a medicinal effect. In fact, it can cure almost any disease, but sometimes there can also be poison mixed in, so you need to be very careful extracting it. That's not a problem if I'm doing it, but still."

"And you think we can make a larger amount?"

"Not right now, no. I can produce maybe a single cup of this a week." If I pushed Apito hard enough, we *might* be able to up that to three cups, but

there was no pressing need to, so I let it slide. “I want to conduct more research into its makeup to evaluate it as a medicine, so there’s not a lot to spare for eating quite yet.”

This wasn’t a lie. My Analyze and Assess skill told me that this was a special-grade panacea. The rarity of the plants we extracted it from no doubt meant it had all kinds of astonishing benefits.

“Yes. The nectar we harvested from giant honeybee hives simply doesn’t compare to this. As a sweetener, it was fairly disappointing.”

Shion nodded. She was always a font of information about stuff like that, even if it didn’t directly connect to cooking. And she was right—giant honeybee nectar was more poisonous than sugary, making it ill-suited for food. I figured I could analyze it and extract something decent from it, but taming giant honeybees sounded like pretty tricky business to me anyway.

“If we could prepare a suitable garden for them and let that be their territory, I think we could get some pretty decent honey from them, though.”

“You think?” Shion said, finally seeing things my way.

“You said this could be a substitute for sugar,” Shuna asked, clearly curious. “Is sugar itself really this sweet?”

I could see Milim’s and Shion’s ears perk up at the question.

“It sure is. There’s no medicinal value, but it’s so sweet that people get literally addicted to it. You can use it in food, in drinks; all kinds of areas. We’ll be able to craft a great deal more food than before, once we have it,” I explained.

“Ah... I see. In that case, I will have us devote all our efforts to discovering this sugar, starting tomorrow. Shion...”

“Yes, Shuna. I promise you, I will stake my life on discovering this sweet plant for us all!”

“Yes! Very good!”

The three women gave one another firm nods. I wanted to ask why they’d stake their lives on this (and since when were they all best friends, too?), but it was fine for now. I took a final lick or two of the remaining honey, already assured that real sugar would be ours sooner than ever now.

With dinner wrapped up, I directed them all to the bath, my crowning achievement. The tub, made with the finest dwarven marble out there, was

filled day and night to the brim with hot-spring water, ready to be used at any time.

Milim had joined us, meekly following along behind Shuna and Shion. Normally, I'd nonchalantly hop in the bath with them all in slime form, but that definitely didn't feel right today. She'd be happier alone with the other females, and besides, I would need to discuss things with the ogres whenever Milim wasn't around.

So I moved on to our meeting hall and gave a rundown of the day's events to the people assembled there. "My goodness... I hardly know what to say. I never expected a demon lord to visit here on her own volition," Rigurd said, shaking his head.

I could understand his position. I had never pictured this happening, myself.

"Well, I think it'll be all right, though," I said. "She's promised not to start any fights in here, at least. Not without my permission."

I wasn't exactly confident about that, but I had little choice but to trust her on that count.

"Perhaps...but shouldn't we be more worried about how the other demon lords will react?" Kaijin spoke up.

Hakuro and Benimaru nodded at this.

"How do you mean?" I honestly asked.

"Well, there are multiple demon lords out there, and they all work under a convoluted system of checks and balances. You and Lady Milim just declared each other allies out in the public square, and that basically means this town's under the protection of Milim the demon lord. And normally, I suppose, that would be incredibly desirable, but..."

"...Sir Rimuru, you are leader of the Great Forest of Jura Alliance and ruler of the Jura-Tempest Federation," Hakuro interjected. "I suppose the actions of today would seem, in the eyes of the other demon lords, to mean that the Forest of Jura has forged an alliance with Milim herself."

"Yes!" Benimaru added. "It means that Milim, who hardly has any subjects of her own, suddenly has a much larger force backing her up. It shakes the foundation of the current power balance among the demon lords. One wrong move, I fear, and the entire forest could become subject to a major war."

*Hmm. Yes, I will admit to not thinking too deeply about it, but I suppose*

*my decisions could wind up affecting the whole forest, huh? But... I mean...*

“Practically speaking, though, none of us could stop Lady Milim if we wanted to, could we?”

Rigurd offered his opinion, and he was right. Even all of us at once would never have a chance. It left us with nothing but the most passive of approaches—waiting for her to grow bored and leave.

“To be frank,” Benimaru said, “her strength is on a totally different dimension from any of us. There is no point even debating whether we could beat her or not. None of us would be alive now were it not for Sir Rimuru’s quick thinking.”

“...Exactly. If other demon lords oppose her, I honestly like our chances against them more than her. Milim the demon lord is a walking catastrophe.”

Soei nodded at his compatriot’s honest feelings.

That largely settled it. There was nothing else to be done, and that was that. So how to handle Milim in the meantime...?

“In that case, I vote that we should leave the day-to-day handling of Lady Milim to her...ah, BFF, Sir Rimuru. All in agreement?”

“““Aye!!”””

Wha?! Dammit, Benimaru! But by the time I had the thought, I was too late. I was used to tossing the ball to someone else most of the time—this time, they did the same to me.

“Besides,” Hakuro said, “Lady Milim is one of the oldest and strongest of demon lords. A lord that we absolutely must not be hostile toward, one could say. For this issue, at least, I see little we can do besides let Sir Rimuru handle it.”

*Way to drive the stake in like that.* I didn’t think she was *that* dangerous, but so be it. I sighed. Nobody else seemed to know how to curry Milim’s favor, and since I was apparently a genius at handling children, I suppose it was up to me to help out. We now had a silent, but steadfast, agreement that the demon lord Milim was *my* problem.

Milim was already looking drowsy by the time she left the bath. Apparently, she was beside herself with excitement—few baths large enough to swim in existed in this world, so I couldn’t blame her. Most people had to make do with quick dips in cold water, and even nobility had to be content

with hot water in cramped little tubs, I was told. Assuming you lived in a rich enough nation to have dedicated baths at all, which wasn't always the case.

I was admittedly kind of picky about having this bath. Selfish of me, I know, but it had turned into a lovely facility. If people liked using it, I couldn't be happier.

I asked Shuna to lead Milim to a guest bedroom and put her to sleep. There weren't any Western-style beds here, just pseudo-tatami mats and futon mattresses on the floor. I worried that she'd have some complaints about that, but it wound up not being an issue. She immediately fell asleep, looking snug as a bug.

It was the demon lord's first day and night in Tempest, and by and large, it could have turned out a lot worse. Of course, the whirlwind she was kicking up had only just begun.

\*

We were busy as bees the next morning.

First, waking up Milim at sunrise wasn't easy... "Why does a demon lord have to wake up early?!" she grumbled.

We managed to get her up and dressed. Her current outfit was just too exposed, so we prepared some other clothes for her the previous evening—just a quick outfit built from whatever we had around, but she was pretty enough that she looked just fine wearing anything.

"This is hard to move in."

"Oh? Well, it looks nice. Isn't that better for you?"

I made a decent attempt to mollify her, and her mood instantly improved. No complaints there. Children can be so simple like that sometimes.

Next up was breakfast. Something resembling bread, fruit jam, and milk—chilled cowdeer milk. I had been telling people about how good cow's milk was, and this was close enough. That, plus some hot vegetable soup.

The jam used fruit that had been boiled, cooled, and then sealed in chilled jars. It used no additional sugar, and I wasn't wholly sure what kind of fruit it was, but it was Shuna's homemade recipe and quite a bit sweeter than I expected. It was more sour than sweet to my palate, but in a world so lacking in sugary food, this was still a rare luxury. Most people in town just had bread and the remaining vegetable soup for breakfast, so the jam was more

reserved for honored guests, so to speak.

<https://mp4directs.com>



<https://mp4directs.com>

“Wowwww!! This is incredible!” Milim gushed as she ate. Glad she liked it. I watched her go as I thought over a few things.

I didn’t particularly mind being the go-to guy for Milim-related issues, but should I really just be acting normal like this? Most of my work around town involved inspection—checking on construction sites, fields as they were being tilled, the weapon production workshop, our food storehouses. I’d discuss things with the supervisors of each location and nail down our future direction.

If any trouble happened around town, I’d sometimes stop by to arbitrate. With all these races living in the same space, we needed rules in place that everybody had to follow. It was one thing when this was just a village or settlement, but we were now a federation with a population in the tens of thousands, and the rule of law was more important than ever. I didn’t have enough time in the day to enact a ton of laws by myself, so the town still ran on a lot of general guidelines more than anything. Thus, if there was a difference of opinion or some other dispute bubbling, I was left to make the final decision.

Rigurd and the rest of my staff solved most issues for me, thankfully, so I didn’t hear about it unless it was something pretty serious. It seemed to me that this was on purpose—they made sure not to bother me about something unless it really was that important. It was surprising, seeing how well these monsters could cooperate with one another. I’m sure everyone had their complaints, but we now had a culture where, instead of acting out physically, people preferred to let me do the judging.

For today, at least, there were none of those problems to tackle. When there was, I’d be contacted about it at least a week in advance, giving me time to listen to both sides and everyone else time to gather evidence and such. Which meant that the only planned appointment for today was a quick stop by Gabil’s place.

I dared a quick glance at Milim. Would I be okay taking her into the cave? It was now filled with Vester’s valuable laboratory tools and experiments—a sort of federal research facility.

Suddenly, I had a good idea. Milim still had only a patchwork outfit on. If her stay here would be extending a while longer, we’d need to prepare several outfits for her. Which meant—

“Hey, Milim, once you’re done eating, you want to go get some clothes

custom-made for you?"

"Why? Isn't this good enough?"

"You'll probably want more than one outfit. Besides, I think you'd look nice in something cuter anyway."

"What? You have cute clothes?!"

"Sure. You can pick out whatever you like."

"Perfect! Ahh, I should have known, Rimuru! This town has *everything!*"

The moment I brought it up, she was already dancing around in her seat. Perfect. That oughta buy me some time. Going into that gauntlet of a dress shop, it was easy to spend half a day without realizing it. I had experienced it for myself, being stuffed into outfit after outfit like a dress-up doll. Most of the designs were made for "fun" looks anyway, so I'm sure Milim would be able to find something she likes.

"Oh, Lady Milim is choosing some clothes? I'd be happy to join her."

"Yeah, if you could, Shuna? I got an errand to run in the cave, so toss me a line with Thought Communication if something comes up."

"Certainly."

"Oh, you aren't coming, Rimuru?!"

"Ah, um, I already have some clothes, so. I'll come back to see you once you're all set, Milim, so feel free to select whatever you like and have 'em tailor it to your size. You could even have some new clothes made for you."

"Ooh! Got it!"

Great. That went well. The moment she heard the magic phrase *new clothes*, her interest immediately launched her in that direction. It oughta keep her from starting a riot or genocide in my absence for a while.

She went off with Shuna to the production workshop after breakfast. Now I needed to get my own errand over with.

\*

I headed for the Sealed Cave with Kaijin coming along.

"Were you all right after yesterday?" I asked Gabil, who was waiting for me. He seemed fine to me, but a cheap shot from a demon lord could lead to all kinds of aftereffects.

"No problem at all, sir!" he replied with a hearty laugh. "I am supremely confident in my body's durability!"

He certainly *acted* like always, too. I breathed a sigh of relief as Vester gingerly came up to me.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, I did file the report with King Gazel as well. I hope it was all right?”

A report about Milim was what he meant. I asked him to send one off yesterday. Our pact with Dwargon *did* include language about providing whatever support we could if danger befell one of us, and this definitely counted. There wasn’t much Dwargon could do, really, but it’d be polite to at least let them know and prepare for the worst.

“Not a problem. Did the communication crystal work all right?”

“It did, yes. It connected me to King Gazel almost immediately. All I said to him was that the demon lord Milim attacked and that you handled it, Sir Rimuru, but was that good enough?”

I could understand Vester’s concern. That terse report probably threw the Dwarven Kingdom into chaos, scrambling to collect whatever intel it could. Vester was probably being swamped with requests for more information.

“Well, we talked it over last night, and it was decided that I’d be taking care of Milim. The only conclusion we came to was that, uh, there really ain’t much else we can do right now. I can’t do anything besides warn him, but I figured it’d be nice to do that, at least. If they have any bright ideas, I’d love to hear them.”

“Yes, I am sure. The demon lord Milim is a class beyond all the others, as I understand...”

“Quite,” Gabil added. “The strongest in the world, as far as I am aware.”

Huh. Famous enough that even these two knew about her? Hakuro mentioned she was the oldest and strongest of demon lords as well, so Gabil couldn’t be lying.

But maybe this was a good thing, depending on how you looked at it. If *every* demon lord was such a monster, then no way was I ever going to keep my promise to Shizu and slay her nemesis. Milim being such an exceptional force meant that hey, maybe I had half a chance at offing your run-of-the-mill demon lord after all. The thought lightened my spirits a little.

The passiveness of our current approach notwithstanding, maybe we really *would* have better luck duking it out with the rest of them. On that point, at least, my staff agreed.

But there was no point in worrying all day. I had time to think about demon lord politics later. For now, I wanted to ask about healing potion.

“Do you have your report, then?”

Gabil nodded, then began explaining his current status with Vester.

The potion from yesterday was apparently the newest that Vester had produced. Something quite different from the things he tried making using dwarven technology, as he put it.

The potion I produced within myself was the result of a 99-percent extraction of hipokute herbs. Drink it, sprinkle it on someone—it worked great either way. Meanwhile, the dwarves could manage only 98-percent purity at best, and that single percentage point made a world of difference in performance.

The official name for the magic elixir I had created was a Full Potion, one that could fully heal any type of injury or wound—even repair missing body parts, like arms and legs. There were a lot of ways to lose those in this world, whether they were bitten off by a monster or blown off by a magical blast, and this potion could fully rebuild them. *Magic* was the only word for it.

According to the Great Sage, all this was possible because my potion could read genetic information from the body to regenerate limbs—as long as the subject wasn’t born that way, anything was healable.

What dwarven technology could make, meanwhile, was called a High Potion. It was a first-class concoction, capable of healing even major injuries, but sometimes it couldn’t fully restore certain wounds—and it definitely couldn’t regenerate lost body parts all the time. I conjectured this was because the potion wasn’t quite pure enough to fully read all the bodily data it needed for that. It could handle most injuries but couldn’t quite push itself up to perfection—that was the difference.

The hipokute we were growing in here was of the same quality as natural-grown plants. The best out there, in other words. So any difference in quality from the potions that resulted were purely the result of production issues.

“Y’know, I’d think a High Potion would be good enough, most of the time....,” Kaijin said as he scratched his head. He had a point. Already, down here in this cave, they had replicated the best that the dwarves could do in their homeland.

“Perhaps,” Vester replied, “but listen, Sir Kaijin: Once a scientist realizes there is something yet better to achieve, he refuses to make any compromise

until he reaches it!"

Once he knew what my potion could do, he wanted to achieve that for himself. Which led up to what we saw yesterday.

"The potion used on me yesterday was in no way inferior to Sir Rimuru's own potion. If I may be so presumptuous to say, I feel we have succeeded this time." Even Gabil was confident in this batch of medicine.

"Let me assess it," I said, running Analyze and Assess on the vial presented to me.

*Understood. This medicine is equivalent to a Full Potion.*

*Oooh. Nice. Vester really made it.*

"Good job, Vester, This is definitely Full Potion, all right."

"Hohhh! I've done it!!"

"Superb work, Sir Vester. I am grateful to have aided you."

"Yeah, not bad, Vester. I always thought you were best suited for research work like this."

As Vester was almost overcome with emotion, Gabil and Kajin gave him their blessing.

Man, I didn't think he could really do it.

"I couldn't have done it without the hints you gave me, Sir Rimuru," Vester said, turning to me. Geez. I didn't really do anything. It was all the result of his efforts, so I didn't want to unfairly take the credit. I just gave him my thoughts, that's all. It didn't seem to me that Vester's work process was much different from the extraction I did within my own body. The quantities involved differed a fair bit, but I thought it odd that he saw so much more of a performance hit than I did.

My reasoning was that it had something to do with the way the potion reacted to the atmosphere around it. The work space inside my stomach was a complete vacuum, free of impurities and the like, and I figured that let me perform the most complete extraction possible. The fact that even this produced only 99-percent purity, I chalked up to the resulting liquid being highly reactive to particles in the air.

I explained this to Vester, and he took it seriously. It was just a passing idea on my part, but Vester believed in me and carried out the relevant

experiments—and that, I guess, is what led to this Full Potion before me.

Which was great and all. But you know, not *everything* about it was great.

“I bet this could be a huge source of income for Tempest if we sold it, Kaijin. What do you think?”

He thought it over a bit, then shook his head. “Ooh, that could be tough, boss. If anything, this stuff is *too* good. The purity level’s so high that it’s not something you can use on a whim, y’know? This kind of quality, *maybe* some hero-class adventurer would bring it along now and then...”

Vester *hmmed* his agreement. “Quite true, I fear. I’m happy this resulted in the best quality you’ll ever find, but in terms of selling it? I’m not quite sure the market is prepared for it.”

*So what the hell were we making it for?* I kept myself from interjecting. But thinking about it, maybe I was wrong this whole time. I thought we could make this potion kind of the town’s flagship product, but Vester and Gabil were picturing it more as a potion of last resort, so to speak.

“Still, Sir Rimuru, there are not so many educated doctors in the Dwarven Kingdom. There are alchemists capable of mixing compounds together, but it is rare for someone to make his entire living off selling High Potions. The medicine you see in the markets is actually Low Potion, made by diluting High Potion with water. They just call it potion in the shops, however. Thus...”

Vester had probably noticed my disappointment. Listening to him, it was actually rather simple. Naturally grown hipokute was a rare thing to find. You almost never saw it bought or sold in the marketplace. There were some benevolent botanists who cultivated it themselves, but even they could only harvest a very tiny amount of it. Along those lines, our mass-production project was a totally alien concept. That’s why even diluted potion was considered a rarity.

Instead, Vester suggested this: “Perhaps we could negotiate with King Gazel to have them accept delivery of Low Potion from us for sale over there? I’d imagine he’d want us to take in those few medicine makers who work in the Dwarven Kingdom in exchange, but...”

“Yeah, that might actually work, boss. If they leave the potion making and selling to us, they can just buy in whatever they need for their own purposes. That may account for a lot of the motive behind their technology-share request, actually.”

Kaijin had a point, but that was fine by me. He and Vester began talking between themselves, figuring out how to best convince Gazel of the idea. It was hard to believe they came to blows not long ago, given how well they got along now. They must see eye to eye on a lot of things, deep down. *Good thing*, I thought.

One Full Potion could apparently be diluted down to a hundred Low Potions. If this idea gained any steam, it could be a pretty lucrative source of income. But no great need to hurry. I didn't want to hurt any of the Dwarven Kingdom's vested interests. We'd have to work things out so we'd both benefit from the deal.

So I decided to let the topic simmer for the time being and took my leave from the meeting.

\*

The friendliness of our chat made me stay longer than anticipated. It was just a little bit into the afternoon, but I was sure the goblinas at the workshop were working their dress-up-doll magic on Milim, so I figured I better pick her up. Meals in Tempest were handed out in the morning and evening, but if she was up for it, I intended to get her something in between.

The moment I stepped out of the magic circle, the fracas was under way.

There was shouting, screaming, and a great pillar of fire coming from a plot of land near the center of town that hadn't been built on yet. It was a pretty sordid-looking scene. There was no damage, thankfully, and no workers nearby got caught up in whatever it was.

Soei, realizing I was there, sidled up to me.

“What happened?”

“Well...”

He gave me a quick rundown, although once I reached the site, I found it easy enough to figure out for myself. While I was off to the cave, the town had another visitor—one who was positively livid with Milim.

I was guided to the center of it, where I found Shuna, Shion, Benimaru, Hakuro, and Rigurd with a few other hobgoblins. Rigurd was sporting a heavy bruise on his face; someone must have hit him.

“What's up, Rigurd? You all right?”

“Ah, Sir Rimuru! This much is nothing to me!”

That was just an act; the damage was obviously fairly serious. I handed him some potion and turned toward where everyone else was watching.

“Did *he* get you?”

“Yes, my lord...?”

I didn’t need to check, but I did anyway. There was a dark-haired magic-born on the ground, apparently struck by Milim as well. His face was twisted in pain, his tongue sticking out of his bloodstained mouth. He seemed alive, but motionless, his eyes rolling into his skull. Around him were his entourage of underlings, frozen stiff and too thrown by this state of affairs to know what to do.

The fallen magic-born was wearing a fancy-looking outfit, dyed in black, and some rather expensive-looking armor.

According to Soei’s report, he identified himself as working for the demon lord Carillon, and Soei had hurried to the scene after the intruder set off his alert network, only to find this magic-born and his group coming down to the vacant lot from the heavens.

Rigurd handled them first since I was away, and things came to a boil pretty quickly afterward. Before Soei could even grasp the situation and report to me about it, everything was already done with. “I apologize for failing to inform you earlier,” he said to me, but I couldn’t find much fault with him.

First, the magic-born had begun by taking a self-guided tour of the city, going around like a would-be conqueror. This was when Rigurd had shown up, and the magic-born had this to say to him: “I am Phobio! The Black Leopard Fang! One of Lord Carillon’s Three Lycanthropeers, and the strongest of all in the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance! What a fine town this is—truly one worthy of falling under the rule of the Beast Master himself, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Surely you jest—” was all Rigurd had managed before getting punched out without further comment. The visitor did not use his full strength, keeping the injury merely serious instead of critical. Soei judged him to be a formidably strong magic-born, and as he put it, a full-power strike could have killed Rigurd on the spot. Kind of hard to imagine, given how frozen and helpless he was now, but still.

But why was he on the ground? Simple.

Spotting the presence of the Black Leopard Fang Phobio or whatever,

Milim flew in, saw that Rigurd was down, and got *angry*. Phobio hurriedly responded with a skill he called Panther Fang Explosive Chop, although nobody knew what it was supposed to be—it seems Milim's force of will deflected it and sent it hurtling into the sky.

That was the pillar of flame I saw, and the fallout from that singed the cute dress she had just put on. No longer able to contain her rage, Milim plunged her fist into Phobio's stomach, which brings us to the current scene before me.

So now what...?

“Ah, Rimuru! This freak was acting like he was the big boss around here, so I put him back in his place!”

Now Milim noticed me, and she was evidently proud of herself. Fishing for compliments. Should I take the bait? He started it, yes, but I didn't want to spark a conflict with another demon lord *quite* yet. I had never heard the name Carillon before, and I had no idea what kind of force he had, even. But we just decked one of his men, and we couldn't say we weren't involved anymore.

*I swear. Take your eyes off her for a moment—and all these headaches she gives me.*

“...Didn't you promise me you wouldn't cause a ruckus without my permission?”

“Geh?! Um, I, erm... This, this is different! He's not from this town, so it's all right! Really!”

“No, it's not! Still, you did help keep Rigurd safe. We'll just say no lunch for you today and call it even—”

“You're mean! That's so mean! Waaahhhh!”

Well, that's what you get for bothering me when I was just thinking about lunch. I didn't need to eat anyway, and Milim must have been the same. What a glutton of a demon lord.

“Dammit, this is all *his* fault! And that Carillon, breaking his promise like that... What a scoundrel! One shot's not enough—let me hit him again...”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

I had to spring over to keep her from punching Phobio again. His men turned white as a sheet of paper, terrified at her brutality.

“Look, how about we go somewhere else?” I pleaded to the bawling Milim.

This was really turning into a travesty, so I decided to try talking this out away from the carnage.

\*

We were back in the old meeting hall. They had just finished taking Milim's measurements and were preparing something new for her when all this happened, so her outfit was quickly replaced.

I didn't want to spoil her, but we wound up serving her lunch anyway. This was partly because she had revealed a couple curious things during her wailing, and I wanted to follow up on that. She happily nibbled on her sandwich, once again in a good mood, so everything was fine with me.

The hall was draped in tension, though. Milim was about the only one unaffected by it. She definitely earned the "demon" part of her name, catching trouble the moment I wasn't around. Perhaps this would've happened even if Milim weren't here, but it wouldn't have gotten so complicated *this* quickly.

...Well, no point dwelling on the past. The future was more important.

"So what are you all here for?" I said as I sized up the now-aware Phobio.

"Hmph! And I have to reply to you lowly would-be magic-born?"

Benimaru and Shion immediately glared at him. I motioned them to stay cool, and they reluctantly stayed there, watching things unfold.

It was just Rigurd, Benimaru, Shion, and me, along with Milim. Phobio had three of his own troops with him; we hadn't restrained him or anything, which could be why he was giving us so much attitude. I figured I'd try to outclass him, tossing in a bluff or two for good measure.

"Call me lowly if you want, but I'm definitely stronger than you. Also, I'd advise you to just give me some answers. I don't know this Carillon guy, but depending on how you act around me, maybe he's gonna have to answer to us before long, okay? Think you're ready to make enemies with the entire Forest of Jura?"

"Ha! Well, look at you! The most self-important slime in the world, eh? And this entire town carries out the orders of such a base creature? What a bunch of wimps you must have here. And just because Lady Milim likes you a little, don't let that get to your head, boy."

Magic-born, just like monsters, tended to flock to whoever was strongest

around them. Reacting to all these barbs would do nothing but tire me out. Certainly, this guy was tough—one of the Three Lycanthropeers, the so-called Black Leopard Fang, whatever. And even without all that bluster, I could tell he boasted a fair amount of magical energy. Maybe no match at all for Milim, but likely stronger than Benimaru or Shion. Even I would've had trouble a bit ago, although not with the Orc Disaster stored in my Stomach now.

This was a powerful magic-born, one worthy of being categorized as a sub-demon lord. I was fairly sure I was stronger, but I was in no hurry to test that out. It'd just make things harder, and winning would accomplish nothing. It may even earn me the ire of this Carillon guy; we could seriously be at war soon. I wanted to avoid that, so I had to exercise my social skills to extract some info from him.

“A base creature?” Milim, done with her sandwich, raised her voice again. “You think you can pick on my friend like that?”

She was more than an ammo dump; she was explosive all by herself. Before I could even begin the conversation, I had a premonition she had ruined everything. But I was getting the hang of dealing with her. Lure her in with food, and she was easy to soothe.

“Hang on, Milim. If you do anything else, I’m seriously taking dinner away from you, okay?”

“O-kay. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Great. With that squared away, it was time to start the investigation.

“Well. First off, you’re right; I am a slime. But I’m a slime that rules over thirty percent of this forest, and if you’re rarin’ for war, then I’m willing to accept that. So I’d advise being careful in how you respond to me.”

I mixed a little Coercion in with my subsequent questions. The answers came surprisingly more readily than I thought. Milim’s threats must have hit home, after all—probably not my Coercion, sadly, but at least I got what I wanted out of him.

The pouting, sullen answers could be summed up as follows: The demon lord Carillon had ordered him to try to scout either the orc lord or the mystery magic-born that fought him, whichever had survived. The magic-born referred to us, apparently, which suggested that the demon lord backup Gelmud had hinted at wasn’t Milim after all.

I didn’t think multiple demon lords were involved with this, but thinking

about it, I doubted Milim would bother with such a convoluted plan anyway. It was more natural to assume someone else was behind it.

Getting back to the subject, whoever won the fight between the orc lord and his foe was likely going to be an incredibly strong foe, so Carillon sent the Black Leopard Fang Phobio, a sub-demon lord in his own right, to check it out. Carillon had a good eye for that kind of thing, apparently, but Phobio was just too much of a moron for the job. If the demon lord wanted me on his side, he should've sent a more intelligent magic-born, one who could bargain with me and put an enticing offer on the table.

“Carillonnnnn... Breaking our promise not to get in each other’s way...” Milim was stewing next to me. Phobio, meanwhile, averted his eyes, as if afraid of her.

The proud sub-demon lord was just a pale imitation next to a real one. Feeling her seething next to me, I reasoned that just about anyone who came here would’ve wound up the same way. I’d definitely need to ask her about that promise later, too; that sounded important.

Now that we had gotten everything out of Phobio, I asked him to take his leave.

Milim’s presence meant that Phobio had no power here, so he glared at the two of us, barked out “You will regret this!” and took his crew out of the city. I told him to relay a message to Carillon, telling him to contact me at a later date if he wanted to negotiate with us, but I doubted he’d ever receive it. When I left that job to Phobio, I knew he’d only provide whatever info made him look good. It’d be better for him to tell the truth, given how his mission was a failure and all, but that was Phobio’s business.

*I’d better get as much info as I can from Milim about this Carillon’s personality and other traits, so I can be ready to deal with whatever he’s got. But how to bring up the topic...?*

“All right, Milim. I’d like some more details.”

“I can’t let you do that! We made a promise that we wouldn’t meddle with each other, so I can’t even tell you, Rimuru.”

*Ah, thanks for revealing you’ve got a secret, then.* Now we had a grown-up and a child trying to outwit each other—and honestly, I liked my chances.

“Oh no? Was this a promise that you’d keep things a secret from each

other?”

“—No, nothing like that. Just not to meddle—”

“No? Well, it’s fine, then, isn’t it? I mean, Carillon’s obviously told his minions all about *you*, huh, Milim? Besides, we’re *BFFs*, and we gotta help each other out, y’know? And I just figured, I better know what I can about demon lords besides you, Milim. Plus, if I don’t know what kind of promise you made, how can I make sure I don’t accidentally start meddling, huh?” I put a special emphasis on *BFFs*.

“Yeah...but...BFFs...”

Just one more push. I decided to offer a toy to cheer her up.

“Oh, right— How about I make you a weapon sometime? I can’t help but worry about my BFF, so...”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re right! Being BFFs is the most important thing, huh?”

And down goes Milim. Just way too easy.

I kept my lips from spreading into a maniacal grin as I nodded with the breezy confidence of a grown-up.

So I successfully extracted what I wanted from Milim—information on three other demon lords besides her, and what they all wanted; what happened just now; and what was happening behind the scenes. Quite a bit about the mysteries I was concerned about.

But—wow. Demon lords, trying to create a puppet demon lord of their own... Milim was in on it just to alleviate her boredom, but this was a pretty serious operation, wasn’t it? And if I’m getting in the way of it, then no wonder they’re after us.

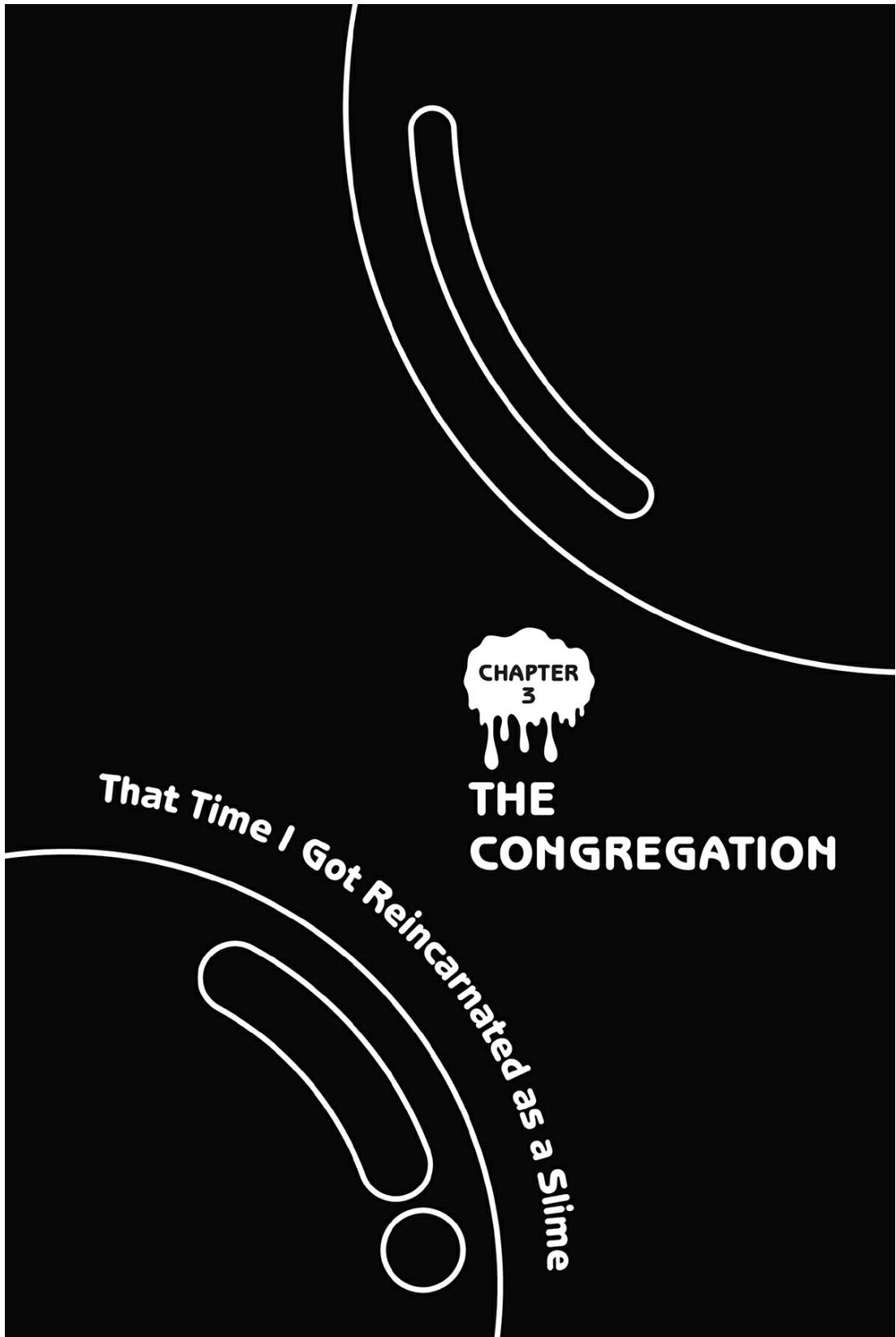
“This...will soon involve other demon lords, will it not, Sir Rimuru?”

