
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a SLIME
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YEN ON
New York

What he saw was a king eternally tormented. A lone, anguished figure, his heart reaching out to his starving people, but all too incapable of doing anything to help them.

The land had dried and withered, killing off their crops and triggering a massive famine. Just past the border, other nations were still prospering, bountiful. But there was no going there. It was the territory of the demon lord, and setting foot on it would be rebelling against the master of this land himself. No need to wait for starvation to take them then. He would kill them all before that happened.

The land they lived on was surrounded by a great forest and three different territories, each with its own demon lord serving as leader. It would be impossible for a horde of low-caste monsters like them to invade from any direction. Which left only one option.

A little beyond the border, the forest lay undisturbed. It was only natural that the king would turn to it for a chance—any chance—at survival.

I'm starving…

I need something… Anything…

His people fell one by one, screaming their unheard pleas. Their numbers weren't shrinking—if anything, they were multiplying. The starvation had stoked the people's natural instinct to protect their species, resulting in a spike in the birth rate. It only made things worse.

They had never seen the king smile, even as he distributed his own rations to the children who needed it most. Still, judging by their frail bodies and lifeless eyes,

they would surely be dead the next day.

Then the king committed a truly taboo act. He gave his own flesh, his own blood, to the one child he had left. And who could have prevented him from attempting to fulfill this all-too-fleeting dream? All he wanted was to save, at the very least, his own family.

It was a crime that no one was able to warn him away from such an act. He couldn't. He saw a world where no one ever ate their fill. And every night, he had the same dream. The king, a gruesome sight on the floor, and a child innocently chewing away at his innards. He wanted someone to help—to deliver them from this layer of hell, one that nobody saw any end to.

That desire was firm in his chest as today, like any other day, began.

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CHAPTER 1

THE START OF THE MAYHEM

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The rage in Ranga's snarl was palpable. As if chiding him, two ogres, one with blue hair and one with black, leaped in response.

A moment later, a shock wave formed a crater in the earth, sending piles of dirt and mud into the sky. The blast from Ranga's Voice Cannon held enough power to atomize a group of goblins on the spot. But it would only work, of course, if it actually struck the ogres.

The dodge did not unnerve Ranga. He was proud of his abilities, but seeing them avoided was the least of his concerns at the moment. He sprang off the ground, hoping to end any tandem attack from the blue- and black-hairs before they could unleash it.

They were both still in the air, and Ranga took aim at the black ogre, reasoning this was the weaker of the two. Putting one out of the picture would rob them of the teamwork they seemed to be counting on in this battle.

Ranga was halfway toward realizing his goal. What he failed to notice was that he had more than two opponents. The moment he was in the air, a wall of fire suddenly appeared before him. It resembled the spiritual magic conjured by shamans, but it was a different type—a so-called mystic art, part of the family of illusory magic. Mastering such a complex spell indicated exactly how advanced these ogres were—not some rabble living primarily off instinct, but those capable of learning and acting on reason, like the human race.

The Flame Wall blocking Ranga's path was not particularly harmful, but it did allow the caster to fully block a single enemy attack. Conjuring such a shield in front of an advancing foe could also serve as a smoke screen, earning the caster precious time to formulate a plan.

And that tactic succeeded. Losing his target, Ranga was forced to land back on the ground.

He didn't enjoy engaging with such foes, who used tricks and feints to avoid a frontal assault at all costs. The illusory spell Confusion, cast at the start of battle, had also knocked his keen sense of smell off-line. At least the effects had not fully incapacitated him yet—though it had taken out most of his companions in battle, unable to resist the magic strike. The only ones who managed to fend it off were Rigur, head of the security team, and Gobta, Rigur's right-hand man. The rest of the dozen or so hobgoblins that had been summoned here by an emergency call during a hunting run—along with their tempest wolf companions—were now de facto out of the battle.

Ranga resentfully stared down the wall of flame and the pink-haired ogre caster who had taken out his friends. There were six foes in all—six ogres, higher caste among the residents of the Forest of Jura. They were nothing to sniff at in battle—not the black- and blue-haired ogres Ranga attempted to engage, nor the purple-haired ogress Rigur was tangling with, nor the gray-haired ogre elder Gobta was fending off. Certainly not the magic-wielding pink-haired one, so effortlessly giving her companions a magical advantage, nor the red-haired ogre standing next to her, surveying the scene.

Not a one could be left to their own devices for a single moment. They were working as a team to fight Ranga and his friends, a strategy no unintelligent race would employ. Easily B rank or higher, by the looks of things. Rigur and Gobta, as stout as they were, couldn't hold out for long.

If only my master, Rimuru, were here—

Ranga snickered at himself over the thought. Relying on his master like that would be unthinkable. Then, as if wiping away any weakness in his body, he howled with the full conviction needed for the decision he had to make.

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Peace had returned to the village, and the hobgoblins had been acting remarkably calm and composed despite the Ifrit attack that leveled

the place.

The biggest surprise, I suppose, was how much of a born leader Rigurd, my newly appointed goblin king, turned out to be. Much more than I would've guessed. He had done a splendid job leading the work teams as they rebuilt the village while I watched after Shizu. Among Kaijin, the three dwarf brothers, and the four goblin lords, everyone seemed to be sticking to their duties, working efficiently for the other villagers.

Really, I didn't need to do much besides offer a couple words of advice. Overseeing our food supply was Rigur, whenever he wasn't busy handling security. Garm, oldest of the dwarves, was responsible for clothing; Dold, the next oldest, for making tools; and Mildo, the youngest, for home construction. All production was overseen by Kaijin, while Lilina, one of the goblin lords, managed our inventory of completed goods—that's how I figured we'd split the responsibility.

The remaining goblin lords—Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd—became my ministers of justice, legislation, and administration respectively, all aiding Rigurd with keeping the local government together. Minister of legislation sounds like a highfalutin job, but all it really involved was taking whatever I blurted out and trying to turn it into coherent law. Simple, really.

These were more intelligent monsters than before, but they were still monsters. When someone stronger than them was around, they listened, mostly. So for the time being, everything was going pretty smoothly. No big problems on the road to building a new country.

But I had other things on my mind anyway. I had this human body now, and I wasn't too hot on draping rough animal pelts over it. So I decided to have someone make me some proper clothes.

Being a slime had proven to be quite useful, here and there, but it had its disadvantages. Apart from certain magical items, I was unable to wear any armor or, you know, grip a weapon. And slimehood itself didn't suck, but being "naked" (so to speak) could potentially lead to

problems. What if I got a paper cut on a leaf or twig or something as I was going through the forest, and then some kind of poison or virus infected me? It pays to be careful, and I figured some actual armor would assuage any anxiety I had about that. I had just about given up on it unless I was able to find just the right magic item, but now that I could turn into a human, the world was my oyster—and the dwarves were making all kinds of stuff from the magical ingredients they seized from monsters after a hunt.

So I paid a visit to Garm, hoping to at least acquire a child's-size outfit. He was stationed at our little clothing factory, a log cabin that had come into being when I wasn't paying attention, and he was overseeing a small team of goblinas as they sewed away.

"Yo, Garm! I could use some clothing for myself."

"Uh, you sure about that, boss? How are you planning to wear it?"

"Heh-heh-heh…heh-heh… Haaaa-ha-ha-ha! That's what you've got to say? If you think I was planning to be a slime forever, you've got another think coming, man! *Haaaahhhh!!*"

"Wh-wha?! You're…growing…? …Well, not too much actually, huh? Were you a child all along, or…?"

"Eesh, I was hoping for a little more shock and awe… Ah well. I can be full-size, too, but this is a lot easier. So could you make an outfit that'd fit?"

"Oh, sure, sure. Mind if I take some measurements? Hey, Haruna, let's get the boss all measured up!"

I was naked, of course, but I didn't let that bother me as Haruna the goblina came up with a measuring rope. I was just a child, after all, and my body was genderless.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed, blushing a little. "You've become so cute, my lord!"

Cute? I mean, I personally thought so, yes, but did that still apply when it was a goblin's worldview? And for that matter, did monsters have aesthetic standards like mine? If you went way down the food chain, they *were* related to fairies, so perhaps their tastes were closer to mine than I gave them credit for.

So Haruna measured me, Garm told me to come back in a few days, and that was it. Having nothing more pressing to do, I decided to test out the skills I had obtained a bit ago.

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If I wanted to play with my new toys in peace, I needed someplace where people wouldn't show up and bother me. I could only experiment so much inside my own tent, which prevented me from unleashing too much power.

So I told Rigurd I'd be out, ordered him to make sure nobody followed me, and moved off—from the center of the village to the Sealed Cave. It was the place I first met Veldora, inside his vast underground space—pretty sturdily built and completely devoid of other people. Even the cave's monsters didn't dare draw near, as they were still so afraid at even the thought of Veldora.

Once I arrived, I got straight to business. Consuming Shizu had earned me the unique skill Deviant and the extra skill Control Flame, both attacks that were already heavily associated with her in my memories. Beyond that, I had Ifrit's trio of moves: Replication, Flame Transform, and Ranged Barrier. I had already used Replication to check out my human form, so that seemed to work well enough.

So what to try first? Might as well start with Ifrit this time. First off, Flame Transform.

Oops! Turns out that doesn't work in slime form. That wasn't the first time a skill was shut away from me due to some sort of incompatibility. I was starting to wonder what the reasoning for that was.

Understood. Ifrit is a spirit, a being who lives off spiritual energy. Its Flame Transform uses its own body as a source of magical energy to unleash its full force. It thus cannot be used while in physical form.

Mmm? So I can't cast it if I'm still made of flesh or whatever? Would it work if I went into black-mist mode and gave myself a magical body, then? Let's try it out.

I turned myself into Ifrit and attempted to use it. This time, it worked without problem, although my core—the thing that houses *me*—didn't seem to transform at all.

So I needed to be magical, then, to make it work. But that didn't mean I had to turn into Ifrit himself, necessarily, right? I turned myself into a grown figure and tried Flame Transform once more. This time, flame extended out from the tips of my fingers and toes.

That seemed to prove it. I couldn't work it very much in regular form, but if I temporarily made myself magical in style, at least, I could manage the Flame Transform well enough. And at temperatures upward of 1,200 degrees Celsius, too, just like Ifrit. What's more, I could focus the magic on particular areas for extra heat.

As an attack, it seemed pretty powerful. The only issue was that I'd have to use it inside a barrier; otherwise the energy outflow would be so huge I'd immediately drain myself of magic. It was hard to regulate. I'd need some more practice.

Good thing I had Control Flame, too; that ought to help keep me out of trouble. Spiritual creatures like Ifrit couldn't last long in the physical world thanks to all the magic they ate up, but with my physical form and Control Flame, a little practice should allow me to cap and unleash the flames as needed.

That brought me to Ranged Barrier. This skill locked the heat of flames within a barrier, which I presumed prevented heat energy from leaking out—and, as my theory went, allowed spirits to manifest

themselves for longer without wasting magic. Another unique property was that it contained certain physical durability, in case you wanted to keep anyone inside the barrier.

I thought of ways I could use this. The largest barrier I could make with it extended out in a semicircle three hundred feet or so in diameter, although it didn't affect anything beneath the ground's surface. I could shrink it down until it was covering nothing but my own body, which didn't reduce its effect at all and kept magic consumption at a minimum. This free control meant I could wear it like a sort of light protective layer. It could also prevent magic leakage during a Flame Transform—not that it would be much help, given that the flames never went beyond the barrier itself.

So was heat leakage kind of like losing energy? Was that the reason it sapped my magic?

Understood. Flame Transform consumes magicules and generates warmth in order to preserve a certain level of heat. The conversion of magic to heat means that leakage of either one essentially causes the same result.

All right. I think I understand, a little. So if I keep the flames locked inside the seal, I don't have to waste any energy because it'll stay active without any further work? I'm pretty sure what I learned in physics class on Earth said something a tad different, but—hey—Newton didn't have to theorize anything about magic over there. He had it easy compared to me. If I started asking questions like "How does it fully enclose the fire?" or "Won't it burn out once it consumes all the oxygen in the barrier?" I wouldn't get anywhere in this world.

Besides, for now, the Flame Transform wasn't as important as the Ranged Barrier as a form of self-defense. Would that work if I had it cover me alone, a form I decided to just call my Barrier for brevity's sake? I had the perfect skill to test that with. Yep: Time for another Replication.

I had been a little reticent to test certain aspects of my skill set, just

in case I damaged myself in the process, but Replication provided an efficient answer for that. My copies, after all, had the exact same abilities I did, except for the unique skills. Those were exclusive to me, I guess, and while I could have my copies use those while they were close by, once they went out of my sight, that was it for uniques. All except for my consuming skills, which were closely entwined enough with my slime identity that even my copies could use them a little.

As long as I was half a mile or so away from my copies, I had full control over them. Anything beyond that, and they wouldn't be able to parse anything except for very simple commands. I still had an insight into their line of view, however, and my Thought Communication skill let me give new commands anytime I wanted. The perfect spy tool, in other words, but that was beside the point of this test run.

So I created a clone of myself and cast a Barrier on it. Then I shot one of my Water Blades at it. It was sharp as a knife—I could see that much as it ripped through the air—but it shattered into nothing in front of my copy. A perfect block by the Barrier. *Pretty strong, then. Just like I expected.*

I then tried practicing to see if I could fire off Water Blades while keeping the Barrier on myself. That turned out to be simpler than I thought. I just had to create a little jet shooter out of my finger and fire away. These shots, in turn, would be enclosed in their own miniature Barrier, a bit like a large soap bubble splitting into two smaller ones. That these tiny force fields expanded the Blades' strength and range was another unexpected benefit.

The testing continued with Poisonous Breath and Paralyzing Breath, and along the way, I realized that taking damage while under a Barrier consumed my magic. Not with Paralyzing Breath—the Barrier did a fine job absorbing that—but Poison Mist drained it immediately, dismantling the whole Barrier once the magic was gone. Of course, this also meant that as long as I charged up the Barrier with enough magic, it would provide some temporary poison protection.