“A sordid state of affairs. We had best bring this up with Treyni at once.”

“Not a problem! With Sir Rimuru at our side, we have nothing to fear from any of the demon lords!”

All of us (save one) were holding our heads at this disaster.

The gale that blew in with Milim’s attack was growing in strength, and it was creeping ever closer to Tempest.



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## CHAPTER 3

# THE CONGREGATION

The Kingdom of Farmus was a vast nation, a sort of front door leading to the assorted nations to the west.

These nations had no direct ties to the Eastern Empire. Instead of official relations, they had powerful merchants who took it personally upon themselves to distribute in-demand goods between the two lands. Most of this informal trade went through the Armed Nation of Dwargon, which (publicly, at least) was neutral and thus gave their tacit consent to the goods going to and fro between them.

Part of Farmus's territory was adjacent to the Dwarven Kingdom, meaning that anyone who lived in one of the so-called Western Nations would have to go through Farmus to reach Dwargon. That is, unless they were willing to brave a path through the Forest of Jura. The Farmus path was far safer and more monster-free, and even with the tariffs and fees applied, it still resulted in a more profitable journey. No merchant in their right mind would opt out of it.

This all meant that not only rare Eastern Empire goods but also high-quality dwarven weapons and armor could be obtained by the Western Nations through the informal trade market with Farmus. It had made Farmus's capital of Marris a well-funded and burgeoning trade city, home to people from all over the world, and earned it the nickname of the "front door" to the west. It also meant the kingdom's coffers were full to overflowing, both from the taxes charged to traders and the revenues from the more well-heeled merchants, paid in exchange for assorted services.

Among the nations of the west, it was certainly either the richest or very

close to it.



Nidol Migam, Earl of Migam, was indignant.

Farmus was, indeed, a rich kingdom, but so much power was tipped toward its central government that practically none of those riches reached the nobility tasked with running its more remote regions. Redistribution of wealth was an alien concept around here, and the earldom of Migam never seemed to see any relief from the taxes they were expected to collect from their citizens.

As with other nations, they were taxed based on their agricultural harvests—and yet, they were also charged with defending their borders against the threats posted by the forest. That was the current source of the Earl of Migam's indignation.

"Have you ever heard something so ridiculous?" he spat out, recalling what the finance minister had just told him. Simply remembering it made his blood boil: *The Storm Dragon has vanished, and thus, the central government's special support payments will be ending, as of today.* And that was that—no back talk allowed. After being summoned to the capital. After being forced to wait for three hours.

That stipend had been a huge aid to them, certainly. The earl's lands went right up to the Forest of Jura, making it a keystone of Farmus's border defense. But that wasn't just Migam's problem. It was a problem that loomed over the entire country.

"And yet...of all the patronizing things they could have done...!"

Nidol was so angry, he couldn't help but verbalize his thoughts. There was too much to consider. He had to think about how he would keep the earldom going.

Sealed away or not, Veldora the Storm Dragon was a special S-ranked monster and thus ignored at one's own peril. With the disappearance now public knowledge, it was perhaps understandable that such "special"—i.e., provisional—support payments no longer made sense.

But the timing couldn't have been worse. The Storm Dragon was just as

much a threat to the monsters, too—and no more dragon meant no more overlord to keep them in check. They needed to *strengthen* their border forces, if anything, for all the new monster activity—and then they lost their budget for it.

That, in a nutshell, was what angered Nidol at the moment.

The government might have a point, but to the Earl of Migam, that didn't matter.

*How do I protect my land now...?*

MMercenaries cost money. Adventurers from the Free Guild couldn't be trusted, when push came to shove. Now was exactly when the government should be extending a lifeline to him. They were talentless fools, completely failing to grasp the situation.

If, heaven forbid, Nidol Migam's lands were swallowed up by hordes of monsters, it'd cost Farmus all the trust placed upon it by neighboring countries and large-scale merchants. It would be the government that would pay the price for that, and right this minute, it was setting itself up for doom.

The earl continued to curse his superiors under his breath. None of this was his own responsibility. He knew that, but still...

He sighed in his wagon, his mind a tad more settled. *No one left but the royal family to press upon...* He recalled the face of the king. It filled him with despair. The sheer avarice of that man would never allow him to care about the fate of some patch of frontier land. It would be blasphemy to say that out loud, but those were Nidol's honest feelings.

Without the pretext of the Storm Dragon to prop him up, the Earl of Migam might be forced to raise taxes, even.

His territory bordered only two other areas: Central Farmus and the forest. There was no reason to prepare for invasion from other countries, and thus no need for a permanent standing army. The earl's territorial force, tasked with driving off monsters and magical beasts, numbered no more than a hundred or so knights.

The number made Nidol wince.

Technically speaking, the earl had been taking the special stipend and pocketing it. The payments were meant to keep up strict patrols across the border with the Forest of Jura, but in this far-off region with no need for a

large army, all they had to worry about was handling monsters. With the rise of the Free Guild over the past decade or so, too, the costs of dispatching monsters had gone down a great deal.

Thus, this whole disaster was something of a comeuppance for the earl himself, payback for failing to enact the measures he should have. He was aware of that, but it was still a bitter pill for Nidol to swallow.

It all began with a missive from the Western Holy Church. The official announcement that the Storm Dragon had vanished came via magic courier, and it forced the Earl of Migam to take action.

The Western Holy Church was the state religion of the Holy Empire of Lubelius. It worshipped a single god, Luminus, as its absolute deity, and served as the headquarters of what was generally the largest religion practiced across the Western Nations. This broad faith was for good reason—there were paladins within their armies, holy knights who each boasted A-ranked powers and beyond, and they were trusted and revered as reliable experts in the slaying of monsters.

The Church's central creed revolved around eradicating monsters from the world, and thus whenever a smaller nation had an issue with such creatures it couldn't handle alone, the Church would send Crusader paladin forces to aid them.

Such a virtuous organization, working for the good of the faithful, would never send false information to its people. The Church was already alerting him about monsters growing more active in the forest—it had to be true, Nidol concluded. So he reluctantly sought to reinforce his own force of knights. A hundred would be enough to simply patrol the forest, but should the monsters fall out of control, being unprepared for it would be a problem. His knights needed to stay in place—that was his conclusion.

So citing emergency provisions, he called in retired knights and the like, successfully beefing up his force to three times its original size. But that still didn't quell his fears. It would take at least ten years, he thought, for a new pecking order to make itself known among the monsters. Relying on retired knights to weather that long, long decade would be tough.

Requisitioning Free Guild adventurers would place pressure on his financial affairs. Calling for an emergency draft was a last resort. For now, he

would have to hope for a healthy crew of volunteers.

The adventurers would gladly take up a monster-slaying role around the forest, but that came at a price—a price that ballooned depending on the danger rank awarded. Having them permanently stationed in Migam was out of the question, but if the worst happened, he still needed to consider tapping their resources. He had already used up most of the government's special stipend, but his earldom was not facing a financial crisis yet—for the most part, those funds went toward his personal entertainment anyway.

Right now, while the retirees were back on the force, Nidol figured he needed to raise a new generation of young knights at once. It was, he imagined, the best measure he could take at the moment. So he funneled all future special stipend funds into the force, along with some of his own money—no point scrimping now.

And it seemed to work. Over time, it seemed like it would all come together. And then the central government summoned him and took his funding away. Who could blame Nidol for losing his temper? Not that being a lazy, embezzling ruler would earn him much sympathy...

In his wagon, as he returned home, Nidol continuously racked his brain, figuring out what he should do next. His mind was full of financial issues. There was no more space in it for the even thornier problems awaiting him soon enough.

\*

Upon arriving back at his own earldom, the Earl of Migam was greeted by a request from Franz, the local guild master, for a meeting. The earl agreed to it, wanting to discuss how to defend the land going forward, and they arranged a conference the following day.

The guild master was practically breathing down his neck, pleading that now was no time to act slowly. Franz was usually a calm, even-minded leader, and seeing him in such a lather was a concern. It made Nidol fear the worst, so he ignored the usual procedure and immediately gave permission for the meeting.

“This is an unverified report, but it is said that an orc lord has appeared.” The next day, Franz offered only a brief hello and told him.

“...What did you say? An orc lord?! And what do you mean, unverified?”

It almost made the good earl faint on the spot. This was a serious crisis, and only his rage kept him going as he confronted Franz.

Unperturbed, Franz continued his report, stating that adventurers from the kingdom of Blumund had heard rumors of the orc lord.

“I would like your help in gauging the nature of this threat. To be exact, I would like you to send out an exploratory force for us.”

There was nothing unusual about this request from the serene guild master to the half-hysterical earl. The Free Guild was not a charity, and it was unaffiliated with any government. They existed in cooperation with, but not within the framework of, the earldom.

“If you would like us to handle this investigation, we could accept that, at a special emergency price...”

“Silence! You money-grubbing weasel!!”

*Look who's talking*, Franz thought, remaining silently composed. He knew the matter needed looking into either way. Franz had a duty to keep his guild members safe; he wasn't going to expose them to dangerous missions without a suitable reward.

Normally, monster-hunting requests like this would need to follow a certain procedure. A town or village would file an official request, providing all the relevant information to the Free Guild. The guild would then use eyewitness accounts and the like to assign a danger level to the monster (or monsters) in question, sometimes sending appropriate personnel to further examine the issue.

Guild regulations dictated that for particularly dicey jobs, pre-evaluation was even more vital to ensure the right rank was assigned. If you wanted a monster slain, you needed several adventurers (guild rules stated three or more) of similar level or higher to tackle it.

Promotions were awarded to members based on their ability to defeat a given target one-on-one, but based on safety considerations, such duels were not the norm during guild business. This was because even if a group of adventurers went against a monster, if the level disparity was significant, they would most likely be wiped out—or at best, eke out a victory at the cost of several deaths and severe injuries to the survivors.

This all meant that Franz couldn't just throw a posse of brave men and

women at a monster the moment it was spotted.

Normally, they'd have the time to take a more gradual approach—but they were being swamped. Monsters were showing up more and more frequently lately. The time lag between taking a request, sending people out to handle it, and coming back was turning into a problem. There were starting not to be enough adventurers to go around.

They needed some kind of organization that could patrol the villages, tasked with handling monster duties without having to file a formal request. And they didn't have that, so instead, Franz asked the earl for more intel. It was all perfectly normal.

Having this situation so politely and thoroughly laid out for him made the earl fall into silence.

He didn't want to deploy his own knights to keep his own town safe, but he couldn't just leave the countryside villages to fend for themselves. As long as they paid taxes, the earl had a duty to protect them all—even as it squeezed the noose tighter around his neck. Franz's guidance was perfectly logical, and Nidol could mount no objections to it. This lack of guild personnel was likely the reason Franz requested this meeting in the first place.

And what about that orc lord? This beast of a monster that consumes everything it comes across? That was nothing to ignore, either. He would have to file a full report with the central government and ask for reinforcements—and as a result, gathering more information was job one. Reliable intelligence was the only thing that would make that bureaucracy take action.

So an investigation was a must—and an urgent one.

“And another thing, I have another unidentified report, and one I find rather difficult to relay to you...” Franz's voice was grave as the Earl of Migam fretted over what to do with the expeditionary force.

His face was embittered enough to make the earl fear the worst.

“Enough bluster. Give it to me.”

“My pardons, sir. The orc lord's armies reportedly—”

“His *armies*?! He's already built up that much of a force?!”

“Yes, I am sad to say. And they are reported to number...approximately

two hundred thousand.”

“...*What?* Can you truly be serious?!”

Nidol was shouting at the top of his lungs. It did nothing to affect Franz’s facial expression. He was not one to make jokes, and the earl knew this was the truth. But it was tough to take. It was just too far separated from reality.

“And how sure are you about this?” he asked, silently praising himself for not fainting on the spot.

“Based on circumstantial evidence, we believe it is quite likely to be the truth.”

“Any suggestions on how to deal with it?”

“Our only option is to ascertain which direction their armies are going and enact swift evacuation measures—”

“You want me to abandon this town?”

“If you believe you have a chance at victory for yourself, then we will not stop you from pursuing that. But if you ask us to participate in the effort, then I’m afraid we cannot accept that without hearing some concrete operational plans.”

“...All right,” Nidol whispered, head hung down. “You know there’d be no chance anyway.”

“In that case, I will leave the expeditionary force deployment in your hands.”

With that final reminder, Franz quickly left the room.

The Earl of Migam thought for a moment.

Whether the town would have to be abandoned or not, he had to consider the worst-case scenario. Which meant his knights had to stay put. But they needed that expedition to take place.

*What should I do?*

It was like all his neglect and mismanagement was coming back to him like a roaring tidal wave. But was there no point complaining about it.

After pondering a few moments, Nidol came up with what he thought was an excellent idea. All he really needed was intelligence on the threat. Perhaps he could deploy a magician versed in teleportation magic, one who could return to town the moment he was finished with his investigation. This sorcerer’s escort team wouldn’t know about their own mission; all they had

to do was protect him until they reached the forest. And if he just cobbled together a few of the expendable knights to build this expedition, he should be able to keep the salaries he paid to a minimum.

And if they did manage to come back alive, he could deal with it then. The vital thing was to figure out where the orc lord was going.



The group that Earl Nidol Migam put together in response to this was called the Frontier Expedition Force. It was composed of thirty members.

Inside town was a correctional facility that housed Migam's petty criminals—villagers who went into debt and attempted to rob travelers from out of town; rowdies brought into custody for picking fights on the streets. They were usually put to work assisting the knight corps, at times even serving as opponents for the knights' combat drills as part of their "corrections." One of these inmates was appointed the leader of the expedition force.

Nidol wouldn't lose a minute's worth of sleep over their deaths. They were light on his finances, too, as an added bonus.

That was about all the thought Nidol put into their selection. But the group did not share the earl's motives.

"Pfft. That greedy old coot. If it's freedom he's giving us, let's accept it with good cheer, eh?"

Such were the feelings of Yohm, the man assigned to lead the thirty miscreants of the Frontier Expedition Force as a coherent unit. His skin was darkly tanned and supple, stretched tightly over his muscles. He was not notably tall, but facing him would still intimidate the casual observer into fearing for his safety. Often, that was all Yohm needed to win the mental battle. This was backed up by his face, which wasn't unattractive, but his guttural, sneering smile made him difficult for anyone to dare approach.

His talents would seem to indicate a quick promotion from street tough to the boss of one alley gang or another. Instead, Yohm was now leading a force of thirty deep into the Forest of Jura.

It had been a week since they replenished their supplies at the last village

bordering the forest. Rommel, magician and the earl's protégé, could feel himself wither around Yohm, as if he had been placed in front of a ferocious man-eating tiger. He could almost feel his knees knocking.

"So what kind of expedition're we on?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you. It is a secret mission."

"Oh-hohh? What kinda nonsense is that yer spoutin', eh? I think you better tell me while I'm still askin' nicely, know what I mean?"

"I'm telling the truth! They haven't given me any details either, believe me."

"Hmm! I see, I see. Well, fine. They used contractual magic on us to make us follow your orders, but once this is done, we've all been promised our freedom. Right?"

"Yes, precisely. The contract that was signed with my client, the Earl of Migam, said exactly that."

"Yeah, and I'm tellin' ya, man, that's BS! How the hell're we supposed to finish this mission if we don't even know what it is, huh? Bumpin' around in the middle of this evil forest... You screwed in the head, or what?"

Facing the full brunt of Yohm's anger made Rommel feel like he'd faint from fear. He understood that his explanation made little sense, but no way could he give them the truth. If he did, he'd find it perfectly logical if they killed him where he stood.

"L-listen, we... We received a report from the Free Guild that something strange is happening in the forest. So like I told you, our mission is to use this image-capturing magitool to record what's going on, then bring it back to town—"

"Oh-hohh! So you wanna die, huh? Now I get it. Or do you think some sorcerer off the street like you can take on a pack of natural-born fighters? You don't believe that contract means you get the right to treat us like crap 'cause we can't do anything, do ya?"

Rommel's heart was struck with the distinct sense that this man was serious. The contractual magic meant that he had to follow Rommel's orders, but now he was starting to wonder how well that stuff even worked.

"Ah, ahh..."

He took a fearful step back, only to suddenly feel something cold upon his neck.

"Ey, boss, wouldn't it be quicker to just kill 'im?"

A man dressed in black appeared, as if oozing out from the darkness. He held a knife, completely black in color, and it was now squarely against Rommel's jugular.

"Not so fast. I wasn't planning to, if he was willing to talk, but—"

"No! No, wait! I'll tell you everything! Just don't kill me..."

"Oh yeah? You willing to admit that we're here to investigate that orc lord yet?"

"Huh?! How did you know that?!"

"Ha! What, you think I'm an infant or somethin'? I got thirty people here—you thought I didn't have any guild insiders I could swap someone out for? I left you alive so you could undo that contract on us, that's all. So... What happens next is up to you, I guess. What'll it be?"

Rommel, without hesitation, decided to release the contractual magic. He clearly didn't have long to live right now, and Yohm's tone of voice indicated that it was best not to defy him too much. Terror gripped Rommel's heart to the point that he was willing to do anything Yohm told him.

"Good thing we got a guy here who listens to reason, huh, bro? Forget about being used and abused to death! Now we finally got some real freedom!"

"So what're we gonna do with him?"

"Please! Spare me my life, at least!"

Rommel's voice was shaky, his face wet with tears, as Yohm's men approached him.

"Well, hang on, now. I'm sure he's at least got Life Search cast on him. We can't let this magician die without being able to report his mission results."

"Okay, so...what? If you're sayin' we gotta keep watch on 'im all hours of the day, I'd rather just kill the man."

Rommel barely felt alive as he listened to Yohm argue with his crew.

"Yeah, yeah, hang on. He's a sorcerer, remember? Maybe he'll be able to do a thing or two for us, eh?"

"Yes! Yes, I will! Anything!!"

"Yep, you hear that? 'Sides, he did free us from that contract and all. I wouldn't feel all *that* right about killing 'im, but whaddaya think?"

"Well, still..."

"I won't tell anyone! I swear I won't tell anyone, believe me! Please!"

Being employed by nobility ever since he graduated from his magic academy, Rommel was not exactly worldly-wise. Yohm never intended to kill him; he just wanted to put him to work. Rommel was too naive to see through that. All he could do was beg Yohm for any type of help he could offer.

“Hey, how ’bout this, boss? Jagi’s a mysticist; maybe he could conjure up a spell to put ’im under our thrall?”

“Dahh, no way! At my level, Rommel’s gonna Resist it for sure.”

“I won’t! I promise I won’t put up any resistance! Please, do it!”

“Great. Anyone got any objection to that? ’Cause personally, I wouldn’t mind having him around as our adviser, sort of thing.”

“We’ll do whatever you say, boss!”

“If that’s what you want, bro, I ain’t got no complaints.”

Yohm’s men said their lines, exactly like they worked it out beforehand. Rommel completely fell for it, accepting the mystic binding spell in an effort to make Yohm believe in him. The ruse fell apart immediately afterward when they all started laughing at him, but for the sorcerer, it was a moot point.

A moot point, but Rommel still had no issue with it. This street punk, Yohm, exuded a sort of evil magnetism that was hard to put into words. One that could make any innocent, open-minded young man lose his footing along the way.

This was the beginning of a truly free Frontier Expedition Force—one free of the Earl of Migam’s leash and one sporting a sorcerer who would meekly follow Yohm wherever he went.



Around the time when Rimuru first encountered Benimaru and his clan—back when they were still merely ogres—Fuze was sighing as loudly as he could at the three adventurers in front of him. He had sent this trio to figure out what was happening in the Forest of Jura, and the moment they got back, they began telling him the most astounding of tall tales.

They were Kabal, Elen, and Gido—three talented guild members, all worthy of Fuze’s trust. Their ranks were all B, and Fuze knew they were

more than up to the challenge that letter came with.

The first story they had for him was about their final moments with Shizue Izawa—a woman Fuze, as well, felt he owed his life to.

“...And that’s how she summoned Ifrit, only to get swallowed up by the raging beast!”

“She probably traveled out of town because she knew that would happen... I think she realized she didn’t have much time left.”

“You said it. And who knows if she ever recovered... My guess is that she would’ve been a lot happier with just lying down ‘n’ dying in her sleep.”

Shizu had been ordered by Heinz, Fuze’s father, to accompany them on the expedition. She was a hero in Fuze’s eyes, as well as a friend he had hunted monsters with, and he was willing to do anything for her. If anything, giving her the ending she wanted filled him with happiness.

After the expedition was over, Shizu said she intended to travel to the demon lord’s territory. She had some unfinished business there, apparently, and she insisted upon attending to it. Fuze knew there was no convincing her otherwise. So he decided to help her from behind the scenes, pairing her with three adventurers he planned to send into the forest.

A pity, then, that they weren’t with her to the very end. Fuze had no right to criticize them for that. Their mission came first, and Fuze himself had kept her true nature a secret from them.

*But did they really have to leave her under the care of monsters?!*

He had no right to criticize them, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Plus, there was so much of their story that he just couldn’t accept.

Shizu was one thing, but their briefing was entirely based on monsters building a town for themselves. A single slime was at the top of the food chain, gathering hobgoblins to construct this town—a full-on, sturdily made municipality, just like any human settlement.

Some of the more intelligent monsters did build small communities. Even goblins and other low-end creatures could slap together shelters for themselves. So having a settlement or whatnot was nothing to shout about. But this trio was talking about a bunch of monsters clearing land in the forest, chopping down trees, and using the wood to build homes. They even divided the town into distinct zones, crafting intricate plans about what would be built

where.

The more Fuze heard about it, the more it sounded like a real, full-on town. But it was hard to accept *monsters* pulling a trick like that. And that slime made him wonder. This creature, apparently named Rimuru, didn't seem like your typical named monster. In fact, *all* the monsters in this town were named, a situation that turned common sense on its ear.

All this apparently happened after this Rimuru monster appeared. It was too shocking a tale to ignore.

"So after these monsters rescued you, this is the town you were taken to?"

"Right. And we're talking, you know, several hundred C-ranked monsters living together? There was really nothing we could've done. I thought I was a goner for sure. And then, they fed us actual cooked meat!"

"Mmm, yeah, that was good. I hadn't eaten anything for three whole days, so..."

Shocking though their tale was, however, these three buffoons were making it sound like a nice campout in the woods. And after that, Shizu went out of control and Rimuru defeated the magic-born she transformed into. It was all simply beyond belief. Ifrit was a Special A-grade spirit. If something like that went rogue and started attacking, it'd be a calamity-class danger. A nation the size of Blumund would face a truly existential crisis.

*And—a slime, the lowest class of monster, defeated this?!*

Fuze wanted to shout at them to quit joking, but they all acted dead serious in their report. Between that, the dwarven artisans in town, and the healing potion that took care of even near-lethal injuries, he honestly began to wonder if they had dreamed it all.

He suspected some form of illusory magic, but that was doubtful. Not as long as Elen was there. Magicians like her had high magical resistance, and anyone who could overcome *that* with their illusions was a Special A grade in themselves.

Plus, the equipment the trio had on was some seriously compelling physical evidence. They had boasted about it to Fuze to no end, but clearly it was of quality make and superior performance—a first-class set. They even possessed an item or two forged by Garm, that most famous of dwarven craftsmen. Fuze could tell they weren't fakes.

Based on that evidence, the story couldn't have been a magic-driven fever dream. It was ridiculous, but he had to accept it as the truth. He had to, but

the report left him at a loss.

How should he even judge this news?

\*

*We had best send someone else to investigate*, he decided after a week's worth of pained deliberation.

By Kabal's description, his team never felt in danger inside this monster town. They had come home with gifts of equipment and healing potion, so that evaluation made sense. That, and after examining all this equipment, they found no curses applied to it and also potion of a better quality than almost anything the local guild had seen.

Fuze had the equipment returned to them—they'd be constantly complaining to him otherwise, and their original gear was all broken into pieces anyway, apparently, which meant they couldn't take any more jobs without it. In exchange, he did collect the remaining potion from them, using it to confirm their story.

When a painful burn victim came into the guild, he used the potion on him, wondering if it'd work as well as Kabal claimed it did. In an instant, the blistered skin was healed, without so much as a scar remaining. The sorcerer-doctors at the hospital had seen nothing like it—they swore it was akin to a divine miracle, brought about by the holiest of magic. That bumbling trio wasn't lying after all.

This town of Rimuru's was orderly, populated by monsters that followed the slime's orders. What's more—although Fuze couldn't guess at the motive—the slime expressed a desire to visit their own city sometime. Kabal and his friends said he was welcome, and should it ever happen, Fuze had already asked the trio to arrange things with him.

To him, the idea of letting some unknown monster venture into the kingdom of Blumund was outrageous. But defying the will of a monster powerful enough to defeat Ifrit solo would be just as foolish.

Fuze found himself plagued with self-doubt. *If I let such a monster into town, I could easily be prosecuted for subversion against the state...*

No matter what it took—even if it meant providing his own funds for the job—he really had to investigate this in more detail.

Just as Fuze was fretting over who to select for this new expedition, Kabal and his cohorts came running over with a new problem. He could hear Kabal calling for him in the guild building now. Meeting him without an appointment normally wasn't allowed, but the panicked tone of his shouting gave Fuze pause.

"What is it this time? Is it something to do with that one?" he asked inside his secret reception room, pointing out a hooded figure among them.

"We got trouble, Fuze! This guy said there's an orc lord out there!"

"An orc lord?!" Fuze almost spit his tea out. First Veldora blinking out of existence; then this mystery slime; and now this orc lord. Maybe none of it directly affected Blumund much, but he was aware that monster sightings had been going up in some nearby kingdoms. Fuze suspected it might all be connected, and the thought was draining.

But the task at hand was the orc lord. "I'm sorry, but could I ask you who you are?" Fuze queried, recomposing himself.

The hooded figure immediately removed his cloak, as if waiting for his cue. "Sorry 'bout that. My name's Gobto, and I work under my captain, Gobta. I came here to tell Kabal over there about the orc lord, upon the request of my leader, Sir Rimuru." Then he put his hood back on and sat down again.

Fuze knew what he saw. That was a monster—a hobgoblin. He might resemble a human from far away, but the green twinge to his skin was unmistakable.

*And a named monster, no less... Kabal was telling the truth...*

This last bit of evidence finally convinced Fuze to believe fully in him. This orc lord report must have been the unvarnished truth as well, then.

"My name is Fuze. I serve as guild master for the Free Guild here in Blumund. Gobto, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"What's that, sir?"

"This Sir Rimuru, your master... Why did he want us to know about this?"

"Ooh, the rank 'n' file like me don't get told those kinds of things. But he also told me to tell you this: 'If worse comes to worst, we might need to have the humans slay the orc lord for us.'"

"I see..."

"That's what he said before going out to face the orc lord. If y'ask me, I'd

say the orc lord's well 'n' truly dead already, but so be it. I wanted to go in with Gobta, too, but Sir Rimuru commanded me personally to travel here instead."

Gobto must have been fairly peeved about that, if he volunteered that information without being asked. He practically grumbled the last few words out. But Fuze was too thrown by the revelation to pay his tone of voice much mind.

*Wh-what?! The slime, defeating an orc lord? Are you kidding? Wait... Is this slime treating us as insurance? Is that how far ahead he's planned his moves? A monster? That's ridiculous!*

Fuze tried to process the news though his extreme confusion.

Kabal's group watched on blithely, apparently willing to let Fuze decide whatever he wanted. Fuze didn't appreciate that much, but now was no time to complain. He calmed his troubled mind.

"You ask me, though," Kabal volunteered, "that orc lord's gonna be no match for Rimuru."

"Oh, you said it! He took out Ifrit all by himself. If you let an orc lord mature, it can be pretty bad news, but freshly born? Nah. It's just not enough of a threat for him!"

"Not that we've got much to do with it, though..."

Hearing the trio's uninvited commentary made Fuze feel like he was about to have a coronary. He summoned up all his spirit, trying his hardest to keep calm as he sized up the situation.

Between them and Gobto, nobody in the room seemed to doubt Rimuru's ultimate victory. That was...well, whatever. The problem was, what was Rimuru thinking at the moment?

His distinctly unmonsterlike activities stood out in Fuze's mind. Building a town, leading great crowds of monsters, and yet apparently seeking a cooperative relationship with mankind.

And this latest development seemed to confirm all that. If he was defeated or thought he couldn't win, Rimuru probably intended to retreat. If the humans weren't aware of this before that point, they'd be so unprepared that they'd have no chance against the orc lord's armies—that was the slime's prediction.

*So if he was telling us beforehand to prevent that...*

Was Rimuru the slime some kind of special creature? He seemed so to

Fuze.

“All right. Thank you for relaying the message. We’ll take action here if it comes to it, so could I ask him for his help at that time if need be?”

“Understood, sir. I’ll be off, then.”

Before anyone could stop him, Gobto was off his seat and out of the room —a dignified, and very unmonsterlike exit. “We gotta go, too,” Kabal said as he herded his gang out behind him.

“What a crazy scene this is turning into,” Fuze whispered as he watched them leave.

*I’m not sure I can deal with this guy by myself. Better talk to my friend first...*

The image of his good friend, the Baron of Veryard, popped into his mind. This was now a national issue, and Fuze was prepared to tackle it. The expedition he was picturing in his mind would soon be greatly expanded, to the point where it would become a three-month investigation.

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Three months later, he had his reports. This was right when the demon lord Milim attacked Rimuru’s city.

Fuze was there, at the usual spot, having a secret meeting with Baron of Veryard.

“So this is the report from your investigation? Based on the evidence from their march, the force numbered several hundred thousand. That suggests beyond a doubt that it was an orc lord, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed, Baron. You would never believe how hard it was to ask the king for permission to deploy his intelligence department... They certainly came through for us, though.”

Fuze’s face contorted in frustration. The conditions required to earn this favor from the king were far from palatable to him.

“Ha-ha-ha, yes, I heard. It seems they have a chair all ready for you in that department, no? I imagine your father would like to hand his position as supervisor over to you sooner rather than later.”

“Don’t remind me. I have enough on my plate dealing with guild master

duties here in town.”

“True enough. But that’s a discussion for another time. This is some extremely valuable information—a town of monsters, and a slime living there that can overcome an orc lord by force. An orc lord who may have led an army of up to two hundred thousand, no less. And scariest of all, all those surviving orcs simply settled across the land instead of rioting and running roughshod over it. Is it all really true? I mean, I know it is, but I cannot believe any of it.”

Fuze could understand the baron’s feelings all too well. He felt the same way. He had asked the king to deploy his spies on the assumption that Kabal’s report and the hobgoblin Gobto’s message were entirely true. The resulting intelligence both blew his mind and made him realize Blumund was facing unprecedented danger.

No adventurer in the world could slay an orc lord with an army in the six figures supporting it. Even if they managed some kind of stealth mission to assassinate this nemesis, and even if it worked, that army would go nuts and raze all the nearby villages. There’d be no way to counter that. The national army would be a drop in the bucket, and the knight corps of some tinier kingdom would just be swallowed by the stampeding horde.

“You’re right. It’s simply unbelievable. Would monsters take such an intelligent, considered approach to this? And how did they convince that massive army not to riot in the first place? Did they actually manage to feed that many orcs?”

“They must have. It’s impossible to accept, but we have to. That slime, Rimuru... I think he’s saved all of us.”

“...Yes. Indeed.”

Fuze fell silent for a moment before continuing, trying to gather his thoughts.

“So we have a town of monsters about a two-week journey from Blumund. That much, we’ve confirmed. They said it was an astonishing example of functional beauty, but they only had the chance to view it from afar. They’ve clearly been at work on a wide swath of land around the town, but all of it was still covered under a tight network of patrols. Even our own agents suggested that infiltration would be difficult at best. Doesn’t that tell you a lot about the intelligence level of this town’s monsters? And the real question is: How should we handle our own relationship with them? Should

we approach this slime as a benevolent presence or as a potential threat to try to eliminate—”

“Wait. You speak of ‘eliminating’ him like it would be simple, but is such a thing even possible?”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Go ahead, but I think I already know the answer.”

“Heh. Well, it’s not. How’d you guess?”

Baron Veryard didn’t raise an eyebrow. To him, as much as it was to Fuze, that was already a given. They had both concluded that Blumund had no chance of victory alone—not unless the Western Holy Church was willing to expend paladins for the job. Each resident of that monster town was at least a C rank in themselves—as expected, since they were all named. Some were reportedly in B or A territory. Their total war power couldn’t even be measured right now.

“Perhaps I should try paying a visit...”

“Are you volunteering for that, Fuze?”

“Sure. I want to measure this Rimuru guy with my own eyes.”

Veryard gave him an approving nod. Hostilities weren’t anyone’s first choice, but this was no potential challenger that could be left ignored any longer. Fuze felt the need to judge for himself. Relying on someone else to make that call wouldn’t work. That was the best choice—and a choice he could only make because the baron respected him so much.

*Plus...*

Yesterday’s events made Fuze believe all the more that visiting this slime directly was the best solution.

He had asked Kabal’s group to guide him to the monsters’ town on that same day. While they spoke, they were all approached by another stranger with a message.

“You are Kabal, right?” the man asked. “I am here to relay a message from Sir Rimuru. ‘The orc lord issue has been resolved. Sorry I forgot to tell you guys!’ That is all.”

Nobody in the group was more surprised by this sudden intrusion than Fuze. They were all seated in a space inside the Free Guild, a room that took every measure possible against people sneaking in. If this stranger was

invited in, that was one thing, but it would have taken unbelievable skill to make one's own way inside.

“Wait! Who are you?”

The blue-haired intruder turned his cold eyes toward Fuze. “I am called Soei. Sir Rimuru has appointed me his Covert Agent.” He gave the reply softly and steadily, completely unfazed by the Coercion from Fuze, an A-minus fighter himself.

Fuze may have felt overwhelmed by this all-powerful presence before him, but he still had the kingdom’s intelligence force at his fingertips, and he knew how to use those skills of his. So he decided to gather as much information as he could from Soei.

“Rimuru... The leader of the monster town? Why are a bunch of monsters worried about us?”

“Heh... Haven’t your friends already told you? Sir Rimuru is exploring ways to live in peace and prosperity with the human race. I am unsure why you are so wary of us, but I would suggest that selecting reconciliation over rejection would be the smarter decision.”

Not even Fuze could hide his surprise at the statement. It meant that his attempts at intelligence gathering were completely exposed.

*Hoo boy... If this is the level of monster Rimuru has recruited, I simply must meet him soon.*

He could tell that Soei was a monster. Even without the horn on his forehead, the aura was as clear as day. He had no intention of hiding it, but it emitted only a slight amount of magicules. It didn’t suggest this creature was anything special, but Fuze’s sixth sense was still ringing alarm bells. He decided to trust in it.

“I see. So you’re on to the fact that we’ve been investigating you. Well, before that, there’s something I’d like to ask... How did a magic-born of your level infiltrate this town? Because I believe we’re protected by a barrier that blocks out all monsters ranked A or higher. A high-level magic-born like you shouldn’t be anywhere near here.”

As guild master, this was a point Fuze couldn’t let slide. Even though it was a short meeting, he was sure this Soei before him was a high-level magic-born, and thus he needed to know how he got past the kingdom’s defenses.

“Hmm. Ah yes. I did notice the presence of that barrier, but that’s what it

was meant for, then? Perhaps Sir Rimuru or Lady Shuna could have identified it as such, but I wasn't able to see quite so much. Thank you for telling me—in exchange, I will answer your question. This body is generated by my Replication skill, and thus retains only a tenth of my magical energy. In your ranking system, I imagine it would only manage a B or so. Do you see what I mean? This kingdom truly does have a splendid defense network, but if it is willing to let low-level monsters slide that easily, I can see it still has its holes."

Fuze listened slack-jawed at Soei's explanation, feeling the cold eyes on him. It sounded true enough to him, and his point was totally valid. With all the effort they expended dealing with hazard-class A ranks, they had overlooked some of the most basic threats—and it was a monster, a potential target of this system, who had pointed it out to him. A small wonder that it turned Fuze's world upside down.

"Well, if you will excuse me—"

"Wait!"

As Soei turned to go, Fuze shouted and stopped him. He had just enough time to explain to the monster that he wanted an audience with Rimuru, in the town that he ran.

"I will inform Sir Rimuru, in that case," he said, bringing a close to the day's events.

This was why Fuze was making the journey. He laughed a bit at the position he was in—dragging the kingdom into this, then dragging himself into the kingdom's work all over again.

*Damn. I didn't intend to serve my kingdom doing this, but...*

He might have complained about it, but he liked life in Blumund. He couldn't just abandon it and flee. So he hired Kabal's trio as his guides, and they quickly planned the journey to Rimuru, capital of the Jura-Tempest Federation.



Yohm and his men proceeded through the forest.

Several days had passed since they had cowed Rommel into submission.

They had no need to heed Nidol's orders any longer, and yet Yohm insisted on plunging farther into the wood. He had no intention of returning to Migam territory—instead, he had a different destination in mind.

“Boss, why ain’t we goin’ back to town?”

“Yeah, I’d kinda like to find a girl to sleep with sooner or later...”

“Shut up, you fools! I don’t trust that crafty ol’ Nidol, but he’s still nobility, y’see? We can’t beat ’im in a head-on scuffle. It’d be easy enough to off the bastard, but then we’ll be wanted by all o’ Farmus. You want the royal knights breathin’ down our necks? They’ll kill the whole group of us!”

“Yeahhh, but...”

“So where d’you want us to go?”

“Oh, now you’re askin’ me? Use your brains a little, guys—”

None of them had much in the way of brainpower, so Yohm spelled it out.

He had a point—even if they returned to the Earl of Migam’s lands, they couldn’t expect to ever have a decent living there. They’d be imprisoned again—and indentured into work again. So he thought their best chances lay in other nations.

“We’re gonna head for the central part o’ the forest and find out what this orc lord’s up to. Then, we’ll travel in whatever direction’s the safest, and whenever we hit another country, we will settle there.”

“But, boss, why do we have to expose ourselves to danger like that first...?”

“Oh, what, you wussin’ out on me, you imbecile? The orc lord’s grown to the point where he’s already got an army at his beck and call. What do you think’s gonna happen if we stop in some town and they’re headed straight for it? We’ll be dead with all the other townspeople, is what. Yeah, it’s dangerous, but we need more info if we wanna keep ourselves safe, okay?”

“Wow. Smart plan, bro.”

“I got it now, boss!”

“Plus,” added Rommel, “Yohm has no intention of actually engaging in battle. He’ll just have me check on where the orc lord army is, then relay that information to the earl.”

“Whoa, hang on, Rommel. Whaddaya mean by that?”

This was Kazhil, Yohm’s right-hand man, who spoke up.

Rommel was quickly solidifying his position as the group’s chief of staff—and everyone in the band recognized his extensive knowledge of matters.

“I mean, once we take care of the original job assigned to us, we can make the good earl think we were massacred by the orc lord.”

“Wait, so...”

“We make that old coot think we’re all dead, then we ain’t got to worry about his men pursuing us, and if the orc lord decides to hit Migam, Nidol can figure out a way to deal with it himself. I’d hate to just let my homeland burn at the orcs’ hands, so we oughta warn ’em, at least, yeah?” Yohm explained to Kazhil, who was having trouble understanding.

“Quite so. I will tiptoe up to the orcish army and use my magic to detect their activity. Once I’ve confirmed where they are headed, I will teleport myself, and only myself, to the earl and report back to him. This is when I’ll tell him that you were all vanquished, so no need to worry about that. Besides, if we’ve gone this far, I might as well collect our pay from him, yes? Then I’ll make up an excuse to return here, so do make sure to wait for me.”

The spark of understanding finally began to spread around the band as Rommel went more in-depth.

“Ahh. Now I see. Then we can escape to somewhere safe and start a new life, huh?”

“Yep. Exactly.”

Yohm’s intention was to have the entire band join the local Free Guild or whatever, gaining a little security for themselves. Free Guild identification papers were added to a ledger kept by magic, ensuring they were valid in any nation. Criminal records, meanwhile, weren’t. It felt like the perfect plan to Yohm, but any crimes they committed *after* joining the guild would also be marked on their magical records, so they’d have to be careful about that.

“Well, we can think about our next moves once we reach our new homeland. With our numbers, we oughta be able to take on some decent monster runs and live off o’ that. But before that, we need to make it outta this mess. You hear me? If the orcs stumble upon us all first, we’re gonna be in deep trouble. Y’all keep your eyes open, you got that?” With that, Yohm closed the topic.

First, find the orc lord’s army. Then, get out safe. They could bitch and moan at one another all they wanted, but one thing was for sure: They could absolutely never let their guards down.

Several hours later...

The band was on the move, running regular patrol shifts to stay alert.

They could hear fighting up ahead.

“Boss—”

“Sshhh!”

Yohm quieted his men down, gesturing them to group together and get into military formation. When they were ready, he waved a hand forward, and they all began to quietly march, weapons in hand and ready for battle.

Already, they could hear voices from up ahead.

“Whoa! Stop, stop, stop! We go there, we’re walking right into its trap!”

“But...but I don’t think we can win if we keep fighting like this!”

“Guys, I can only keep our position here for so—whoa! Look out!”

They could hear all the shrill complaints above the *Ting! Ka-shing!* of solid metal clashing against metal.

“I swear, you guys... Why do you do all this dangerous crap every single time?! How do you even survive, performing all this utter nonsense? I knew I was putting too much faith in you... Dah! Elen! Look out! It’s headed over there!”

The noise grew louder. They could hear the entire conversation now. They were humans, apparently ambushed by monsters. Several of them, Yohm figured, based on how the sounds of battle never halted for a moment.

“What now, bro?”

Yohm wasn’t sure. He didn’t answer, instead carefully eyeing the woods ahead.

He had thirty men under his command, but by adventurer standards, they’d be a C rank at best. Maybe Kazhil, his partner in crime, could manage a B—and Yohm himself, while confident in his strength, didn’t have that much experience against monsters. Thinking rationally, they were better off letting them be.

*What a pain in the ass... Well, sorry, you guys, but we’re outta here—Wait. That girl?!*

Just as he was prepared to give the order, Yohm spotted a woman running at them from ahead. There was the sound of a female among the voices he heard; it must have been one of the fighters.

“Dehh! All of you, prepare for battle. That bitch spotted us!”

Yohm’s Farsight skill let him see the situation clearly. A large male

fighter was using his shield to fend off an attack from a spider, but it got sent flying after one strike made it through his parrying.

The spider, opting not to pursue its opponent, changed its focus to the woman some distance behind. It must have been intelligent enough to leave the tougher, dicier foes for later. And indeed, the woman was quick and unerring in her moves—the moment the spider was upon her, she was already fleeing.

Truly, a seasoned adventurer. Yohm took a moment to marvel at the sight—long enough for one of the spider’s eyes to focus squarely upon his group. This spider chasing the girl was a true monster, its body protected by an exoskeleton harder than steel that defended almost everything except its joints. It could move all those many joints freely and easily, making it far quicker than any human. Each leg was as sharp as the keenest of blades, ready to slice through any tree trunk or human torso. They weren’t swords so much as retractable spears.

It was likely the “boss” of the local territory, and between its foreboding appearance and its apparent strength, it was a far cry from any monster Yohm’s band had defeated before.

*Those adventurers look pretty expert, so they’ll probably hold out for now, but attrition’s gonna kill ‘em in the end... That swordsman’s still keeping things pretty even, but...*

All the same, Yohm didn’t expect this to end well for any of them.

“That... That’s a knight spider! An A-minus monster! Oh no... Yohm, there’s no way we can defeat it. Let’s go! We’re just no match for it!!”

Rommel, using the elemental magic spell Clairvoyance, was already looking pallid as he gave the report to his boss.

Yohm wasn’t interested in listening. “Forget it. Look at that monster move. It can use the trees to go wherever it wants. Once that party’s annihilated, we’re gonna be next—it’ll hunt us down in an instant and kill us all. Running at full speed ain’t gonna save us now, huh?”

He had no knowledge about knight spiders, but Yohm was still coolheaded enough to instinctively feel what this monster meant. Those instincts told him that fleeing was not in the cards. So he decided to fight back.

They were surrounded by trees—trees that the spider could cross more quickly than skittering across the ground to catch its prey. Once it caught

sight of you, it was all but hopeless. These were the knight spider's hunting grounds, and Yohm's men were the hapless prey. The only way to survive was to slay the foe—that offered the only potential for survival they had.

Yohm steeled himself. "Dammit, I'll make you pay for dragging us into this, ya bastards! Rommel, cast some strengthening magic on me! Kazhil, you direct our men! Form a circle, and if anyone's hurt, change 'em out. You're all gonna survive! That's an order!"

Following his command, the band formed a circle formation. In the middle were healers and scouts—men not suited for battle—and Rommel. The rest were forming a shield to protect them. Their orders were to focus exclusively on defense and not launch any attack. Instead, they would let the fighters in the safe zone deal damage with arrows and magic.

The scouts readied their bows, waiting for the knight spider's advance, as Rommel began to cast a spell. It involved several inscription magics, something he normally never used, as he set about boosting Yohm's strength. There was the supplemental magic spell Strength, along with Agility, Protection, and Reinforce Weapon—all serving to power up every aspect of his weapons and armor, granting him a great deal more force. It didn't make them any less anxious about his chances against a knight spider, but it helped.

Still, Yohm's heart was serene as he stared the spider down. In a moment, the battle was under way.

The woman truly had no shame, showing zero hesitation as she made a beeline straight for Yohm's band.

"Excuse meeee!" she shouted as she wriggled her way inside the circle, not bothering to ask for permission. The moment she was safe, she took a moment to catch her breath.

*She's got a lot of nerve,* Yohm thought.

"Whoa! Lady! That's not fair, going in alone!"

Somewhere amid the chaos, another man—a thief, by the looks of it—had made his way inside as well. *Not a moment off their guard,* Yohm thought as he rolled his eyes, but he had other things to attend to.

"Oh, come on... Are you in any position to whine at me?" the woman said.

"Whaddaya want from me? There's nothing I can do against that guy!"

How am I supposed to strike any kind of lethal blow with a dagger, I ask you?"

This pair, at least, didn't seem too concerned about the danger.

"Geh. I'll settle things with you later," Yohm said as turned toward the spider and swung his greatsword at it. He preferred wielding a two-handed weapon like this in place of carrying a shield. It was a good six and a half feet long, bladed on both sides, and the force behind its weight made it a fearsome slashing weapon. That weight also made it extremely hard to handle, but even without magical enhancements, he had the brute strength and ability to easily heft the greatsword to and fro.

Now he was using that magic support to whip the giant hunk of iron around like a steel demon.

Hard, solid noise surrounded him, and the tortuous *clanggggg* irritated his nerves. It was the sound of Yohm's sword smashing against the knight spider's leg. It should have been cut cleanly in half, but the exoskeleton was more than capable of resisting this force.

He groaned. *Geh. Damn, it's tough. Is that what all that sound was before?* Then he changed position, hoping to divert the spider from his party's circle formation. The spider followed, predictably enough, then attempted to spear Yohm with several legs at once. Unfazed, he danced his way through the attacks—the same ones the large fighter parried with his shield earlier. Without any kind of shield, Yohm opted to wend his way through the stabbing legs instead.

For what seemed like forever, Yohm continually deflected the knight spider's strikes. It was never-ending for Yohm but a mere instant in reality. Several legs grazed past his cheek, dug into his side, pricked at his legs, but none of the strikes affected the battle.

He had dodged them all—and as he had the spider's attention, the man with the shield, along with a lightly equipped swordsman, were back in the battle, equipped with a new set of magical enhancements and ready to fight again.

"Sorry we got you into this. I'm Kabal. You can whine at me later."

"No time for details. Just call me Fuze for now."

"Yohm. My band's nothing but a drag on us, I guess. We'll have to take care of this ourselves."

"Got it."

With that short conversation, the three refocused on the attack. They each moved to surround the knight spider, restricting its movements, taking turns to attract its attention while the others hit at it.

Faced with this steel-like exoskeleton, no pedestrian attack would cut it. Yohm's men understood that; none dared any foolish moves. If they failed and a pincer felled one of them, the results would be too terrible to look at.

They knew their role was not to drag down their leader. They believed Yohm could win, and in the meantime, they reinforced their defenses.



The magicians Elen and Rommel were each preparing their trademark spells.

As a sorcerer, Elen's specialty was elemental magic, granting her access to a large swath of damage-dealing offensive spells. But she was positioned poorly for that. All the trees surrounding them made the most powerful of her flame-based magic out of the question. Magic was all about picturing what you wanted to happen, allowing the caster to change the nature of their spells to some extent...but attempting to corral white-hot flame was a tall order.

But right now...

“Let’s see how you like one of my strongest moves! Stone Shot!!”

In a moment, Elen had converted the stones on the ground into lethal bullets, infusing them with yet more magic force to summon a punishing, coordinated rain of ammunition upon the knight spider. Every magic-enhanced stone bullet was the size of a human fist, and based on its speed and mass, each one delivered several tons’ worth of force. It was a merciless, punishing magical rain.

Meanwhile, the three fighters were still taking turns to confront the knight spider—Yohm deflecting its strikes with his greatsword, Fuze with his smaller, nimbler sword, and Kabal with his shield. This is what the spider had to deal with as it was pelted by magical bullets from all directions—but none even dented its exoskeleton. They all bounced harmlessly off, knocking the creature slightly off-balance for an instant but doing little else.

“Awwww... That was my killer move, toooo...”

The sight of her killer move failing after she used most of her remaining magic force on it astounded Elen. She had already tried out Icicle Lance and

Windcutter, and the results were similarly pitiful. Really, the last finisher she had left was also her strongest—Fireball.

“It’s hardly a surprise,” Rommel commented. “This knight spider is a local boss-class monster, rank A-minus. We can expect it to have a lot of magical resistance. Given how it’s the apex predator around this area, you’d have to expect at least this much strength. It’ll be hard for any of us to land a convincing blow at our levels...”

“Okay, so now what do we do?”

Rommel shrugged at Elen. “Nothing left but to help them with support magic, I suppose.”

Elen tried to counter this brief assessment. But faced with the reality that none of her magic worked, she gave up. She had a feeling, without even trying it out, that Fireball would meet the same fate.

“Oh, all riiight! I hate not being in the spotlight and using stuff like this... but I’ve got Magic Barrier on me.”

Rommel nodded. As a sorcerer himself, he had several inscription magics at his disposal. Those were what he had used on Yohm, and the other two fighters were already enhanced enough.

“The enemy’s offense is so strong that it just peels away any magic effects on them. It’s over if they break their weapons, so it’s all I can do to keep just Reinforce Weapon going. If you can fully focus on building that Magic Barrier at all times, that’ll help us out.”

“All right!”

Elen adjusted her outlook on the battle. She couldn’t deal magic damage, so she was stuck with a support role instead—a role she happened to be first-class at. Calculating her remaining magical force and recovery skills, she distributed her magic as needed for the battle at hand, and Rommel did the same by her side.

It wasn’t flashy, but it was a consistent approach to magical support as they concentrated on keeping the aid flowing to Yohm, Fuze, and Kabal. He may have said “just” Reinforce Weapon, but he still managed to keep his other spells going as well without interruption.

It was an impressive, top-level feat from Rommel, the result of him perhaps toughening up a bit and sowing the seeds of his own magical talents during the past few days with Yohm.

The performance lit a fire in Elen. *Not bad. Better not lose the spotlight to*

*him!* Now, she didn't mind the role so much. Not flashy, but absolutely important.

Meanwhile, the knight spider and its opponents continued to trade blows with one another, the sheer, wearying intensity of the confrontation not allowing them rest for a single moment. Even in such extreme conditions, the three were still flashing bold, intrepid smiles.

"Yo...Kabal, yeah? That armor of yours sure is tougher'n my cheap piece of junk."

"Heh-heh! Yeah, I'll bet, huh? This was crafted by Garm himself, you know! It ain't no ordinary piece of scale mail!"

"Huh. Garm the dwarven armorsmith? Dang, no wonder. It looked like you took a couple direct stabs, and yer none the worse for it!"

"Oof, you saw that? *That's* embarrassing. Well, I may not look it, but—"

"Will you two take this more seriously, please?! Stop chatting while it's my turn to distract him!"

Fuze couldn't help but lecture the other two as they enjoyed a lively bragging contest better suited for a tavern. They both grinned, like students being admonished by their teacher.

"I'm up next, old man."

With an exaggerated slash, Yohm tagged in for Fuze. The magical light surrounding him, slightly dimmed just a moment ago, was now bright once more. He was ready.

The rotation of magical support was being timed perfectly with their own juggling act, as if all five had been working together for years. Very few could have guessed they were fighting in this group for the first time.

"Thanks," Fuze shouted, leaving the heavy lifting to Yohm. Dodging his way through the knight spider's string of stabs, he felt exhausted, his very nerves worn to the core. But he never griped about it. He was the oldest and most experienced man in the circle.

By the guild's rankings, he was an A-minus adventurer. His position as Blumund's guild master meant he was no longer on the front lines, but he never stopped honing himself—the reason he was still able to keep up with this spider's movements.

*But I'm definitely losing my edge. I could've taken this guy solo way back*

*when, but not now. All I'm doing is buying us just a small sliver of time...*

Still, he was the great natural talent among the trio surrounding his foe right now.

And because of that, Fuze could predict how this would turn out.

*This isn't good...*

Sooner or later, they would falter.

With the right magic, tackling a monster stronger than you would be feasible enough. Here, that wasn't working out. Knight spiders were too resistant to magic, requiring punishing physical damage instead. Fuze understood that, out of this group, only the three of them were gifted enough melee fighters to deal out that kind of damage. Yohm's men weren't up to snuff.

So it was all up to these three men, but after ten or so minutes of battle, they had hurt the spider only a tiny amount. None were seriously injured yet, but they couldn't hide their accumulated fatigue. Gaining another fighter in Yohm, along with some much-needed magical support, was what allowed them to even tread water.

"Oh, man, I dunno..."

"Pfft! Quit your cryin'! You're the ones who roped me into this! We're all gonna get killed if we can't do this guy in, so if you got breath left to bitch at me, move yourself!"

When Kabal muttered to himself, Yohm launched into a tirade.

They all understood that perfectly well. Without any really decisive magic that worked, they knew that beating it with their own muscle was next to impossible.

But giving up was a one-way ticket to death.

They all drummed up as much courage as they could, continually throwing themselves into the all-but-desperate battle.

Then they heard another voice. One much more relaxed.

"Huh? Ooh! Hey, is that you, Kabal? Whoa, long time no see! And you're fighting a monster like always, too, huh? You sure must like fighting."



They were being greeted by five monsters riding wolf-type creatures—a platoon of goblin riders, led by Gobta.



Just as they were about to return from their usual patrol, they heard the sounds of battle from before. Gobchi, the eye-patch-wearing assistant to Gobta, noticed first.

“Gobta, I can hear fighting from somewhere.”

The platoon captain was pretending to ignore the noise, hoping for a nice, chill ride back to town, but his team was having none of it.

“I guess so, huh? Should we go check it out?”

“Ooh, well, I’d say that’s a good idea, yes. Don’t want to be yelled at later, do ya?”

“Yeah, yeah... Let’s just check up on it, then.”

Following Gobchi’s advice, the platoon headed toward the sounds.

And then...

Gobta found a couple of familiar-looking faces fighting a knight spider.

“Whoa! Damn, it’s you, Gobta! Don’t just stand there like an ass; help us out! We’re running out of time!”

Kabal sounded quite a bit more harried than Gobta, dodging the spider’s sharp barrage of strikes as he shouted. He was plainly near the end of his rope, simply letting the multi-leg attacks he couldn’t fully parry bash against his armor. It wouldn’t be long before that armor gave way—and with it, his life, perhaps.

“Ooh, that’s Fuze, isn’t it? Hey! Fuze! It’s me, Gobto!”

“You too, Gobto?! Hurry up and take my place!!”

Just as Gobto spotted Fuze and called out in greeting, Kabal was the one who shouted back as the spider flicked his helmet off his head for him.

“Well, all right. I’ll take over for Kabal. Gobchi, you get everyone else to distract the spider!”

At Gobta’s orders, the platoon began to move.

Nimbly dismounting his starwolf, Gobta strode over to follow Kabal’s lead as the other goblin riders directed their partners to divert their foe’s attention. The wolves attacked with their sharp fangs and their claws, and while neither found any play on its hard exoskeleton, their speed outclassed the spider’s, letting them take a secure stick-and-move approach.

The B-ranked starwolves couldn’t scratch a knight spider, but in terms of agility, they were an even match. So giving up on the direct approach, they shifted styles so their hobgoblin partners would take over on offense. Thanks to the able hands of Gobchi and the rest of Gobta’s crew, this let them slowly pile on damage.

“Dang, those spears of theirs are *sharp*. It looks like they can lengthen and shorten them at will, too.”

“They are. And they’re a measure sharper’n my greatsword, even. Maybe we coulda had a fightin’ chance if I had somethin’ like that, eh?”

Kabal muttered in wonder as he took a break to heal himself, and Yohm appeared beside him to take a break as well.

“I just can’t believe this. What are those wolves? Some kinda mutant from black wolves or gray wolves? And why do a bunch of hobgoblins have such incredible weapons, too? And why’re they so strong?!”

Fuze picked this moment to join them, still panting for breath and taken aback. Neither of his companions had a ready answer, so they settled down and began to watch.

Considering the brutal battle they’d just waged, it was hard to imagine what they were seeing now. The goblin riders were boldly attacking, or seemed to be anyway—although they appeared to be giving themselves a fairly large safety margin. None of them were damaged. Meanwhile, Gobta was the only one confronting the knight spider on foot, leaping this way and that to attract his foe’s attention. He didn’t have to fight for it. It seemed like he had a full grasp on every twitch of the spider’s legs.

“Man... That hobgoblin— Gobta, he said? Who the hell’s he, huh? And, like, even before that...” Yohm cut himself off.

There was a lot he wanted to ask, but he resisted. Now wasn’t the time. He wanted to catch every moment of this battle while it lasted.

Gobta busied himself with twisting, bounding, and dodging the spider’s attack. *Hmm. Kinda slow. Compared to the wringer Hakuro puts me through, this is easy peasy.*

Taking a closer look at the spider, he realized that it always stopped moving for a moment before unleashing one of its leg-pincer combos. The multi-leg attacks followed a set rhythm as well, making it simple to predict where they would stab next.

“Okay, let’s get this over ‘n’ done with!”

With a single, spirited shout, he removed the shortsword from his waist and, with pinpoint accuracy, slashed at a small wound made by one of his goblin riders. One of the spider’s long, spear-like legs arced through the sky. It was sliced cleanly from its body.

“Dang!”

“Whoa, Gobta! That’s incredible!”

“Now *that’s* a shortsword. I think I’m in love with how it cuts!”

Gobta wasn’t one to ignore all the praise from his friends. It was forged by Kurobe for him, thanks to Rimuru’s promise. It was certainly no bargain-basement item from the local weapon shop—it was a masterpiece of a blade, crafted to be as sharp as possible.

It was also magic, imbued with a certain extra-effect thanks to Rimuru’s Deviant unique skill. When Gobta willed it in his mind, the blade would encase itself in ice, turning it into a jagged, frigid blade that could also be launched as an Icicle Lance. Gobta didn’t invoke it here; using magic took up a massive amount of his own magicules, so he couldn’t just whip it out on a whim. Kurobe had reminded him time and time again about how his ace in the hole should only be used when the time was right, and he followed that advice faithfully, never wasting his arsenal.

Besides, now he had a weapon even more effective than an Icicle Lance.

“This is even better!”

He held the sheath for the blade up high, still clenched in his left hand. He

didn't mean to sound like a braggart, but he undoubtedly looked it.

“A sheath...?”

Instead of answering Gido's question, Gobta made his move. He pointed the sheath at the spider, hole first. The next moment, it emitted a sort of blackish-red glow.

The entire inside of the scabbard was lined with magisteel, with insulated electric wire wrapped around it like a solenoid. Energizing this wire with Dark Thunder—the skill that Deviant had granted it—created a powerful magnetic field, which then launched the bullet at the bottom of the scabbard out of the hole. A sort of coilgun, in other words.

It was called the Case Cannon, and while Rimuru had made it mostly for fun, Gobta was a huge fan.

The scabbard ejected a hunk of iron around two centimeters across. It made no sound, but the effects were dramatic. The spider writhed in intense pain, its mouth shivering and gnashing. The resulting otherworldly noises sounded like pure anguish. And why not? The shot had gouged out or flattened several of its eyes, which were now spurting out jets of blue liquid.

“Yow! That was great, Gobta!” one of the other goblins whooped.

The humans, meanwhile, had nothing to say. Not even Fuze could fully parse what had happened.

“—What the hell was that!?” he stammered out.

Gobta had other things on his mind.

“Well, we're gonna have one heck of a feast today! There's gotta be some great eatin' on this spider!”

His eyes were on the knight spider—not as a foe but as a yummy piece of prey.

“Whoa, whoa, that's an A-minus area boss! And you're worried about eating it!?”

Fuze was ignored once more, his voice rapidly losing its strength. His mind had trouble keeping up with the sights before him. All he could do was sit there and watch absentmindedly.

Yohm and his men were just the same, gazing at this former clear and present danger to their lives that had been swatted down like a bug. Yohm

didn't like that much, although he couldn't articulate why. A natural sort of disappointment spread across his face as the five goblin riders ignored him and kept toying with the spider.

A few minutes later, the humans were presented with a dissected knight spider.

Gobta was next to it, looking incredibly pleased with himself and chatting with someone via Thought Communication.

"They'll have a recovery team here before too long. You leave three of us here to stand guard. I'll guide Kabal and his friends back to town."

"Got it. Be careful."

After finishing the conversation, he briefly discussed with his right-hand man, Gobchi.

"Well, ready to go?"

And with that cheery question, Kabal and the others set off.

Fuze was too flabbergasted, Kabal's gang too overjoyed, and Yohm too annoyed to formulate any answers.

It was up to Yohm's band to shout their approval instead. They weren't quite sure how it all worked out, but regardless, they were all on their way to Tempest, the land of monsters.



Gobta certainly sounded triumphant in his briefing.

We were at the usual meeting hall, Milim seated next to me like she had somehow earned the right. Shion and Soei were behind us, with Rigurd and Benimaru seated ahead.

Next to Gobta were Kabal, his two friends, and an unfamiliar middle-aged guy. He was joined by a tanned, rugged-looking man and a fairly nervous-looking magician type. Shuna had just taken her own seat, ordering one of her assistants to bring out tea for the group, and then Gobta began talking.

Once he finished, we all decided to introduce one another. The middle-aged guy was Fuze, the top guy at the guild in the kingdom of Blumund. Must've been the dude who told Soei he wanted an audience with me.

The tanned guy was...well, pretty handsome. Not as much as Benimaru or Soei, but he had smooth, taut muscles and a wild look about him that must've floored 'em at the tavern. His name was Yohm, and he called himself the captain of the Frontier Expedition Force, sent out by one of the earls in the kingdom of Farmus. The thin, flinchy guy next to him really was a magician, as it turned out—Rommel was his name, and judging by the looks of things, he was the brains to Yohm's brawn.

Once they all gave their names, I decided to give mine.

"Guess I better speak up, too. My name is Rimuru Tempest, and I'm the leader of this town, or nation, or whatever you wanna call it. The Jura-Tempest Federation is the official name for it. And as you can see, I'm totally a slime!"

It felt necessary to mention that, given how I was the only nonhuman in the room. It made the older guy—Fuze, I mean—open his eyes wide.

"Truly, a slime...?"

He seemed to know at least a bit about me, but I guess I should've expected him to be a little shocked. If it didn't personally happen to me, I guess I'd have trouble believing that a slime was going around acting like the king of his little nation of monsters.

"So, uh, Rimuru," Kabal asked, "who're all the new faces in the room?" He must've meant the ogre mages. I gave them all an intro. That just left Milim, who spoke up before I had a chance to point her out.

"And I'm Milim. Good to meet ya!"

A pretty casual intro, especially for a demon lord prone to bouts of cruelty like she was. Hopefully nobody was fooled by the pretty face.

Fuze was the only one to respond to the name "Milim" with any sort of suspicion; maybe he knew about her demon lord side. Kabal and Gido, meanwhile, were alternating their gazes between Shuna and Shion. Milim might've been cute, but they must've already dismissed her as too much of a child. They certainly are honest to themselves, at least.

Yohm and Fuze must not have been too interested in potential romance—or maybe they were just nervous, having to deal with monsters like this. Their faces remained stony serious. *I wish Kabal and his gang could learn from them a bit. I can understand how they feel.*

It was odd, though. Gobta ran down the whole story for me, but I still didn't understand anything about what went on. *Why were Fuze and Yohm fighting together?*

Just as I thought it, Fuze opened his mouth.

“Allow me to explain, perhaps...”

He must have noticed that Gobta's report wasn't quite enough. *Glad to see someone has some tact around here.* Witnessing my slime form must've thrown him off a bit, but he was still being remarkably polite with me. Better hear him out.

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Once he was done, I think I began to get the idea. I guess the orc lord news had sparked so much chaos that he decided to have Kabal guide him here to check things out for himself.

Rommel provided some supplementary info of his own, too. He was largely in the same boat, driven by the guild in Earl Nidol Migam's fief in response to the rumors spreading across Blumund. The magician told me everything he seemed to know about Nidol's thoughts on the matter, and judging by that, he had a pretty accurate grasp of what was going on.

“Why are you being so honest with me?” I asked.

To which he replied, “Well, to be frank, I'm really not sure what I should be doing here, right now. I just figured, you know, honesty would be the best policy, as we try to move things forward.”

I solemnly nodded at him. *That sure helps me, too.*

Suddenly, the previously silent and sullen Yohm shouted out, like someone had flipped a switch. “That crap doesn't matter! What I'm wonderin' is: Why is this slime actin' like he's king of the world around here? I mean, y'all realize this is insane, don't you? And how do slimes even talk anyway? I mean, what the hell? Why's he got all you guys under his spell or whatever?”

“How dare you be so rude!” Shion roared.

“You shut up, woman!” Yohm shouted back.

*Ooh. Bad move,* I thought—but before I could even finish that thought, there was a dull *thud* as Shion used her sheathed longsword to send Yohm crashing to the ground.

“Ah! I’m sorry, I just...”

“You just *what*?!”

I should have expected it, but I really need to do something about Shion’s temper. Yohm may have been out of line, but this instantaneous resorting to violence had to be addressed sooner or later. I immediately had her look after Yohm—she hadn’t put much force into it, so at least he wasn’t dead. A few shakes of healing potion, and he woke right back up.

He winced at the sight of Shion looking right down at him, but otherwise returned without a word to his seat. I had to hand it to him. It took a lot of guts to pull that off.

“Sorry about Shion there. She tends to lose her patience a lot. I hope you’ll forgive her.”

Yohm nodded—I’m sure very reluctantly.

“But that was so terrible! I’m known for my endurance under fire, you know!” That was news to me. I figured it was safe to ignore her babbling.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Losing your patience, huh? I see you’ve got a lot to learn, Shion. You need to broaden your horizons, like I have! No wonder you’re so hot-tempered!”

I felt like I could hear Milim happily blurting out something like that, but I’m sure I was imagining it. No doubt it was the last thing Shion wanted to hear from her.

But anyway.

It was time to put all these reports together.

Fuze was here because he heard about this mystery slime—i.e., me—and wanted to get to the bottom of it. Figuring out whether I was friend or foe was his main priority.

“The very idea of monsters creating towns— Ah, pardon me. I can understand demi-humans building settlements well enough, but a town where multiple races live together? I’ve never heard of such a thing. I have a habit of not fully believing something unless I witness it with my own eyes, you see. And if this whole story was true, I wanted to figure out how we would interact with it, and how much. The reports I received told me this land wasn’t a threat...but I thought ascertaining for myself would be the best move. So that’s what brings me here. I was hoping you’ll permit me to stay a

while so I can survey the entirety of your operations.”