I applied more magic to the next barrier and placed it on my clone. A few more shots of Poison Mist confirmed it—the more magic I laid on, the longer the Barrier would hold up. It proved to be pretty damn durable, in fact. Even more so if the Barrier was covering the original instead of a clone, I assumed, to the point that Poison Mist–style attacks were likely nothing to worry about. Now *that's* armor I could count on.

The final experiment of the day involved using Flame Transform alongside Ranged Barrier. The results were…fascinating.

Damn right it's A rank. At least.

A Flame Transform inside a Flare Circle barrier would expose anything organic inside the barrier to several thousand degrees of heat, scorching them instantly. Being confined to a restricted space did wonders for the attack's strength. It cooked the very air itself, robbing it of all oxygen and searing the lungs of its victims before they knew what had happened. Any creature who breathed air would face little chance of survival.

I didn't have to worry about breathing, of course, and my Resist Temperature tolerance would take care of me anyway. For anyone else, though, it was a death sentence. In a way, it was a relief. Without a body that just happened to be so adaptable to Ifrit's attacks, my chances of victory would have been pretty slim.

Still, this was another overpowered skill, and I'd need to deliberate over it a bit more. Shizu had a Cancel Flame Attack tolerance, perhaps a side effect of merging with Ifrit. This kept her safe from fire strikes or extremely hot environments—a bit like my Resist Temperature, except without the cold protection, although it offered even more insulation against heat. *Cancel* must have been a higher level than *Resist* in this hierarchy, and considering Resist Temperature was already an upgraded tolerance, Cancel Flame Attack must've provided a fantastic amount of protection.

So all and all, the experiments bore a lot more fruit than expected.

Nothing I could've learned inside my own tent; I would've torched the village immediately.

Happy with the results, I returned to the village. I didn't need sleep, but replenishing my magicule stores was vital, and rest was the best way to do that. I'd had enough of being forced into sleep mode, and it was never a good idea to overdo things anyway. No need to panic. I had all the time in the world.

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The next day, I stopped by Garm's cabin for a fitting session. They were still stitching up my outfit, but Haruna had some mass-manufactured armor and clothing for me to try on.

"Oh my! It looks quite good indeed, my lord."

It felt like she was playing dress-up with me somewhat, like a child and her doll, but Haruna and her coworkers seemed to love it, so I let it slide. We found an outfit in their equipment that fit perfectly, so I went with that for the time being. It was basically the same as the rest of the hobgoblins' wear, but it felt surprisingly comfy. Garm must have been pretty good with his hands, after all.

"Hmm," I said, "not bad. Easy to move in, and it looks sturdy enough."

"Ha-ha-ha! Glad to hear it, boss. Just you wait until your own custom outfit's all wrapped up!"

I was starting to look forward to it. I had given him the skin from the boss direwolf I dispatched a while ago, so in terms of fashion *and* function, it ought to be first-rate.

I stepped out of Garm's workshop with great anticipation, still in child form since there was no reason to abandon my new outfit just yet. I was expecting a few arched eyebrows, but everyone passing by immediately smiled and opened the road to me. They must have recognized me all the same, which I was pondering when I ran into

Rigurd out surveying the scene.

"Hey, Rigurd. Things going well?"

"Ah, Sir Rimuru!" He beamed back at me, instantly making out who I was. "Things could hardly be going better, and we all have you to thank for it!"

"So you can tell who I am? I'm not in slime form."

"Ha-ha-ha! Of course, my lord! The elegance you project from every pore of your body is unmistakable!"

So now I was just projecting how awesome I was, whether I intended to or not. Not an aura, but just…sheer class? Perhaps my naming them all had something to do with it, but regardless of the reason, I didn't care as long as people knew who I was.

With that concern out of the way, I decided to stage another experimental session down at the cave, telling Rigurd not to bother me unless it was an emergency. I was working with some rather potent offense again that day, and I didn't want to put anyone in danger.

"Yes, my lord! By the way, I imagine you have no need for food today?"

The question made me give Rigurd a thoughtful look. *Oh! Of course! Why did I forget about that?* I've got this lovely new human body, and I haven't even tried eating anything yet!

"Actually, hold on. I think I'm going to eat with you guys starting today."

"Y-you *will*, my lord?!" Another beaming smile—which always looked a bit threatening from hobgoblins, but it wasn't their fault. "Well, we must hold a feast today to celebrate the occasion! I will instruct Lilina to prepare a sumptuous spread for us all!"

I was just as happy as he was. I didn't *feel* hungry, no, but it would technically be the first solid food I'd had in ages. It was exciting.

A distance away from the village, I stumbled upon Rigur and Gobta.

"Hey," I said. "I guess there's a party at the village today, so try to hunt down something tasty for Lilina, would you? I'm capable of eating food now, so let's make this an evening to remember!"

"Ah, Sir Rimuru!" Rigur exclaimed. "Is that so? Well then, I will provide the most succulent cowdeer I can!"

Cowdeer? Cow…deer? The name made it easy to imagine the sort of animal he was talking about. People around here seemed to dig it. I was starting to seriously look forward to this.

"By the way, Sir Rimuru, to what do we owe the occasion of your new appearance?"

"Heh-heh-heh! How kind of you to notice, Gobta! Life as a slime is pretty easy for me, but going around as a human ain't too shabby, either. It offers a lot more command over the five senses than I enjoyed as a slime, for one. Taste, in particular. That, and this form makes it easier for me to interact with you guys."

I had already reproduced all my old senses pretty well except for taste in slime form, but being a human still felt more…natural, somehow. Although being a slime *was* second nature at this point.

"Oh, I see!" Gobta shouted. "I would like to interact with you, too, Sir Rimuru, but I do prefer more curves, sir!"

"That's *not* what I meant by 'interacting,' you idiot!"

I rewarded his observation with a reverse roundhouse kick. My body moved exactly as I instructed it, which meant my right foot struck home in the pit of his stomach. The pain caused him to pass out, and really, I couldn't think of any better medicine for such a fool.

“My apologies, Sir Rimuru. I ensure you I will instill some discipline in Gobta later.”

“Sure. I’m not that offended. But thanks in advance for the meat.”

“But of course! We’ve had a number of herds migrating from deeper within the forest, so the pickings are quite good. We won’t let you down!”

“Oh? Something up in the forest?”

“Indeed, we occasionally see large-scale migrations of magical beasts, due to changes in habitat or other factors. I doubt it is anything serious, but we are stepping up our patrols.”

That struck me as odd. He was probably right—it’d be nothing—but you always need to stay a step ahead on these things. So I summoned Ranga and assigned him to sentry duty with Rigurd and his team. Nothing he couldn’t handle, I was sure.

In a moment, Ranga stepped out from my shadow. I was capable of summoning him now—my pride forbade me from being unable to do something Gobta could handle with such ease. I had been practicing on the sly for a while.

“You called, Sir Rimuru?”

“I did. I want you to join Rigurd’s team in the forest. I doubt you’ll see anything, but if you do, keep the team safe.”

“Yes, my lord. I will make it so.” His face was meek and docile, but his tail was wagging like mad, as if nothing pleased him more than being bossed around. He was back to normal size now—which still meant he was six and a half feet tall, or thereabouts—so the wagging didn’t kick up any gale-force winds, at least. I was glad to see he was listening to my training.

“Keep a close eye out, Ranga. And if you see anything, Rigur, let me know.”

“Ha-ha-ha! There is hardly a thing to worry about, Sir Rimuru. I hope you have a hearty appetite worked up!”

He was right. Maybe I was overthinking it. Ranga was at least a B-plus in terms of strength—maybe even an A-minus by now. His class was on the upper end of what you saw in the Forest of Jura. He’d be fine. The thought of all that roasted fantasy-monster meat in my mouth was making my brain catastrophize over nothing.

“I’ll be sure I do. I’ll be in the cave, so let me know if something comes up.”

Then I nodded at Rigur and left.

The excitement was welling within me all the way to the cave. Actual roast meat! There was no way I could expect much from hobgoblin haute cuisine, but if all they were doing was grilling up some meat and plants and such, what could go wrong? They probably wouldn’t season it with much apart from salt, but oh well.

…But hold on. Do they bother adding any seasoning at all? I hadn’t thought about it, since I had no sense of taste. *They’ve got to use salt, at least. Maybe I should find some rock salt and build a little supply for myself, just in case.*

The Analysis skill provided by the Great Sage let me track down some rocks with salt content in them. Predation let me suck it in and extract the salt, and I just tossed the rest. Couldn’t be easier.

Though was it really all right to use my skills for stuff like this? *Hmm. It has to be. What’s the harm in using the tools I have?*

So with the salt in hand… Oh wait, I was testing out my skills, wasn’t I? I was so distracted by the upcoming feast that I lost track of my original mission. I shook the cobwebs out of my head as I headed for yesterday’s underground cavern.

*

Today, I wanted to try my hand at some Control Flame maneuvers.

It was, as one would expect, an extra skill to control flame. You could build up your body's temperature and the ambient heat in the palm of your hand, focus it on a single fingertip, or just whip up a campfire on the ground wherever you liked, no actual wood or kindling required.

That, however, was it. Hence, why it's an extra skill. Nothing that powerful. I couldn't, like, set my finger on fire or shoot flames from my palms. I thought I could maybe release the heat from my fingertip like a sci-fi laser rifle, but I was sorely disappointed. And forget about triggering explosions like Shizu did with ease. She was probably fusing this with some of her own magic to do that.

Hang on. Fusing with magic…?

Suddenly, the Flame Transform I had worked on the day before came to mind. Back there, I had changed my "form" into a grown adult and infused my own body with that skill—but as I'd thought about it overnight, I realized I could try working Flame Transform on my internal magic stores instead. For spirit beings, Flame Transform turned their "body" into energy waves, but I figured there was no rule that said I *had* to use it that way.

For example, what if I released some magic and worked Flame Transform on that? And if I could then take the results over with Control Flame…

Received. It is possible to combine the Mimic aspect of your Predator unique skill, Flame Transform, the extra skill Control Flame, and the unique skill Deviant. Execute?

Yes
No

Hee-hee-heeeee. Just like I thought. "Yes" it is, then.

Pretty surprising to find this unexpected quirk of Deviant, before I even had a chance to fully examine it. I felt like I'd been introduced to some new kink—a bit guiltily, but at the same time, I was just beginning to realize the extent of this new world.

Report. Flame Transform and the extra skills Control Flame and Control Water will disappear following the combination. In its place, you will have earned Dark Flame and the extra skill Control Particles. Resist Temperature will also evolve into Cancel Temperature. This will eliminate the extra skill Cancel Flame Attack.

I gave the order, and the Sage did the rest. The results let me earn a new skill far more easily than I would've guessed. Losing Control Water along the way was a regret, but I figured it was because I could do the same thing with Control Particles well enough. *Time to try 'em out.*

Dark Flame was a skill that let me release flames from my body whenever I focused my internal magic force. I created a field of magic, transformed it into flame, then launched it away—thus, creating fire from thin air. I could also adjust the temperature based on how much magic I used.

If I wanted to grab someone's head and immediately encase it in flames, it'd be possible (albeit a tad toasty). If I wanted to focus the flames on my palm and shoot them off, no problem. Basically, I pictured it as gathering a bunch of magicules in a single place, setting them on fire, then releasing—somewhat like how my Water Blades worked.

I fired a shot of this at a nearby boulder. It immediately burst into flames—and judging by how the surface was literally melting, it had to be pushing 1,500 degrees again, about the same as with Flame Transform. *What a weapon I've stumbled upon.* I could probably get it even hotter, depending on how much magic I crammed into it, and if I worked it on a larger scale, maybe I could trigger an even larger explosion. *Better practice that. Never know when I might need it.*

Now I could work these flames however I wanted without thinking too deeply about it, and I suppose I had Control Particles to thank for that. Working the magicules around me allowed me to control the paths of other molecules in the air, creating heat from the resulting friction. Since I was controlling magic to move these particles around, I could boost the temperature simply by using a little more force.

It had come all too easily, but Control Particles was a fearsome tool to add to my arsenal. The Great Sage attempted to explain the ability over the course of several minutes, using all kinds of unfamiliar jargon and logic, but I cut it off. It was indecipherable, a total waste of time. I figured it would handle the details for me anyway.

More interesting was that now I could apparently control the very air molecules around me. My understanding of Dark Flame was that it transformed magicules into flame to create searing temperatures, but if I could make any sort of molecules rub against one another for similar effects, could I use that to create electricity, perhaps? Like, say, what if I linked Dark Lightning up with Control Particles…?

Received. It is possible to link Dark Lightning with the extra skill Control Particles. Execute?

Yes
No

Looks like I was right. Yes, I thought to myself—and with that, the skill Dark Thunder was mine. This, by and large, gave me access to Dark Lightning–type skills without the need to transform my body into a Twilight Starwolf, as well as adjust its strength to some extent. The wolves could use the dual horns on their heads to fine-tune the intensity and range of their attacks, but Dark Thunder eliminated the need for all that.

I tried summoning some electricity between my thumb and pointer. An arc of bluish-white energy danced between them. Just like with Dark Lightning, I could freely control its size and force with the amount of supernatural energy and magicules I used—from a light,

paralyzing jolt to a vaporizing thunderclap.

Honestly, this Control Particles stuff was getting a little godlike. It was nothing all that exciting by itself, but when paired with other skills, it turned into a juggernaut.

Although, really, it was my Sage unique skill that was creating all this, alongside the Deviant skill that Shizu left for me. If it weren't for that, then...

...Hey, what kind of skill is Deviant anyway?

Received. The unique skill Deviant is capable of the following...

To sum up what the Sage told me, Deviant's effects could be broadly divided into two categories.

Synthesize:
Transform two differing targets into a single object.

Separate:
Release the properties inherent to the target and make into a separate object. (The original object may disappe if it has no physical form.)

This appeared to be the main engine behind Shizu's transformation. Human and spiritual forms, two very different things, synthesized into a single creature. It was hard to say whether Ifrit took Shizu over first, or if Shizu invented the Deviant skill to keep Ifrit from staging a complete power grab. There was no way of knowing for sure now, but either way, it was clear I could adapt this skill for a number of things.