It made sense to me. I’d hate to be feared as a potential threat, so I readily gave him permission.

I also gave him my own outlook. Being guild master suggested Fuze was in a fairly high position—a man of influence, perhaps, in Blumund. Being able to speak frankly with someone like him, and request their cooperation, sounded like a good idea to me.

“You might not believe it,” I explained, “but I’d really like to be friends with the humans. I already told Kabal and his friends about that. I’m not asking for it immediately, but you know, I think it’d be nice if we could start engaging in trade or some other kind of interaction. We’ve already opened formal relations with the Dwarven Kingdom along those lines, which you’re free to confirm for yourself. I think your merchants would find it pretty convenient if they could run caravans through this area, but what do you think?”

“Hang on— I mean, please, just one moment. You mean the Armed Nation of Dwargon?! I know that is a neutral kingdom, one that had close relations with many demi-human races...but you’re saying it’s recognized this land of monsters as a nation? Because I find that extremely hard to believe...”

I had asked him to trust in me, but he was proving a tough nut to crack. So I called for Vester as a witness. It turns out Fuze was familiar with him.

“Minister Vester! ...Or not anymore, I suppose. But regardless, I never imagined meeting someone of your stature here... Is all of this true?”

“Ah, well met, Sir Fuze! It has been quite a while, hasn’t it? Well, you are correct. Through a rather unique turn of events, I am now living quite peacefully in this land. Everything Sir Rimuru has told you is the truth—King Gazel and Sir Rimuru signed the covenant themselves.”

The conversation wended its way across a few other topics, but I still had the impression Fuze thought he was dreaming all of it. Maybe the idea of monsters banding together and establishing a nation was a little too wild for just anyone in this world to start believing yet.

Yohm’s motives, meanwhile, were a bit more complex.

He and his band of men intended to fake their own deaths in order to gain

their freedom. They were seeking asylum in some safer country than their own, where they intended to join the local Free Guild. They also intended to inform Earl Nidol Migam—the greedy old fox, as they called him—about what they found in here. This wasn’t out of any love for the earl, but so they could potentially save as many of their fellow countrymen as they could. A man of honor, certainly, no matter what his looks and attitude suggested. Rommel had grown to like him, plainly—to the point that he betrayed Nidol, his benefactor, to become Yohm’s top aide.

Hearing all this made me think a bit.

“All right, so...Fuze, people already know around your kingdom that the orc lord was defeated, right?”

“No... Only the king and a few select people are aware.”

And that meant—

“Okay. So, Yohm, wanna forge a contract with me?”

“Huh? What the hell’re you—erm, how do you mean, sir?”

Now both Shion and Shuna were glaring at him. They must not have liked that tone of voice. Maybe it’d be kinder of me to pretend not to notice.

“Well, to put it simply...”

To put it simply, Yohm and his band of thirty men would become the saviors of the day, the slayers of the orc lord.

That monster was well and truly defeated, and yet Fuze still eyed me with suspicion—because I was a slime, a monster. In that case, why don’t we frame the rumors we’d spread so that I merely cooperated with Yohm, and he was the one who pulled off the feat?

There’d be a few unnatural time-related contradictions to that story, but the general public didn’t need to know all the details. If the top brass who *did* know the truth were willing to keep mum, the regular Joes out there could work out the rest of the tale for themselves. As for the surviving orcs, we could say that there was a mutiny in the army, and there you go. A nice, simple story—and easy to believe, as long as that two-hundred-thousand figure didn’t get mentioned.

Meanwhile, I could’ve helped Yohm with supplies, armor, what have you, instead of directly participating in combat. That way, I could establish myself as this really helpful, trustworthy slime who gave our man of the hour material support, right? That, I figured, would paint me in a better light than being this mystery threat of a monster to everyone.

“...That’s the basic idea of it, but what do you think?”

Our guests were dead silent. Too frozen to react. Kabal and his friends, meanwhile, were so lost in this conversation that they had decided to sit there and enjoy their tea instead.

Compared to that, Benimaru and Shuna were thoughtfully nodding, impressed at the idea. Milim and Shion were all smiles and puffed-out chests, but I’m not so sure they understood me.

Milim had nothing to do with this anyway. *She’s behaving, at least, but maybe I should give her some honey before she gets bored and starts wreaking havoc somewhere else.*

“Who do you think I am? ...Well, all right. I’ll take this.”

She gladly accepted the jar of honey I presented to her. Shion flashed a jealous look at her, but...well, sorry, none for you.

“Wait... Wait, wait, wait—what kind of idea is that?! What do you mean, ‘what do you think’?!”

“Come on. Me, beating that guy? You want me to be some fairy-tale hero or somethin’?”

Fuze and Yohm were protesting in stereo. I didn’t expect them to be very amenable to it at first. That reaction was a given.

“Whoa! No ‘hero’ stuff. That’s someone special, so you can’t just call anyone that. Being a hero comes with a lot of baggage from the past. Just call yourself a...champion instead,” Milim replied.

*Hmm. Interesting.* So just like with demon lords, people didn’t take kindly to guys declaring themselves heroes with a capital *H*. Hero, champion, whatever—I wanted Yohm to be that for me.

“That’s not the problem, you little brat! Besides—”

*Thud!!*

A cold wind drifted across the hall.

“Hey!!” I shouted.

“Lady Milim...” Shion seemed like she wanted to say something.

“W-wait! No! This isn’t my fault!”

Milim was already in a panic. I hadn’t said anything yet, but already she was nearly in tears.

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, Milim. But this is your last chance, all right?”

“All right. Believe in me, Rimuru!” Milim swore to behave, nodding

fervently.

I felt kind of bad for our new champion here, but really, this was Milim's fault. Spoiling her would do nothing good for me, so I gave her the scolding she deserved. Shion, for her part, smiled a little—just deserts for what happened to her earlier, maybe. I resisted the urge to remind her she was in the same boat. Hopefully she got the message well enough without that.

“Milim...? I feel like I’ve heard that name before.”

Uh-oh. Fuze’s eyebrows furrowed at the mention of Milim’s name. He hadn’t identified her yet, but I needed to stay on guard. This demon lord was a lot more famous than I gave her credit for, I guess.

Let’s, um, dodge that question for now.

“Well, uh, is Yohm all right?”

I was worried. That was quite a thud I’d heard.

“Yes, Sir Rimuru. I’ve already administered the potion,” Shuna reported with a smile, just as Yohm himself woke up.

“Nngh... What... What just...?”

He was still a bit confused, but nothing was wrong with him. Getting beaten by Shion and Milim in rapid succession like that made me marvel at his natural toughness. That potion’s some hot stuff, but he deserved credit for surviving at all.

“Um, Rimuru...yeah? Well, all right. I’ll do whatcha say. All these menaces to society you got servin’ ya, I gotta admit—you’re one hell of a slime. From now on, as far as I’m concerned, I’m all yours, pal. Tell me whatcha want.”

It was a surprise, hearing that the moment he got his marbles together. I didn’t like how we more or less had to beat it out of him, but if that convinced him, there was no need to browbeat him about it.

“Yeah, sure thing. And thanks.” I nodded at him in agreement.

We were now together, and the whole event was enough to make Fuze forget all about Milim. “In that case, I have no objections about working with you on this, too. However, would you mind if I made absolutely sure, first, that you are on the side of the human race?”

“Mm? Okay. That’s fair enough.”

And now Fuze was with me, too.

\*

Fuze was kind enough to work with a friend of his, the Baron of Veryard, to smooth things over with the king of Blumund. As he did, I worked out the exact sort of rumors we needed to spread around the local nations, adjusting the little details to match with the plotline I came up with. Soon, we were in contact with every Free Guild in the area.

In exchange, I offered Fuze preferential treatment for some of the merchants coming from Blumund. Any merchants affiliated with the Free Guild there would be allowed to stay at Rimuru, capital of the Jura-Tempest Federation. For now, we weren't charging any tariffs—that could be discussed among us once they trusted us well enough and we opened a bit more formal diplomacy. I had no idea what we should charge anyway. I'm not a politician; I can't calculate stuff like that. I may have acted all kingly and magnanimous about it, but seriously, I was sweating bullets inside.

This meant that any merchants who work through the Blumund guild would get a pretty damn good deal until I worked all of that out—and part of that consideration would go back to Fuze's pocket.

How long would it take for Blumund to trust in us as a fellow nation, though? Not very long, perhaps, or maybe never, even after several decades. I was prepared to wait them out, and in the meantime, I could at least prepare to enact some official ties.

We'd need to build that trust first, but at the same time, we'd need to figure out how much of a tax would be appropriate. It'd have to be cheaper than Farmus, of course, and it'd be important to boost our amenities and spread the word on our safety record. We hadn't finished up our trading roads yet, so any tariffs could probably wait until that was all wrapped up.

There was still a ton of work to do, but at least things were settled between ourselves and Fuze. And Blumund was a small country—the rise of a nation with trade routes and a friendly leader offering them held major meaning. If we could toss guaranteed safety across the entire region into the mix, Blumund could stand to make a major profit from it. *If* they could trust us enough to commit, that is.

Now, to let Fuze bring that offer home and come back with a more detailed report. I couldn't say how it would turn out, but I had to hope things would go in a more positive direction from now on.

As for Yohm and his band, they would be staying here for a while.

If he was going to be our orc lord-slaying champion, he needed to look the part. Hakuro was probably training him hard right then.

The man had a decent amount of natural talent, but not quite enough strength to become the stuff of legend. Just giving him some big, long weapon to carry turned him into a different man, but we'd need more than that. Instead of just relying on his physical strength and instincts for battle, Hakuro thought, he'd need to have control over some arts as well.

Equipping him wasn't a problem. We just happened to have raw materials from a recently pummeled knight spider on hand, and I figured we could use those to give him the best weapon and armor he ever saw. Until that was taken care of, his training would focus more on his body and mind.

In battle, there were three things that mattered: speed, offense, and defense. That applied even if you brought magic into the mix—that could always be countered with magic defense—spiritual resistance. The Free Guild based its ranks off the aggregate of those three elements, which meant that simply finding some better weapons and armor would be enough to boost your rating.

In that way of thinking, the materials we used in the completed equipment were top-of-the-line. Knight spiders, at the end of it, were not that terribly fast. It might seem otherwise, given how they could attack with multiple legs at once, but keep your wits about you, and it becomes clear that they aren't moving too nimbly. That was plain, given how the B-rated Kabal and Gobta more than held their own against it—I was starting to peg Gobta as more of an A-minus, but regardless.

The knight spider earned its own A-minus mainly thanks to its exoskeleton. Its strength came from how incredibly solid that was, as well as its ability to inflict serious damage even by grazing its opponents. Which meant—

“Whoa, Rimuru... You sure yer okay with me havin' equipment like this, pal?”

Yohm seemed honestly touched as he took in his new exoskeleton-crafted armor. It was a full-plate suit, mottled in three different colors—a dark brown as the base, with a unique pattern of green and red on top. It almost looked like a work of art. I called it the Exo-Armor.

He was surprised all over again when he picked up the chest piece.

“Man. So light, too...”

Of course it was. Compared to regular armor, which took a shirt of chain mail and added metal plating to all the most vulnerable areas, a suit of full-plate armor was ponderously heavy. They defended you well, but at the cost of all mobility, so normally you never saw them in action.

This Exo-Armor, meanwhile, used no metal, making it relatively lighter than steel—the key to its weight advantage. Sticky Steel Thread lined the inside in a mesh formation, keeping the wearer safe against heat or cold. The exoskeleton itself boasted superior defense against magic and physical attack, and with the thread reinforcement, it easily shrugged off your garden-variety magic and melee strikes—something we’d already proven in our experiments.

In a nutshell, it offered more durability than full-plate mail at a third of the weight. I couldn’t say how it felt on a monster whose muscular strength outclassed any human’s, but for Yohm, it was the best armor in the world.

“Yep. Garm put his heart and soul into this. He bragged that it’d fetch a price higher than any Unique piece of gear if we put it on the market.”

“M-more than a Unique?!”

“Like, the kind of thing an adventurer spends ten years or so savin’ up for? How top-end are we talkin’, pal?!”

The news came as a major shock to Yohm.

Just as adventurers were ranked, weapons and armor received their own ratings.

The type of thing you’d find regularly at shops was Normal. If it performed a little better or had magic effects applied, it was rated Special—worth a lot but still relatively accessible to the average consumer. In a world like this, where death was always lurking around the corner, you wanted the best equipment you could afford, so most adventurers hit the road with a full array of Special equipment.

However, even this stuff was still nothing compared to a top-shelf piece of work, crafted by a master forger and priced as such. The kind of broken-stat weapon or armor that boosted the wearer’s rank the moment he or she grabbed it. This kind of first-grade stuff was rated Rare, and amassing a full set of Rare gear was something of a status symbol in adventuring circles.

Anyone who managed the feat was revered and respected as a person who could get the job done. The armor Garm crafted was all Rare pieces, and that was why Kabal and his crew were so overjoyed to receive it.

And at the very top, there was a level even above this highest of levels—equipment with world-shattering performance. Exquisite pieces made by old masters from only the best materials, taking no account of matters like production cost and profit. These were called Unique. Weaponsmiths in the larger cities would decorate their shop walls with these for advertising purposes; nobility would store them with tender care as family heirlooms. They were the best of the best, and there weren't many such pieces around, only adding to their rarity value.

As an example, these sorts of Unique items were equipped by every member of Gazel's personal friends, along with his Pegasus Knights. The pride of a nation of craftsmen, one could say. Money and materials were no object with their top-caliber equipment, honing an even sharper edge to their world-beating war power. *Hell, no wonder they're so strong*, I had thought to myself when I learned about it.

Boosting their talents with weapons and armor were one way humans handled monsters, which I had no complaint about. But it had to suck for the monsters felled by such overpowered equipment.

It follows that we wanted to play that same game with our own stuff.

Based on that, again, Yohm's shock was understandable. The greatsword he wielded was all scratched up, even chipped in places; it was no longer useful. Kurobe had prepared another weapon in its place, and it was another masterpiece.

This was a Dragonslayer, a type of greatsword that could hold its own against large-size magical creatures. It didn't have a curve to it, unlike the larger battle swords the ogre mages had; it was more of a Western-style dual-edged blade. One edge was sharpened to a shine, dedicated to slicing and dicing, while the other was solidly reinforced, making it more of a crushing weapon.

Given Yohm's shield-free fighting approach, I figured he'd find that easier to handle than his last weapon. The way he stared at the Dragonslayer in his hands and murmured "Look at this thing..." suggested he was happy

with it. Good.

As a Kurobe creation, the Dragonslayer was another Unique piece. With the right technique, it had the power to slice through even a knight spider's exoskeleton. If you ask me, those two pieces alone just made Yohm's power zoom up to A-minus rank.

It sounded a bit like cheating, relying on equipment to boost your strength. But I let it slide. You needed technique to make the most of it anyway.

Yohm, to his credit, had grown strong enough to truly be worthy of owning this stuff. I hadn't given him anything except food and a place to sleep, and he had no complaint about that. I did hear him scream in pain and call Hakuro a demon and all kinds of other colorful things, but nothing about my treatment, at least.

He was under contract to work with me, after all, and I gave him some pretty nifty equipment, so I figured I was fine.

If I can be honest for a moment, I almost hesitated to let him have it all. Unique items were a rarity in this world, and I wasn't wholly sure I wanted ours to flow into the hands of outsiders. Ultimately, though, I decided that if he had champion-level equipment, that'd make my story all the more convincing.

He was training hard in this town, his talents now noticeably improved. He didn't look out of place at all in his Exo-Armor. A little bit more work on him, and nobody would ever doubt for a moment that Yohm slew the orc lord.

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The days of training continued for Yohm.

His weapon and armor were complete, but I decided that his band had better get equipped, too. I'd need to invest in them a little if I wanted them to help me out later. Hakuro would hammer them all into shape, too, so it should help them ability-wise. Plus, it'd give even more weight to the tale of this great champion and his stalwart band of supporters.

Of course, they were after more than just nice equipment. Apparently,

they were enjoying life here in the city as well. I didn't mind at all. They were working hard for me.

What I had to offer them was scale armor dyed a fresh, bright-green—the completed version of the test piece I gave to Kabal. For the lighter-equipped thieves and the like in their crew, I had a few sets of red-colored hard-leather armor built. Both colors were a nice match for Yohm's own Exo-Armor.

“You... You're even giving this amazing armor to *me*?”

This armor didn't offer much against melee attacks, but it was pretty darn resistant to magic. All I wanted was for Rommel not to look out of place as the champion's personal sorcerer, but I'm glad he apparently liked it so much. Besides, this was about all I could do for him. Magic isn't something you can “train” your body for the way Yohm trained with Hakuro; the rest would be up to Rommel himself.

I also handed him a copy of our communication crystal. It'd be a pain if we couldn't stay in contact, and luckily for us, he just happened to be a magic user. That oughta make things easier.

After preparing and presenting this equipment, I had Rommel go back to Blumund. There, I wanted him to spread the word (and exaggerate a bit) about how the mighty Yohm and his men gave the orc lord a swift and fatal whipping. He said he had no interest in living there again, either—as he put it, being the earl's magician mainly just meant being assigned all kinds of potentially lethal tasks. Once he received his payment, he pledged to stick with Yohm from now on.

This earl, Nidol Migam, sure didn't sound like he was much good at all. He put his personal fortunes above those of his people, he was greedy, and he treated his own staff poorly. Considering the high taxes he charged the local peasants, he certainly didn't devote much of it to territorial security. Given he dealt with issues only after they popped up like that, no wonder his people relied so much on the Free Guild.

“He's the worst bastard you ever did meet. Eh, not that we're angels ourselves, but he takes the cake!” Yohm practically spat at me.

The trope of a wicked, greedy nobleman was a familiar one in the stories I read, but when one was actively affecting your real life, nothing could be more depressing.

But if anything, that was good for me. I could have Yohm return home a champion, one who protected all of Migam. He'd go from village to village, allowing the locals to skip all the guild bureaucracy. He wouldn't work for free, of course—the village would simply submit their completed monster-slaying job papers to the guild, and he could get paid through the earl later. No way would he, nor anyone else, want to serve Nidol for free.

The arrangement would benefit us both, but its biggest merit was boosting Yohm's reputation as a champion. He'd earn the thanks of whomever he saved, and stories of his strength and sincerity would spread across the land. That, in turn, would boost the rep of the monsters who supported him—i.e., us.

Plying his trade across the villages wouldn't be easy, but keeping his base of operations here, in Rimuru, would simplify a lot of things. A communication crystal could be activated by any of the shamans that every village had at least one or two of, so I decided to pass a whole bunch of copied crystals around. I could essentially duplicate them for free, thanks to the Great Sage's backup. That was just a matter of processing the magic stones from monsters and crystallizing them to a high enough purity. I kept that a secret, since word going around seemed like it'd come back to bite me.

These crystals could always be stolen, of course, and there wasn't much I could do about that. That was each village's problem, and I didn't see the need to babysit them that much. It'd be part of their normal lives to tackle, so they could handle it for themselves.

So taking in feedback from Rigurd and the ogre mages, we gradually sorted out the details behind Operation: Make Yohm a Champion. We may have had a contract, but he wasn't exactly my underling—on the surface, we were working cooperatively with each other. Which was great, because it meant I didn't have to pay him a salary. Really, we still didn't have any outside currency, so if anything I oughta be charging him rent.

No point being so miserly, though. That was why I gave him room and board for free.

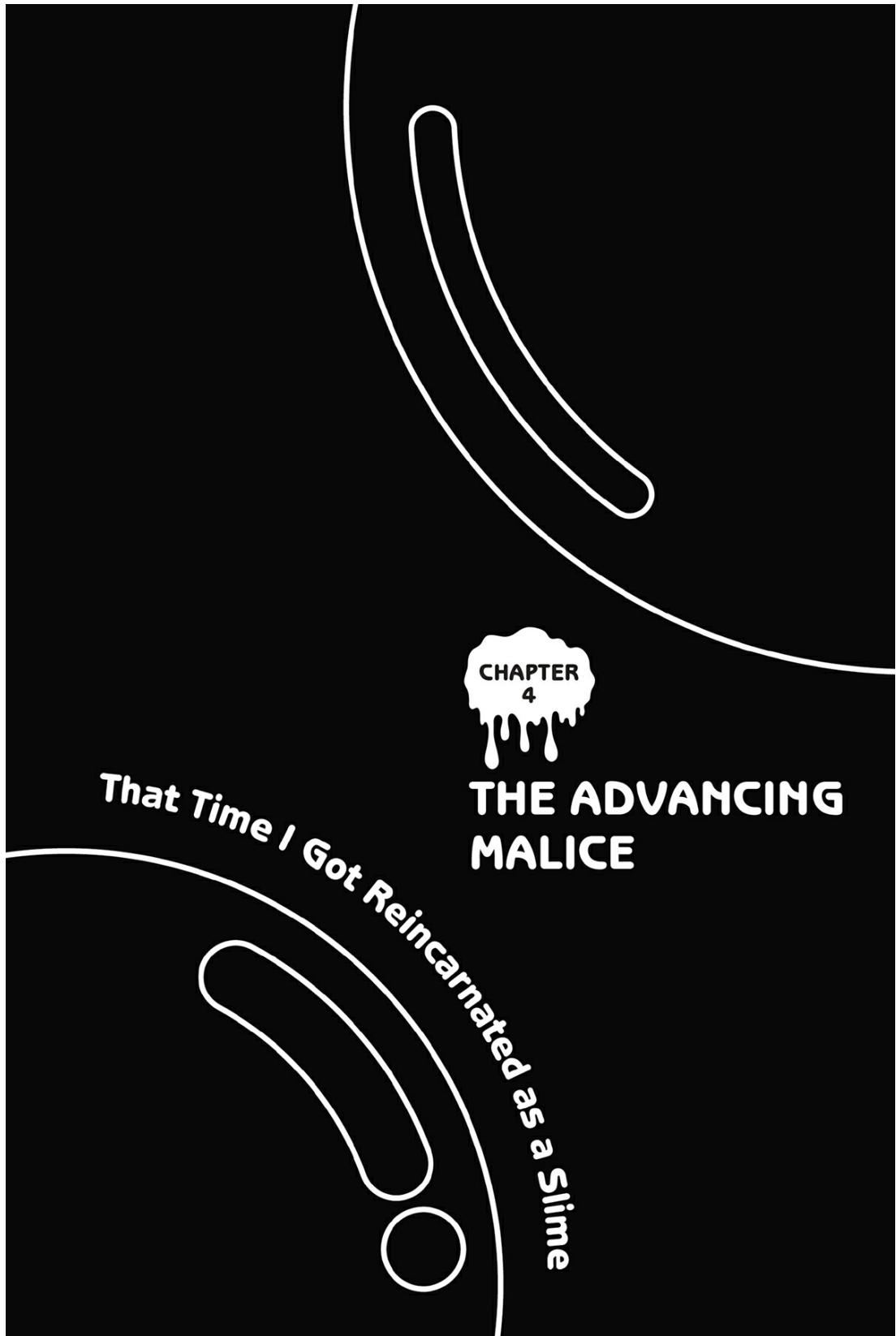
Another motivation of mine, speaking of this town, was that I wanted to advertise this place. I had heard about how people who have it tough in their local village head for the big city to try to make a living. Why not come here instead? I wasn't expecting humans and monsters to be arm in arm overnight, but again, I was thinking long-term.

Several weeks later, all of Yohm's equipment was ready. We finally had his horses and his communication crystals. Rounding up thirty-one wild unicorns was a huge ordeal, though. B-plus magical beasts, every one of them. Strong.

But this wasn't the outlaw band from before. Hakuro had trained Yohm and his men up to the point where they were almost unrecognizable from a few weeks back. None were going to faint at the sight of a magic creature any longer. You could rely on these guys now—and with their brand-new equipment on, they had the air of brave, battle-proven warriors. More than worthy of accompanying a champion.

“Well, it's been fun, pal. We'll see you for now, Rimuru!”

And with that, Yohm set off, promising to use this town as a base for their future activities.



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## CHAPTER 4

## THE ADVANCING MALICE

The magic-born Mjurran pushed her emotions deep inside as she walked across the forest.

Mjurran was once a witch, living in this forest. Persecuted by others, she had fled here three hundred years ago—quietly researching her magic, interacting with no human or magic-born. But those days were nearing their end. Extending one's life with magic only worked for so long.

Facing death, Mjurran had some slight sense of regret. She had yet to even peer into the great, dark crevice that was the world of magic, and she had no successor to take on the knowledge she gained. She couldn't help but ask herself what her life was even for.

In the midst of this impasse, she was greeted by the demon lord Clayman. He had been at that post for about three hundred years, and he was negotiating with the more well-known monsters and magic-born in the area at the time—or smashing them to bits, one or the other. He was building an army of subordinates at an astonishingly rapid pace, and that was what brought him to meet Mjurran today.

Seeking the witch's magic, he made her this offer: "Let me grant you eternal time and a young body that will never age. In exchange, I ask you to swear your allegiance to me."

Mjurran accepted it, and right now, she thought it was a mistake. She did indeed grow younger, earning the gift of eternal life—but in the process, she lost her freedom. It was a terribly unfair, uneven bargain. For the demon lord, swindling someone with as much magic knowledge and as little experience

with the outside world as Mjurran was like taking candy from a baby.

The moment she made the oath, a cursed seal was carved into her heart. The so-called Marionette Heart was one of Clayman's most secret of mystic abilities, allowing him to use a mix of fabulously expensive magical media with the magicules of the target to turn the receiver into a magic-born.

This skill was pulled off successfully, and Mjurran was reborn—and became a marionette, unable to defy the will of Clayman.

With the magical skill she already bore, Mjurran proved to be a fairly high-level magic-born. It was nothing that made the now-captive witch content. Ever since that moment, she was Clayman's eternal puppet.

She could not understand people like Gelmud: magic-born who willfully wanted to be ruled over. She was always looking for a gap, a loophole she could use to free herself from the curse and strike back at Clayman. But her knowledge told her this was all but impossible. The moment she broke through Marionette Heart, the demon lord told her, she would revert to human form. Frozen time would start to flow for her again, and there would be little, if any, of it left to her natural life span. And there was another reason: Clayman was just so much more powerful than she was—enough to make her writhe in disgust.

So Mjurran continued to serve the demon lord, knowing she would never find it in herself to defy him and dreaming of the day she might be released from this detestable curse.

And now...

Clayman's latest assignment for her was an investigation.

"I'm not sure I am suited for battle..."

"No. You aren't, regardless of how high-level you are. So I want you to observe how those who serve another demon lord fight, and then record it for me. You won't be in direct contact with them. I am sure you're capable of that, yes?"

Mjurran was hoping she'd be asked to scout for new members of their fighting force. She was disappointed. Instead, the demon lord flashed a serene smile and gave her his orders.

The demon lord Clayman, the Marionette Master himself, could

manipulate his underlings like puppets and grab the very hearts of those he encountered.

Only a very small subsection of people could call themselves his friend. The rest of his force were mere tools, incapable of resisting until they were worn to nothing. If they wanted to live, their only choice was to carry out the jobs they were given. This mission, too, was already set in stone, as far as Clayman was concerned. If Mjurran said anything else, it would just anger him.

“I understand,” she said, suppressing her own emotions. She had to follow him. All she could do was nod.

*Such a regret*, she whispered. Some memories of her past, when she was free, were making her sentimental.

Snapping herself out of it, she refocused on her mission, spreading the illusory skill Detect Magic around the local area. The magic was used to sense the magicules around her, but when combined with the extra skill Magic Sense, she could read information from an even broader radius.

Mjurran’s centuries-long life span was not the result of good luck. It was built on the back of sheer ability. She was, indeed, weak at direct combat, but not because she was powerless. She was a wizard, a master of three different systems of magic. While none of it was suited for battle, in terms of usefulness, she was at a far higher level than Gelmud could ever hope to be. Clayman understood that all too well, making sure to assign her the exact jobs she was suited for.

*Any reaction...?*

With the spell came a vast amount of data that streamed into her mind. She had examined it all from moment to moment, and now she detected the presence of another magic-born—one with a vast store of magical energy.

She braced herself. She must have been near the territory she was asked to observe. Focusing her mind as intensely as she could, she turned her eyes toward her target...

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She was greeted with a strange sight.

A large number of monsters were chopping down trees, then processing them in assorted ways. The larger trees were transported away, the smaller ones disappearing into thin air—some spatial skill, she thought.

They appeared to be building a road. Behind this crew was a well-built path which, from her viewpoint, seemed to extend to the far horizon. Some on this team were digging up large boulders buried in the earth and pulverizing them into pebbles; others would then take these away and blanket them along the ground. These were then further crushed and distributed evenly by large, heavy-looking cylinders, like logs made of iron.

These iron logs were a type of road roller that Rimuru had ordered. It was being pulled by man power—well, monster power—but there were handles on the front and back, with three crewmembers assigned to each end. It was heavy work, but with a steady stream of heave-hos, the crew easily pulled the roller forward—and behind it, they left a well-tended path of crushed gravel.

A higher-level monster served as foreman for this crew, and everyone appeared to be working together to lay this road out. It was like nothing Mjurran had seen before.

All this was being carried out by high orcs, one of them higher level and emitting an unusual aura from under its full-plate armor. This must have been the mass of magicules she detected earlier.

*So the orc lord won...and he evolved.*

That was Mjurran's judgment, but it was not her role to draw conclusions, so she abandoned the thought. All an observer was tasked to do was watch and record something she continued to do over the next few days as the crew rolled on.

As she observed and chronicled what she saw, she began to wonder what lay at the end of the completed road.

*Hmm... It might be best to continue observing the targeted monster, but I suppose I should broaden my information gathering a little.*

Clayman was a wary, worrisome demon lord. He would no doubt ask. Knowing him as long as she did, Mjurran could easily imagine it—though she couldn't deny that she also wanted to flee the stress of continually observing a magic-born stronger than her without being detected.

So she stepped away from her assigned job and began to move. Taking a

detour through the forest, she stealthily traveled away from the crew and onto the gravel road. Then, seeing it unfold before her, she dashed along it in the opposite direction from the construction team. She was invisible thanks to perception-blocking magic, and she stayed that way as she ran uninterrupted for several hours.

Now Magic Sense was telling her something else.

*This is...a pretty high-level presence coming up. Is that...Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang?! Carillon must be serious, if he's sent one of the Three Lycanthropeers...*

This was a massively powerful magic-born, one Mjurran would have no chance against. Not even the orc lord would give it much of a workout. But what was odder was Phobio's movements—he was traveling right past the orc lord's position and toward somewhere else. The place Mjurran was going. The roads must have been connected.

She began to wonder what was so important on the other end of this road.

Her intel-gathering mission meant she wasn't allowed to come too close to her target. With her magic eyes, however, she didn't need to. She could see them well enough from far away, and her curiosity was driving her to track Phobio now. She continued doing so for a while, until she finally caught sight of a large, open area up ahead. It was still too far to be seen without magical support, but apparently that was where Phobio landed.

*So that's where he went. The orc lord's stronghold, perhaps? Perhaps he wanted to smash their headquarters first.*

Mjurran wasn't sure what to make of it—until she turned her “gaze” toward Phobio's landing point. She immediately regretted it.

*The... The demon lord Milim?!*

It was an absolute wave of violence, unleashed by that girl with the platinum-pink hair.

The girl was grinning, this infallible presence that dominated the other demon lords.

Milim, the Destroyer herself, was there—and despite the distant point Mjurran was observing her from, Milim still noticed her. With a smile, she rolled her eyes toward the faraway spy. Mjurran hurriedly turned off the spell, even as fear shook her, even though she knew it was likely too late.

Her position was known, and she had to flee, no matter how futile she felt it was. If there was any silver lining to this, it was that Milim was in no hurry

to take action. She was willing to let this “observer” go.

“Don’t interfere with anyone’—that was the deal, right? I suppose I owe my life to that,” she said to herself.

Slowly, Mjurran stood up. Locking eyes with Milim came as a shock, but they had both seemed to tacitly agree not to interfere. Very well, then.

Some of the mystery magic-born she was shown in the images were near Milim as well—they must have survived, too, along with the orc lord.

*How should I report this to Clayman...?*

Wondering to herself, she left the site.

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After finishing her report to the demon lord, Mjurran hefted a deep, depressed sigh. His first response to it was harsh—“Spotted by your observation target? That’s far too sloppy for you.” Just recalling it disgusted her.

“If you can’t even perform the job I assign you, you really have no value to me. I can’t have you just up and dying on me, so please, try to be more careful in the future. Continue observing and wait for your next orders,” Clayman spitefully continued.

To him, Mjurran had no value, just like Gelmud. That was the kind of man he was. The Marionette Master was, as his nickname suggested, an excellent commander of other people’s work—but he never treated his servants as anything special. It was a master-slave relationship.

*I failed. I completely failed... Why did I have to pledge my faith to a man like that...?*

Pushing her emotions back, Mjurran turned her focus elsewhere. If she wanted to live, she couldn’t afford to fail next time. She had only been tasked with intel gathering, but against the demon lord Milim, that was a tall order. Continual observation of her would be suicide. She knew Milim was not at all unintelligent—her temper often made people misjudge that, but it was true. What’s more, her instinct for picking up on other people’s thoughts made it all but impossible to hide things from her.

Another concern for Mjurran were the “next orders” Clayman had for her. Something told her that continuing to follow his commands would be far from a good idea. *Forget about following in Gelmud’s footsteps*, she thought.

Her situation wasn't good. If she continued to stand by idly, she feared it would be the end of her.

*This is awful. But—*

She was prepared for what might come. She had no hope, but in some way, Mjurran thought this could also be her big chance. Serving the demon lord as long as she did, she felt she could read his thoughts a little by now. She was aware that Clayman was planning some kind of new, large-scale operation—one that, she predicted, she'd have to serve as a sacrificial lamb for.

If she couldn't escape from Clayman's rule, then death was waiting for her. Maybe she could fake her death and beat him to the punch...or maybe she could free herself from the Marionette Heart and regain her freedom. Those were the hopes Mjurran was betting her life on.

If she could find some piece of information that would please Clayman, that would be perfect. If it was juicy enough to earn her freedom, even better.

Regardless, she wanted to make it look like she died, as in her initial thought. Doing so might arouse suspicion, but having the demon lord Milim around actually made it more convenient. If Milim decided to kick up some dust, it'd attract attention from all corners. It'd be more than enough to attract Clayman's eye, and after that, Mjurran would mean little to nothing to him.

She had made up her mind.

She couldn't read what Milim might do. But if the Destroyer was on the move, that would be one large stone she was throwing into the pond. The more ripples that resulted, the less Mjurran's presence would stand out.

There was no need to hurry on this. Clayman was not a demon lord to trifile with. He would see through a half-baked plan of action. For now, she needed to remain in obscurity, faithfully carrying out her orders.

So Mjurran sat there quietly, waiting for time to continue onward.



The demon lord Clayman closed his connection to Mjurran and sneered.

He had been a bit harsh with the witch, but so far, everything was still

according to plan. Given Milim's behavior at their summit, he presumed that she would head right into the forest. Based on that, it wouldn't be good for her to think that he was uninterested in these mystery monsters. He was the one who hatched and supported this plot in the first place.

What Clayman wanted was a demon lord who'd serve as his faithful puppet—and now that some uncertainties were making themselves known, supporting whoever survived as a future demon lord seemed dangerous to him. They would be too hot to handle, much less make into one of his underlings. If he could grasp some kind of weakness inherent to his target, that was one thing, but Clayman had no intention of dominating with sheer force, the way Carillon would.

But there was no need to spell all of that out. Just indicating that he was interested, or making Milim think as much, would work fine without planting any seeds of doubt in her mind. Plus, his true mission was to entice Frey to join his side, and as long as that was so, keeping Milim's attention focused on the mystery magic-born freed up his own movements a little.

He was sure Milim was gloating right now, laughing about how much of a head start she had on him. Thanks to her keen sense of intuition, any attempt at deceiving her usually ended in failure. That's why he needed Mjurran to take her assignment as seriously as possible—and if Milim took care of her in the process, that was no great issue, either. The moment Milim spotted her, Mjurran's role in his life was over. Having Milim rub her out wouldn't hurt Clayman at all.

“By this point, Mjurran’s a pawn I can stand to get rid of. I’ve obtained all her knowledge. She’s largely useless in battle. It was about time to dispose of her anyway. This works well for me,” he mused coldly.

Just then...

“Just as terrible as always, aren’t you, Clayman? Sad to hear. You need to treat your tools right, or else they’ll fall apart. Didn’t Laplace tell you that?”

The apparent response to Clayman’s whispers came from a hazy presence in a corner of the room. It revealed a young girl wearing the mask of a clown, one with tear marks running from its eyes.

Her voice was equally forlorn. It didn’t bother the demon lord, who leisurely turned around to face the girl.

“Oh, you’re back, Teare? That was fast.”

He addressed her with a deep sort of affection, despite her entering the

room unannounced. That was rare for Clayman but nonetheless to be expected. This was one of the demon lord's very few true friends. Teare, the Teardrop Jester—much like Laplace, the Wonder Jester, her coworker and vice president of the Moderate Jesters—was an old companion of Clayman's.

"Uh-huh. It was pretty tough this time. I couldn't move around too freely in Frey's territory. She is a demon lord, after all."

"I could imagine. You weren't noticed, were you?"

"No problems there. Mission complete! I *am* part of the Moderate Jesters—you could learn to trust me a little more!"

Clayman flashed her a contented smile. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I do, I do, Teare. I just worry you're putting your neck on the line too much."

The concern he had for Teare was evident in his voice. It was a much different tone from what he used with Mjurran a moment ago. Anyone could see that any worry he had for Teare was the genuine article.

"Ugh! Can you stop treating me like a child already?!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, of course, Teare. But did you hear the news? Milim seems to have taken quite the liking to those magic-born. This is turning out even more interesting than I had thought it would. Who could have imagined that Milim herself would seek out one of Carillon's Three Lycanthropeers? Such a pleasure to see unfold."

"Well, fair enough," Teare replied quizzically. "But how do you think it's going, though? I haven't seen your crystal-ball recordings yet, but are these magic-born really amazing enough to keep Milim's interest?"

Clayman could sense her curiosity. He made no attempt to hide his own heart from her. "Well, to be honest, I suppose they cannot go on ignored. In terms of strength alone, I would easily be able to dispatch them..." He paused to think for a moment, carefully choosing his words. "But Laplace was...unnerved by them. He 'felt' something, is how he put it. I thought he was overthinking matters, but if both the orc lord and these mysterious magic-born survived, it does give me pause."

"Hmm... Really?" Teare sounded convinced by this assessment. "Well," she continued, "if it was enough to unnerve that little sneak Laplace, there's got to be something to it, doesn't there? Either them and the orc lord made peace, or one side's subjugating the other...or something else? It's hard to judge their value, I think, as long as we don't know. We at least need to know what the demon lord Milim finds so fascinating about them."

“Certainly... I can’t disagree with that.”

“Right? You aren’t acting like yourself, Clayman. You’re usually a lot more cautious about these things.”

Such a scathing comment forced Clayman to reconsider his approach. If some monster under his control made this statement, he wouldn’t have given it any kind of sincere thought. It might’ve enraged him into killing the poor creature.

“Perhaps I might be a little too hasty here. I suppose I’d best collect more information from a variety of angles before I debate it any further.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right!”

So following Teare’s feedback, Clayman decided to investigate the magic-born a little more. He had no interest in recruiting them; his objectives were still the same.

The only question he wanted to tackle: What was Milim so interested in with them? That was a major concern for him, and he thought learning more about the magic-born might lead to an answer.

Otherwise, to a demon lord like Clayman, high-level magic-borns hardly mattered at all.

Recomposing himself, Clayman decided to listen to Teare’s report.

“So how did your investigation turn out?”

“Well, it looks like Frey has no intention of getting involved in the Forest of Jura.”

“Ah... So she won’t make a move, then? Did you get a grasp of what was going on over there?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Teare grinned.

She had taken on this job because Laplace was busy with another assignment.

Her mission was to investigate the demon lord Frey and collect intel on any potential weakness they could take advantage of. That was what brought Teare into Frey’s territory.

Teare might have looked like a little girl, but much like the demon lord she served, she was a first-class superpower.

“So, um, my impression was that Frey was kind of on high alert about something or other. She had harpies flying around all over her realm, like she

was preparing for war or something.”

“Ah. It figures. Did you find out why?”

Teare snickered a little. “I did. And guess what?! She’s freaked out because Charybdis might resurrect itself!” she reported cheerily.

It made perfect sense to Clayman. “I see, I see... Well, Teare, I’d like to make another request of you, but how’s your schedule looking?”

“Eee-hee-hee! I thought you might say that. I have Footman on standby, too, so if it involves some rough stuff, we can handle it!”

“Heh-heh... Well done, Teare. But I’d like you to keep this from turning violent. First, I’d like you to travel to where this Charybdis is sealed away and see if it’s possible to win this creature over to our side.”

“Sure thing! Leave it all to me, Clayman!”

“I believe the location is—”

“*I said*, leave it all to me! I gotta get going, okay?”

With that, Teare once more sank into the muddy darkness. Watching her leave, Clayman exhibited a twinge of worry in his eyes—an extraordinarily rare thing for him. In an instant, they were back to their bold, fearless shine.

“Well... Charybdis, eh? Very good. If its power is truly up to demon lord standards, I can hardly wait to see what it packs.”

The whisper was delivered with a joyful smile as he descended into his own thoughts.



Carillon, king of the lycanthropes, first declared himself demon lord four hundred years ago in his thirst for more power. The world was in a great era of upheaval back then, with demon lords stepping in and out of the picture at a dizzying rate, and he made the move near the end of a great world war, one fabled to take place every five hundred years.

Frey was one of the other survivors of that era to join the demon lord club, with Clayman staking his claim a century later. Leon Cromwell, meanwhile, assumed the title two hundred years ago, with his defeat of the Accursed Lord under his belt.

Together, the four young demon lords were known as the New Generation.

The older ones, meanwhile, were wizened generals by comparison, all surviving at least two world wars, and their strength was on a completely different level from the new gang. That led many in the New Generation to strive to expand their own forces, and Carillon was one of them.

It was little wonder, then, that he was now attempting to recruit some more brawn for his side.

Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang and one of Carillon's Three Lycanthropeers, understood his master's feelings better than anyone else. That was why, even after being trounced to a terrifying degree by the demon lord Milim, he was still hiding himself deep in the forest.

There was no way he could do something as utterly shameless as returning home right now. If he explained everything to Carillon, he would no doubt laugh it off and forgive him. But Phobio's pride refused to allow that. Failing to live up to the expectations of Carillon, the man who saved his life, would be unbearable.

“I can't let that happen!” he half howled into the air.

“Please, calm yourself, Sir Phobio!”

“That defeat was unavoidable. Not even Lord Carillon could quell the rage of Milim—”

“Shut up! Lord Carillon would never show his ugly face again if it happened to him. I was just too inexperienced for the job...but my pride forbids me from returning without anything to show for it.”

The anger in Phobio's embittered reply made his men fall silent.

They had been hiding out for a week, taking shifts as they kept watch over the town. The demon lord Milim had stayed there the entire time—and they had also seen monsters engaged in a variety of tasks, from building construction to road expansion. There were also monsters tasked with procuring food and patrolling the area—the order preserved around town was amazing to see. Not even Phobio could hide his shock.

“Just look at those bastards. Up and building a town for themselves... I dismissed them as lowly monsters, but they've got technology that not even I am aware of...”

“You certainly said it. I wouldn't want to subjugate them so much as open formal relations with their leader.”

This was Enrio, a monkey lycanthrope, taking an intellectual approach to the question. He had a point. These monsters were working in orderly crews, under the command of their leaders. This was clearly some state-of-the-art engineering. It was incomparable with what Enrio knew in his homeland, the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania, with its crude stone houses and roads of bare, flattened earth.

“Yeah. Even if Milim wasn’t here, we’ve taken the wrong approach. We tried to conquer them without any chance for them to counter us—and that cost us the opportunity to earn their trust. But what’s done is done. And even if I’m all healed up, my humiliation at the hands of Milim hasn’t disappeared. I have to find a way to get back at her! Some way that won’t put any trouble on Lord Carillon. I know in my brain that it’s impossible, but this is about my heart.” Phobio’s voice was dark, ghostlike, and bereft of its usual cheerfulness.

Up to now, Phobio was an absolute ruler. Nobody could defy his strength—but now his first setback was giving him pause. He had never lost to anyone before, except Carillon. His logical mind told him that losing to Milim was unavoidable, but the flames of humiliation still simmered deep below.

“I know what you mean, sir, but...”

Enrio knew exactly how Phobio felt. But exacting revenge upon Milim was not in the scope of reality. He tried to make Phobio give up on the idea but found himself interrupted.

“Ohhh, I completely understand. All that anger and frustration... I’m an old veteran of those feelings.”

“Who goes there?!”

“Since when were you here?”

Phobio’s troops were far too late to react. The figure had already sidled right up to them as they sat around the campfire—and judging by the way it had avoided detection by an entire group of high-level magic-born, it must have been quite talented indeed.

“Hohhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! A good day to all of you! I am called Footman, member of the Moderate Jesters. They call me the Angry Jester, and I am delighted to make all of your acquaintances!”

The polite greeting from the rotund figure was marred slightly by the enraged expression on its mask. The gregarious tone of the clown’s voice

made its presence seem, in a way, quite surreal.

“Mm-hmm. You don’t have to be so wary of us. My name’s Teare, a fellow Moderate Jester. We’re sort of jacks-of-all-trades, and I promise we’re not fighting against you!”

And then, a female clown stepped out from behind Footman, this one with a tearful mask. The angry man and the sobbing girl—a very strange thing to see beside a peaceful campfire.

Asking Phobio and his cohorts not to be “wary” of them was a tall order. But the way they appeared out of nowhere certainly hinted at their powers. If they weren’t foes, perhaps it was best to believe that.

“Hohh? I’ve never heard of this Moderate Jesters group before. A jack-of-all-trades? Well, whatever. What are you after anyway?” Phobio asked, trying to work out their objectives.

Footman seemed like he couldn’t wait to answer. “Hohh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Well, I was called here by your feelings of anger and disgust. The waves of rage I felt rippling from here were quite noteworthy, indeed! Were you the source of them? I would love to know what makes you so enraged. Would you be so kind as to tell me? Because I’m sure I could offer some assistance!”

He transformed his mask as he spoke, making it erupt into an eerie smile.

“You expect us to talk to someone as creepy as you two?” Enrio countered. “Sir Phobio, there’s no reason to fall for their politeness. May we dispatch them for you?”

“He’s right!” another of Phobio’s men added. “It’s not normal, someone coming here without being asked to. You two look to be high-level magic-born as well, but you picked the wrong group to wrestle with. We belong to the Beast Master’s Warrior Alliance, part of the armies of the demon lord Carillon. Do you think a pair of wandering magic-born like you could defeat us?”



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The group had little interest in hearing them out. The strangers were too suspicious-looking, and the way they dared to offer help riled their anger. Phobio's group were in the elite echelon of Carillon's forces—they hadn't fallen to the point where they required the help of random creepsters.

Ignoring them, Footman continued. "You seek power, do you not? Well, power's just what we have. Quite a bit! It comes with a level of danger, of course, but if you can conquer this danger, the strength you could earn from it is tremendous!"

"...Oh?"

"Yeah! You want to beat the demon lord Milim, don't you? So why don't *you* become a demon lord, too?"

Teare's question drove the camp to silence. The sound of one lycanthrope swallowing nervously seemed to echo against the trees.

"A...demon lord? Did you think you could trick us with such ridiculous  
—"

"Charybdis. Have you heard of it?"

The single word from Footman had earth-shattering effects. The moment he uttered it, Phobio froze in place.

And then—

"The evil powers that giant fish holds are incredibly massive! If you don't need it, well, we can always offer it to someone else. See ya!"

—Teare dealt the next blow.

Gesturing to Footman, she turned and prepared to walk off. This was how the devil tempts you—by making you panic, stealing your decision-making skills, and blocking your ability to think rationally.

"...Wait."

Phobio stopped her, defeated by his very own ambitions.

"No, Sir Phobio!"

"You can't listen to these people!"

"Tell me more," Phobio asked, ignoring his men.

The flames of crazed desire were dancing in his eyes as he turned them toward Footman. Maybe this was his chance to scare the wits out of Milim with all her power. It could even let him rule over the lands as a demon lord himself. None of it was a dream any longer. And imagining it made Phobio fling away all his composure.

*No. I never liked this from the start. Why did the demon lord choose me to*

*dispatch a single, wimpy orc lord? I don't need to take that crap. Yes... If it's a new demon lord they need, nobody should have any complaints about me taking the helm. If it makes me stronger, I'm sure Carillon will laugh it off anyway!*

Phobio, prone to hasty thinking even in the best of times, had been completely hooked by Teare's and Footman's sweet words.

"Ooh! A fine decision, Sir Phobio. And the correct one! Who besides you could ever become a demon lord?"

"You're up for it, then?" Teare added. "Well, it makes sense to me. Someone strong's gotta be demon lord, or else it'd be a terrible mistake! That's what I think, too—and you're just the man for the job, Sir Phobio!"

Yet, Phobio was no fool. He still had ultimate authority over these two flattering him, and he hadn't forgotten one very pertinent question to ask.

"Knock that crap off! I said, tell me more. If I say yes to that offer, what do you get out of it? You gotta have some kind of endgame! So out with it!"

Teare and Footman had expected this.

"We do get something out of it, yes. If you become a demon lord, Sir Phobio, we're hoping you can show us a little favor afterward. Hopefully, you'll be able to accommodate us in a few areas?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! And we could hardly subdue Charybdis by ourselves. We've discovered where it's been confined and everything, but if we can't tame it, it'd be such a waste! And just as we were pondering over what to do about that, who should we run into but you, Sir Phobio!"

That was easy enough for Phobio to accept.

"Huh. All right. But how do you know I can tame Charybdis any more than—?"

"Hohhhhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! No worries there! I am positive you will succeed at the task, Sir Phobio! And even if you should fail by some incredibly unlikely event, we will demand no reparations from you. We only charge our clients if they win, win, win! On that score—at the least—you can place your full trust upon the jacks-of-all-trades at the Moderate Jesters!"

*Huh, Phobio thought. So when I become demon lord, they want it to be clear who helped me out the most.*

In that case, perhaps it was best to leave the demon lord Carillon's army. That move could do him well, whether he succeeded at this or not.

Phobio had a lust for power. He also felt confident that he could tame

Charybdis. Instead of fearing failure, he was already sure of his success, ready to accept the deal. All the extravagant praise from this pair made him feel like he was sitting on a demon lord's throne even now—or perhaps, Phobio was already caught up in their spell by then.

“All right. I accept your offer!”

Following his instincts, Phobio nodded, signing the papers that Teare handed to him.

\*

Phobio then turned to his troops and gave his final orders.

“I want you to go back to Lord Carillon and tell him what I agreed to.”

“Sir Phobio?!?”

“But...”

“Listen, you guys,” he said, stopping them. “I’m not gonna cause any trouble for Sir Carillon, so tell him I’m giving up my post in the Three Lycanthropeers and leaving the force. Nobody’s gonna whine about what I do if I’m just some magic-born unaffiliated with anyone. Besides...I’m going places. I’m going to be stronger. Strong enough to lay waste to the world. And I’ll make Milim recognize that!”

Nothing could change Phobio’s mind—a mind that was almost unnaturally attuned toward revenge against the demon lord who slighted him. As if his unfading feelings of humiliation and anger were pushing him forward.

Enrio silently watched him, thinking and observing as his companions exhorted Phobio to reconsider. After all the years he had been his closest confidant, he knew well that once he made up his mind, it wasn’t easy to make him reconsider. Phobio’s will was firm, and his heart could not be moved. So...

“Very well, sir. I will report to Lord Carillon first. However, the strength of Charybdis is still an unknown. I would suggest you be careful with it—do not expect it to eat from your hand that easily.”

And with that, he left, taking his companions with him. Considering the nonaggression pact the demon lords had with one another, Phobio picking a fight with Milim could become a serious crisis. Enrio needed to confer with Carillon and take countermeasures before that happened. It was with some

reluctance that he left, but he couldn't afford to do anything as foolish as let his emotions dictate his priorities. It was an order, besides, and one made with whatever reasoning power remained in his mind.

*Sir Phobio is not a fool. I cannot think he will be deceived for long by that strange duo. And even if this Charybdis actually exists, Sir Phobio should be able to tame it.*

He chose to have faith in Phobio.

With Enrio on his way, the only people left were Teare, Footman, and Phobio.

“Well, shall we be off, then?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to show this Charybdis my power and smash it to the ground. And with our combined forces, we’ll turn that demon lord Milim into a sobbing baby!”

“Yep! You sure will! I’m totally cheering you on, too, so don’t let your guard down! Ready to go?”

Teare and Footman motioned Phobio to follow behind them. After a short journey, they reached a small cave, deep in the very heart of the Forest of Jura.

“Charybdis is here?”

“Sure is!”

“It has not resurrected itself quite yet, you see, but you can still feel its lust for destruction bubble into the air. We love such emotions, so that’s how we found it.”

There was an evil grin on Footman’s face as he spoke. Phobio failed to notice, enraptured as he was by the strange aura he could feel from the cave.

“Now,” the clown continued, “let me explain how this works. Resurrecting Charybdis requires a large number of corpses. Charybdis is a sort of spiritual life-form, essentially like a demon. We have to give it a physical corpus, so it can exercise its power in this world. So...”

He gave Phobio a sidelong glance. Phobio could read what it meant. He gulped nervously.

“Wait. Are you...?”

“Why, yes! We are! To tame Charybdis, you must instill it within your own body. You will become one with it!” Footman’s voice boomed,

revealing his obvious excitement.

“Mm-hmm,” Teare added. “If you want to stop, now’s your chance, okay? This seal won’t last for much longer, and when it breaks, Charybdis will wind up resurrected on some battlefield or monster fight or whatever. In fact, it’s probably gonna try using the remaining dregs of its power to cook up the monster corpses it needs to resurrect itself—and if that happens, we’ll have gone through all this trouble for nothing!”

Was that true? It might be. There was a slight twinge of impatience to Teare’s voice.

“If Charybdis automatically resurrects itself, I doubt we’d be able to control it. It’s just a pure drive for destruction, so it won’t take orders from anyone, I don’t think. Not even if we defeat it. So...we have to unseal it before it resurrects and take its powers away, or it won’t work,” she continued, choosing her words carefully.

Her eyes turned straight toward Phobio. They stabbed into him, much as Footman’s had. There would be no more eloquent way to ask the question they were asking.

“All right,” Phobio replied sternly. “I’m already committed to this; I ain’t gonna chicken out now. I am ready to make the power of Charybdis my own!”

“Yeah! That’s the spirit!”

“Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Well said, Lord Phobio. I really must thank you—and toast our good fortune as well for running into such a trustworthy partner!”

So it was decided.

Phobio ventured into the cave alone, eyes filled with the pride he held as a high-level magic-born. A finely purified will that believed in victory without fearing defeat. But sadly, his heart was still filled, deep down, with his grudge against Milim and his buried anger at his own immaturity.

To the spiritual life-form known as Charybdis, nothing could be more delicious.

The moment he fell for Teare’s and Footman’s sweet words, his fate was sealed—a fact he had failed to notice as he plunged into the cave’s darkness.

Time passed.

“He is gone, isn’t he?”

“He certainly is.”

“Hohh-hoh-hoh! *Hohhh-hoh-hoh-hoh!*”

“Ha-ha-ha... Ahh-ha-ha-ha!!”

The laughter came loud and fast once they were sure Phobio was fully inside.

“Exactly the sort of person one would expect to be serving that blockhead Carillon, eh? And after all the excuses we practiced beforehand, he barely questioned us at all.”

“Totally, totally! That monkey guy looked a lot smarter than him.”

They had contrived a fairly extensive amount of arguments and strategies to convince Phobio to accept the offer from this pair of odd-looking strangers. But Phobio’s eyes were so clouded by rage and greed that it went far easier than predicted. They ridiculed him for it in his absence—so easy, it was almost a disappointment.

“Is that the end of the job, then, Teare?”

“Mm-hmm! All I heard from Clayman was to revive Charybdis and have it head for Milim.”

“And no new business after that?”

“Nope. This job’s all wrapped up! Oh, and how about we just dispose of the lesser-dragon corpses we brought in? We’re not gonna need ‘em anymore.”

“Indeed. We go through all the trouble to prepare a temporary body, and then that fool volunteers for the job instead! No need for these corpses, no.”

So they tossed the bodies to the ground.

There were a dozen or so lesser dragons in all; they had killed an entire flock of them for the job. Lesser dragons were not part of the draconic races that Veldora belonged to; there was nothing inherently magical about them. They were unintelligent creatures, incapable of handling magic, but they were protected by a tough body and strong scales, giving them a killer advantage in close-quarters fighting. The human race usually ranked them around a B-plus or A-minus, but not even such a powerful beast was any match for two high-level magic-born.

Their lives were cruelly taken, and now they were being treated like garbage. Bringing them to a human town and selling the assorted parts from them could fetch a small fortune, but to Teare and Footman, they were just an

encumbrance.

Once they removed the corpses from their spatial-magic storage and dumped them on the ground, they left the scene, satisfied at a job well done.



It had been several weeks since Milim arrived, and the time really passed by in a flash. Every day was a battle with her.

Some days, she would check out our agricultural operations and even help plow the fields. I was willing to bet that we were tilling the fields created after clearing trees from the forest faster than any modern farming equipment could manage. It was exhilarating, seeing how quickly the job was being done.

Other days, she'd observe our workshops. Watching Kurobe forge a new sword practically made her swoon for the guy—and then she'd immediately get bored and whine about wanting to try doing it herself. He said yes, and of course, her approach was incredibly violent—one strike was all it took to almost destroy the forge space, anvil and all. It taught us all that Milim wasn't really suited for delicate work.

Chaotic days, to be sure, but at least they were peaceful now.

Not much had changed with life around town after Yohm and his crew left. The only real difference was the guests we were now hosting. Kabal and friends were still staying here, as was Fuze.

“Uhh, don’t you kind of need to get back home sooner or later? How long were you planning to stay anyway?”

I decided to bring up the question with Fuze while Kabal and his gang were taking Milim out hunting. They got along pretty well with her, too; by now they were her second favorite after me. I needed to take advantage as much as I could.

“Well, is it all right if I stayed a little bit longer? There’s, you know, a lot of things to tackle.”

He wanted more time. He, too, had been walking around town, observing the assorted goings-on. He wasn’t liable to cause trouble if I took my eyes off him, unlike Milim, but it still made me nervous.

“Oh, come on, you’re still not convinced that we’re not a threat?”

The whole reason for his stay was because he was suspicious of us—or me, really. The longer he stayed here, the more concerned it made me.

“Mmm? Oh no, I’ve long since dropped any worries I had about you, Sir Rimuru. It’s just...”

His voice trailed off.

“Okay, so why are you still here?” I pressed.

Fuze scowled a little, then resigned himself to reveal the truth. “Well, it’s just comfortable living here, you know? Thinking about it, it’s been a long while since I’ve had a chance to rest and take it easy, so...you know, I was thinking this was a good chance to let my hair down for a bit.”

*What? Wow, talk about brazen! I’ve been on pins and needles worrying about Fuze, and he was treating this as a resort vacation?!*

“Uh, you realize I permitted you to stay here because you were going on about trying to ‘gauge us out’ and so on, right?”

I was truly at a loss for words. All the politeness I extended to him at first now seemed like a truly stupid idea. And that wasn’t all—there was one other thing too important to forget.

“Also, what happened to your promise that you’d help make Yohm and his band into champions?”

“Oh, no need to worry! I’ve decided that I can trust you, Sir Rimuru, so I’ve already instructed my team to finish up the arrangements.”

Apparently, he had already reported to Blumund and gotten everything set up for Yohm over in Farmus. Despite being on vacation, he was still handling his job for me. Shrewd of him, I guess—or maybe, indicative of the fact that I couldn’t let my guard down around him.

“Really? Well, great, then. So you like it here?”

“I should say so! This town is amazing! Having such a fine place to rest and recuperate so near to Blumund is truly welcome. Of course...I can’t help but think about the dangers involved in traveling between here and there.”

I suppose Fuze really did see this town as a kind of health spa. Guess installing that hot-spring bath and working hard to improve our food quality paid off. It was more the work of Shuna and the three dwarven brothers than me, but still.

Our diets, in particular, had dramatically changed over the past few weeks. It still wasn’t all that varied a menu, but each meal had started to taste

quite a bit better. We didn't have much in the way of seasonings, such as *mirin* or soy sauce, so no really strong flavors yet—but we did have salt, as well as something kind of like pepper and a variety of condiments from the fragrant grasses of the forest.

These ingredients, combined with Shuna's genius in the kitchen, were producing some pretty high-grade food.

"Ahh, being able to consume such fine cuisine, day in, day out. I am a happy woman indeed!" Milim also approved.

She had made friends with Shuna while I wasn't paying attention, and the sight of her stealing—er, sampling—tastes of food in the kitchen became a regular occurrence. Shuna was fond of her, too, and sometimes I wondered if anyone saw her as a demon lord any longer. But hey, having friends isn't a bad thing.

We were also training apprentice cooks for Shuna's operations. From both genders, too. Shuna didn't have the analysis and assessment abilities that my unique skills provided; she had to rely on her five senses to make the food she did. The new cooks stuck to Shuna's advice along those lines, working hard to keep bellies full across town.

With all the different races coming in, our population was starting to swell. This naturally meant we needed to employ a large number of people to cover our food needs, along with keeping the peace, cleaning the rest houses, and doing the laundry. Everyone had their strong and weak points, so we had decided to divide the work into six categories: cooking, cleaning, upkeep, sewing, assistance, and miscellaneous. Rigurd was responsible for taking command and providing assignments. He was good at it, and the job he was doing bringing all the town's monsters together was a wonder to see.

Yohm's band also had nothing but good things to say about our food. They liked their living quarters, too, along with the town experience in general. If it wasn't for that, I'm sure they would've fled from Hakuro and his demonic training regimen long ago. Judging by the way monsters around town treated them, they must have enjoyed the work well enough. Once we started hosting merchants in here, I was pretty sure it'd work out just fine.

It'd be great if we could all work together and turn this area into a tourist destination. I had certain plans along those lines, but nothing concrete yet. For now, our first priority was convincing everyone else that we weren't dangerous.

Danger on the roads, though...?

That was probably a good point. It'd be exceedingly rare to run into something as big as a knight spider, but there certainly were a large number of monsters out there. A forest as deep and thickly vegetated as this one was no place for a human being to live—the monsters posed a danger, but so did getting lost and running out of food. Nobody was around to treat you if you hurt yourself, and the threat of illness on the road was also present. It took nearly two weeks to complete a one-way journey between Blumund and here, but you could expect to tack on a few extra days for all sorts of reasons.

Having Shadow Motion and the like on hand made the distance something we could cover immediately, but that wasn't available to adventurers. Even seasoned travelers like Kabal's team needed around ten days to cover it, no matter how quickly they went. If they got in a fight and lost their bearings, it was a given in this world that they'd need to expend a few days getting back on track.

I wanted to use the merchants to spread the word about this town for me. That was my plan, but there were still a few stumbling blocks to cover before we brought it to action.

“Hmm... I see. It'd be quicker to build a new road, wouldn't it?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Um, well, I'm having a crew pave a road between here and the Dwarven Kingdom, but I've also got another team handling building construction. Their work's settled down lately, but I was thinking maybe they could put in a road to Blumund. It'd keep people from getting lost, at least.”

“Wait, really? That's kind of a big national operation, isn't it? You'd need a ton of money to—”

“There you go again, Fuzie.”

“Fuzie? Something about you calling me that really creeps me out.”

“Ah, don't worry about it, Fuzie. If we can build a road and pave it with gravel, that'd open passage to carriages and wagons and such. It'd save a ton of time, plus, it'd be useful for future relations, right? And we'd be happy to undertake this operation. Just one thing...”

“What's that?”

“I want you to spread the word, like you promised. Just let everyone know

that we aren't a pack of dangerous monsters. And I'd also appreciate it if you could introduce me to an expert in customs and tariffs and stuff. I want to sell some of the goods we produce, so if I could get in contact with people who can help with all that stuff, that'd be great. How about it?"

Right now, the path between here and Blumund was little more than a rough animal trail, capable of accommodating horses but not full carriages. We had started to build a road to Dwargon, but we hadn't even gotten around to clearing the trees that dotted the path to Blumund. We hesitated to, because we were afraid of calling too much attention to ourselves, but that was before all the battles and such in the forest.

Things were starting to calm down again, and I wanted to have some highways we could leverage to improve our trading activity. I was prepared to leave that issue alone if we were seen as "the enemy," but if we were building diplomatic relations with other countries, we needed some real roads, fast. And since I ran things in the forest, it was up to us, I felt, to do all the construction work.

I figured now was a good time to plead my case to Fuze about this, even if it sounded a tad patronizing, and have him do his job for me. It had the intended effect. Fuze looked honestly touched.

"Sir Rimuru, you would really do all that for us? In that case, we'll do our best to provide any kind of support you need!"

*Heh. That was easy. Fuze will probably be singing our praises to anyone who listens to him once he returns home.* At the very least, if he didn't have a narrow, prejudiced view of us, then I'd say I won this battle.

If using some of our idle man power to build a road was enough to earn that much appreciation, it's a pretty cheap deal for us, I think.

\*

Kabal and his friends were back by the time I had finished cajoling Fuze. Milim came running up to me, a big smile on her face.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Another bumper crop today!"

Behind her, Kabal and Gido were both carrying a huge number of monsters on their backs.

"Boy, that Milim sure is something else! She can spot out monsters in the blink of an eye! She made things so much easier for us." The empty-handed

Elen beamed as she trailed behind the demon lord.

There wasn't a speck of dirt on Milim at all; I guess she had the men in the party handle all the heavy lifting. She was wearing a new dress from Shuna, and I suppose she didn't want to splash any blood on it. *Not exactly hunting gear, I don't think...*

"Phewww! Finally back!"

"That was a hard day of work, eh? Let's hit the hot spring and grab a mugful of something."

"Ooh yeah! The fruit wine here is awesome!"

Kabal and Gido didn't seem to mind being used and abused, at least, although that probably wasn't the way they thought about it. The men were spoiling Milim, after all, and it wouldn't be very nice to gripe about that and stir up conflict. If they had no problem, neither did I.



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It did, however, remind me all the more about how, no matter which world you lived in, some men were doomed to have women use them. I, at the very least, could show them a little kindness.

“Hey, good work, guys. Why don’t you get yourselves cleaned up first?”

“Yes, I would hardly want you to remain all dirty like that—”

Shion started to comment, but then—

“Hmm?!”

Suddenly, Milim ran next to me, eyes pointed forward.

“Who’s there?!”

Shion handed me to Milim as she addressed some presence in front of her.

*I’m not a piece of baggage, you know. I have no idea why they’re ferrying me back and forth, like I’m some fragile work of art.*

Benimaru and Soei took position behind Milim as I grumped about this for a moment, Hakuro standing nearby among the trees. I didn’t spot him arriving—he must have been training just now, but his clothing was still in perfect order. Impressive. And with Ranga bursting out from my shadow, we now had the town’s main force gathered together.

Geld was out working on the road project, so he wasn’t here. He had reported to me a few days back about how he sensed something suspicious nearby, but he never actually saw anything, so he chalked it up to his mind playing tricks on him and kept up the road construction. I had a feeling that I was forgetting about someone else, too, but—hey—with all the guys we did have, I didn’t predict any issues.