I already knew that Synthesize could be applied to skills, leading to all manner of other combinations. Perhaps it could be combined with magic as well? Maybe fusing flame and wind to create hurricanes? Or maybe I could give magical effects to weapons and trigger a special

attack with just a little magic force?

To give you my honest opinion, this Deviant skill was a scarily good fit with my own skill set. As a slime, I wasn't capable of nervous sweating, but I might as well have been. A few quick experiments had already given me Control Particles and Dark Flame, and I now also had full control over electrical attacks. There were tons of monsters left for me to Predate and glean new skills from, and I planned to do that as much as I could.

And for that matter, could I use the Separate function to seize skills from my enemies?

Received. It depends on the specific scenario. However, erasing or separating skills etched into the target's soul is not possible.

So it couldn't do *everything*. But it'd work sometimes? I'd need to figure out exactly what was available to Separate from my target first.

But really, Synthesize was the biggest prize with Deviant. I was planning to take a lot of skills from a lot of monsters going forward, and seeing what kind of things I could create from them was already getting me excited.

I suppose it was all thanks to the Great Sage, but either way, Predator and Deviant made for a potent duo. It didn't exactly have the most attractive name, but in Deviant, Shizu had given me one hell of a farewell gift.

I decided to wrap up that day's session with a few Cancel Temperature tests. Temperature covered both fire and ice, I supposed, and considering even Resist Temperature was enough to handle Ifrit's mega-charged fire, having an upgraded version should handle most attacks tossed my way. Anything short of being launched into the sun like a slingshot, at least.

There was a barbecue waiting, and I wanted to wrap this up quickly. But defensive skills directly contributed to the preservation of

my life. I had to figure out what I had.

Just as I had yesterday, I used a sizable amount of magicules to create a Replicated slime body. Something about attacking a cloned, naked human resembling a young girl gave me pause. I could probably summon up some clothing or armor once I was more versed, but that didn't make this any less in bad taste. (Slimes were pretty cute themselves, but if I wanted to do any real experimentation, I had to beat up *something*.) I knew from yesterday that I could apply a Barrier to block my own Water Blades. *Now, let's try attacking it with Dark Flame.*

Using the same level of magical energy as before to smash Dark Flame against a Barrier, I found that it succeeded in fully blocking the heat. Not bad. If it could annul Ifrit's Flare Circle, it could handle well near anything, I supposed, to say nothing of Icicle Lance. So I was good against hot and cold, then?

Received. Cancel Temperature is linked with Ranged Barrier, thus canceling the effects of temperature-related attacks.

Ah, perfect. If Shizu possessed Cancel Flame Attack, Ifrit must as well, since it let them each handle such high-temperature attacks in the first place. It seemed like the perfect tool. Now that it was combined with Resist Temperature, I had nothing to worry about from ice, either.

Removing the link for a moment, I tried Dark Flame once more. This time, it smashed through the Barrier instantly, but my Replicated clone was perfectly safe. Resist Melee Attack must have helped absorb some of the shock wave-based aftereffects.

Between all these resistances and my Barrier, I figured I could rest pretty easy when it came to my own defenses. *Better not forget to link all this stuff with the Barrier first, though.*

Received. Ranged Barrier is now linked with your resistances.

Relaunch as Multilayer Barrier?

Yes
No

As it turned out, I couldn't create a single Barrier with lots of different effects applied to it, but I was free to create multiple Barriers with one resistance effect each. So "yes" it was, once again, and the moment I thought it, I could feel a thin, colorless, invisible coating come over me. It was a Multilayer Barrier, consisting of several layers but still so thin that my Magic Sense skill could only barely spot it. It didn't require much magic energy to keep going, either—once it was summoned, it barely consumed any at all, far less than I could naturally recover by myself.

Another great success for today, then. There were still some potential skill combinations I wanted to work my mind around, but for now, I had done more than enough. I had gained more offense and defense, and as I departed the cavern, I felt more than satisfied.

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Making my way down the path to the exit I had memorized, I thought about ways to suppress the mystical aura I had a tendency to exude.

It was just the occasional light aura of magicules, and while I could keep it down if I thought about it, for some reason, it'd just appear while I wasn't paying attention. With all the energy I had absorbed after defeating and consuming Ifrit, it was getting difficult to hide.

I ran into another giant centipede on the way up, but it simply gave me a quick glance before scurrying away. So now did all the other residents of this cave. Glad to see I was finally getting a rep around here, but really, it was probably that aura more than anything.

The Multilayer Barrier did wonders to hide it, but my presence still leaked out a tiny bit—or, to be more exact, the Multilayer Barrier itself was exuding a bit of force. It beat letting my power roll off me without

any cover, but it didn't really help much.

If I could do something permanent about this aura, I could probably pass for a human pretty much anywhere, but…

Suddenly, an idea came to mind. I reached into one pocket and took something out—a beautiful, fetching mask. The Mask of Magic Resistance, the lone physical memento I had to remember Shizu by. I had absorbed the broken pieces with Predator and reassembled them with my body. Maybe this mask could block it?

It was a magic item, one infused with four effects: Magic Resist, Antidote, Breathing Support, and Amplify Senses. Pretty valuable, I imagined. Also, the likely reason why Shizu could breathe normally when summoning fiery explosions within point-blank range of herself. Breathing Support probably kept her lungs full even as the flames consumed the oxygen around her—not that I needed that with my body. I could Synthesize up a respiratory system if I really wanted to, but I didn't. Maybe this mask could convince people that I *was* breathing, though. It wasn't useful now, but it could be depending on the kind of people I ran into.

The other effects—Antidote and Amplify Senses—seemed a lot more useful to your average adventurer, if not to me. The one effect I needed the most was Magic Resist, which could both dull any magic attacks enemies cast and (hopefully) hide my internal magical force.

I put it on. It had an oddly calming effect, and it seemed to fit pretty well. The moment I applied it, the aura pouring out of me immediately dispelled. *Nice. Let's go with this whenever I'm bumping around the outside world.*

So that wrapped up another nagging issue. Good. And I had some nice, juicy grilled meat waiting. As I made my way back aboveground, I was filled with glee.

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My first decent meal in ages—turned out to be wishful thinking.

The moment I stepped out of the cave, I could instantly feel that someone was fighting. The magicules in the air were stirring, disturbing the surrounding atmosphere.

The meat would have to wait. I gave up on it and made my way in the direction of the particle surge. On the other end…

I found nothing short of a battle to the death.

*

I could hear screaming as I approached the scene of the battle.

It was Gobta.

He was crossing swords with an elderly white-haired ogre, but he was far out of his league. Whatever physical strength and agility this adversary had lost over the years, his swordsmanship and footwork made it clear he was no amateur. Gobta, meanwhile, was *totally* an amateur. I had to hand it to him for managing to stay alive up to this point. He seemed to be holding his own for now, wildly flinging his body around to dodge the ogre's strikes, but his astounding luck could only save him for so long.

A moment later, the elderly ogre closed the distance between them and landed a single slash across Gobta's whole chest, right before my eyes.

"Gaahhhh!!" he shouted as he rolled on the ground. "Oh, that hurts! I—I may die! I may very well die here!!"

I figured he was fine if he had the energy to plead his case with that much gusto. Besides, to my eye, his opponent didn't seemed very intent on killing him.

Noticing my presence, the wizened ogre abandoned the fight, confident enough that Gobta was no longer a threat.

"Calm down, you. The wound is a shallow one."

"Gah, Sir Rimuru! Are you here because you were concerned about me, my lord?!"

"Yes," I said, "and I'm glad you're in good shape. Don't need a recovery potion or anything, I see."

"Whoa, I, um, please? I—I apologize if I didn't make that clear enough!"

Yeah, he was fine. His wild instincts must've propelled him to the ground, preventing him from being any more seriously injured. So I tossed him a bit of potion, more to shut him up than anything. One flask was plenty. The old ogre didn't move while I administered treatment; it seemed like he was observing me instead. It was a little unnerving.

The area around us was littered with fallen hobgoblin warriors and tempest wolves. None appeared to be dead, but knocking them all out without dealing any grievous wounds would've taken some serious talent. A magical strike, perhaps.

Farther off, I spotted a purple-haired ogress fighting with Rigur. This, too, was sadly one-sided. The ogress, wielding an iron mace that was little more than an enormous hunk of metal, was apparently blessed with superhuman strength. Rigur's sword was starting to bend against it, and his wooden shield was long since battered to splinters. It wouldn't be long before he was out of the picture, too.

Ranga, noticing me, sprang to my side. "Sir Rimuru," he said, "my deepest apologies. I was here, and yet, look at this disaster…"

I stopped him mid-sentence. This wasn't Ranga's fault; they just had the misfortune of running into the wrong adversary. These were ogres, one of the highest-level races in the Forest of Jura, and no

hobgoblin could hope to last too long against them.

"Hold your weapons," I softly ordered Rigur and the other stragglers. He instantly did so upon hearing my command. The ogress, instead of striking any further blows, gave me a thoughtful look. She was large-framed, muscular, but still in proportion. Her chest was formed enough to make her identifiable as female, and to my surprise, she looked quite a bit more noble than I expected.

I ordered Ranga to take the exhausted Rigur away. The ogres, while still wary of me, made no move to stop him.

"S-Sir Rimuru… I—I cannot express my sorrow…"

Rigur, covered in scratches from head to toe, could barely form a single word or two between breaths. Against the purple-haired ogre, he had little chance of victory. His skills maybe hovered around B rank on a good day.

"Don't worry," I said as I gave him a potion. None of his injuries were serious, so his recovery wouldn't take long. "Just get rested and leave this to me. Ranga, what happened to all these fallen fighters?"

"Ah, that—"

According to him, magic had felled them all. It was some sort of sleeping spell, and none had managed to resist it in time. Good thing it wasn't a confusion-type, at least. That could've been murder.

Magic, though… Talk about drawing the short straw.



* * *

I took a moment to calmly assess the situation.

There were six of them, and they were a rather odd group, one that totally contradicted my conventional wisdom of the ogre race. They were fully clothed, and dressed well, if simply. I was expecting tiger-skin loincloths and little else, but I was wrong. They were big, as I'd pictured, and each one was well-built, but their full wardrobe was a surprise.

If they were this well-dressed (and wielded magic to boot), they had to be highly intelligent. Perhaps more dangerous than an equivalent party of human adventurers, even.

If you took two races of equal physical strength, the presence or lack of intelligence could make a huge difference in danger level. That went double for such a high-level race. These monsters were B rank or higher as it was; if they were further armed and working together, they could've even hunted down Ranga.

The ogres' weapons made me curious, too. That they had weapons wasn't unusual—if even goblins could buy them from dwarves, pretty much anything with a pulse could. But there was a difference between simple clubs and full-on swords. Eastern-style ones, too, very different from the dwarven Western types that worked more like bludgeons.

The elderly ogre who felled Gobta wielded a sword that could only be described as a Japanese-style katana. And judging by how he handled it, he was a seasoned swordsman. That, combined with his ogre strength and magic, made this group potentially lethal.

That magic was apparently provided by the pink-haired ogress off to the side, dressed in a remarkably elaborate outfit. She had a sweet but extremely resolute face, and the way she carried herself suggested she was a noble among her race, perhaps some sort of demon

princess.

The most dangerous of all, though, was undoubtedly the red-haired ogre.

“What sort of evil monster is this?!” the pink-haired one shouted as I gauged them all. “Stay on your guard, everyone!”

Her expression appeared to be honest fear now, and with her eyes fixed on mine, she must have been referring to me…

“Whoa, wait a sec. You think I’m evil?”

“Oh, attempting to play dumb, is it?” the pink-haired ogress countered. “No good-hearted human would ever have control over such a heinous horde of monsters. You appear to be hiding your magical aura from us, but you are fooling no one! Did you think you could deceive us?”

“You cannot pull the wool over our princess’s eyes! Reveal your true self, now!” the black-haired ogre bellowed.

“How nice for the mastermind to appear before us at such an early stage!” continued the elderly one. “With their sparse numbers, we have every hope of victory!”

They didn’t sound too interested in listening to me, then. I did my best to plead my case, claiming this was all a misunderstanding, but to no avail. They insisted I was a sinister presence, and that was that.

And so…

“Enough of this,” the red-haired ogre snarled. “If you insist on making such flimsy excuses, we have ways of making you reveal the truth. We know you are with the evil pigs who dared attack our allies!”

This made no sense. But a battle now seemed unavoidable. I could have easily fled, but there were still sleeping hobgoblins and tempest wolves all around me. I wasn’t heartless enough to leave them

vulnerable.

"Sir Rimuru," Ranga asked, "what will we do?"

Even a freshly healed Rigur and Gobta wouldn't help us much. Ranga and I were the only really useful fighters. So I decided to point him at the magician.

"I want you to take on the pink-haired ogress over there. I think there's something else going on here, so I want to get through to them. Meaning: Don't kill anyone, all right? I don't want any more magic tossed around, so just run a little interference for me. I can defeat the rest."

"But, Sir Rimuru, you against five ogres…?"

"Don't sweat it. Like, I couldn't possibly lose."

The ogres within earshot stirred angrily. I didn't care.

"…Yes, my lord!"

Following my orders, Ranga zoomed into action. The ogres immediately fanned out in formation.

I took a moment to figure out how I was going to handle this. I wasn't lying before—I really didn't think I could lose. Based on my experimentation over the past two days, I knew I had gotten more than a fair bit stronger. Ifrit was well past A rank, apparently, and since he was part of me now, I had to be A level.

Rigurd said ogres were around B to B-plus, meanwhile, and considering the stately dress of the ones before me, we might be dealing with A-minuses, even—but stronger than Ifrit? Yeah, right.

It'd be easy to kill them, I thought, but our inability to talk this out was concerning. If they clearly wanted to murder us, that would be one thing, but they had killed none of my allies. And while they weren't willing to listen to me, I was sure they would if we could all

just chill for a second.

So I took action, making a beeline for the dark-haired ogre. My body felt light as it obeyed my thoughts. I had been human for a relatively short while, but already it seemed to fit me like a glove. The difference in height from my slime form didn't bother me, either, since Magic Sense gave me a 360-degree insight into my surroundings.