Besides, the person facing us was familiar to me.

“It has been quite a long time, my leader.”

It was Traya, a dryad and Treyni’s younger sister.

“Sure has. But why are you looking like that? All like you’re about to kill someone?” I said as she kneeled before me.

The seething rage was something you could detect even from far away, sharp enough to make both Milim and Shion react to it. Her semitranslucent body was a bit hazy in places; perhaps she had taken some damage. It was clear that something happened to her.

“...Well, I am afraid it is an emergency. Charybdis, a calamity-class monster, has revived itself. The power wielded by this great spirit is akin to a demon lord’s. My sisters are keeping it immobile for now, but we are hopelessly outclassed. Plus...it appears the great spirit is seeking out this

land. Charybdis is a tyrant of the skies; ground-based forces can do little against it. I came here to advise you that you must solidify your defenses and prepare some aerial war power.”

The fatigue was clear on her face as she explained.

Tension quickly filled the air. Surprisingly, Fuze was the first to react—he was stunned to near silence the moment he saw Traya (“A dryad?!” he had shouted), but the mention of Charybdis’s name got his brain in gear again.

The blood drained from his face as he shouted. “Charybdis?! Oh, man, if it’s really revived, that’s a bigger threat than any demon lord. Unlike those guys, you can’t even reason with this thing. It’s classified as a calamity, but I’d say it’s safe to assume it’s a full-on disaster, if anything...”

As he put it, its strength was demon lord-caliber, but instead of leading an army, it just went around by itself wreaking havoc. A sort of unintelligent monster, to put it another way.

However, thanks to its unique Summon Monster skill, it could call out schools of megalodons, a large, shark-type monster, anytime it wanted. The otherworldly creatures dissipated after a period of time, once the magicules giving its body physical form were exhausted, but even so, they were an A-minus force that couldn’t be ignored. What’s more, Charybdis could summon ten or so at once, making even its servant beasts a formidable presence.

If Fuze was right, then I honestly had to agree with him. This was worse than a demon lord.

“I don’t know why we would be targeted, but if we are, this is great for us. We must choose the best fighters we have and prepare to counter this force.”

Benimaru was certainly excited, but we needed people who could fly...

*Oh! Wait! I forgot!*

“Right. I forgot Gabil. He’s probably doing research in the cave. Can someone get him for me?”

Soei went off to fetch him. In the meantime, I decided to go back to town and hold a prep meeting.

We were back in the now-familiar meeting hall, Traya using Thought Communication to speak with her sisters.

Soei was back with Gabil, with Vester joining him, so we could make contact with King Gazel if need be. On the question of aerial firepower, the

first thing that crossed my mind were his Pegasus Knights—each one of them were A-ranked fighters, so if I could gain their support, I couldn't ask for anyone better to rely on.

Gabil and his fighters could fly as well, but they were no better than B-plus, and taking on someone ranked higher than you was gravely dangerous. I preferred to think of a way we could guarantee victory for ourselves, with minimum damage.

"Things couldn't be much worse," Traya began. "For some reason, the summoned megalodons have incarnated themselves in the corpses of some lesser dragons. They've manifested to creatures over sixty feet in length, like nothing we have ever seen before, and there are thirteen of them. My sisters estimate that each one is in A-ranked territory."

“““...”””

Everyone in the room lost their voice at this. A creature as strong as a demon lord, plus thirteen other A-ranked monsters? I wanted to ask if this was some kind of a joke.

"What will we do, Sir Rimuru?" Benimaru asked.

*Ugh, that's what I want to ask...but I'm the leader of this alliance, and it's my job to make the decisions.* Plus, no matter how much I hemmed and hawed about it, there was only one answer to give.

"What'll we do? Well, we'll kill it, won't we?" Reluctant though I was, I presented that conclusion to the others.

The moment I said it, everyone in the room took action.

"Heh. I didn't need to ask. In that case, I will begin to prepare."

"Indeed, what else could we do?"

"Exactly! This will be no sweat for Sir Rimuru."

When it came to this sort of thing, they knew exactly what to do. Nobody voiced any disagreement with me; instead, they sought out their roles and sprang into action. The sight made Fuze lose his head a little.

"Whoa! Is that all? Don't you understand? This is a demon lord-class enemy..."

"But even if we stalled for time, we can't expect much support from Blumund, can we, Fuzie?"

"Well, no, but..."

"I'm not fighting to lose this, of course, but if it comes to it, I hope you'll consider taking in some of our residents."

“Not fighting to lose...? But even the dryads can’t handle this monster! Now’s no time for this kind of easygoing nonsense. It’s a huge problem! One that requires an international response!”

I wasn’t intending to sound easygoing. I was honestly fairly panicked myself. That’s why Benimaru and the other ogre mages were so quick to begin preparations—and Gabil himself was running off to gather his troops. Hakuro was in contact with Gobta to get the goblin riders assembled.

Each of them was a B-plus threat alone, but working together as a coherent unit, he declared that they could easily have one or two of the megalodons for dinner. They even looked forward to the chance to experience battle against a higher-ranked enemy. Crazy.

Meanwhile, Rigurd was bringing the town leaders together, explaining the situation and ordering Rigur to lead the evacuation. Calling attention from the air would make you a target, so I imagine he’d take them all into the forest.

All of this was done in orderly fashion, without anyone getting too worked up about it. Sadly, with the frequency of the crises we’ve been asked to tackle, I suppose we’ve gotten used to things like this.

Fuze, being unaware, must’ve thought I wasn’t sensing the danger enough, and I can’t blame him for that.

\*

Milim, meanwhile, was going with Shion to the bath.

Some enemy coming to attack the town wasn’t any concern of hers. Her devotion to the routine was at least helping keep everyone around her calm.

After everyone sprang into action, the only people left in the meeting hall besides me were Fuze and Kabal’s trio. We took the opportunity to talk over a few things.

“All right, I’m not gonna tell you guys not to worry about anything, but I intend to do everything I can for this. I’m having Vester make contact with King Gazel for me, so we should expect some more support, too. After that, well, I’ll do what I can,” I said.

Fuze looked less than optimistic. He had a lot of questions, doubts, and other thoughts in his mind, and I got the impression he was having trouble forming them into words. I was in no hurry, so I wanted him to calm down a bit.

“...You aren’t going to run?” he finally asked after a moment of thought, clearly worried for all of us. He was gravely serious, and I thought he deserved a serious reply.

“What would running accomplish? I’m the strongest dude in this nation. I’ve told my people to take refuge if I ever lose, but you know, just because I lose one fight doesn’t mean I’m giving up on the battle. If there’s absolutely no chance of winning, then sure, I’ll run away and think up another plan. If not, though, then it’s important that I go right in front of our foe and gauge how strong he is with my own eyes, isn’t it?”

*I need to do that if I want to formulate any kind of strategy. Plus, since I am the strongest in the Alliance, nobody’s running as long as I don’t lose.*

I thought about saying that, but I found it a little too embarrassing.

It just felt so lame, telling people that it was a leader’s job to take the loss sometimes. That’s why I tried not to lose, if I could. Until I actually did lose, I had to play the strongman role to live up to everyone’s expectations.

And even if I was defeated, I didn’t have much to worry about—not after telling everyone so many times to take refuge in that case.

“...Ah. That’s what being a leader of monsters means, I suppose.”

“Yeah, well, this isn’t the kind of nation that would crumble after losing its king anyway, so...”

Fuze nodded at me. He looked convinced enough. “Still, it strikes me, Sir Rimuru, that you think quite a bit like we humans do. You don’t seem like a monster at all. Plus, it’s just so strange, having a slime be the most powerful being in the realm,” he said with a chuckle.

He might be right. It didn’t seem like anything unusual to me, since I was a former human, but to Fuze, having a monster think and act so human must have thrown him. Plus...

I’d actually been hiding something from Kabal and his friends. I still hadn’t told them what had happened with Shizu in the end. It was kind of a tough subject to bring up, so I intended to stay mum about it until asked. But if I was ever going to come out with it, now seemed like a good time.

“Hmm... Maybe so. You might find this hard to believe, actually, but I used to be a human being, too. You know Shizu, right? I think I’m probably an otherworlder, just like she is. Though, really, it was more like I died in my old world and got reborn as a slime in this one. And while I’m at it—”

I used my Universal Shapeshift extra skill to transform into a human.

“What on—?!”

Fuze’s eyes lit up as Kabal’s crew audibly yelped in surprise. It was Elen who noticed first.

“Umm, looking at you... That’s like a smaller version of Shizu, isn’t it?” she timidly asked.

“Oh, no way, Elen.”

“Yeah, Shizu was an old lady! She wasn’t anywhere near as cute looking as this.”

Kabal and Gido were quick to protest, but Elen held her ground.

“No, there’s no doubt about it. I mean, I saw her! Like, what she looked like under the mask...”

Oh, she did? It was just for an instant, so I didn’t think any of them caught a glimpse, but... This works well for me, though. I was going to tell them now anyway.

I removed the mask from my pocket and put it on the table.

“That’s Shizu’s mask, right?”

They eyed it, then me.

“Yeah. I wasn’t really hiding it or anything, but I didn’t take this form around you guys because I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. Elen’s right —I inherited this form from Shizu.”



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“...Inherited?”

“Yeah. When I ate her.”

The four of them looked surprised, but none seemed angry. They retained their cool as they waited for me to continue. They had chosen to believe in me, luckily enough.

“Shizu and I came from the same country. When she died, she asked me to take over her mission...and as proof that I’ve taken on her will, I picked up the form you see here. So...I can’t go around acting like an ass while I look like Shizu, you know?” I said quietly.

About half of that was my real feelings. The other half, really, was just an excuse I was using to deceive myself. *Guess there’s no helping it if they’re suspicious of me now*, I thought, as I turned my eyes to Fuze.

“...Can you tell us what happened?”

There was not a trace of doubt in his voice. So I spent the next few minutes describing Shizu’s final moments, as well as the circumstances behind my death and rebirth.

“I see... So that’s what it was...,” Fuze whispered.

Perhaps Fuze had been spending so much time in this town because he wanted to ask me about Shizu. Just like me, he had trouble finding the right time to bring it up.

“Well,” Kabal said, “I believe in you, pal.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“And me! And me!” Elen insisted. “But... Wow, Shizu really did everything she could to make her dream come true. And now you’re gonna try to make that happen, Rimuru?”

Elen’s question was more to the point than I had anticipated. But there was no need to tiptoe around answering it.

“I am. I promised her as much. I’m going to free up all the emotions that are binding her heart down. Not that I’ve met the guy or anything yet, but as far as I’m concerned, the demon lord Leon is my prey to catch.”

“Wow... I always knew I could believe in you, Rimuru!”

Elen flashed me a friendly smile. As for the other three men:

“Leon? Huh?!”

“You’ve got a death wish, Rimuru. I mean, Charybdis is practically a pushover compared to that guy...”

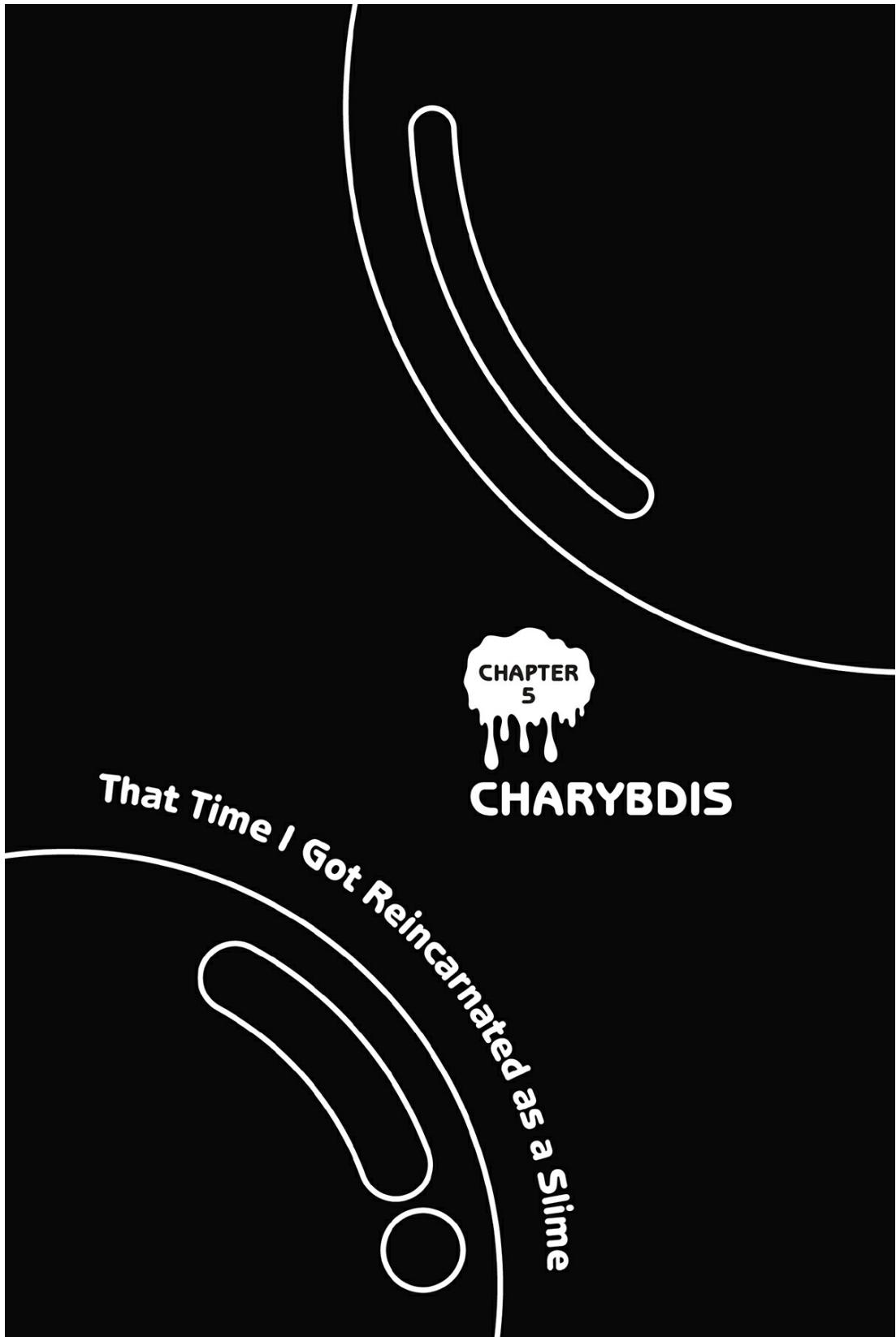
“Yes! You can’t go around calling someone like that your prey! Don’t

blame me if it leads to your death!"

They were, to say the least, a little unnerved. Well, so be it. Wish they could learn a little from Elen, but our little heart-to-heart seemed to have earned me all their trust. They each offered to join in this battle, but I turned them down. If I blew this, as I explained, it'd be up to them to figure out a new plan immediately. They relented pretty quickly.

*Charybdis, though, huh...?*

Thinking about the battle up ahead was already dampening my spirits.



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## CHAPTER 5

# CHARYBDIS

The fight was about to begin.

We were at the end of the gravel road leading toward the Dwarven Kingdom, near the midway point between the capitals of Dwargon and Tempest. We rendezvoused with Geld and his construction team there, waiting for the moment to come.

It was about time for Charybdis to appear.

Vester had contacted King Gazel to explain the situation. We didn't even have to mention our pact; Gazel immediately deployed his knights for us.

As he put it: "Hmph. What kind of swordsman would I be if I didn't help my younger fellow student in a pinch?"

He *really* loved playing the role of the dojo big bro with me. It made me fear for the Dwarven Kingdom's future—but if he was helping us, it was all good.

The team of one hundred knights he quickly put together had already gone on ahead. The plan was for them to strike at Charybdis from behind as we advanced from the front, in a classic pincer attack. We'd be relying on them quite a bit this time.

An additional four hundred knights were also preparing to step in, just in case this first attack ended in failure. It'd be nice if this plan of ours worked, but we needed to consider what would happen if it didn't. Gazel was no fool; I was sure he'd be using this attack to gather intel on the creature for himself. I didn't mind, since I was planning to defeat it right here and therefore didn't need to worry about things after that. That'd make life easier for us.

Beyond that, all we had to do was wait for the plan to unfold.

We used the time to have Treyni (who had joined us on-site) tell us more about Charybdis.

I knew it was this super-powerful monster already, but listening to her story, she made it sound even more hazardous than that. It was no exaggeration to say that it was as strong as a demon lord. Being called a calamity monster, one would expect it to be a calamity-level threat, but not necessarily here. Fuze was apparently telling the truth—this is more of a disaster-class menace.

Why not just call it that, then? Well, there was a good reason for that. The term *disaster* was normally reserved for demon lords, which Charybdis wasn't. So why wasn't it classified as a demon lord? Simple: It was just a monster that wreaked havoc wherever it went. It took no intelligent action, neither working in groups nor deliberately seeking to destroy the human race, and some wondered if it had any true intelligence at all. A real terror of a monster, but on that point, it was also quite different from a demon lord.

She called Charybdis a spiritual life-form, whatever that was. That term meant it could resurrect itself if defeated in one body by moving over to a new one. That sounded a little familiar to me—in fact, it sounded a lot like how Veldora worked.

“This Charybdis was born a very, very long time ago, running through cycles of death and rebirth. It is the cruel, brutal ruler of the skies. One could even call it the heaven-sent child of Veldora the Storm Dragon, ruler and guardian of the forest.”

*Huh? Did Treyni say something important there? Because it sounded kind of important. The child of Veldora? Was my guess correct, after all?*

“Wait a sec,” I hurriedly interrupted. “What do you mean, ‘the heaven-sent child of Veldora’?”

Treyni explained. “Charybdis is a monster created by the accumulated piles of magicules that leaked out from Veldora.”

Which meant it was the same as I was. We were sort of like what the human race would call siblings. That, in turn, suggested one possible reason why Charybdis was so doggedly honing in on my position. I was related, in a way, to Veldora, so it was gunning for me first.

*Perhaps it's already noticed that Veldora “exists,” in a way, inside me. Maybe I'm overthinking it, but I suppose I'd better stay on my guard.*

After our discussion with Treyni, we went over the details of our strategy one more time.

The thing we had to watch out for the most with Charybdis was its unique Magic Interference ability. Using this made any magicules within a thousand-foot radius of the monster go haywire—it could use its own powerful magic to interfere with the very way magicules worked.

“Even the high-level wind magic at my command had no effect on Charybdis,” Treyni recounted. “Under Magic Interference, we believe the effects of all magic are greatly reduced. What’s more, the biggest difficulty lies in how it annuls any sort of flight-based magic. Try to make contact with it, and you’ll lose your magic and crash to the ground. Losing the advantage of height makes it a very difficult enemy to fight.”

This was exactly why we needed an aerial offense that wasn’t dependent on magic. Even if you had wings, though, could those be canceled like magic, too?

*Understood. The principles of flight differ for creatures like winged horses and dragonewts. Their wings contain the power to control gravity, lightening their overall bodily weight and letting them adjust the flow of power to propel themselves forward. This method of flight is unrelated to the presence, or lack thereof, of magicules.*

Judging by the Sage’s answer, my wings shouldn’t be affected, either. I did find it a bit strange that having these wings alone let me fly. Turns out it had nothing to do with physical strength. I didn’t have to flap my wings a bunch to stay aloft, not that it mattered at the moment.

This brought up another question, though.

“I see... So flight magic works by taking advantage of magicule resistance around you. But does that mean Benimaru’s Airflight wouldn’t work, either?”

Airflight was one of the ogre mages’ Battlewill arts, powered by the user’s magical aura. It provided basically the same benefits as regular flight magic, but given that fundamental similarity and what I had just secretly learned from the Sage, I figured Magic Interference must affect it.

“Indeed, I believe it is just as you say. A very keen insight, Sir Rimuru.”

I appreciated the compliment, but it wasn't the answer I hoped for.

"Geh. Seriously? This guy's no slouch. So I guess flame broiling it with ranged attacks will be pretty tough."

"It seems likely, my brother. If magicule-driven attacks won't work on it, that puts rather large restrictions on our offense."

Benimaru and his friends, meanwhile, were already debating how they were going to fight.

"Heh-heh-heh... Aren't you guys forgetting something important? Don't tell me you've forgotten who I am! Some big ol' fish isn't gonna make *me* break a sweat. I'll give 'im one heck of a beating!"

It was Milim, who had changed into battle gear while I wasn't paying attention. She stuck her small chest forward, trying to look as defiant as possible.

*Can we go with that?!* I was all ready to welcome her to the force.

But Shion had to go and turn her down. "I'm afraid we can't allow that. It'll put you in a bind, Sir Rimuru, and this is an issue for our town to handle."

*Why would it put me in a bind?*

Just as I was thinking that, Shuna butted in. "She's right. It'd be a mistake to rely on her for everything, just because she's our friend. But if Sir Rimuru is in serious trouble, we will gladly ask for her support then."

*Um, I'm kind of in serious trouble right now, guys.* Not that I could say that out loud to them. The others were all nodding; they were keen to defend their home by themselves as well. I wouldn't get away with relying on Milim from the start.

"Ha...ha-ha. You heard them, Milim. Just trust in me, okay?"

I hated to turn her down, but I did. *Way to go, man. You barely trust in yourself.* I kept the thought a secret.

"Wh-what?! And here I thought my time had finally come to shine, too..."

Milim hung her head in disappointment. She was ready for action, changing her clothes for it and everything, so the shock of being refused must have been intense. She stole a few glances at me, looking ready to cry, but I couldn't do anything for her. It was a disappointment for me, too.

So that's what was on our plate, then. It was us against Charybdis.

\*

Our discussions continued. Another major problem was that the megalodons that served Charybdis most likely had Magic Interference at their disposal, too. Our long-range attacks were already heavily restricted, and trying to get closer would fail once our flight skills were blocked. Practically speaking, we had very few means of defeating Charybdis or its megalodons.

Ultimately, we decided to just try fighting it and see what happened. There was little point debating any further at this juncture, so instead we would try out whatever attacks we thought could work.

Eventually, my Magic Sense picked up a group of fourteen monsters approaching us. It wasn't long before we could see them.

Even from afar, the eerie sight was astounding. Giant sharks, over sixty feet in length, were gracefully swimming across the sky. Their bodies were protected by solid, stiff dragon scales that would assuredly deflect most garden-variety attacks. It was shaped like a shark, but at the core, it was a completely different monster.

With them was another, even more bizarre sight—the gigantic dragon accompanying the thirteen sharks.

Its size was enormous, making the megalodons look tiny by comparison. Maybe three or so times their size? Its total length had to be over 150 feet or so. There was a single large eyeball on the bottom of its wedged, sharklike head; on the top was a pair of solid-looking horns that appeared as if they could gouge their way through solid stone, or anything else for that matter.

By comparison, its limbs looked like mere decoration, tacked on to its shark-shaped torso—but the two pairs of wings on its back, one larger than the other, looked almost exactly like Veldora's.

Charybdis exuded a weird, ominous sort of beauty.

And with that, hostilities began.

The Pegasus Knights were currently traveling here as fast as they could. Doreth, one of Treyni's other sisters, used the elemental magic Wind Protect and the legion magic Army Move to boost their speed. A Thought Communication message confirmed that they would arrive earlier than planned.

In the meantime, we decided to engage the foe. Once the Pegasus Knights showed up and it became a free-for-all, we wouldn't be able to use any large-scale magic. When we made contact with Charybdis, we wanted to strike.

“Eat this! Hellflare!!”

Benimaru kicked things off by choosing his biggest, strongest wide-range flame attack. Always something classic about using your most powerful move the moment you meet your enemy...

Maybe I was overthinking it, but the black dome this move produced, over three hundred feet in radius, was still only big enough to encase Charybdis and one megalodon. I mean, these dudes were *way* too huge. At 150 or so feet in length, they looked like they were pretty close to us, but they were actually still far away. A six-hundred-foot diameter was pretty big, but to these giants, it must've felt cramped, if anything.

And the results?

“You’re kidding me! I put everything I had into that...”

Benimaru’s frustrated muttering was understandable. Charybdis continued to leisurely soar through the air. Its megalodon companion had fallen to earth, mostly burned up by the attack, but Charybdis itself was the same as before. Some of the scales that burned off were replaced by new ones, but that was all. Between its naturally high defense and the effects of Magic Interference, it had successfully resisted Hellflare. It hadn’t even fully incinerated the megalodons, indicating exactly how effective Magic Interference was.

I wasn’t too shocked by this—I was expecting this—but it made me realize again that this foe was going to be a huge pain in the ass. But we all kept our cool. Our plan was to expect this, so we moved on.

“All right. Let’s follow the plan: Break them up and take each one out.”

Our priority now was to buy some time for the Pegasus Knights and wipe up those meddlesome megalodons. Heeding my order, we all spread out to our positions.

I had transformed into a human, too, so I could handle whatever came my way. There were twelve megalodons left. Paring their numbers down looked like it’d be a tough row to hoe.

Each one was an A-ranked monster, but despite their speed, they didn’t have all that much power. They weren’t exactly technical fighters, either—like Charybdis, they lacked intelligence and thus didn’t seem like they required that much caution.

If a megalodon fought that knight spider Gobta dispatched, for example, the spider wouldn't last a moment—it'd get crushed by those jaws. If it fought Gobta, though, he'd be able to dodge and run all over the place.

To sum up, those sharks were offensive and defensive powerhouses, but their speed in battle wasn't that much of a threat. Based on its speed—an integral element of any battle—the megalodon wasn't that astonishing of a monster.

Of course, a single strike from one could still easily be lethal. You didn't want to approach one with a halfhearted effort, and my forces knew that well.

\*

Geld and his team were the next to launch an attack after Benimaru. I had my command post set up on a slightly elevated hill, so I could see the action unfold below me.

This force under Geld's command was an elite one, all high orcs ranked B or higher. Anyone ranked below that would potentially get in the way here, so we had them handle the town evacuation instead. They numbered less than a hundred but still took a leading role in our strategy.

Using the trees as cover, the force began trying to entice the megalodons to come closer so they could strike. This, sadly, did not work well. We were anticipating that the sharks wouldn't be able to move very much surrounded by trees...but with their powerful bodies, they could simply raze any trunks that stood in the way like so much dried kindling.

Following that, the megalodons unleashed a blitzkrieg attack. This involved bashing into the enemy, using scales sharpened like blades to slice into them—you could call it Blade Charge or something similar, if you were inclined to give it a name.

The elites under Geld's command took evasive maneuvers, but the sharks were just too big. Even though its speed should've made it avoidable, a gigantic shark capable of swimming freely through the air made evasion difficult. Now the orcs were the ones caught in a forest prison with the trees getting in their way.

Thanks to everyone being geared for defense like Geld was, there were no apparent deaths. Several dozen of them, however, were seriously hurt, unable to continue in battle. The remaining fighters lying low in the forest were

clearly shocked by this—and when faced with the megalodons' punishing strikes, I couldn't blame them.

I could hear a scream of rage.

“You'll pay for hurting my friends!”

It was Geld.

As he shouted, he faced a megalodon in front of him, halting its charge. His entire body was covered in armor, which protected him from the sharp, bladelike scales. Using his ponderous strength, he stopped the shark in its tracks.

“Now! Get 'im!”

The moment the order was made, a horde of high orc fighters took action. They moved slowly, but the damage from their battle axes was heavy. Little by little, cuts and slashes appeared on the megalodon's body.

But sadly, none were lethal. The sheer size of it meant this barrage of attacks was too little, too late.

The megalodon shook its frame. That was all it took to send several dozen fighters flying. Geld's face grew stern, harnessing his hatred to apply pressure to the shark's head. It thrashed around more in response.

It was Geld's otherworldly strength against the megalodon's violent rage, and it proved to be an even match. Then fortune smiled upon Geld.

“I will assist you!”

I heard another scream, and a flash of light descended from the sky to land squarely on the megalodon. The creature died right there, never aware of what happened to it.

Gabil had appeared.

His force was functioning as a hit-and-run unit here, and when he saw Geld was in danger, he immediately stepped in to bail him out. Realizing Geld had the megalodon pinned down, he fired off an attack fueled by all his strength—and with his rank of A, that was nothing to sniff at. Even a sixty-foot-long shark couldn't withstand that kind of force.

And Geld's good fortune didn't end there. The dragonewts under Gabil's command were using the Full Potions they had manufactured to quickly heal the wounded. The potion flowed freely on the battlefield, restoring even the serious cases to perfect health.

“Gwa-ha-ha-ha! Thanks to you restraining that monster, Sir Geld, dealing the final blow could hardly have been easier!”

“Thanks, Sir Gabil. Would you like to keep fighting together with us?”

“Ooh! That sounds like fun. If we can help you out, I would gladly take the opportunity!”

Now Geld and Gabil were a tag team. Their respective forces worked together as well, allowing them to keep up the vicious onslaught against the megalodons without worrying too much about injury. This battle would deepen the bonds between them, no doubt.

Before long, they had succeeded in slaying two more of them.

\*

Lethal combat was breaking out elsewhere as Geld commenced his attack.

Gobta, following Hakuro’s orders, was using his Case Cannon to strike at megalodons. It packed a powerful punch, but there was no way that a bullet an inch wide could strike a lethal blow on these guys. It had opened a gash in the megalodon’s stomach, about half a yard in width, but all that did was add fuel to its anger.

“Hey, uh, I dunno if this is gonna work!”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Of course it won’t. I lured it over here so I could have all of you defeat it.”

“Gahh! You’re just bullying me, old man!”

Nobody bothered trying to stop Gobta from yelling bloody murder at him.

What transpired next was a game of tag in the forest. Just as Hakuro declared, he intended to have the goblin riders defeat this megalodon for him. The riders were now surrounding it, ready to stake their lives on this game. Each, in turn, would take a stab with their spears, then edge away. When the shark targeted one, another would attack in their place.

They were all frantic. They weren’t quite as speedy as the shark, but their opponent was enormous. Being able to maneuver more nimbly in the forest gave Gobta’s team a slight advantage.

In a battle under those conditions, even a tiny error could be life-threatening. But they continued with the near-suicidal attack, using High Potions to clear up any wounds.

“If worse comes to worst, we have Full Potions. As long as you aren’t instantly killed, you’ll be fine!” Hakuro’s voice might have been friendly, grandfatherly in a way, but his instructions belied his demon-instructor

persona.

“Whoa! Are you serious, old man?”

Only Gobta had the presence of mind to lodge a complaint. The others were too busy attacking and dodging.

“Come on! The bait needs to fully grab its attention! Attackers, don’t think about anything else—just put all your power into pummeling your foe! But don’t forget to fall back after your attack. If you *do* forget, well, it’ll be a painless death, at least. Hoh-hoh-hoh!”

The very definition of a demon, Hakuro offered Gobta’s riders no mercy in their training.

They numbered only twenty, each taking turns baiting and attacking the shark, and they had divided into five teams that engaged it in a set order. Each one of them toyed with the megalodon, one after the other, although they had to watch out since it wouldn’t always change its target for them. The basic procedure: attack, dodge, move, heal, and prepare for the next strike.

Having no defense on hand, the bait had to devote themselves fully to grabbing the shark’s attention, then dodging. It was the most dangerous of the jobs, and if the megalodon didn’t focus on a new target, it’d have to keep on baiting. The time between the goblins’ attack and the megalodon adjusting its target provided the most dangerous moments of the entire battle.

But Gobta’s goblin riders worked in perfect order, carrying out their shifting roles with no confusion.

“Impressive,” I said.

“Yes. Sir Hakuro taught them well,” Shuna replied.

“He certainly has,” Benimaru agreed. “Growing younger has only added further polish to his demon-instructor ways.”

“Wow! I wish I could play with ‘em, too!”

Milim, meanwhile, apparently had the wrong idea about this whole battle. *Better not think about it. If I play her game, I lose by default.*

“Hey, c’mom, do you think I could—”

“No.”

She was tugging at my clothing, begging for a chance. I had to play bad cop with her.

*I wish she wouldn’t look at me like that. I’m about ready to cry myself, here.*

\*

Up in the sky, things were getting pretty explosive.

Soei was there, and like Benimaru, he was only capable of using Airflight—and he wasn’t particularly great at it, either. Despite that—and I don’t know how he managed it—he was grappling with a megalodon in midair.

The secret behind it was actually simple. Soka and her four dragonewt guards were positioned above the shark, casting their shadows over its body. Soei could then use Shadow Motion to make a beeline for them. Magic Interference only interfered with magicules in midair, so Shadow Motion didn’t seem to be affected.

I gotta hand it to Soei—the moment he spotted that loophole, he immediately made use of it. But he was just getting started.

Now Soka’s team of five was hovering over a single megalodon. This was indicated by the way both the “real” Soei and four of his Replication-conjured clones were each latched on to a different shark.

“Monster Puppet String!!”

Soei’s four clones each launched the skill at once. It was a secret move, letting the caster fully control monsters that lacked intelligence. Special bewitching string was used to tap into the neural network that carried messages from the brain, replacing them with fabricated orders instead. This immediately placed four megalodons under Soei’s control—using the dead bodies of other animals just came back to bite these guys.

Controlling each of his replicated bodies, Soei had the megalodons attack one another. They split into two pairs, feasting upon each other’s flesh.

“Take those four out when the time is right,” he shouted to the dragonewts above, using the fifth megalodon he was personally riding to head for Charybdis. It was such a brilliant, dazzling display that you almost forgot those sharks were supposed to be A rank.

It looked like Soei was on a whole new level now, much like Benimaru. I’m sure he was putting his all into this fight, but he made it seem incredibly effortless. He couldn’t have been much different in strength from Geld—where did that clear difference come from? Despite the chaos all around me, I couldn’t help but wonder.

As for Soka's team:

"Understood, Sir Soei. Leave the rest to us."

Soka gave him a quick salute, steeling her gaze at the megalodons.

"Don't let up! I refuse to let you do anything to disappoint Sir Soei!"