Rearing back in surprise at my sudden advance, the dark-hair steadied himself, eyes wide open. He was still too late.

"Take a rest!" I shouted, bringing my left palm toward him. A small vent opened up, and within a moment, it was spitting out a black mist toward the flabbergasted ogre—the Paralyzing Breath I'd taken from the cave centipedes.

I'd figured I could belch it out now that I was in control of this body, and I was right. Mimicking only the monster skills I needed wasn't exactly a finesse move, but it worked.

Report. Mimicry of the unique skill Predator, combined with the synthesis and separation skills of the unique skill Deviant, has earned you the extra skill Universal Shapeshift.

Not only did it work, it bore unexpected fruit.

I had wondered, with my Deviant skill's synthesis and separation traits, could I just recreate whatever unique aspect of a monster's abilities I happened to need at the time and nothing else? Despite testing it out on the field for the first time, it went pretty darn well, I think.

Now I could transform smoothly, without a lot of effort on my part, and I could even select the part of the monster I wanted—for that matter, busting out traits from multiple monsters at once. Using a direwolf or a black snake as a base would make me look like some weirdo chimera, but I was free to use my human form instead,

apparently.

The most notable trait of this skill: I could control all my abilities at once without much limit. In other words, I had even more freedom with my attacks than before.

The black-haired ogre shuddered, mist covering his entire body. He fell to the ground, still bolt upright and unable to move. Facing the brunt of my B-plus-level black centipede transformation was enough to stop even him in his tracks.

But the ogres weren't your run-of-the-mill foes. The moment I felled the black-haired one like a mighty tree, two others lunged at me. In a moment, the purple-haired ogress was upon me, cannonball-like mace swinging in the air. The blue-haired one was lurking behind her shadow, ready to land a surprise attack when I wasn't paying attention. It was a well-practiced example of teamwork, but with Magic Sense, I could see it coming a mile away. Veldora had told me no one would ever sneak up on me again, and he was right.

The noble-faced ogress sneered, eyes like two long slits. I waited for the moment she raised her mace high, then pointed my left hand at her and unleashed a spinning flurry of Sticky Steel Thread. The flexible strands, strong enough to even keep Ifrit restrained, had been synthesized with Deviant to grow even more durable. They now cocooned the ogress, and she couldn't escape, no matter how she struggled. All that training really *did* pay off.

As I sung my own praises in my mind, a sword shot at me from a blind spot below. The blue-haired swordsman had aimed straight for my heart. But I didn't panic. Magic Sense had told me he was there, so I was just thinking about how I'd handle him.

I decided to use my right arm as a shield to deflect the straight sword. After the dull thunk of steel striking against something solid, the sword broke neatly in two.

The ogre's eyes widened in surprise as I landed my follow-up, a

straight jab from a scaly right arm. I had deployed Body Armor—the scale defense from the lizards in the cave—up and down my hand and forearm, and it made short work of the blue-hair's chest plate. It shattered, ensuring I had defanged him without hurting myself a single bit along the way. I didn't really need Body Armor here—Resist Melee Attack linked with Multilayer Barrier was enough to annul any potential damage to my arm—but hey, just in case, you know?

That meant three ogres were out of the picture. That left the pink-haired ogress Ranga was tangling with, the haughty-looking red-haired one, and the elder ogre, still standing there and gauging my every move.

"Do you see how strong I am now? Are you willing to hear me out a little?"

"Silence! Now I am more convinced than ever—you lie at the very root of this calamity. It was your cohorts who led those fetid pigs to destroy our home, was it not? A simple horde of orcs would never be enough to defeat us normally. It was you! The magic-born who doomed us!"

Um? The magic-born who what? This was getting to be one serious misunderstanding. And when that red-haired ogre said *pigs*, was he talking about orcs? Rigur and his crew had suggested there was some kind of struggle going on over forest territory…

"Wait, you've got the wrong—"

I attempted to state my case, only to be stopped by a premonition behind me. I turned around—the elder wasn't there. Was the other one lecturing me just to divert my attention?!

In a panic, I turned, blocking a strike from behind with my right hand. It was a shock, someone evading Magic Sense to get so close undetected. Thankfully, the unique Great Sage skill sped up my thought processes to a thousand times faster than normal. The elder unsheathed his blade in a flash, and I was just barely in time.

But something about my arm felt unusual. My skill set kept me from experiencing pain, but—oops—he had lopped the thing right off. This old guy's skills were incredible. Even with Multilayer Barrier and Body Armor in place, it was like he could cut through paper.

"Mmh… I must be growing senile. I was sure I had decapitated you there…"

Senile, my ass. His physical skills were no match for his companions, but his speed was ridiculous. He was lethal.

Retrieving my amputated arm, I stepped back a little ways.

"Sir Rimuru?!"

"Stay back! I'm fine!" I shouted, shooing Ranga away. The elder was too dangerous for him to handle. He looked confused for a moment but turned his attention back to the pink-haired ogress, apparently trusting me.

"I will not miss next time," the elder said as he resheathed his sword and readied it anew.

No way I would underestimate his advanced age now. I needed to show him everything I had.

Apparently waiting for the moment I was fully focused on him, he leaped up, and with a shout of "Die for my comrades!" slashed at me from my flank.

"Hah!" the red-haired ogre shouted, still targeting me. "Losing an arm should be the end for you. You were strong, I'll grant you that, but you were arrogant. You thought you could take us on alone, but that was your undoing!"

He had a unique way of moving, too, one that let him stab at my weaker points head-on. He must have seen me as enough of a threat to not bother keeping alive.

Master-level teamwork like this was a huge pain in the ass. I was incredibly strong, so I didn't pay much attention to it, but I was really just an amateur in a fight. Whatever rubbed off on me during phys ed class was about all I had.

Getting all serious against a total newbie seemed a little immature, but then again, I did tell them I couldn't lose. I suppose I had it coming. But I still had to make it out of this scrape, by hook or by crook.

I considered the situation as I worked to keep the two at a distance. Taking them on with a single arm sounded like a steep order, so I used my Predator special skill to reabsorb it. Self-Regeneration, the slime-intrinsic skill I started with, was good enough to heal me when paired with Predator in the past. Hopefully, it could handle more delicate surgeries like this…

Report. Combining the mimicry skill of Predator with the slime-intrinsic skills Dissolve, Absorb, and Self-Regeneration has earned you the extra skill Ultraspeed Regeneration. This comes at the cost of the slime-intrinsic skills Dissolve, Absorb, and Self-Regeneration.

Losing all those slime skills at once seemed kind of a hefty price to pay, but I couldn't complain about the results. I never used those things anyway, given that Predator covered for them all.

Launching Ultraspeed Regeneration, I focused on rebuilding my right arm. The arm I had consumed was taken apart and instantly absorbed into my body—and in the blink of an eye, it was back. It was crazy fast, like none of my recovery skills from before. "Ultraspeed" was right.

…Oops. No time to gape at my own handiwork. Let's try a quick bluff.

"Heh-heh-heh… Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Did you think cutting a simple arm or two off meant you had won? Well, sorry to disappoint you. I will admit to underestimating you all earlier, though. Time to

get a little serious!"

I removed the mask and placed it in a pocket. The ogres, already spooked at how fast I had rebuilt my arm, were positively stunned by what they saw under the mask. Releasing my full magical aura made my hair begin fluttering in the air. They must've instinctively sensed the danger.

"You monster!" the red-haired one intoned. "I'll kill you with everything I have! Ogre Flame!"

I guess fire was his ace in the hole. I was immediately the center of a hellish vortex that might have been two thousand degrees or more.

"That little spark? That won't work!"

It would have vaporized anyone other than me, but Cancel Temperature meant that it didn't even singe my hair.

Seeing his finisher fail so spectacularly sent the red-haired ogre, for the first time, into an obvious panic. He kept his head through sheer force of will, resolutely staring at me. He wasn't broken yet, I had to hand him that, but considering I didn't want to kill him if I could, I kind of wish he accepted defeat sooner than later.

Right now would probably be my best chance.

The ogres were by and large stopped, wary of what I might try next. *Let's bust out something huge to break 'em all at once.* And if that didn't work—if they still didn't want to hear my story—then I'd have no other choice but to finish them off.

Please let this be enough, I prayed as I made my final move.

"You want to see what real fire is like? Look at this!"

I let the Dark Flame whirl around my left arm. I was hamming it up, I knew, but I had to if I wanted to make my foes grovel before me.

“M-my brother!” the pink-haired ogress tangling with Ranga shouted, the fear apparent on her face. “That flame… Your illusory arts are nothing compared to it!”

It shocked her, at least. Her brother’s Ogre Flame was a mystical art, one that turned his very aura into flames. Mine, meanwhile, was an innate skill, which must’ve thrown her a little.

“Heh-heh-heh, you’re right! But I’ve got something even more fun than that!”

Now it was time for some Dark Thunder from my right hand. I needed this to be the clincher, the thing that finally scared them out of their wits. No need to hold back, although I couldn’t waste all my magic on it, either. I adjusted the force to around a third of its usual level, then sent the particles flowing.

“Behold, my true power!” I screamed as I loosed a bolt of Dark Thunder at a handy boulder nearby. It instantly evaporated, and a beat later, a blast echoed. There wasn’t even any soot left behind. Just like when I tested it, maybe even a bit stronger.

Damn, this thing’s crazy! Maybe there was a need to hold back. I knew I had poured fewer magicules into it than last time. It didn’t make sense. It should’ve been a third as strong, enough that I could fire several bolts if I wanted…

Received. Compared to Dark Lightning, Dark Thunder consumes —

I didn’t ask for it, but the Sage swooped in to explain. Basically, it was stronger since it was more focused on delivering a powerful strike on a limited range, which meant it used far less magic. That was why it did more damage with fewer particles.

I was starting to think this Dark Thunder was a bit more unique than I suspected. Just like Dark Flame, it was hard to figure out when it was best to use. It made my heart race, and I was the one wielding

it. *Good thing I didn't try it on myself*, I thought. It was nothing I could rely on Multilayer Barrier to save me from.

So how will the ogres respond?

"…Tremendous. It pains me to say this, but your powers are in a class far above ours. However, as the next in line to lead my band, I was raised to take pride in my race. How could any leader allow his fallen comrades to suffer in silence? Whether I succeed or not, I must strike a return blow!"

"…Young master, let me join you!"

Great. The exact opposite effect. Now the red- and white-haired ogres were playing the tragic heroes, their faces bewildered. They were ready to sacrifice their lives against me. It wasn't how I meant to end this, but against that attitude, it'd be hard to suppress them without causing their deaths.

So there's no other way?

Whether they were mistaken or not, I couldn't let them run free now—it'd just lead to further trouble later. I hated to say it, but I was starting to understand it was their own damn fault for being so stubborn.

Just then, the fetching ogre princess shouted out.

"Please, wait!"

The pink-haired ogress stood before her red-haired brother, arms open wide to stop him in his tracks.

"My brother, you must think calmly about this. Such an all-powerful magic-born using low-minded tricks to send the pigs to our homeland? It is absurd, for he himself is strong enough to lay waste to all of us single-handedly. He is unique, to be certain, but I am no longer sure he is with the horde that attacked us."

“What?!” The flustered redhead looked at me. “But…perhaps…”

“Guys, I keep telling you, you’ve got me all wrong! Are you finally ready to listen?”

Steam was billowing from the spot where the vaporized boulder used to be. It was more than enough to back up the ogre princess’s argument. The redhead glanced at her, then me again, finally falling to a knee.

“My apologies. Perhaps I was driven into having the wrong idea about you. I hope you will accept my deepest regrets.”

So he finally admitted he was maybe wrong about this. I appreciated the thought. It came as a relief.

“Well, no point talking here. How about we go back to the village? You guys come along. I’ll be glad to feed you, at least.”

And so the conflict that started for reasons unbeknownst came to a peaceful conclusion.

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The hobgoblins began to awaken, perhaps because the princess released the spell on them. It must have been one heck of a charm, considering all the noise from my magic didn’t bother them at all. For my part, I released the Sticky Steel Thread covering the purple-hair and sprinkled a bit of potion on the unconscious blue-hair.

I wasn’t exactly sure what to do with the black-hair, but it turned out Deviant was more than enough to separate the paralysis from his body. Normally, you’d need magic or medicine to handle that. I’d used Paralyzing Breath without thinking of the consequences very much—I’d have to make sure there was an easy way to undo it next time. That, I regretted a little.

Nobody was seriously hurt, so we all headed for the village. And just like they promised before I left, there was some magnificent food

waiting. That's Rigurd for you. The ultimate bureaucrat. His organization skills were nuts.

I still didn't feel hungry, but I had been looking forward to this since morning. It had been a physically active day, and between that and the test of my taste sense coming up, I was champing at the bit.

And here it came. That first forkful of meat.

It's so goooooood!!

I thought I might cry.

The flavoring was a worry for me earlier, but they had taken the juice from assorted types of fruit to make a sauce. The promotion to hobgoblin status must've upgraded their palates, too, and they were now experimenting with all sorts of new recipes.

This magical beast was cowdeer, right? Well cooked, it was tasty enough even without any extra spices or such, but adding some fruit to the mix provided a very different—and very engaging—sensation to my taste buds. It did wonders to mask the gamy flavor and tie a neat little bow over the whole package.

That was how Lilina, the goblin lord overseeing our food stocks, and Haruna, the proud cook, explained it. I followed their suggestions as I cleaned my plate, taking in the experience I'd missed.

Speaking of which, they were pretty ecstatic when I gave them the salt I had collected. They knew what it was, I guess, but had given up on securing any because it was too expensive.

I suppose, to a goblin race mainly preoccupied with survival up to now, seeking out new flavorings wasn't too high a priority. They got the requisite salt in their diet from the flesh and blood of their prey, and beyond that, they didn't think deeply about it.

I advised them not to go overboard with their salt intake, just in case. Not that I was sure monsters could suffer from high blood

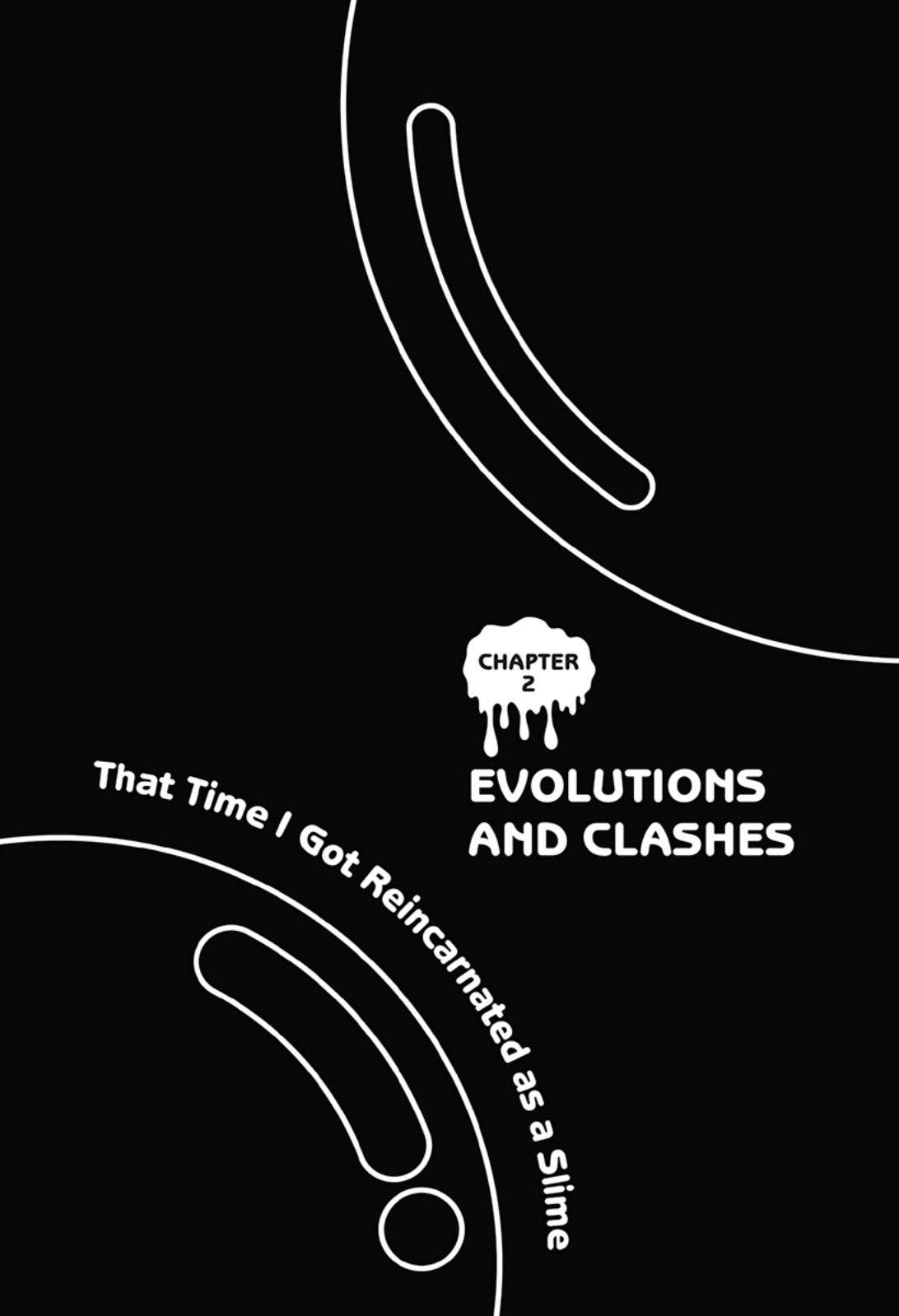
pressure in the first place.

The pink-haired ogre made a surprising contribution, too. She knew a great deal about herbs and aromatics and the like, and she brought in a few wild grasses we could use to hide the meat's more unpleasant odors. "I hope this will atone for our rudeness a little," she said as she helped collect the ingredients. She was a high-level creature, and she worked briskly, putting the freshly evolved hobgoblins to shame.

The other ogress—the one with purple hair—was just eating along with the others, though. Perhaps female ogres weren't necessarily banished to the kitchen in their society. If it was this delicious, I wasn't going to care about genders.

It wasn't long before pink-hair was getting along swimmingly with the rest of the goblinas in the village. They'd try to learn as much as they could from her, I was sure. It was nice to have another positive influence around town.

All's well that ends well, I suppose. The roast-meat feast I was so looking forward to went off without a hitch, and our new companions were all too happy to join us as we drank through the evening.


CHAPTER
2
EVOLUTIONS
AND CLASHES
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 2

EVOLUTIONS AND CLASHES

We decided to sit and hash things out with the ogres the next day. We chose the log house built atop the recently burned-out public square in the center of the village.

Mildo, youngest of the three dwarf brothers, had done a great job crafting it from the basic sketch I drew on a plan of wood. My previous stint as a general contractor gave me at least that much knowledge, as I measured out the dimensions and such as best I could with charcoal on wood and handed it over.

It was the Great Sage, and the new freedom my body offered, that made it possible. Plus, the drafting tools the dwarves brought over. With a bit of effort, you could get something almost as accurate as from a computer. I was starting to feel like I could whip up a skyscraper in no time flat.

Mildo had no problem comprehending the blueprint—maybe my drafting approach was a lot easier to understand than whatever was this world's mainstream.

Which made sense. The buildings around here were child's play compared to the kinds of things we'd designed for the concrete jungles back home. The Dwarven Kingdom had plenty of impressive architecture, to be sure, but in terms of technical execution, it still had a ways to go. Maybe we'd have high-rises built on this square someday. It was amusing to think about.

But I digress.

I guided the ogres to the house's reception room, looking around to make sure everything was built as I ordered. They meekly followed behind, eagerly looking around the house like it was a novelty. There was zero decoration yet, so I don't know what enthralled them so much, but whatever.

The reception room had a large table, along with a few simple stools encircling it. We were all gathered there—Rigurd, the four goblin lords, and Kaijin the dwarf as a mediator. Thirteen in all, counting me.

Why did I have Rigurd and the rest here? Because I figured the ogres had some important things to tell us. If something was happening to the Forest of Jura, it'd come to our doorstep soon enough. I didn't want to be the sole go-to point for every crisis. "Rule but don't govern," as they say.

Haruna came in with tea for everyone. She gave a quick bow once she was done and left the reception room. It was still a tad awkward for her, but she was beginning to learn some manners. Wonderful progress.

I brought the cup to my lips. Bitter, but not distastefully so. I didn't used to be so picky when it came to this sort of thing, but the long-awaited return of my sense of taste was maybe making me more finicky.

The green tea–like bitterness played around my tongue. I could feel its heat, too. My body had Cancel Heat, I suppose, but I could still feel this. Funny.

The ogres seemed to enjoy it as well. I waited for them to settle in before we began to talk.

I started by asking why they were there in the first place. They replied that they were fleeing in order to regroup and rally themselves. That, in itself, was disquieting. I had a feeling this would go on a while.

If there was a force out there that could defeat ogres, we had a threat on our hands. These were B-ranked creatures, even solo, and I could tell that much from yesterday's battle. And these guys here were the cream of the crop. Masters of the forest. The highest class of monster you'd find here, I was told.

Better hear them out.

⁎

To sum up the ogres' story…

There was a war, and the ogres lost. That was about it.

While I was busy fending off Ifrit at this village, the ogres were getting involved in a war of their own. Who on earth could challenge the most powerful race in the Forest of Jura to war—and win? It sent a thrill of tension across everyone in the room. Their faces tightened with concern.

"They attacked our homeland out of nowhere," the red-hair muttered angrily. "Their power was overwhelming… Those hideous pigs, those *orcs*!!"

It was an army of them, apparently. And unlike humans, monsters never thought about formally declaring war before having at it. So while the ogres didn't decry the surprise attack in and of itself, orcs attacking them was far from the norm.

Why? Simple: the difference in strength. Orcs were D-ranked creatures. Stronger than goblins, but nothing a veteran adventurer would lose sleep over. Ogres, remember, were two grades higher than that, rendering a one-on-one battle eminently predictable. And yet, the weak challenged the strong, and they won…

I decided to go a bit more in-depth.

The ogres' home was a fair bit larger than our own village—an informal collection of clans, which together formed a kind of battle-fort home to three hundred. About as powerful as a small nation's knight corps, in other words—a force equivalent to a three-thousand-strong army of fighters trained to B-minus monster status.

These ogres lived a life you could describe as militaristic. The clans held battle training with one another on a regular basis, occasionally

joining this or that side to assist other races when they fell into conflict with their neighbors. Some of the clans had even made their mark on history, forming vanguard forces of an army for one demon lord or another, and these ogres were descended from them.

They lived, in other words, as de facto mercenaries. And the ogres of this world were quickly destroying the image I once had from my own fantasy novels. But that wasn't the issue. They had been defeated by far weaker monsters, and it looked like they were all still in shock—for in this reception room, we were looking at the sole survivors of the entire settlement.

The red-haired one had taken his sister, the princess, away from the place while their leader was spearheading a team to defend them from the orcs. She was nobility, after all, a sort of ogre shamaness, and her people put her ahead of everything else in their lives.

"If only I were stronger…," the red-hair groaned. The last thing he saw was the orcs, clad in black armor, delivering the final blow on his leader. A giant orc, one that let off an eerie aura. And one other, a figure who didn't bother to hide their own brutally dark aura; one who wore a mask that looked a bit like an angry clown.

"It was one of the magic-born people, I am sure of it," the shamaness declared. "A high-level one. I'm afraid my brother never stood a chance."

"Indeed," the elder added. "We jumped to conclusions about all of you because we saw that fiend in action. We thought you were one with them."

Yeesh. Really? Cute li'l old me? Getting lumped in with this murderous freak? The way they put it bruised my ego a bit, but then again, I *was* wearing a mask of my own back there. Perhaps it was natural to associate me with that magic-born guy.

I was under the impression that a magic-born person could be almost any intelligent monster. Ogres would count as magic-born, even. But if this guy outclassed them that much, he had to be

something extra fierce.

I knew from our earlier confrontation that nothing was more dangerous than monsters with a little intelligence. They could wield magic with the ease of a human caster and handle weapons equally as well. That, combined with physical strength that outclassed humanity's, made them difficult to counter at all.

And the higher level the monster, the more disastrous the results could be. It'd be safe to assume we were dealing with an A rank, at least. Not welcome news.

Oh, and just for clarity's sake, goblins are a subrace of mankind, so their evolved hobgoblin forms don't count as magic-born.

The ogres continued.

It seemed there had been three other orcs equivalent in strength to the black-armored one. The four made short work of the ogre stronghold's elite fighters, and as they did, the rest of the orc soldiers poured into the fort and kicked off the massacre in earnest.

There were several thousand—just an estimate on the ogres' part, but still a massive figure. And the funny thing was, they were all clad in the sort of full-plate armor you'd expect a human watchman or the like to wear as a uniform. Like a massive wave of metal, steamrolling across the forest.

If that was true, this had to be the work of more than simply the orcs. Orcs were human types as well, but they were treated as low-level, unintelligent monsters, like goblins. There was no way they could cobble together the funds for such extensive, and expensive, armor. Plus, there were lots of powerful monsters in the Forest of Jura. It'd be impossible for the orcs to avoid attracting attention on the way to the ogre stronghold.

It seemed fair to assume they were colluding with some other nation—a nation of humans. But I couldn't guess what they wanted,

and that concerned me. If the force was several thousand strong, they couldn't have merely wanted to crush that one ogre site. They were gunning for the entire Forest of Jura, at that rate.

"You know," Kaijin offered, "they might be in cahoots with one of the demon lords."

Demon lord? Shizu's face flashed across my mind, her final words echoing alongside it.

Leon, the demon lord—the foe I'd promised to defeat.

Could that be possible? I wasn't sure I had it in me to topple a demon lord quite yet, but…

Generally speaking, I didn't think any demon lord cared much about this forest. Outside of it, their lands spread far and wide, and their fertile fields were mostly tended to by vast numbers of golems and slaves that had been captured in battle. Demon lord–controlled lands never had to worry about famines, and as a result, these lords were rarely concerned about areas under human control. The way it was explained to me, the so-called war slaves had it good enough that their lives weren't much different from anyone else's. I couldn't say how human nations considered them, but as far as the Forest of Jura's denizens went, the demon lord lands were pretty chill.

So if anyone was looking to conquer someone else's territory, chances were good that humans were involved.

At the same time, there could always be a demon lord or two who wanted to kick off a war just for fun or to pass the time. Veldora the Storm Dragon had been another check on their behavior, and now he was gone.

It made sense. I had to think more about defending this forest, I supposed. But either way, one thing was sure: This place was getting overrun by orcs.

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So what now…?

I decided to hear everyone out.

“We believe the orcs are seeking to seize leadership over the forest,” Rigurd said after I prompted him with a glance.

Everyone was looking at me now. Fight them? Run? Or join their alliance? The way the ogres were acting, they knew that we could be enemies once again, depending on my decision. Suddenly things were far more intense. But I didn’t care.

“Well, how about another cup of tea for now?”

One came to me.

Everyone put their respective cups to their lips, and the tension abated somewhat.

Right.

“So what are you people gonna do?” I asked the ogres.

“What…do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s your future direction? Are you gonna run so you can fight another day, or just hide out somewhere instead? ’Cause if you were planning to run, I was just wondering if you had someplace in mind.”

“Is it not obvious? We will build our strength, wait for an opening, and challenge them again!”

“Precisely. We must avenge our lord!”

“As must I! We are all but powerless right now, but I refuse to let those two-legged pigs live!”

“““We promise to follow our young master and princess!”””

The ogres certainly had an answer. *Hmm*. They must've resigned themselves to this from the start. Even back in our own fight, there wasn't a single hint of hesitancy clouding their eyes. They must've known it would mean their lives…but I had to respect it. Despite how cornered they were, they still had the dignity to not kill any of the hobgoblins. I had a feeling I'd regret it if I let them march off to their deaths.

"Hey, you guys interested in joining my side?"