Her voice was cold as she addressed her team. Toka, Saika, Nanso, and Hokuso looked just as grim and resolute.

I knew Hakuro was a demon instructor. But what about Soei? In a relatively short time, this group of five had grown astonishingly coolheaded. What kind of education did it take to instill that in them?

After a little bit, when the megalodon-on-megalodon fighting grew more intense, the four dragonewts under Soka began their attack. Soka stayed high above, giving out orders for the others to follow.

It worked. Despite the difference in rank, they were bringing the sharks down.

Soei wasn't the only one pulling off impressive feats today.

And thus, Soka's team bagged four confirmed shark kills for themselves.

\*

Even more impressive were Shion and Ranga. They must've formed a team when I wasn't paying attention.

"This time, no matter what, I've just got to stand out!"

"Mm. Yes. I am in agreement with that opinion."

So Shion jumped on the back of Ranga, now at his default huge size. He was expecting this, and once she was on, he started running—and jumped right off my command post on the hill, sprinting straight into the air.

Wait. Into the air?

Looking closely, Ranga was running in midair, making a few powerful leaps as he did, as if there were invisible footholds to stand on. And there were, in a way. He was using the extra skill Control Wind to create them. Pretty skillful feat, there. Maybe you could call it Windwalker or something. But anyway, it meant that Ranga could run even faster in midair than he could on the ground.

This art used magicules, however, which meant that Magic Interference could affect it. No matter how sturdy Ranga's footholds were, a megalodon's interference might be enough to shatter them...or so I thought.

As I watched, trying to figure out what he was doing, Ranga showed off some truly amazing moves. In a moment, he was in the air above a megalodon and jumping off, gaining speed as he practically dive-bombed the enemy directly below him.

At his full size, Ranga was a good fifteen feet or so in length. Not much compared to a megalodon, but still, that's a lot of mass. And now Ranga was approaching the shark, combining his own leaping skills with the pull of gravity to gain more speed than running alone could accomplish. But this wasn't simply a ramming attack. Shion was still riding him, and her large sword was out.

Despite being parallel with the ground below, Shion couldn't have looked more serene. And the moment that Ranga and the megalodon crossed paths, she brought her sword down, the light-purple glow it emitted arcing across the air. She had used her aura to expand and strengthen the sword, extending it to over three times its normal size. Like a guillotine blade thundering down from above, the demon sword descended...and neatly removed the megalodon's head.

“Behold! Decapitating Demon Blade!”

Decapitating Demon Blade was the name of the skill. Instead of unleashing pure aura like Ogresword Cannon, it simply formed it into a set shape for use. But thanks to working with Ranga to gain as much speed as she possibly could for the strike, the tip of the extended sword flickered faster than the speed of sound, cleaving right through the megalodon's head.

It was a simple, yet absolutely heroic move, I thought, and in that way it befitted Shion well. After that, now that the shark's Magic Interference was gone, Ranga shot some lightning down to burn the body, and that was that.

Shion and Ranga used the same tactics to take out two more of the sharks.

“Fighting these huge, tactless brutes is no fun at all. I grow tired of it. I'd like to target their leader, but what do you think, Ranga?”



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“Shion, that opinion speaks to my own heart as well. Let us go and see what this foe’s strength truly is.”

“That’s the spirit, Ranga. Let’s do it!”

Their excuses made, the two of them sprinted toward Charybdis.

\*

There were, at first, thirteen megalodons, each an A-ranked monster. Of the two remaining survivors, one was already dead, slashed to ribbons by Hakuro’s barrage of strikes. We had lost nobody on our side to death or injury. Things were going well, and I breathed an internal sigh of relief over it.

“Ah, how disappointing. Your mobility and ability to avoid danger have improved, but your offense is still woefully lacking. You couldn’t even defeat a single one of them... Once this battle is over, I will need to toughen up your training.”

“Whoa! Come on, gramps! If you toughen it up any further, I’m gonna die! Like, really, really die!”

“Did you just call me gramps?”

“Aghh?!”

I heard a pained scream from Gobta, and then all was quiet. I wasn’t sure what had happened. Maybe some passing megalodon bit him or something, huh? *So I guess we now have one casualty. I’m sure he’s not dead, though, so I’ll just believe that he’s still all right.*

—And as I was thinking all this nonsense, new developments began to unfold. Soei was controlling the final megalodon like a well-trained mount, making it sink its teeth mercilessly into Charybdis. It was latched on to the great dragon now, looking like a work of surrealist art.

The megalodon was still alive, but it was no longer any sort of threat. That just left Charybdis to tackle.

Paying no further mind to the megalodon, Soei flew over to Charybdis.

“Whoa, you think Soei’s gonna be all right?”

“Sir Rimuru, there is nothing to worry about. Soei is second only to me in terms of real strength. This is the perfect chance to test out Charybdis’s

powers.”

Benimaru heard me muttering to myself and cheerfully replied. He didn’t sound worried at all, implying just how much he believed in Soei.

“Besides, we have that pair in the battle, too.” He pointed to Shion and Ranga.

They were both on the dragon’s back. Presumably they had climbed up to a pretty high altitude to avoid Magic Interference, then dive-bombed down on it. Looking at Charybdis, though... The sheer size of it was mind-blowing. Being over 150 feet long was a threat in and of itself. Simply dropping a mass that size on a city from above would result in unimaginable damage.

*Understood. Based on an estimate of its size, from a height of—*

*That’s fine, Great Sage. Thanks, but I don’t need to crunch the numbers. It’d just depress me to hear it anyway. If you’re gonna be that way, how about giving me some easy way to beat this guy?*

---

Radio silence, huh? The Sage had this incredibly bad habit of going mum exactly when I needed it the most. Or maybe it was just pouting at me.

Anyway.

Before my eyes, Soei, Shion, and Ranga had commenced their attack on Charybdis.

*Things have been going well so far. Maybe...*

But despite my wishes, it wasn’t that easy. The sheer size was a true menace, and now that was clearer than ever. All three launched attacks, but none worked at all. They were up against a 150-foot-long frame; anything they could throw at it was little more than peeling a layer off an onion. And more importantly, none of it could reach its magic-controlling neural network.

Charybdis, technically speaking, was not a living thing. It was a monster with a pretty twisted ecology, and thus it had no internal organs or anything. Picture it as using the flesh of lesser dragons to construct an armor of meat

surrounding it.

This was to be expected, and it was also a given that no half-baked attack would be enough to stab through it.

“So it’s come to this. My magic had virtually no effect from outside of a thousand feet...but if a close-range approach like that fails as well, there is nothing we can do. Magic doesn’t work, and now we know that physical attacks are just as meaningless,” an anxious Treyni said.

“See, this is why I told you to leave it to me...”

Even at a time like this, Milim was still wheedling incessantly. I had no time for her at the moment.

According to Treyni, even Aerial Blade—the strongest elemental magic spell she had at her disposal—was reduced to only about a tenth of its natural power. Far from the deciding blow it was meant to be. It did deal some damage, but as she put it, the wounds immediately healed themselves.

Plus, after the attack had continued for a while, it suddenly flew into a violent rage—the pain receptors must’ve taken their time transmitting their message to its brain.

“It suddenly sped up and attempted to ram me. Each of the scales on its body slashed at us, like small individual swords. The light rays from its eye scattered the nearby magicules. To beings like ourselves, which create their corporeal forms through magicules, it was a very difficult attack to deal with.”

She recounted the situation for us.

I had this explained to me at the meeting hall, but seeing it in person made the sheer ferocity easy to understand. Run-of-the-mill attacks were meaningless against this monster.

“...Oh no!” Treyni suddenly shouted.

“Its single eye flashed red for a moment. That might be a sign that Charybdis is preparing to attack,” Benimaru explained.

*Uh, I saw it, too, guys, okay? I was just, you know, taking a more laid-back approach to assessing it.* Besides, Shion had just summoned her full aura to bust out an Ogresword Cannon, so I was kind of distracted by that. Maybe that’s what pissed Charybdis off, but regardless of the reason, it looked dangerous. I decided to send a Thought Communication their way.

*Did you hear that? It might be hatching something, so keep your guard up!*

*Yes, Sir Rimuru!*

*Understood.*

*I hear you, my master!*

I nodded at the replies. I'm sure they didn't need that "keep your guard up" reminder, but hey, just in case.

But my message turned out to be an incredibly good idea. Just a moment later, Soei and the others were exposed to a truly massive attack. A deafening sound akin to fingernails on glass filled the air, itself enough to make it feel like your very soul was being contaminated. It was the sound of the scales that covered Charybdis's body grating against one another. And then...

"My heavens! I had no idea it possessed an attack like that..."

"This...is bad. It can't be evaded."

The tension was clear in Treyni's and Benimaru's voices. From every inch of its own body, Charybdis was unleashing a calamity, one that would spread death and destruction wherever it went.

And in the midst of it...

"Hohh! So this is Tempest Scale, the attack that made Charybdis feared as a tyrant! Never seen *that* before!"

That was Milim. Having nothing else to do, she was offering color commentary to me now. *The name of it doesn't matter. And if you knew about that, I really wish you could've told us...*

I almost asked her what she knew, but I stopped myself. Now was no time for a long-winded explanation, and the attack was pretty self-evident anyway.

Right now, I was more worried for Shion and our other allies. It had happened right after I warned them to stay on guard, so Soei, Shion, and Ranga were just barely able to take evasive action. But they were being threatened by Charybdis's overwhelming supply of scales—hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands—being shot out in all directions like high-caliber bullets. They varied in size, but even the tiniest were several inches in diameter. Take one unguarded, and it'd no doubt be even more disastrous for you than a sword slash.

There were tens of thousands of them raining down at incredible speed. There was no place to run. The so-called Tempest Scale worked at a far broader range than even Hellflare, which was capable of mowing down entire landscapes.

"Ngh, I can't dodge them all. Ranga and I have Shadow Motion, but..."

“Dodge them? What a childish thing to suggest. This won’t be enough to kill me!” Shion snickered at Soei’s assessment.

Her eyes were bloodshot, and I was pretty sure she had lost all sense of reason. She was brandishing her sword at Charybdis, not even bothering to protect herself against the storm of scales. She was obviously in danger.

Soei and Ranga met in the air once more.

“...Soei, you should flee. I will serve as a shield for Shion.”

Fully stretching out his legs, Ranga leaped away from their foe’s Magic Interference radius, then used the extra skill Control Wind to turn back toward Charybdis. The first wave of scales had already reached him, cutting through skin. Just as he promised, he intended to shield Shion with his own body.

“Are you crazy, Ranga? You need to go!” Shion shouted, regaining her senses.

“Heh-heh-heh... I imagine that Sir Rimuru, too, would select the option that gave him the greatest chance of survival. But with a body this size, I cannot find shadows suitable enough for me to use Shadow Motion with. You go alone, Soei.”

Shadow Motion often seemed like an all-powerful skill, but even it had its limitations. In the air, with only stable and temporary footholds available, it simply wasn’t available to Ranga. Hearing this made even Soei hesitate for a bit.

“...The greatest chance of survival, eh? Then I’m staying here. But don’t worry. I’ll make the *real* me retreat before I die.”

“Ha! How Soei-like of you. In that case, may we all live to see another day!” Shion laughed, voice loud and clear.

Faced with the terrifying Tempest Scale, not one dared to give up on themselves. It could be called reckless, but to me, I couldn’t have asked for anything else.

They were all ready for this.

“You people really are a bunch of idiots, you know that? You could at least count on me now, of all times.”

I decided now was the time to speak.

““““?!”””

All three froze in surprise. I flew in front of them, raising my left arm against the advancing scales.

“““Sir Rimuru!!”””

I could hear them shouting my name, a mixture of shock and joy in their voices. I didn't respond, head faced forward to handle what must be done.

Which was...

“Consume them all, Glutton!!”

With my call, the insatiable Glutton within me stirred. The results unfolded in a single moment. I imagine not too many knew what had happened. The wall of innumerable scales that loomed over them just a moment ago had now neatly disappeared.

“A...astounding. Well done, Sir Rimuru...”

It was Soei who found his voice first. And really, I was just as surprised as he was.

I flew up there since, hey, if it's a long-range attack, I could just eat it all up.

...Okay, that's a lie. The Great Sage actually tipped me off. All I did was take it at its word and step up to protect my friends. Using Shadow Motion to appear in front of them, I just barely made it in time to follow the Sage's advice and unleash Glutton.



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The effect was awe-inspiring. All the scales that hurtled through the air between us and Charybdis were fully consumed. This skill was even more off the charts than I had thought—and well done on the Sage's part, too, for making the timely suggestion.

Not that I needed to tell it that.

Instead, now seemed like a good time to look a little cool around everyone else. "Leave the rest to me. You three go back down and rest," I declared, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"B-but... We can still help you..."

I stopped Soei before he could continue. "Look! It's already regenerating its scales. That wasn't a single-use skill—it's something it can launch again and again. I don't know if I can protect you all from a second round of that. We should be glad that we made Charybdis attack us at all, really—if we didn't know about those scales and left the Pegasus Knights to handle it, the casualty list would've been huge. You can be proud of yourselves today, people!"

Soei retreated back, apparently convinced.

"I wish you good luck!"

"Be careful, Sir Rimuru."

"You may summon me at any time, master."

Ranga carried them off after they all said their farewells. Now, then. I just gave them that big-hero act, but being faced with this huge freak, I wasn't exactly feeling serene. *No point whining about it now, though. I'll just have to do what I can.*

It was time to face off against Charybdis.

\*

I wasn't kidding, though; we were really lucky we got to see Charybdis's Tempest Scale before the Pegasus Knights showed up. The scales that didn't quite fall in range of Glutton were causing serious damage in virtually all directions. If we took the brunt of that shot, defense just wouldn't be possible. We'd all be mincemeat.

None of our forces took a direct hit from the scales, thankfully, but the nearby forest had been heavily damaged—or really, violently reshaped. The amount of power behind it was just ridiculous.

*Well, better do my job, then.* The first question to tackle was how many seconds I had until another Tempest Scale barrage came along. I could already see the Pegasus Knight reinforcements off in the distance. They were stopped, apparently just as awed by that last attack as we were. Presumably someone would explain what's up while I was engaged with Charybdis.

It was my job to keep that dragon engaged with me and reveal as many of its attacks as possible. After that, we could keep ourselves at a safe margin and gradually chip away at the guy together. It'd be a marathon, but we'll just have to slog through it.

Now I was starting to regret turning down Milim's offer. Really, I wouldn't mind if we swapped positions right now. But that'd look so lame. I should give this the ol' college try, at least—if we just can't do it, I'll think about it then.

So our mission to conquer Charybdis was now fully under way. To kick things off, I fired a bolt of magic fire, one of my new moves. The moment it struck Charybdis, a searing Dark Flame burned and wrinkled its skin. Just as I thought—it worked.

A regular old spout of fire would've been snuffed out by its magic resistance. Dark Flame would've been no different, its magical energy dissipating the moment it made contact. To get around that, I'd either have to make physical contact with it and attack, or—as I did now—cover my magic with something else until it made contact.

That's why I tried loading a magical bolt with Dark Flame and shooting it. The result was a success, making Charybdis writhe in pain from the intense heat... Or at least, act a little irritated, maybe? It's so big that I wasn't sure that bolt did much damage at all. Can't give up now, though. Enough of them, and the damage is bound to pile up over time.

So I kept attacking, spurring myself forward. I tried a few different moves, gauging the dragon's response. It seemed like Dark Flame and Dark Thunder both worked well against it. Fire-based attacks worked across a broader range of its body, and the lightning seemed to affect its magical neural network a little.

Along with that useful info, however, I learned a few things I wish I didn't have to.

“Uh...hang on. This guy has Ultraspeed Regeneration, doesn’t it?” I whispered it out loud, even though I knew nobody would respond.

*Understood. Judging from the recovery speed of its physical structure, it is not incorrect to assume the individual “Charybdis” possesses the extra skill Ultraspeed Regeneration.*

Oh, wait, someone *did* respond. Or I should say, I learned something at that moment that I fervently wished wasn’t true.

Basically, Ultraspeed Regeneration was what made Charybdis’s scales grow back at such high speed. Once that process wrapped up, I was sure there’d be another Tempest Scale blast—even quicker than before, if it didn’t bother aiming at the storm this time. Perhaps as soon as three minutes—but if I could damage parts of it enough, maybe it wouldn’t be able to release scales from those sections of its body.

Confirming this, I used Thought Communication to let everyone else know. Then, with a now-ample amount of info in hand, I figured out how I would get the Pegasus Knights involved.

\*

The battle continued...for over ten hours after that.

Milim had grown so bored with sitting on the sidelines that she fell asleep, but I was fighting for my life. We had to damage Charybdis quicker than it could heal itself, or else we’d never get anywhere. All of us plunged ourselves into this desperate struggle, drinking mighty swigs of healing potion with abandon as we fought.

I’d say we were about 30 percent of the way, maybe? We were all in on the effort. Anyone who could fly was up there, along with Ranga and Soei via Shadow Motion, while Benimaru and the dryad sisters lobbed magical attacks from afar and Shuna and the rest provided support healing and protection. Beams of searing light and sharply honed scales zipped to and fro across the battlefield, magic and skills flying past the other. It was an incredible, yet terrifying spectacle to see.

All of us were working together and giving it our all, and we were not

quite a third of the way there. We were all keeping a safe distance, so none of us had dropped out yet. I think there might have been one dropout, actually, but maybe I was just imagining it. But even the most well trained among us were gonna have trouble keeping this pace up forever. We weren't going to be afforded a single mistake—lose focus, and not only you, but our entire strategy would go up in smoke.

It seemed hopeless. But nobody in our army dared to give up. And just as I was racking my brain, figuring out what I should do:

*"Gnh. Grnhhh...aahhh... Y-you... Mi..."*

*Hmm? Did I just hear something?*

*"Curse youuu...uuu, Mi—Mili... Milim!!"*

*Huh?! Milim? Did it say Milim just now? I immediately had the Great Sage perform an analysis.*

*Understood. A small, slight presence of life is confirmed to be within the body that Charybdis is occupying. It is believed that the damage it has taken has led to biological distortion, perhaps because it did not fully assimilate with the body's magical core. In addition—*

I listened to the details.

According to the Sage, Charybdis used the bodies of other magic-born in order to create its own physical form. These bodies would normally disappear and be assimilated, but if the magic-born involved held strong enough feelings or anger or disgust, the assimilation might not fully complete itself.

*And now its rage was aimed at Milim, not me. Hmm? Wait a minute. So did this monster head straight for our town because some magic-born out there had a bone to pick with Milim?*

Oh, great.

This didn't have anything to do with us! And here I thought it was picking up some kind of magic waves from Veldora inside me. Talk about overthinking.

*And...hang on. So it's no problem at all if I shove this on Milim's shoulders, then?*

The shocking truth hit me.

The moment I woke her up, I sent Milim a Thought Communication.

*Hey, uh, Milim, I think this guy's got a score to settle with ya, after all...*

*Ooh, I heard it. Looks like Charybdis is using Phobio, the Black Leopard Fang, as its core body. You know, the guy who was here before?*

Despite being a long distance away, Milim had still picked up on Charybdis's thought waves, using her Dragon's Eye to accurately discover its identity. Its analytical abilities were ahead of even the Great Sage's, but I should have expected nothing less from her, I guess.

*I suppose you're right. And here I was keeping you idle because I thought this was our guest to handle.*

*Ooh, does that mean I can tackle it, maybe?!* she excitedly asked, not bothering to wait for my full explanation.

Just as I expected, she pounced on the offer. Nice. I knew she was champing at the bit for this from the start, but still. Gotta hand it to her; I'm impressed she had the patience to wait for so long.

*Okay. You take my place. Sorry I got between you and your friend here, I guess.*

I made sure to emphasize that. This was Milim's guest, not mine. Now I could take Charybdis, this unfathomably hideous calamity of a monster, and palm it off on Milim.

Oh, and one more thing:

*Also, uh, Phobio was working for Carillon, wasn't he? You think you could maybe spit him out of that thing while you take the monster out? I'd like to rescue him alive, if possible...*

This was important. I knew it was a pretty crazy thing to ask, faced with a monster like Charybdis and all, but I had a feeling Milim was up to the task. Plus, if she killed a servant of the demon lord Carillon, that'd just create new problems for us. I had another motivation, too, but that one was so pie in the sky—I could save it for later. For now, I just wanted Phobio safe.

*Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You got it! That'll be a cinch for me. I've learned how to hold back my power a little lately, too. Lemme show you how good I've gotten at it!*

Milim gladly accepted, relishing the chance to boast about herself. She'd learned how to hold back, though...? Like she had any idea what that meant. For some reason, that made me a bit concerned. I opted not to voice that concern, though, as I let her take care of the rest.

And now that that was squared away, the rest would happen pretty quickly.

“Okay, guys! Retreat from the area immediately!”

“What are you talking about, Sir Rimuru? We have hardly given up yet.”

“Please, just do what I say! Believe in me! You all have to get out of here!”

My shouting was enough to make Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, call out the order to retreat, albeit grudgingly. We were in a state of total exhaustion, it was true. Things would gradually get worse for us like this. Perhaps he figured my strategy was to wait for the remaining knight corps to show up before reengaging.

“It’s all yours now! Good luck!” And with that, Dolph sent his cavalry back. My own friends didn’t voice any such objections, of course; they had picked up on enough of my Thought Communication to get the picture.

And so, once I was sure everyone except me was gone, I sent the signal.

*Okay, Milim! All set here!*

“You got it!”

She had already flown into the air, not bothering to wait for the signal. Her dragon wings were stretched high behind her, a self-contented smile on her face. In another moment, she was next to me.

“*Gnh. Grrrhhhhh! Mili— Milimmmmm!!*”

Noticing her presence, Charybdis arched its body and glared straight at us. It was already too late.

“Well, here we go! Here’s what ‘holding back’ looks like for me! Drago Buster!!”

A fantastic stream of bluish-white light rushed from Milim’s outstretched arms.

It was a light of destruction that made everything disappear.

*...?! Cannot analyze. Collecting data... Failed.*

The Great Sage within me sounded a bit surprised. Maybe I was just imagining it, but still. It failed to identify the exact nature of Milim’s attack, but the results were pretty obvious.

The sight before me was forcing me to rethink the meaning of the term holding back. Several streams of the white light had pooled together, crashing right through Charybdis's body. It began to eat away at it, giving the dragon no time for Ultraspeed Regeneration to work. The 150-foot-long frame was no match for it, and in the blink of an eye, it disappeared.

All I can say is, thank heavens this was an airborne target. If it was on land, it would've reshaped the entire geography of this forest. That was the sheer enormity of the attack. We had spent the past *X* number of hours gradually whittling away at it, taking out 30 percent of its energy, and now it was destroyed beyond repair in the space of several seconds.

Truly, Milim's strength could only be described as beyond imagination.

Charybdis was gone, and a little piece of its body fell to the ground. Or not a piece, actually—this was Phobio, that magic-born it was built around. Milim kept her promise. She called it holding back; I would call it a masterpiece of work.

I flew over to the magic-born, grabbing him before he smashed against the ground. He was alive, if barely, which meant I got what I wanted. I decided to get to work immediately, preferring if nobody else had to see this.

Analyzing Phobio's status, I found that he and Charybdis were 90 percent fused with each other. Without quick action, the beast would just resurrect itself again. That's why I needed to do this.



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“What are you doing with him?”

“Just watch,” I said, dodging the question as I began. “We can’t let Phobio go free, right? I figured we better take care of him right now. Fully.”

The task at hand involved fully separating Phobio from Charybdis. My Deviant unique skill allowed me to synthesize and separate things, and it’d be the latter that I’d use for this job. However, just doing that alone would cause Charybdis, a spiritual life-form, to float away out of my hands. That’s where my other unique skill, Glutton, would come in.

Even with my Sage and all, I wasn’t able to fully combine unique skills together. Under its control, however, I could run them in parallel to one another. It would be a delicate sequence, a bit like performing surgery, but I was capable of it. If I screwed it up, I’d have to take Phobio’s life as well, so this could have repercussions on my relationship with Carillon. I really wanted this to work, if I could help it.

I focused on the job, devoting all my strength to it. First, I separated a little; then I consumed the bit I took off. The Sage took care of controlling the two disparate skills for me, so I had to do the actual job all by myself.

The battle against Charybdis was starting to seem like someone else’s problem by now—and I knew the reason why. It was Milim. She had dozens of times more magical energy than I did; a demon lord with untold amounts of power. Having her around meant I wasn’t nervous at all about facing Charybdis. I knew in my mind that we were all in mortal danger, but in one corner of my brain, I was spoiled by the fact that I could always call on Milim for help. There was no real sense of danger to me.

This, on the other hand, was different. I couldn’t leave this job to anyone else. Mess it up, and it could be the spark that touched off a whole other crisis. That was why I didn’t want anyone else watching—I wanted to take full responsibility for whatever happened.

Of course, I had Milim right next to me, curiously taking in the proceedings, but...

*Report. The magical core of the individual Charybdis has successfully been separated from the individual Phobio. Consuming the magical core of the individual Charybdis... Successful. Analyzing core... Partially failed. Isolating and continuing to analyze. The*

*following skills have been obtained—*

Success. It felt like that took forever, but I had completed it before everyone who evacuated out for Milim's attack had come back.

A torrent of information streamed into my head. I didn't like the "partially failed" bit of the Sage's report, but now that everyone was back, I filed that concern away for later. Given that it was isolated or whatever, I was pretty sure there was nothing dangerous about it.

All I had left to do was give some healing potion to the weakened Phobio before I forgot. I gave him a swig of my very own, handmade Full Potion, quickly stabilizing his physical condition.

Now to wait for him to awaken.

Thus Charybdis, the threat that landed on our doorstep, was fully slain.

\*

"Would you be able to explain to us what happened?"

That was the first thing knight captain Dolph said when he saw me.

*Hmm. Yeah. I guess you'd want an explanation, wouldn't you?*

"Well, um... You know. This girl here, she's actually the demon lord Milim, so..."

"Ha-ha-ha, you certainly enjoy your jokes, Sir Rimuru."

His eyes weren't laughing.

"But if you had a magical weapon capable of outputting so much force, I wish you could have informed us of that in advance! We'll be expecting a more official explanation later on."

He was clearly miffed at me, and I could understand why. I didn't have much excuse, really.

"Still, whatever you did managed to eliminate Charybdis, a being that could have been a true disaster to all living races. It is a stroke of good luck, indeed. If you will excuse me, then, I need to report to His Majesty."

He relaxed his scowl a bit and bowed.

"Thanks for all your help. I will provide my own explanation to King Gazel shortly." I returned the gesture.

I meant that. This was a demon lord-class monster, and the dwarves

didn't hesitate to step up against it. Without their support, I probably wouldn't have even noticed that Phobio was the magic-born driving its rage. Chances are that I would've asked Milim to kill it anyway, but then she wouldn't have "held back"—she would've atomized it all the way, and I wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop her, no doubt.

It was that small sliver of extra time that helped us notice the ever-so-slight discrepancy between Phobio and Charybdis.

"Provide your thanks to His Majesty, not to me. Also, if I may speak only for myself..." Dolph came a bit closer, lowering his voice. "If you are going to report to the king, could I ask you to travel to Dwargon to make the report personally? His Majesty is still rather distressed about how your last visit turned out. The exile and refusal of board he sentenced you to has already been lifted, so..."

This was probably less Dolph's personal invitation and more his interpretation of Gazel's feelings, I imagined.

"All right. In that case, tell King Gazel that I would love to be extended an official invitation. I look forward to visiting again and giving my report."

"Excellent! I am sure His Majesty will be overjoyed. Kaijin, Garm, and the rest are also welcome to return at any time. They could join you, if they chose to."

Dolph was already excited about the idea. I'm sure Kaijin and the gang would like to visit home sometime. Taking them along could be nice, and I'm sure that's the whole reason Dolph brought this up with me. He might have that gruff military veneer, but I guess he really looked out for others, too.

After that and a few other small pleasantries, the Pegasus Knights were busily hurrying their way back home. I felt truly grateful, from the bottom of my heart, that none were hurt.

\*

With the danger past, I went back into slime form. But just as we were about to head home...

"Ngh... Where—where am I? What happened to me...?"

I heard confused muttering.

Phobio had awoken. It put Benimaru and Shion on their guard, but Phobio wouldn't have had any energy to fight right now. His wounds were fully

healed, but his magic power was exhausted. Plus, with Charybdis fully extracted and eliminated from him, he was back to “merely” being a high-level magic-born—nobody we couldn’t take, if it came to that.

“Hey there. You up? Do you remember what you did?”

I spoke slowly to the bleary-eyed Phobio, who was gradually regaining consciousness at the sound of my words. Then he jumped up and, incredibly suddenly, prostrated himself before me and Milim. Guess he remembered.

“I—I am sorry! I mean, I deeply apologize to you! I’ve done something horrible to you, Lady Milim...and I’ve put so much trouble upon all of you a second time!”

The pallid magic-born before me was a lot more impulsive with his emotions than I had thought. It seemed unnatural, in a way, someone like that causing so much chaos.

I was just about to ask what drove him to do all this when Treyni asked an even more pointed question.

“How...did you know where Charybdis was sealed away? Because I highly doubt you merely stumbled upon it.”

That was a good point. This was a proud magic-born; if revenge against Milim was what he wanted, I bet he figured he could do that by his own hand. But pursuing revenge to the point that he instilled Charybdis into his own body? That seemed quite unusual, and I had been wondering about that for a while.

“Well...”

To his credit, he didn’t hide any of it and fully explained what happened to him—the request he made to the two masked agents of the Moderate Jesters.

“A pair of strange-looking masked clowns? But that location is secret—only we knew where it was, and it was the hero herself who told us. A formidable foe, indeed, if they were able to track it down... And masked, you say?”

This seemed to trouble Treyni in particular. She seemed to know them.

“Was one of the masks asymmetrical, perhaps? Drawn to look like they were making fun of you?”

“N-no. There was a girl whose mask made it look like she was crying, and then a fat man with an angry mask. They called themselves Teare and Footman.”

Not the guy Treyni knew, then. But...wow, mysterious masked magic-born, huh?

*...Wait a sec.*

"Hey, I think Benimaru said there was one there during the attack on their homeland..."

"Yes. I just thought of that myself. A rotund magic-born wearing a mask of anger. That was one of the people controlling the orcs!"

So that was it. The figure who pitted me against Benimaru and the other ogres in the first place.

"Indeed. One of the orc generals working away from my command was accompanied by a high-level magic-born bodyguard, hired by Gelmud. That man's name was Footman," Geld added.

Then—

"And come to think of it, when Sir Laplace rescued me, he said he was in Gelmud's employ as well... He said he was the vice president of the Moderate Jesters, which he described as a jacks-of-all-trades group. And the mask he had on... It was just as Treyni described. Asymmetrical—and with an arrogant expression on it!"

Gabil dropped the bombshell.

Events from across the land were suddenly being connected together.

"...I see. The man was called Laplace, you say?"

"And...Footman? I will be certain to remember that."

Treyni's eyes were filled with a dangerous light, and Benimaru wore a defiant smile.

I was surprised to hear that Treyni had made contact with these guys as well. Given her penchant for popping in and out of existence all over the place, they must have crossed paths somewhere. And while Footman had not personally interacted with the ogres back there, he was certainly a major factor behind the destruction of their homeland. They were not fully our enemies, perhaps, but they certainly had something against us all.

The Moderate Jesters. A mysterious band of jacks-of-all-trades. They sounded like trouble, so I decided to ask Milim if she knew anything.

"Mmm? I've never heard of that group before, no. Nobody said anything about using guys like those to cause strife among races or anything. How interesting! I wish I could've gotten to meet them."

Milim, at least, had heard nothing from her demon lord cohorts. She

didn't know many details about the whole orc lord operation, I suppose. Gelmud was the main man behind all that, apparently—Milim just got the outlines of it, not the little details like hiring a bunch of jokers to help push things along.

"Maybe it was Clayman scheming behind the scenes with this, not Gelmud. He had the connections for that," she indifferently continued.

"Clayman? Who's that?"

"Mm? One of the demon lords. He just loves dirty little schemes like that."

Geez. She was exposing him like it was no big deal, but what the heck? The guy was still just a suspect; we didn't know if he was the real criminal here yet—but as Milim put it, Clayman was the kind of guy who'd arrange something like that. Not because Gelmud wasn't up to the task, but because Clayman was always trying to set it up so he'd have an advantage over the other demon lords.

The orc lord operation was devised by three of those lords, who assigned the job to Gelmud in order to keep things balanced among themselves. If any of them was gonna try to game the system, as Milim described it, it was definitely Clayman. I didn't have much to comment about on that point, so I filed the fact away in the back of my mind.

I had thought this whole affair was over, but there were still plainly some issues left to tackle.

"Something does bother me. This Laplace... He said he was not among the monster tribes." After Milim was done speaking, Treyni offered another observation.

In this world, a monster tribe could still be defined as pretty much anyone who was hostile against the human races. Saying you weren't a monster was another way of saying you were allied with humans and so on. Assuming you weren't lying. But if they had no quarrel with the human race, that seemed feasible enough to me—there were bound to be other magic-born who took my approach.

Or... Hang on.

"He said he wasn't magic?" I asked Treyni.

"Yes, Sir Rimuru. He might have supporters in human society."

Aha. Yeah, this was rough. A major issue, in fact. But I had no way of confirming it. Without any evidence, debating over it was useless. So I

resolved to keep an eye out for this weird group and wrapped up my interrogation of Phobio.

\*

We now had a fairly ample amount of info to work with. Putting it all together, one truth became clear about this incident: These Moderate Jester guys liked approaching their targets with claims of offering help. It allowed the Jesters to achieve their goals without dirtying their own hands.

With the orc lord, they attempted to set off a war among monster races. This time, they wanted to have Charybdis fight us—or Milim, at least. It sounded to me like Phobio had simply been taken advantage of. The real mastermind was someone else.

“Sounds like they used and abused you, huh? Try to be a bit more careful about taking fishy offers like this in the future, all right?”