"Huh? What are you…?"

"I put it clearly enough, didn't I? If you guys were working as mercenaries anyway, why don't you work for me instead? If you wanna fight for your old lord, I'd be happy to hire you to do that."

"We…"

"Besides, if it's strength you're seeking, don't you think you should side with me? I can't really pay you much outside of giving you three hots and a cot, but…"

"We couldn't! Doing so would involve this village in our quest for vengeance!"

"I do not see a problem with this," Rigurd said. "We are here to serve Sir Rimuru, and no other. If he wills it, no one will work against his desires."

"Yeah," added Kaijin. "That, and I kinda expect we'll get involved in this sooner or later anyway, y'know? If that many orcs are on the move, I doubt anyplace around here is safe."

"Very true," another goblin lord chimed in. "A lizardman spy once made contact with the village we used to live in. As goblins, we were unable to understand what he wanted at the time, but I imagine he was investigating some new movement or trend. Which means this place could become a battlefield. It is best for us all to work together."

They all seemed well enough in agreement. Hmph. Not like a bunch of goblins could do much themselves. If we had an orc horde coming, we needed as many people on our side as possible.

"Right," I offered. "If you agree to serve me, I think I might be able to make your dreams come true, too."

"…How, exactly?"

"Simple. If you join me, I promise I'll fight with you if something comes up. I never abandon my companions, and if you let me hire you on, I will be glad to cooperate with you."

"I see. So we protect this village, and in turn, the village protects us? Not a bad proposal. In fact, it is a welcome one. We could use this place as a base to assemble the resistance forces we need against the pigs…"

"Yeah, exactly," I replied. "We're gonna be fighting anyway. You might as well come along for the ride."

"And could this agreement stay in place until the ringleader of the orcs is defeated?"

"Sounds perfect to me. You'd be free to do whatever you like once the matter with the orcs is settled. You could work with me to build a nation, go out on a journey, whatever. What do you think?"

The red-haired ogre thought this over for a few moments while the others remained politely silent. They must have respected his decision-making skills. He closed his eyes, then opened them once more.

"Very well," he said. "We will serve under your leadership!"

So that's the path he chose. Good. That's a big help for me, too.

⁎

Winning over the ogres was a major coup, as far as I was concerned. I figured they wouldn't be rankled by the idea of serving me in a mercenary capacity, and I was right. And if we had several thousand orcs to deal with, we needed to beef up our numbers, fast. We had no idea what kind of strength this orc army had, so I wanted as much to work with as possible.

It may have been strictly business, but they had sworn to follow me, and that meant we were friends now. And if we were friends, I'd need them to have some actual names, or else it'd just be a pain in the ass.

"Right! Let me give you people names, then."

"Hah? What are you…?"

"What do you think? I said names. It's annoying not to have them, right?"

"N-no, er, we are able to communicate with one another well enough already, so…"

"Hoh-hoh, indeed! Humans may have names, certainly, but we monsters have little need for them…"

"Wha? Don't be stupid. I don't care if you don't think you need them or whatever. I'm saying *I* need them, 'cause otherwise it's a pain to get your attention, okay?"

"Y-yes, but…"

"Please, wait a moment!" the pink-haired ogress explained. "Giving a name can be a very risky maneuver. We had best begin with those of a higher ranking first…"

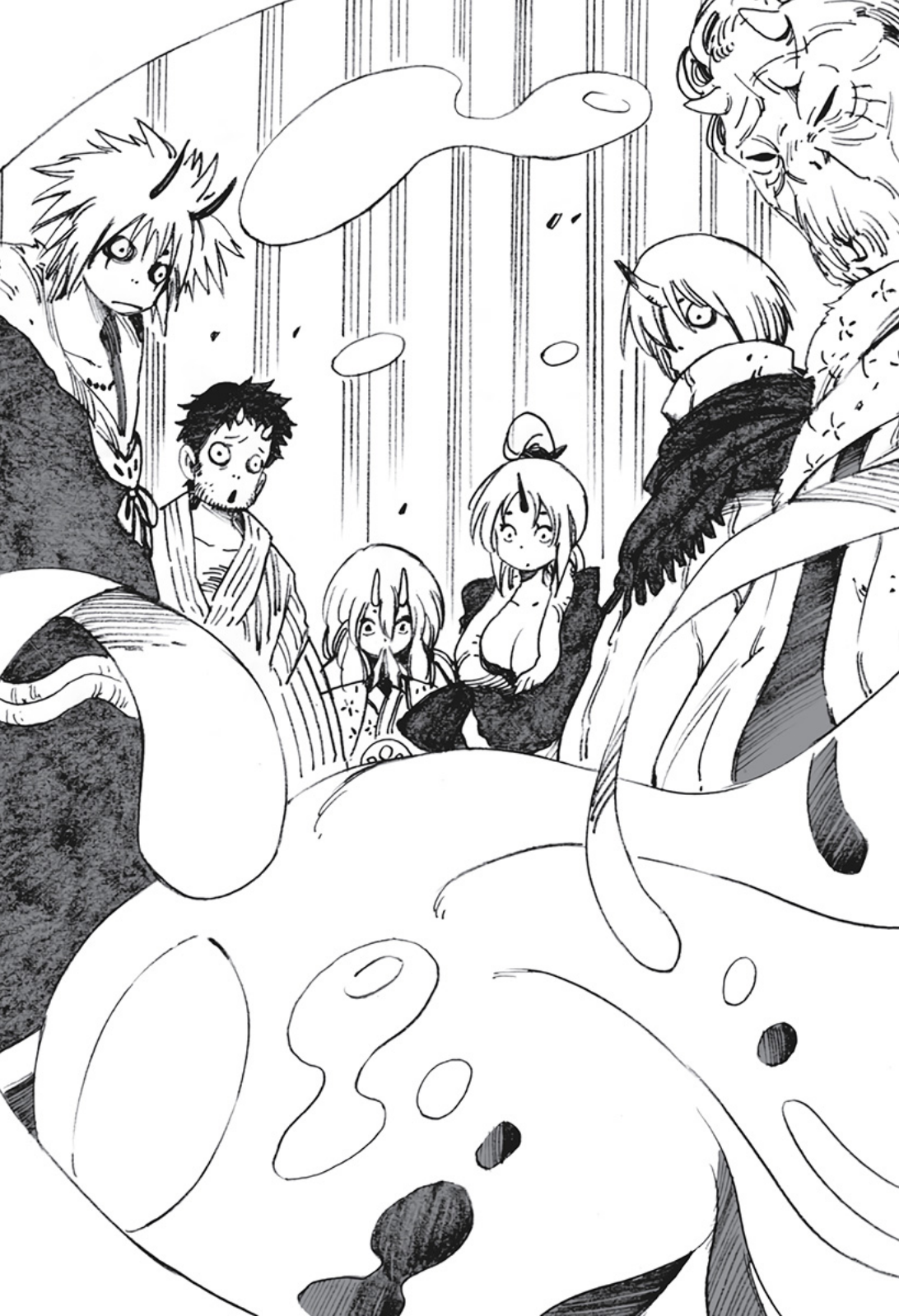
Dangerous? Right, like I use too much magic and I fall asleep? Well, I'll be fine as long as I don't try to name an entire village at once, right?

“No, no, quit worrying,” I said, ignoring the pink-hair. “It’ll work out just great!”

Time to think up some names. The ogres still looked dubious, but to hell with them. *Let’s get this show on the road.*

I was really on fire this time. The ogres were kind enough to each have different hair colors, which made it easy to come up with ideas. The red-haired guy became Benimaru, a name that means “red circle” and tends to get associated with the samurai of olden times. Something virile seemed like a nice match overall.

The princess became Shuna, or “scarlet plant.” She had pink hair and knew a lot about herbs and stuff. Sounded about right. The white-hair became Hakuro, “white elder,” which was pretty obvious given how he looked. Blue-hair became Soei, “blue shadow,” thanks to that sneak attack that almost tripped me up. If he’d targeted anyone else, those could’ve been seriously dangerous.



Purple-hair became Shion, “violet garden,” because the way her ponytail stuck out somewhat reminded me of a flower. Finally, black-hair became Kurobe, basically “black” but with a country flair. That seemed to match him—boorish, unrefined, but still likable.

I was pretty satisfied with my choices. I came up with them almost immediately, like a divine revelation of sorts. But as I patted myself on the back, I suddenly began to feel drained.

Wait a minute…

By the time the thought occurred, it was too late. It was back to sleep mode for me. *Why would naming six people exhaust my magic like that?* I thought as I reverted into slime form, no longer able to control my body.

“Wha—? A slime?!”

“How on…?! You were a slime all along?!”

I was too weak to respond.

This, apparently, alarmed the ogres a lot. They fell to the ground, seemingly just as drained as I was by the ceremony. What’s going on here? I wouldn’t have my answer until my magic was recharged.

*

A night passed.

This round of sleep mode, if anything, was even rougher than last time. I was conscious, but it was like everything I saw was in a dream. My memories were vague, like something soft being pressed against me, or like I was floating amid fragrant flowers or something. I had no way of knowing exactly what was happening, but I was probably overthinking matters.

“Shion! How long are you going to hold Sir Rimuru close to your

chest like that? It's time to switch out!"

"Princess Shuna, you cannot be serious! There is no 'switching out' to be done! I will take care of Sir Rimuru, so please, you should rest yourself…"

"Enough of your nonsense, Shion! I tell you that I will watch Sir Rimuru, and watch him I shall!"

Apparently, this was some kind of argument, but I'm sure I was just imagining it. Just like I was imagining them playing tug-of-war with me. Let's just go with that.

So what did happen? I got to find out once I finally woke up to the sight of all six standing before me.

The one in front was a handsome young man with a burning blaze of crimson hair. His eyes were just as bright-red, and they were fixed squarely upon me, never wavering. *Who's this?* I thought. But another look confirmed it—it was Benimaru, the ogre referred to as "young master" by his cohorts.

Two horns, smoother and more beautiful than obsidian, poked out from his crimson locks. They used to be thicker than elephant tusks, but now they were honed, polished, and as thin and beautiful as a work of art. The Benimaru I knew was a hulking figure, but this guy was maybe just under six feet tall, and his body was taut and well-defined.

The amount of energy I felt from him, however, made him seem like a completely different person from before. He wasn't quite as strong as Ifrit, for example, but that was the first comparison that came to mind. *He might be past A rank now.*

How the hell did naming someone unlock this much force? was my honest reaction.

Next to him was a fetching young woman who was almost hidden

in Benimaru's shadow. Shuna, I supposed. She was already sweet-looking, and that had evolved massively along with everything else. Like, what the hell? This was a total princess now, man. A completely different level from before. Her long hair, just a touch pink now, cascaded across her head to the ponytail below. She had two horns of white porcelain, lightly shaded skin, and lips the shade of a cherry blossom in spring. Her crimson eyes seemed a little glossy as she looked at me.

Dude, what a babe!! No 2-D anime girl could compare. She was smaller, around five feet, and the aura she projected made you instinctively want to protect her.

Hakuro, the wizened old ogre, seemed far younger now. He had looked about ready to keel over at any moment before, but now it appeared he was maybe just beginning to approach his golden years. *His posture is perfect, and at least some of the physical strength he had lost with age has returned*, I thought. Even in a straight-on test of strength, he was no longer someone to trifle with.

His eyes were still black, his hair still a shocking shade of white, but now those eyes were sharper. His long hair was tied back, and he had a pair of small horns on both sides of his forehead. He looked like a warrior, and if he took me on now, I wouldn't exactly like my chances.

Shion, the other ogress, had clearly paid close attention to her hair. It was well washed and combed, nice and straight instead of flipping out in the back like earlier. It had a fetching sheen of purple, a nice match for her ponytail.

She had a single horn, that obsidian-black shade again, and it naturally parted her hair. Her purple eyes, like the others', were firm upon me. Her skin was nearly white, her lips bright red. She didn't look as wild as before—maybe a little makeup?—and that, combined with being about five and a half feet, made her look pretty damn amazing.

The whole package was sleek as a supermodel, but she had one extremely unique part—a part that whatever masculinity I had left all but forced my eyes to wander toward, I suppose. I was in slime form, at least, so she couldn't see where I was looking. Which was good. *I bet she'd look kick-ass in a business suit. Honestly, I wish she could be my secretary.* Such were the thoughts of my soul.

Soei was about the same age as Benimaru, with a complexion on the darker side and lips a slightly bluish shade of black. The single white horn on his forehead contrasted well against it, and his navy-blue eyes exuded a strong force of will. He had handsomeness to him, something Benimaru most certainly did not, and he was about the same height, to boot.

How were all these people getting so attractive all of a sudden? And not just attractive but, like, in the completely opposite direction of what they were before. A total one-eighty. The sheer perfection irked me a little, which I suppose is only human.

Kurobe was in the prime of his life. To put it nicely, he was rugged; in a not so nice way, he was hairy. It made him stand out a bit among the beauty pageant contestants surrounding him.

His hair and eyes were black, his skin a dark shade of brown. He had two white horns, noticeable without being too huge on his forehead, and in a way, the averageness of his looks made me feel a kind of kinship with him. It was a relief, in a way, his presence in the crowd. Between that and his apparent age, I had a feeling we'd get along pretty well.

So that was the six, and it wasn't just their looks that had changed.

Benimaru and his friends had evolved from ogres to ogre mages, a natural progression like the one from goblins to hobgobs. It made for a showier-looking creature, but if anything, their strength received the biggest upgrade. I'd say they were all past A rank now. At first I thought it might be a mistake, but no. All of them. No wonder they

robbed me of all my magic.

It was starting to look like the stronger the monster I gave a name to, the more magic it required to engineer the upgrade. Evolving monsters required a commensurate amount of magicules, a valuable lesson I had to learn the hard way. If I had screwed that up, I could've dried up my magic entirely, which would've been beyond bad. I had depleted it to the point where I was basically catatonic, after all. *I'd better try to take it nice and slow with this kind of thing from now on.*

I had done a pretty good job evolving six of these guys. I was proud of that. But I had my regrets.

They had really better not turn traitor on me, for one…

And speak of the devil, Benimaru goes, "Sir Rimuru, we have a request! Please, we beg of you to accept our solemn oath of fealty!"

Great. Now I felt dumb for even thinking about betrayal.

"Hmm? Geez, you don't have to get all formal about it. Just because you're my mercenaries doesn't mean I want you groveling at my feet."

"It is not that, my lord. We wish to serve you as your loyal retainers!"

What?

I told them they were free to go once this little skirmish was wrapped up, but I guess Benimaru and his people had other plans. They must have talked this out among themselves in advance.

""""Please, give us your benevolent aid!!"""" they now intoned in unison.

I had no reason to say no. But were they really okay with nothing but some meals and floor space in a cabin? That bothered me, but if

that was what they wanted, I might as well believe in them.

Thus, the village's population grew by six in a single day. I decided to keep to myself that I honestly feared their strength.

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Taking another good look, I realized exactly how much they all had changed. They had shrunk a decent amount, which made their clothing flap loosely about, but they still had the dignity to wear it well. Beauty's a damn helpful thing to have at times like these. I didn't think Kurobe could pull it off, but I guess he borrowed an outfit from Kaijin, and it worked on him. If not for the horns, I'd almost mistake him for a dwarf.

Hakuro was the only one who hadn't physically changed that much. His outfit still fit him normally.

Shion, on the other hand, was a bit precarious, her now much ampler chest threatening to spill out. Eep. Better do something about that. *Garm should be informed of this at once*, I thought as I kept sneaking secret peeks at her bosom.

Soei's chest plate was still in pieces, too. I had forgotten about smashing that up, but, hey, there's an easy way to make up for it. It was time for all the ogre mages to get new clothing and equipment. I had promised to take care of their basics, and I didn't want them to fight with old, banged-up crap.

So I took them all to Garm's cabin.

"Hey, boss!" he greeted me, smiling as he stopped working. "Those the new ogre friends we've got? You sure about that? 'Cause they sure don't *look* like ogres to me, but…"

He looked pretty surprised, his eyes right on Shion's chest.

"Yeah, well, I named 'em all, so they aren't exactly ogres any longer. Ogre mages, is the term for 'em now, I think."

“Ogre mages?! That’s a high-level race, isn’t it? Born only on extremely rare occasions among the ogres…”

“Is it? Well, there you have it, I guess. You think you could make some clothing and armor for them?”

“Oh. Yeah, sure thing.”

Garm still seemed dubious but refrained from commenting further as he brought the ogres inside. I was sure he’d be measuring them all shortly. Hakuro was good to go as is, and Kurobe apparently borrowed a few days’ worth of outfits from Kaijin. Simple work clothes, really, but Kurobe seemed happy enough with them.

And that reminded me: Why did their clothing look so Japanese?

“Hey,” I asked Hakuro, “your weapons are pretty unusual, aren’t they?”

As he put it, around four hundred years ago, a group of armored warriors came to the ogres’ homeland, heavily wounded and seemingly lost in the forest. The ogres were a warfaring bunch by that point, more akin to monsters than they are now, but even then, they blanched at attacking the defenseless. They were a high-level race, not very preoccupied about food, so they took care of them.

The warriors, thankful for this, instructed the ogres in battle techniques and gifted their armor to them. One among them knew how to forge these katana-style weapons, and after a long trial-and-error process, they succeeded in producing large numbers.

“One of the warriors they trained was my own grandfather,” Hakuro said proudly, “and he made well sure to teach me every skill he had.”

“Yeah,” Kurobe added, “and my family’s among the blacksmiths that supply ’em all!”

“So you can make those swords yourselves?”

“I am more versed in a straight sword,” said Hakuro, “but I have learned how to take care of these well enough, at least. Kurobe, though, is a sort of weaponsmaster to us.”

“Yep! I made all o’ these swords. I ain’t too good at fightin’, but you want me to bang some metal together, I’m your ogre!”

Wow. I had no idea there was a weaponsmith among them. Kurobe was notably weaker than the others, so I guess strength wasn’t the only thing he was good for. This group from four centuries ago might have been otherworlders like me, I figured, not that I had any way of knowing for sure. The important thing was that the ogres were intelligent enough to keep their tradition going.

“Very good,” I said. “In that case, Kurobe, you’re going to be our village’s dedicated swordsmith from now on.”

“You’re on, Sir Rimuru! I’ll do my best for you.”

I introduced him to Kaijin at once, and since they had already met yesterday, our discussions went quickly. The two immediately hit it off, and by the time I left, they were already talking about new weapons they could craft—that, and some kind of weird “research” Kurobe wanted to tackle.

I don’t know if it’s because of this, but it sounded like Kurobe possessed a unique skill known as Researcher. It sounded a tad like my own Predator skill, and it was geared for producing things, offering subskills like Full Analysis, Spatial Storage, and Transform Material. Spatial Storage was basically like my Stomach, and Transform Material allowed him to mess around with the stuff he kept in Spatial Storage. For example, he could “store” a big heap of scrap iron and transform it into solid ingots for further processing. More or less like my Copy skills, then.

It was funny how Researcher gave Kurobe the kind of skills that he, and only he, would find useful. He had also obtained Control Flame and Resist Temperature, and while I’d peg him as B rank in battle, those skills would make him a pretty tough fight for most

people, wouldn't it? Although it seemed the man himself wanted to devote his life to forging katanas.

Now, at least, I was pretty sure the hobgoblins wouldn't have to worry about where their weapons were coming from. But before they swung into mass production, I really wanted them to craft some swords for me and the other ogres. I gave Kurobe a fairly massive supply of magisteel for the job and set him at it.

"I'm gonna make the best swords you ever did see!" he promised, striking a fist against his chest to prove the point. I was looking forward to it.

*

Their measurements taken, Benimaru and Soei stepped back outside, dressed in fur outfits. People that handsome, they look good in anything. *I am so jealous.*

"Hmm? Where's Shuna and Shion?"

"Ah. Yes. About that…"

Benimaru was a little reluctant to explain. After prodding him a bit, I learned that the two were apparently unsatisfied with wearing simple fur. Given how fancy Shuna's royal vestments were, I guess I couldn't blame her. She said she'd just fix up her own outfit, finding bare fur to be too itchy for her tastes.

"Princess Shuna, you see," Soei said, "is quite gifted with sewing and such. One of the best among us, in fact."

I could believe it. She and Shion had been dressed in a fabric I could only describe as silk, assuming that existed here. It was made by weaving together string spun for cocoons by nearby creatures known as hellmoths, then infusing the thread with a large quantity of magic for extra protection.

They were also wearing clothes made out of what looked like hemp

fabric—not far removed from the bare rags the goblins wore, though much better cared for. We weren't talking about the same base plants, of course, but it was basically identical. The ogres grew a large amount of a cotton-like crop, something I supposed Shuna would be able to process, and the resulting fabric was sturdy enough.

It'd be useful for everyday clothing, but ooh, that silk! We definitely needed more silken battle gear, what with the defense it offered. It'd be perfect for a base layer underneath the armor Garm made for us. I decided to bring it up once I saw him following Benimaru out.

"I see," Garm said. "Clothing from woven fabric…"

"Yeah, I was wondering if we could make something out of silk, actually."

"Silk?!"

I was shocked by how much of a surprise this was to Garm. Though maybe I shouldn't have been, given how expensive that stuff looked in the Dwarven Kingdom when I was there. Hemp and cotton clothes were all over the place, but silk was a rarity. They didn't even know how to make it, and the core materials were beyond precious.

"Perhaps I could help with that," Soei interjected.

Hellmoths were B-ranked monsters, capable of charming people with the powder they released from their bodies, but as larvae, they were defenseless. They simply searched for cocoons containing juvenile insects and harvested those.

I decided to leave the harvesting to our troop of goblin knights, with Soei leading them to whatever secret spots he knew for that. Sooner or later, I'd like to capture some larvae and try raising them in a building on-site. Not that I knew much about how that worked, but if they could raise silkworms in captivity back on Earth, it had to be possible. Probably a bit of trial and error, though.

Shuna and Shion soon stepped out themselves, their clothes refitted. I called for Garm and the fairly bored-looking Dold and formally introduced them to Shuna. “Oh my!” she exclaimed when I explained things to her. “I’d be able to help you, Sir Rimuru.”

So as we talked, I began to delegate duties. Shuna would produce high-quality textiles and fabrics to use for clothing. Garm would craft battle gear made from silk. Dold would dye the resulting fabric and clothing. With their combined efforts, before long we would have all the comfortable wear we needed.

As we went over this, I suddenly wondered if we could use my Sticky Steel Thread for any of it. Given my Cancel Temperature ability, it’d probably be able to handle most heat-based attacks—or make the clothes fireproof, at least.

“Oh, thank you, Sir Rimuru!” Shuna beamed. “I’m sure I will be able to produce the finest fabric there is for you.”

“I hope you will!”

“Just leave it to me, Sir Rimuru,” she added, blushing slightly. How cute. She must have loved being relied on like that. Sewing was her hobby, and getting to use that in the course of her princess duties seemed to provide a lot of motivation.

As far as I could tell with the dwarf brothers, working with such a fetching young ogress would be much to their liking, too. *Please, please, please, just don’t make any moves on her…*

She might look cute, but she was deadly. If they tried to give her a slap on the ass or something, I very much doubted they would be alive by sunrise.

I wouldn’t put it past them, either, which was the thing. Being freed of carnal desires like this had made me a fairly cold judge of other people’s character. If I wasn’t a slime, I’d probably be more worried about my own hide than anyone else’s. That was how cute she was. A total demon princess. You’d risk your life trying to ask her out.

On a whim, I decided to whip up a few drawings. There wasn't any paper around, so I was still using charcoal on wood. My new body made it pretty easy to craft what I wanted, which in this case was what we'd call a *business suit* in my own world.

I traced a few example outfits for men and women, trying to picture Benimaru wearing them as I did. Given the looks they were all gifted with, I figured these would complement them perfectly. *Shion in particular, with her dignified appearance*, I thought.

"Very interesting," Shuna offered when I showed her. "I would be glad to try sewing some of these."

So that was that. In the meantime, I decided that I'd go with something a bit more informal for myself—a light shirt and some pants, good for the summer heat. I wouldn't mind some kind of hoodie, either, but no way I could conjure up a zipper on this planet. For now, I had used Thought Communication to communicate my image of how it should look and feel to the relevant people, so hopefully they'd make that for me sooner or later.

With these orders placed, we all took our leave from the workshop, except Shuna.

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Lake Sisu was situated in the center of the Forest of Jura, surrounded by a broad region of marshland. It was the domain of the lizardmen.

A smattering of caves surrounded the lake. These formed a sort of natural underground labyrinth that stymied anyone who tried to go inside, and at the end of it lay the vast cavern that contained the lizardman stronghold. There, the race held control over the lake area, secured by the natural protection they were blessed with.

Today, however, the lizardmen were greeted with news that had the potential to affect their people's very future.

The orc forces were here, and they were advancing on Lake Sisu.

The chief, upon hearing this, still managed to retain his composure. “Prepare for battle!” he bellowed. “We shall kick these pigs back to the abyss they came from!”

He was supremely confident, but that didn’t mean he would rest on his laurels. Along with the attack order, he sent the call to gather as much accurate information on the orcish army as his people could find. They had to have a grip on their numbers, to start.

One average lizardman, carnivorous and ferocious in battle, ranked around a C-plus. Their battalion leaders would probably manage a B-minus, maybe a few up to B, even. Perhaps around half the tribe would serve in battle, and half would be a formidable presence in any war.

The conventional wisdom was that a fully armed knight corps from one or another of the small kingdoms around the forest was a solid C-plus threat. In most of these kingdoms, the military consisted of at most five percent of the overall population—usually more like one percent, unless they were involved in protracted warfare. A lizardman force ten thousand strong, exhibiting the teamwork and synchronization the race was known for, would offer no hope for a kingdom whose population numbered beneath a million.

And this would be a fight on their home turf. The chief liked his chances.

But there was still something that bothered him. The orcs had no problem with going after weaker opponents, but they never dared to defy those higher up on the food chain. Lizardmen were not weaklings. They were “higher up,” as it were. Goblins would be one thing, but what was making them act so fearless against lizardmen?

The question gave birth to a small seed of doubt in his mind, one that even now stabbed against the chief’s heart. He was a bold man, but he was also careful—a balance anyone who wanted to lead such a fierce tribe had to have. And the chief’s concerns wound up being all

too perceptive.

"The orc force numbers a total of two hundred thousand!!"

The spy team's report to the chief and his council of tribal elders sent a thrill of fear across the great cavern. Its content, delivered amid halting breaths by the lizardman warriors, froze everyone in place.

"Ridiculous. That couldn't be possible!" one of the elders scoffed.

The chief agreed—he would have said the same, if so many others weren't in attendance. He had a duty to be a rock for his people, unmoved by every ill tiding that greeted them. He couldn't believe it, but he couldn't simply say so. If the report turned out to be accurate, he would have to accept it and come up with countermeasures.

"Is this true?" he ventured.

"By my very life, it is, my lord!"

"Very well. You may go and rest."

He gave the warrior a composed nod and ordered the lizardmen, who no doubt had run at full speed day and night to deliver the news, out of the chamber. The sight of the chief, as sage and reserved as ever, must have relieved them a bit—so much so that they fell to the ground, right where they stood, too exhausted to continue. It was all the proof the room needed that their news was true.

Two hundred thousand? It is insanity…

Watching their fellow warriors carry the spy team away, the chief found himself forced to reassess the situation. The orcs were certainly a fast-multiplying race in terms of numbers, but he doubted even they could assemble such a huge array of fighting men and women in one place.

How could they even have the logistics to supply two hundred

thousand hungry stomachs?

It would be a gargantuan effort, keeping those supply lines fed. Transporting all that food couldn't have been feasible for such an undisciplined rabble.

"These orcs are selfish louts," one of his advisers whispered to him, "not a care in the world for anyone but themselves. How could anyone have wrangled them into a single cohesive unit?"