Phobio wasn’t exactly free of fault here, but given that the real culprit was elsewhere, it didn’t seem right to punish him. I didn’t want to stir up added trouble, besides. If he swore he wouldn’t bother us anymore, I was glad to let him go free.

“...Huh?”

He was still prostrate before us.

“I, er, I don’t deserve to be forgiven. I accepted this offer at my own discretion. It had nothing to do with Lord Carillon, so please, allow me to pay for this with my life...”

It was weird, seeing him act so bold and brave while bent over in front of us.

“N-no, really, I have no reason to kill you. Right, Milim?”

“Mm-hmm! Of course! I wanted to give you a wallop, sure, but I’m all grown-up now. I’m not angry at all, so consider yourself forgiven!”

*A wallop, huh...? Doesn’t sound all that grown-up to me. But oh well.*

“See? And if she forgives you, I wouldn’t worry about any of us.”

“...But I let my anger take control of me...”

“Mm-hmm. And probably... That guy with the angry mask? He was probably using those emotions of yours.”

Phobio looked up at my observation. “Come to think of it...that bastard said he was attracted to me by my feelings of anger and disgust...”

His face was astonished as it dawned on him. I was just giving him a bit of a lecture, but maybe I was more on target than I thought.

“Yeah. See? So don’t worry about it.”

“He’s right. And you’re fine with that, too, aren’t you, Carillon?”

*Huh? Carillon?*

As if to answer my question, a man appeared from the underbrush. He had an attractively rough, unpolished look, sporting a well-tailored but well-worn outfit. His short blond hair stood on end, his sharp eyes only adding to the intense atmosphere he presented.

“Heh. You noticed, huh, Milim?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, of course,” he replied.

Between the name Carillon and the obvious friendliness they shared, I could guess the identity of this wild-looking man projecting his inner strength in the quiet. He was nowhere near as large as Charybdis, but he presented exactly that sort of overpowering aura—if not more of one, like he’d blow you away with a thought.

*So this is Carillon the demon lord, huh?*

“Hey. The name’s Carillon. Thanks for helpin’ this guy out without killing him.”

Thus the demon lord Carillon greeted me, looking me straight in the eye.

The air grew suddenly tense.

I had no words to overcome the daunting aura of strength that overwhelmed me. Once again, I recalled how the term demon lord wasn’t just for show. But as the leader of this land, I couldn’t let myself be cowed like this.

“I wasn’t expecting the man himself to show up. My name is Rimuru Tempest, the leader of Tempest, our nation of monsters here in the forest,” I declared, summoning all the courage I could.

“Pfft! A single magic-born person, establishing a new nation? Perhaps I woulda believed it in the past, but in this world, you’d have to be suicidal. I was told the orc lord killed our mystery magic-born, but I guess that report wasn’t too true, huh? You’re the masked magic-born that killed Gelmud, aren’t you?”

*You look at this slime, and that's the conclusion you reach?* That was the only thing I could think. But Milim was here, and maybe he got to witness the battle against Charybdis as well.

“Yep. You’re right.” I transformed into a human. “So are you here to get back at me for that, or...?”

I doubted it, but I asked anyway. Carillon grinned at the question.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Funny. No wonder Milim likes you.”

The laughter instantly dispelled all the tension. But once he was done guffawing to himself, Carillon’s face stiffened. Then, he did something none of us was expecting. He admitted he was wrong.

“Well, sorry one of my men went berserk on you. Guess I neglected to supervise him well enough, and I hope you’ll forgive me for that.”

He didn’t bow his head or anything, but he did apologize in the only way he could. Plus:

“You could say I owe you one now, I s’pose. Lemme know if you have anything I can help ya with.”

Really, he couldn’t have been more sincere with us. Carillon, this demon lord who was far more powerful than myself, was acting in good faith with someone like me. I suppose it just proves how incredibly, deeply broad-minded he was. *He owes me one, huh? If that's how he sees it, I can think of something...*

“In that case, it’d be nice if you could sign a nonaggression treaty with us.”

“...Is that all you need? All right. By my name as demon lord—or should I say, as the Beast Master Carillon of the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania—I swear I’ll never turn our blades on any of you. That assumes, of course, you promise the same to us.”

He accepted it easily—another sign of his incredible capabilities. I found it quite admirable.

Since we were already flustered enough, we agreed to send envoys later on to work out the details.

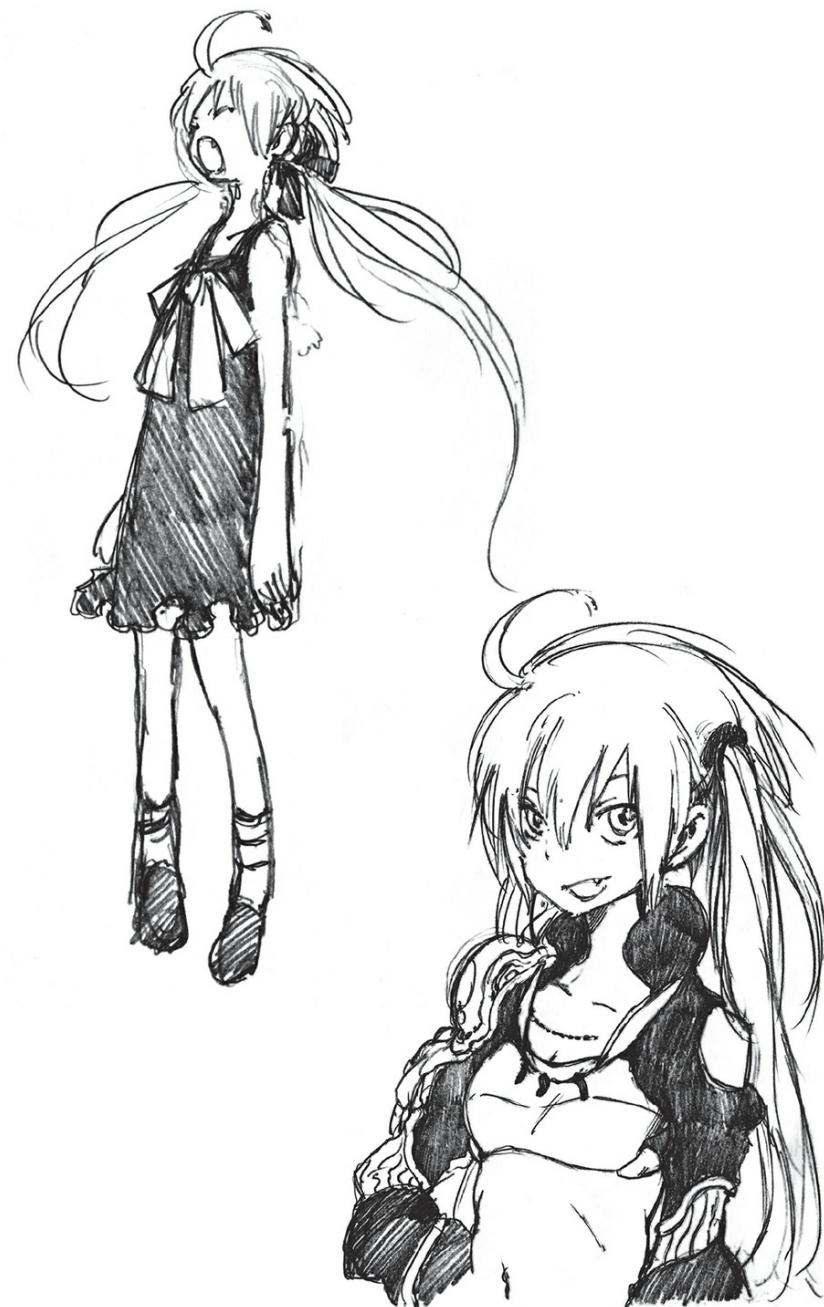
I didn’t know how much I could trust in this pact; given how impulsive Phobio turned out to be, could his master Carillon be much the same way? It should mean that he wouldn’t butt in on our affairs for a while, at least.

If I could learn more about Eurazania, maybe we could open diplomatic relations with them, too. That’d be the best thing.

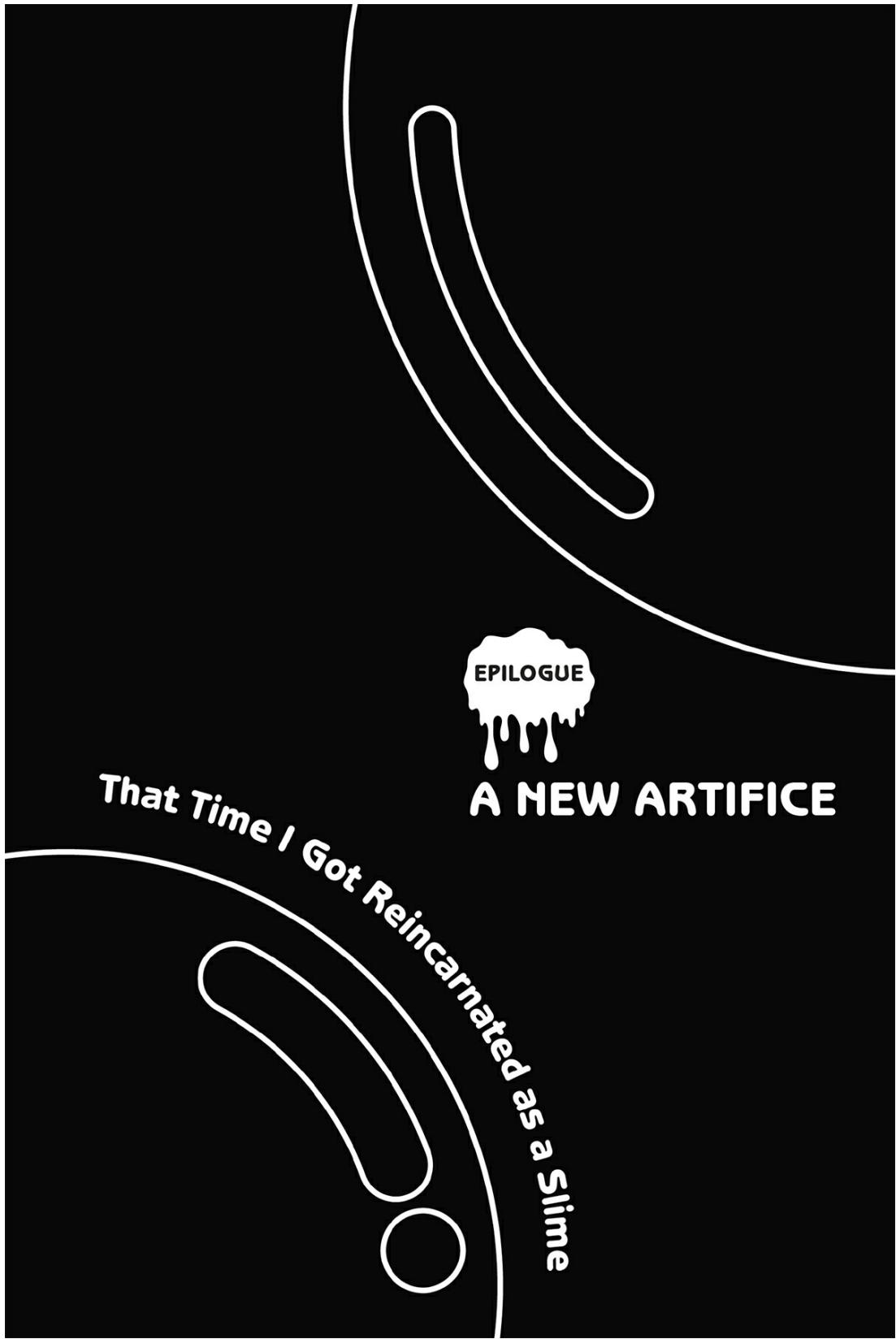
And that pretty much wrapped up the day. Carillon let his fists do the talking with Phobio, putting him near the brink of death once more, but we all have our funny traits like that, I suppose. He lent his limp subordinate a shoulder as the two of them shuffled away and teleported themselves back home.

It was time for us to return home, too. The day had its ups and downs, but things were finally starting to settle down a bit.

**ROUGH SKETCHES**



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## EPILOGUE

### A NEW ARTIFICE

Several days had passed since Charybdis's defeat. The land of Tempest was calm once more. A lot had happened, certainly, but our nation was finally starting to get recognized, and I couldn't have been happier.

We were now on friendly relations with the Armed Nation of Dwargon and the kingdom of Blumund. The road between us and Dwargon would be opening up soon, and my official invitation had already arrived. I needed to make my report, but they were planning more to receive me as an official state guest.

Over in Blumund, Fuze was doing a lot for me by going around royal and noble circles and convincing them that given how this latest crisis had turned out, it'd be much more to their advantage to work with us, not against us. Blumund wasn't a large nation, so "noble circles" didn't encompass that many people, as he said. None were putting up a lot of roadblocks against him, so I doubted I had much to worry about.

"Oh, trust me, I've got so much dirt on the nobles that the carrot-and-stick approach'll work just fine with them," he had told me as he left. And given the sneer on his face, I felt safe in leaving all that to him.

Kabal and his cohorts seemed pretty intent on staying here, but they still had a job to carry out—escorting Fuze back home.

"Can we visit again?"

"Yeahhh, I'm not sure I can live without Shuna's cooking any longer."

"You can say no all you want; we'll be back soon!"

They very reluctantly left, taking Fuze along with them. I wasn't going to turn them away; they were more than welcome to return, and I set up bed

space for them and everything.

And there's another nation I shouldn't be forgetting—the Beast Kingdom of Eurazania. If our talks went well there, that'd be one more nation to build formal ties with. We got put through the wringer, but we sure earned a lot from it. There was no telling how our discussions would turn out yet, but building a formal friendship with one of the bigger demon lords was a major coup. I wanted to see it succeed.

So we gained a lot, and if anything I, personally, gained just as much. The Charybdis-specific skills Magic Interference and Gravity Flight, for one. That, and Resist Magic, the ultimate ace in the hole against any magic thrown at me. I was having the Great Sage analyze all these to the hilt, so I was sure it'd be connecting them to other skills before too long.

That was one other reason why I asked Milim to keep Phobio alive. I mean, I did want to wrest Charybdis away from him, but it'd also be nice, I figured, if I earned a few new skills as a side effect. With all the trouble he put me through, I felt I deserved to reward myself a little.

So what were we doing now?

*Thus! Swishh! Thwam! Bash!*

I think the ambient noise speaks well enough for itself.

Benimaru, Soei, Shion, and I were being pummeled.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Save your breath!!”

The woman laughing shrilly at us was, of course, the demon lord Milim. She was training us, which I thought appropriate given how unfairly strong she was. It was four of us against the one of her, but it was hopeless. The Dragon's Eye from her saw completely through every trick and attack we attempted.

*That's Milim for you. She's incredible,* I thought, more intensely than ever before.

Milim was wearing a Dragon Knuckle around her fist—the weapon present I had promised her long ago. Such knuckles were originally meant for punching with your bare hands without hurting yourself, boosting the force of your strikes in the process. Not this one—this was the exact opposite. Put this on, and it restricted your punching power by around 90 percent. The

magisteel at its core applied the Reduce Speed and Power Drain inscription magics to the wearer.

When I gave it to her, she peered at it with intense curiosity, then gladly accepted it. She'd been wearing it every moment since—including during meals, which I had to warn her about, much to her whining chagrin. I was glad she liked it, but she had to learn the right time and place.

This Dragon Knuckle did a whole lot to save us all. We'd been engaging in mock battles every morning with Milim since that day; it had become a regular part of the routine. Her power was just ridiculous, her agility practically cheating, her stamina inexhaustible. Thank heavens she was on our side.

Only Hakuro could put up any real fight against her, which taught me all over again how important actual technique was, instead of relying on physical strength and skills. Of course, even with Hakuro's technique, a Milim who took the fight seriously would offer him no chance.

Technique was important, but it wasn't enough. What I lacked most of all, however, was battle experience. These morning combat sessions were my attempt at playing catch-up.

Why was I going through this? Easy. Compared to my past life—my past world, really—there were far too many issues that were solved here by duking it out. The orc lord. Charybdis. I was on good terms with Carillon, but the other demon lords could be a different matter. Plus, I had that vendetta against Leon.

After meeting two demon lords in person—Milim, then Carillon—I realized there was no way I could take on one of them right now. So I was working hard, taking the steps I needed to improve on that.

I stayed busy otherwise, too. Training with Milim occupied my mornings; after lunch, I did my rounds in each section of the town. It was an orderly, scheduled life, and I stuck to it for many weeks.

Having a nice, nutritious meal after a training round was always pleasant, too. Fried chicken, steak, hamburger, croquettes. Fried shrimp, too—or at least, an animal that looked kind of like shrimp. It was called *ebiira*, as well, which was frighteningly close to *ebi*, the Japanese for shrimp. Funny coincidence.

We never had to worry about food getting contaminated, either. Shuna's hygiene and disinfection habits were perfect, and besides, I could Analyze

and Assess anything presented to me, so I knew my stuff was safe. I still wasn't exactly sure if monsters got food poisoning, but...

All this variety to the menu was lifting Milim to ever-higher heights of ecstasy. "Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How can cooking the same meat produce such amazing food?!" That was her reaction to her very first steak.

Every day brought her new joy.

With the fried shrimp, she gobbled it all up instantly, not exchanging a word at the table. I suppose trying to recreate foods popular with kids paid off well, and Shuna was polishing her skills more than ever.

*Glad Milim's such a fan. She's repaying me with her training, so I'll want her to stay in high spirits if I can.*

So the days passed by, all of us growing even stronger than before.

Hakuro's skill set was already complete, so he didn't grow as quickly, but everyone else? You could hardly recognize them. If Treyni decided to pop in right now, Benimaru or Soei could give her a serious run for her money.

I was growing, too.

"You've certainly improved, Rimuru! If you declared yourself a demon lord now, I sure wouldn't complain!"

If Milim was putting it that way, I must've been improving by leaps and bounds. I kept telling her I wasn't interested in the role, though. Plus, she whipped the four of us again today. Trying to join the Demon Lord Club right now would result in nothing but trouble for me.

"By the way, why did *you* become a demon lord, Milim?" I asked to change the subject.

"Ooooooooooh... Hmm. I'm not sure? Something really bad happened, and it got me so angry that I became one?"

"Why are you asking me...?"

"Well...I don't remember. It was a super-long time ago, so I forgot!"

Despite her cheerful reply, I wondered if maybe something bad had happened after all. It'd be rude to prod her any further about it.

"All right. If you forgot, you don't have to try to remember it or anything."

I ended the conversation there.

Milim looked and acted like a child, but inside, she was a full-fledged

demon lord. One of the oldest, in fact. She'd probably lived far longer than I could even comprehend. Maybe she didn't have any friends, thanks to her expansive life span separating her from her companions over time.

I decided to ask about something else I had wondered about.

"Hey, so... Do you have any, um, family, or people you're looking after? You've been here this whole time, but are you sure you don't need to get in contact with anyone?"

"Mm. I have people who take care of me, but I'm not worried about them. I'm the strongest one out there, so it'd be too intimidating for people if I showed them some care, even, you know? That's why you're my only friend."

The sudden declaration made me pause a little. Maybe BFF, the way she defined it, meant a lot more to her emotionally than I had thought. I'd better take that seriously and try to live up to it.

"Yeah. Well, let's hope we keep it that way for a while, Milim."

I gave her a pat on the head. She just looked so childish, I couldn't help but feel like she was some family relative.

She gave me a happy smile.

"You bet!"

\*

Several days later...

"Okay, I'm off to work!"

Milim made a sudden declaration.

"Huh? That's kind of sudden, Milim. Right now?"

"Mm? Well... This isn't, like, the last time I'll see you or anything, so yeah, I'm headin' out!"

With that, she changed back into the bikini-ish outfit she'd first arrived in. She used Change Dress for the job, a bit of magic that was so helpful that I had her teach it to me. It's recommended to anyone with a lot of clothing, although you need to learn spatial magic first (for clothes storage), which actually makes it tough to learn.

In her original outfit, Milim turned to me and smiled. "I'll be sure to tell the other demon lords not to lay a finger on this place, okay? You've got nothing to worry about, Rimuru!"

“Oh? Great. So you’re off to meet them?”

“Mm-hmm! That’s my job!”

She puffed out her chest proudly.

There was apparently some kind of conference among her, Carillon, and the assorted other demon lords out there. The concept kind of scared me—a secret tryst where the demon lords of the world wove their sinister conspiracies in private. The whole orc lord thing resulted from one of those meetings, so I felt I had a personal stake.

*But—hey, if it means the other demon lords leave me alone, then great. Perfect.*

The group Milim was affiliated with, by the way, reportedly didn’t include Leon in its ranks. Leon was one of the newer demon lords, so Milim didn’t know too much about him, either. Carillon didn’t seem like such a bad guy, though—what were the rest of them like? I was a tad worried, but it wasn’t like Milim couldn’t handle them. She was cunning, and she was on a whole different level from the demon lord pack.

I did warn her, at least, to watch out for other people trying to deceive her. “Oh, you worry too much. I’m really smart, Rimuru, so nobody’s gonna trick me!” she replied with a smile.

*Yeah, it’s that confidence of yours that I’m worried about...*

“Well, I’ll be back soon!”

And she was off—into the air. So sudden, just like when she came. And in another moment, she was silently breaking the sound barrier (no shock wave, oddly) and falling out of sight. She said the site was pretty far-off, but at that speed, she didn’t have long to travel.

“Hmm? Did Lady Milim go somewhere?”

Shion looked concerned. They had become rather good friends.

“Yep. She said she had work.”

“Work?”

“She had promised to meet up with a few other demon lords.”

“Other demon lords...? I hope they don’t trick her...”

See? That’s what you’d totally think. Shion had the exact same worry I did.

“Well, she said she’d be back once her work was done, so there’s no point worrying much about her.”

“Quite true. Rather rude of us, I’d say, worrying about someone so much

stronger than any of us.”

“True...”

“I’m going to grow stronger—and when she comes back, I’m sure going to surprise her!”

“Better train harder than ever, then.”

It didn’t seem right, feeling all sad about someone like Milim, but losing her so suddenly like this did make one feel lonely. Thinking about it, she had really become a big part of this town. The way she could take over your mind like that... She was one mysterious demon lord.

*For now, though, let’s focus on what the ogre mages want to be stronger. And let’s see if we can’t shock Milim when she’s back.*

So before long, I resumed my training under Hakuro, my mind refocused on my mission.



It was a broad, expansive, and decadently decorated room. The demon lord Clayman was taking a moment to drink some wine and take in the elegance. Across from him, Frey the Sky Queen was seated, looking out the window and acting depressed.

“How did things turn out, then?”

“Apparently quite well, Frey. We took advantage of a servant of Carillon who was disgruntled about Milim to set Charybdis on her.”

Clayman smiled broadly.

“Milim defeated the beast, according to our observers. You have nothing to worry about now, yes?”

Yes, everything went exactly as Clayman wished—including the results of the battle. Milim was clearly going to win; there was no doubt about that between the two demon lords.

“But none of this angered Carillon himself at all?”

“Why would it? There’s no evidence linking any of this to me. If Carillon’s angry at anyone, it’s either Milim or that mystery pack of monsters. Or perhaps he’ll point it toward those jacks-of-all-trades that tricked that Phobio gentleman, but as long as he doesn’t learn that I hired them, that’s not a problem.”

Another light chuckle.

The Moderate Jesters, his true friends, were a group shrouded in mystery. There was no way Clayman's involvement with them could ever come out. Carillon had no way of contacting them, no way to figure out where they were—he couldn't touch them.

*Still, though...*

Clayman recalled the final set of images Mjurran gave him.

Milim, pulverizing the all-powerful Charybdis in a single instant. Her—and someone else.

"This magic-born, though. The one who defeated Gelmud. It attempted to take on Charybdis solo. Very powerful, indeed; I can see why Milim is so preoccupied with it. If we aren't careful, it may grow to become as strong as us demon lords."

"Heh-heh! That's a pretty funny thing for you to say, Clayman."

Frey didn't sound terribly interested. Instead, she changed the subject to the main issue at hand.

"So about your compensation, then. What am I supposed to pay you?"

She turned her eyes to Clayman. This was why the two of them were here today.

"You don't have to be so wary of me, Frey. This time, if you could just listen to a request of mine, that is more than enough. I helped you out, and in exchange, you can do the equivalent."

"All right... I'll do that, if I'm capable."

"Thank you very much. I was sure you would say that." He gave a satisfied smile at the deal.

*Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. This should help make things go my way at the next demon lord summit. It'll also let me approach my other goal—hmm? Wait a moment. If this goes well enough, I could even take control of Milim. Yes, with that certain item I was provided...*

Clayman almost found himself shaking at the thought. With Frey now on his side of the chessboard, the idea he had just come up with no longer seemed so impossible.

"However," he said, stopping Frey as she tried to leave the room. "this now means that the only thorn in your side at the moment is Milim alone. Having superiority in the air means nothing against her, doesn't it, Frey? I would be happy to discuss matters with you, so if it's something I can help

with, don't hesitate to mention it. You can contact me at any time."

Behind the friendly face, a new artifice was beginning to formulate itself. Frey didn't notice, or pretended not to if she did. "I'll be glad to when the time comes," she said as she offered her good-byes and left Clayman's castle.

Alone in his room, Clayman was deep in thought.

*If I could obtain Milim's power, there would be no need at all to incite the other demon lords. I will need to take the time to seriously consider this. And I hope you're looking forward to it, Milim...*

He removed a mask from his pocket and placed it against his face. He could feel his heart relaxing itself. To Clayman, he only felt like his true self with this mask on.

*But still... This mystery magic-born cannot be ignored, no. We'd best be careful with it, just like Laplace and Teare warned. I could assign Mjurran to infiltrate their base of operations—it'd be a fine chance for her to restore her good name.*

Mjurran's intel helped a lot more than he expected. He had thus decided to use her as much as possible, until there was nothing left.

Besides, this infiltration job was right up Mjurran's alley. If it went well and she curried their favor, great. If not, and Mjurran was rubbed out, Clayman had the perfect excuse to get personally involved. It would provide the best pawn to replace Mjurran with.

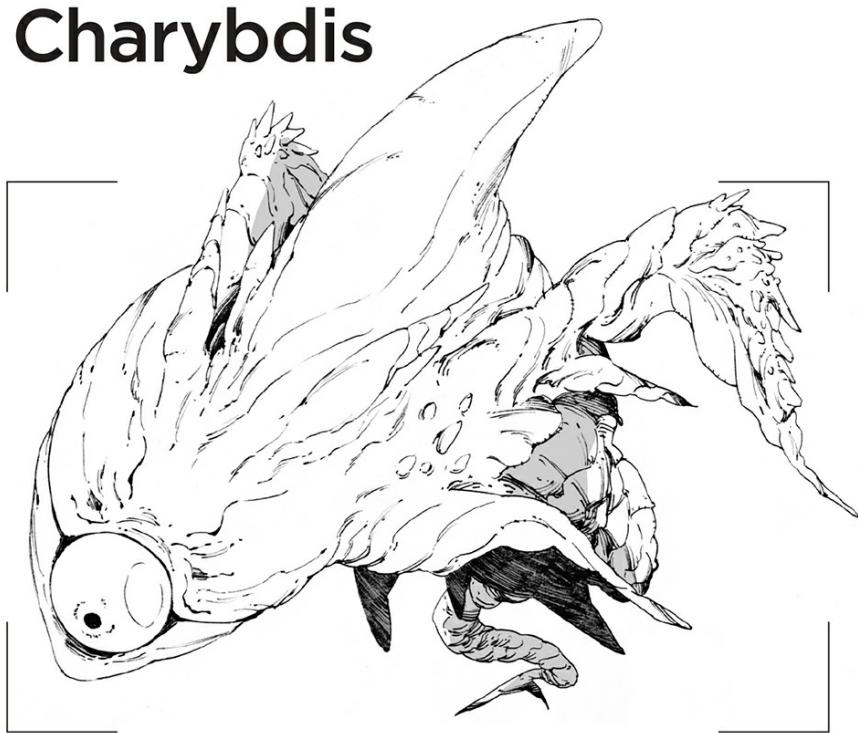
That mystery magic-born needed to be watched, but compared to bigger things on the horizon, it was still a small presence. He just had to wait, gather information, and use it when the time was right, just in case the monster interfered with the plan he was hatching.

He was not giving it his full attention, perhaps, but regardless, the demon lord Clayman was not watching Rimuru and his city.

An ashen sort of joy erupted across his heart, a smile running across Clayman's face as he worked out his new artifice...

**PRESENT STATUS**

# Charybdis



Race → Spiritual Life-form      Protection → Crest of the Storm

Title → Child of Veldora

Magic → None      Special Skills → Tempest Scale

Extra Skills → Control Gravity    Magic Sense    Magic Interference  
Ultraspeed Regeneration

Tolerance → Cancel Pain    Resist Melee Attack    Resist Paralysis

---

A gigantic one-eyed dragon, heralded as the child of Veldora. Born from a cloud of Veldora's magicules, it can be said to be part of Veldora's "family," similar to Rimuru. It has no solid sense of self, operating solely to satisfy its lust for destruction.

### PRESENT STATUS

# Milim Nava

Race → Dragonoid

Protection → Unknown

Title → Destroyer

The True Demon Lord

The Oldest Demon Lord

Magic → Unknown

Skills → Unknown

Normal Abilities

Punch: Bashes boulders in!

Kick: If someone mouths off, this shuts 'em up.

Milim Eyes: Dragon's Eye can spot anything you try to hide!  
\*An ultra-high-level skill. Combined with Analyze and Assess—and Measure Magic.

Milim Ears: Dragon's Ear picks up all your nasty gossip!

Special Skills

Drago Buster: After learning how to hold back, Milim learned this attack method, which lowers her force and improves her accuracy. It is said to be even more powerful as a result.

Tolerance → Unknown

One of the oldest demon lords. On a whole other level from other demon lords, she boasts overwhelming power.



## AFTERWORD

Nice to see you all for the first time in a while. This is Fuse.

First off, thanks to all of you for picking up this book. I think I mentioned that in Volume 1, but if you didn't pick it up, we never would've gotten started with this, so I'm sure I can write that as many times as I feel like!

*That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* has reached its third volume on sale. It's all thanks to your support, so really, thanks a bunch, and I hope you'll continue supporting me.

With those pleasantries out of the way, I thought I'd talk a little bit about the content of this volume. There are some spoilers in here, so it might be better to save this afterword for after you read the rest of the book. That's doubly true if you haven't read the web novel version yet!

\*

I warned you above, so let's get to the main meat of this.

The concept of this volume was pretty simple: the demon lord Milim! From the cover to the concept, we decided to have Milim be the main thrust of this volume.

A lot of different people and motivations were involved in this. The first time I recall it coming up was when my editor showed me some ever-so-slightly risqué illustrations. I liked them, I thought it could work, and so we went with that “cute/erotic” concept with Milim. (She was portrayed as more of a goth-Lolita in the web novel, but that's changed a lot in this published version, something you can see right on the cover.)

When I first saw that illustration, I actually said, “Hey, can we maybe make this a little more provocative?”

“Sure,” my editor said, “I'll discuss it a bit with Mitz Vah.”

But—and this is a true story—when I saw the rough for the final cover of Volume 3, it wasn’t exactly a “little more” provocative, huh?

“Um, her bottom’s mostly just string now, but is that all right?”

“No problem!”

Nice to have an editor I could rely on. In that case, I had no objection.

So that was how we figured out Milim’s look. Which makes it sound easy, but there was a lot involved to it. The designs for the characters that I didn’t give any special instructions for (Frey in particular) were settled on a lot more easily, so we really devoted a lot of energy working out Milim among ourselves.

That’s the kind of passion that me, my editor, and Mitz Vah brought into creating her. It’s not like we were driven by sexy art or anything, so don’t get the wrong idea.

Actually reading the book, you’ll see how it worked out, but unlike the cover and illustrations, the text is quite serious. Well, I’m not sure if I could fully call it “serious,” but either way, it is *not* sexy at all.

Disappointed? Well, I am a little, too. I added a lot of new writing to the web version—three-quarters of this novel is new material—and as a result, there’s a new chapter that’s not on the web at all, “The Demon Lord Attacks.”

Dividing the content of the web version’s third chapter into two sections was something my editor and I decided on after talking it over, although it was mostly just me being selfish, I think. I had a personal desire to take a few episodes that I kind of glossed over on the web and cover them in more depth. After several discussions, we ultimately decided to place the spotlight on Milim in this volume, and that’s what let me exercise my selfish desires to the hilt.

This volume features a lot of development—a bigger town, negotiations with the Dwarven Kingdom, and so on—a lot of intrigue from foreign nations, and quite a few new characters. If you were able to grasp and accept the actions and motivations of each character, then I’ll call this volume a success.

There’s also a magic-born or two who got edited out entirely to make the going easier for those who haven’t read the web novel. I think you’ll be

seeing them in future volumes, but I'm afraid I can't give guarantees quite yet.

Whether you're new to this or read it on the web, I'm working hard to edit the content so it's engaging to both audiences. The main thread of the story will remain on the web, but I plan to continue to change the little details here and there, so watch out!

\*

Now, some news.

You might already be aware of this, especially if you saw the notice on the Japanese version's *obi* cover, but *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* is getting a manga adaptation! It's set to launch next spring, in the pages of Kodansha's *Monthly Shonen Sirius* magazine.

Taiki Kawakami is handling the manga version. He draws some wonderfully cute visuals, and Rimuru and the rest of the gang are showing off a different—and lovely—sort of charm you don't see in the novels. I'm really looking forward to it, and I can't wait to see all the characters strut their stuff outside the novel format.

Though, to be honest with you, I'm already looking at the rough comic layouts! Seriously, I couldn't be more blessed.

Some of you may wonder why this kind of offer came along. I'm not entirely sure why myself. I guess fate is a lot more important than I thought, huh? I think I'll get to talk about this more later, but that's all for now.

Thanks again to all of you! Keep on supporting *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*!

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