That's the question, the chief thought. Even the most gifted leader couldn't control a force of two hundred thousand at once, not unless they had absolute control over them all. A thousand at once would be about the practical limit. Orcs were D-ranked monsters with intelligence beneath that of humans. They cared little for anything that wasn't directly in front of their faces. They were foolish, to a man, and the word *cooperation* didn't exist in their vocabulary.

The chief had his hands full managing all the lizardmen who served him, which numbered around twenty thousand. And that was a race that, by and large, lived in harmony with one another. Add a zero to that figure, and it was simply beyond comprehension.

"Is there some manner of genius class among them leading the forces?" the chief said to himself.

"It could hardly be the case," his adviser replied. "Anyone capable of maintaining order among them would need to be a unique monster, and I have never heard of more than one such creature appearing at the same time."

"Indeed," another chimed in. "The idea of multiple unique monsters of your caliber, my lord, being born among the orcs… Impossible to think of."

The chief nodded as they each shook their heads in disbelief. *No. It makes little sense. But there is no point denying facts. If I am to assume this report is valid, what are the orcs capable of doing?*

Even if the orcs did have several unique monsters like the lizardman chief, would they have it in them to work together toward the same objective? Assembling an unheard-of force like this would require some other presence, something pushing all those talented, unique monsters to strive for a common goal without going at one another's necks. Such a uniquely charismatic leader would mean that even low-level orcs could not be trifled with. In fact, they could be a threat like none before.

Should I take action under the assumption that such a superior leader is among them? Do the orcs have it "in" them, so to speak…?

Wait. Could it be…?

Reaching a certain point in his own logic, the chief grew visibly agitated. The thought was something he wished to banish from his mind, but he couldn't. Someone capable of ruling over such a force. Someone said to be born only once every few centuries…

"Could there be an orc lord among their ranks…?!"

As soft as the chief's whisper was, it transmitted loud and clear to his people despite the rising commotion. Those who understood it fell quiet, eventually silencing the entire cavern.

"An orc lord…"

"But surely…"

"If, by some chance, this were the case…"

The elders who served as the chief's advisers were similarly unable to shake the possibility. An orc lord was the stuff of legend, and in their thoughts, indeed capable of commanding a six-figure army. The more they mulled over the idea, the less they could imagine any other reason for this state of affairs.

"If… If, somehow, they have an orc lord among them, that would certainly explain why they have come together in this way…"

“But for what purpose?”

“Does it matter at this point? The only question is whether we can defeat them or not!”

The cavern was in an uproar once more, the advisers exchanging opinion after hostile opinion.

Whether we can defeat them or not…?

Fighting on a plain would put the outnumbered lizardmen at a heavy disadvantage. The marshes, however, were their backyard. With a careful hand and the right traps set in place, they had every chance at victory.

Or they thought they did.

If this was just a simple orc horde like any other, the chief knew how to dispatch them any number of ways. But if an orc lord truly had been born, it wasn’t so easy any longer. If they were this outnumbered, they would need to maintain high morale and overwhelm the enemy with their teamwork. The chief knew it was possible, what with their knowledge of the local lands, but that strategy wouldn’t work against an orc lord. An orc lord was a monster, through and through, one who could sniff out and consume the very fear that lay in his allies’ hearts.

The chief thought to himself*, How can we escape this dilemma?* If this orc-lord thing turned out to be a nonexistent threat, he could ask for nothing else. But nonetheless, he felt compelled to take every measure he could before the confrontation came.

He would need backup.

The chief, his mind made up, called for one of his men. This man’s name was Gabil, and as prudent and thoughtful the lizardman chief was, not even he could see the sheer amount of fuel he would soon add to the flames of this chaos.

The pallid goblin chieftains gave each other nervous looks as their meeting began. There were fewer attendees than before—which made sense. Many had fled in the face of this unprecedented threat, one that could dramatically change the Forest of Jura for all time…

It all began with the direwolf attack. That, and all the goblins who abandoned the villages that the named warriors belonged to. Despite this desertion en masse, the named fighters successfully fended off the wolves.

A savior among them had used his unfathomable strength to protect them. Not only did the named fighters overcome the direwolves' threat, they made them do their bidding; and now they were attempting to rebuild. The villagers who had professed a desire to fight with them in a tribunal some time ago were now gone, moved to the village run by this savior.

Goblins, those petty, trifling little things, had no hope of survival unless they lived in groups, coming to one another's aid. But even after all that happened, there was no way these goblins, after abandoning their kin like this, could drive a stake into their pride and beg for forgiveness.

No matter how much, deep in their hearts, they truly wanted to.

Some had already verbalized as much, in fact. But if they sought to join them now, they would no doubt be treated little different from slaves. Thinking of it that way, it was completely impractical.

Fortunately, this savior gave no indication that he wanted to swallow up the villages that surrounded his. Perhaps they could just maintain the status quo, living as they did before. That would be best, yes.

But life wasn't that kind to them. One day, out of nowhere, a small group of orcish knights dressed in full plate mail came to visit.

“We are knights with the Orcish Order! As of this very moment, this land is under our valiant orc lord’s control. We shall grant you maggots the chance to remain alive, if you wish. You must collect all the food provisions you can within several days and bring them to our headquarters. If you do, we will spare your lives and treat you as the slaves you are. If you do not, we will provide no mercy. We offer no terms of surrender to those who defy us. Think well before you take action! Gah-ha-ha-ha!”

Their one-sided declaration complete, the orcish knights boldly took their leave.

Orcs were, at best, D-ranked monsters. Stronger than goblins, yes, but not overwhelmingly so one-on-one. This kind of strength was beyond anyone’s knowledge.

Some unknown, terrifying thing was happening to the Forest of Jura—everyone was sure of it now. Something that portended dark things for not just this village, but every other one in the surrounding area. By the time the villages had assembled and learned that the exact same declarations had been made to them all by the orc knights, desperation had fully taken hold. At that moment, the goblins all realized there was nowhere to go.

The orcs wanted the goblins to supply their food, that much they knew. They wanted it from them so they wouldn’t have to worry about procuring it themselves. Otherwise, they would have razed the goblin villages at first sight, burning them to the ground.

They claimed they’d spare their lives, but if they were going to confiscate every scrap of food they had, what was the difference? They’d either starve or be killed. The difference was between a certain death or an infinitesimally small chance at survival—no matter how much they gritted their teeth, the goblins had nothing but utter annihilation waiting for them in the wings.

Their battle-ready forces numbered less than ten thousand. There was no way to make contact with their comrades in the outer lands,

unaffiliated with the tribal elders. There was nothing to be done.

Just as they found themselves at this impasse, they were greeted by news that forced their hand even more. A lizardman envoy had come to visit.

Was this a glimmer of hope? The goblin elders scrambled to meet this messenger, a lizardman named Gabil who claimed to lead his tribe's warriors. The arrival of a named creature made them swarm around him, like a savior sure to extract them from this horrible predicament.

"I want you," this savior told them, "to swear your loyalty to me. Do it, and your futures shall be bright indeed!"

The elders immediately decided to trust in him. It was the classic mistake of the weak, grasping at anything that could possibly aid them. Some of the goblins suggested that it'd be preferable to rejoin their old brethren instead of being ruled by the lizardmen, but they were in the minority. The vote was cast, and they were now under Gabil's beck and call—having no idea that this effectively set their fates in stone…



Gabil, warrior lord of the lizardmen, had taken one hundred fighters with him out of the marshlands via a direct command. The chief had given him his orders—orders he was not particularly fond of. He was a named monster, and his nameless chief was using him like a pair of oxen yoked to a wagon.

And even if this chief was his own father or not, it was starting to test his patience…

He knew he was chosen. Special. It was a source of pride for Gabil, and the main source of his self-esteem.

And "chosen" he was. He had encountered a certain monster in the

marshes, and that monster gave him a name.

"You have potential," this figure told him. "In the future, I could imagine you being my right-hand man. I will be back to see you someday!"

Thus, he was named Gabil. He remembered it like it happened yesterday—the event, and the monster, Gelmud. He saw Gelmud as his true master.

He may be my father, but what reason do I have to let a nameless minion boss me around for all time? I need to rule over all the lizardmen someday. I have to, for Sir Gelmud's sake!

Was this how things should be? It couldn't be, or so Gabil thought. It was a side effect of wanting to be recognized by his father—the ever-stern figure in his life, the great leader of all lizardmen. He was letting his pride overcome him, but he didn't have the vocabulary to realize that.

What now, then…?

The chief had ordered him to travel around the goblin villages and seek their cooperation. He was allowed to threaten them to some extent, but he was expressly forbidden to do anything that could turn them against the lizardmen. A tepid idea, Gabil believed. *What works with goblins are shows of strength. It always does.* As far as he was concerned, his way would work just fine—he had all the power he needed for it.

Yes! What need do we have for a chief so weak-minded that the mere thought of an orc horde makes him quiver in fear? Now is my chance to seize control of the entire tribe!

It seemed the perfect opportunity. But it wouldn't be easy to bring the lizardmen to his side—lizardmen who valued power, but also solidarity, above nearly everything else. The chief held control over all his citizens, all the way down to the lowliest muck sifter, and Gabil knew few would side with him at first.

He thought, still, that he could cobble together enough soldiers who would be loyal to him. The goblins, for example. Low level, yes, but they would perform well enough as living shields. A significant number of them, and even they could pose a threat. Strength lay in numbers, he knew, and ten thousand sounded like a very useful figure to him.

"Why worry about the orcs? With my powers as the strongest warrior among the lizardmen, they are but a trifle. And I could seize this opportunity to make my father abdicate once and for all!"

"So," one of the warriors with him chimed in, "the era of Sir Gabil is soon at hand?"

"Mmm? …Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Indeed, indeed!"

"Very good, my lord! And I promise that we all shall follow you to the end of the world!"

Gabil gave him a confident nod. In his mind, his future as the new chief and great leader of the lizardmen was already a matter of fact. Then, perhaps, his father would finally see him for who he really was. For now, though, he would need to be discreet. Lie low and wait for the right opportunity. Building his forces came first.

So he traveled to the goblin villages. One by one, he put them under his command. They had apparently made contact with the orcs already, and that was enough for them to treat him as some kind of benevolent god. It only served to boost his already burgeoning confidence—which made things move in unexpected directions.

I am the true hero here! Gabil thought. His actions grew bolder, riskier. His inflating ambitions were famished, and soon they needed to be fed.

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Several days passed.

I had worried at first that Benimaru and the ogres might not get along so well with my people, but I guess I had nothing to worry about. To hobgoblins, ogres were a rank or two higher on the pecking order—but the goblins had the capacity to accept them as their own. And since ogres weren't too keen to pick on those who were weaker, they were practically worthy of worship as far as goblins were concerned.

With Kurobe making swords, Shuna sewing clothes, and Soei gathering hellmoth cocoons, I had everyone humming along, really. Benimaru and Hakuro were down in the underground cavern, which I had told them about. "Training," they called it. Which was fine by me—in their evolved forms, I'm sure they had new abilities that needed testing out.

Shion had mentioned where they were when we were out surveying the structures currently under construction around town. Or to be exact, I was being held close to Shion's chest as she walked around. She had volunteered to be my secretary, and I had no reason to turn her down, so she was now serving as my transport in the place of Ranga. I could've transformed into a human, but—really—being a slime was a lot easier. I definitely didn't have any impure motives like enjoying the sensation of being sandwiched in between her breasts or anything.

I called it a *town* just now, and that was the best way to describe it. Certainly not a village any longer. In terms of what I had cooking for the future, we were starting to get pretty broad in scope. Of course, we were still busy enough with the sewer system and other underground infrastructure that it'd be a while before much would change aboveground. Given how much enthusiasm Mildo was giving his job, though, I had every reason to expect big things at the end.

The center of town was starting to get pretty full with buildings, even if most were only temporary. It was becoming our industrial district—a line of log houses located next to our storehouses, serving as workshops for building weapons, armor, and clothing. Kurobe was holed up inside one, laughing heartily with Kaijin as he worked on

something or other. I was patiently waiting to find out what it was, since I felt I'd just get in the way of the creative process if I barged in.

So we headed for the building Shuna was in.

"Ah, Sir Rimuru!" She beamed as soon as she saw me. She quickly rose to pick me up, as if snatching me from Shion's hands. She gave me a few loving pats as she toured me around, showing me how they were handling their work. They seemed to be having fun there, which I was glad to see, and as we chatted, she had no particular complaints.

Whenever Soei came back with his cocoons, they'd get right to silk production. Work on hemp and cotton fabric was already under way. I was impressed with their speed.

"Well, we have you to thank for that, Sir Rimuru," Shuna said.

It turned out—and I had no idea about this—that Shuna had obtained the unique skill Analysis, the same one I had been using to such great effect. Apparently, she had inherited many of the benefits I had as part of my Great Sage skill—Hasten Thought, Analyze and Assess, Cast Cancel, and All of Creation. In her case, though, her Assess skills were so advanced that she could just use Magic Sense to analyze objects, where I had to use Predator on them first.

Pretty convenient. But thanks to earning that unique skill, she had lost a decent chunk of her magic energy. The hit had taken her back down to approximately B-plus level, although the evolution was still enough of a strength upgrade that she had no complaints.

"Sir Rimuru," Shion said as our chat with Shuna winded down, "Princess Shuna has her work to handle. Perhaps we had best leave her to it for now?"

She had a schedule for me, just like any decent secretary.

"Oh? Are you taking good care of Sir Rimuru, then?"

"Of course!" I could feel Shion taking me away from Shuna. "I will

see to all of Sir Rimuru's needs, so there is no need to worry about that."

"Hee-hee-hee! I certainly wouldn't mind taking care of him, too."

"Not at all, Princess Shuna. There is no need. I will fully provide for him!"

I could almost see the sparks flying. *Nah, just my imagination.*

Besides, I didn't need to be taken "care" of at all. I had lived alone for long enough that I could do pretty much anything I needed on my own. *Maybe it's time I got out of here*, I thought…

"Sir Rimuru! Who do you think is best suited to take care of your needs—me or Shion?"

I was too late.

"Um, yeah… You've got silk to weave or something, right, Shuna? I guess you could help out whenever you're free, maybe?"

Help out on what, exactly? Hell if I know.

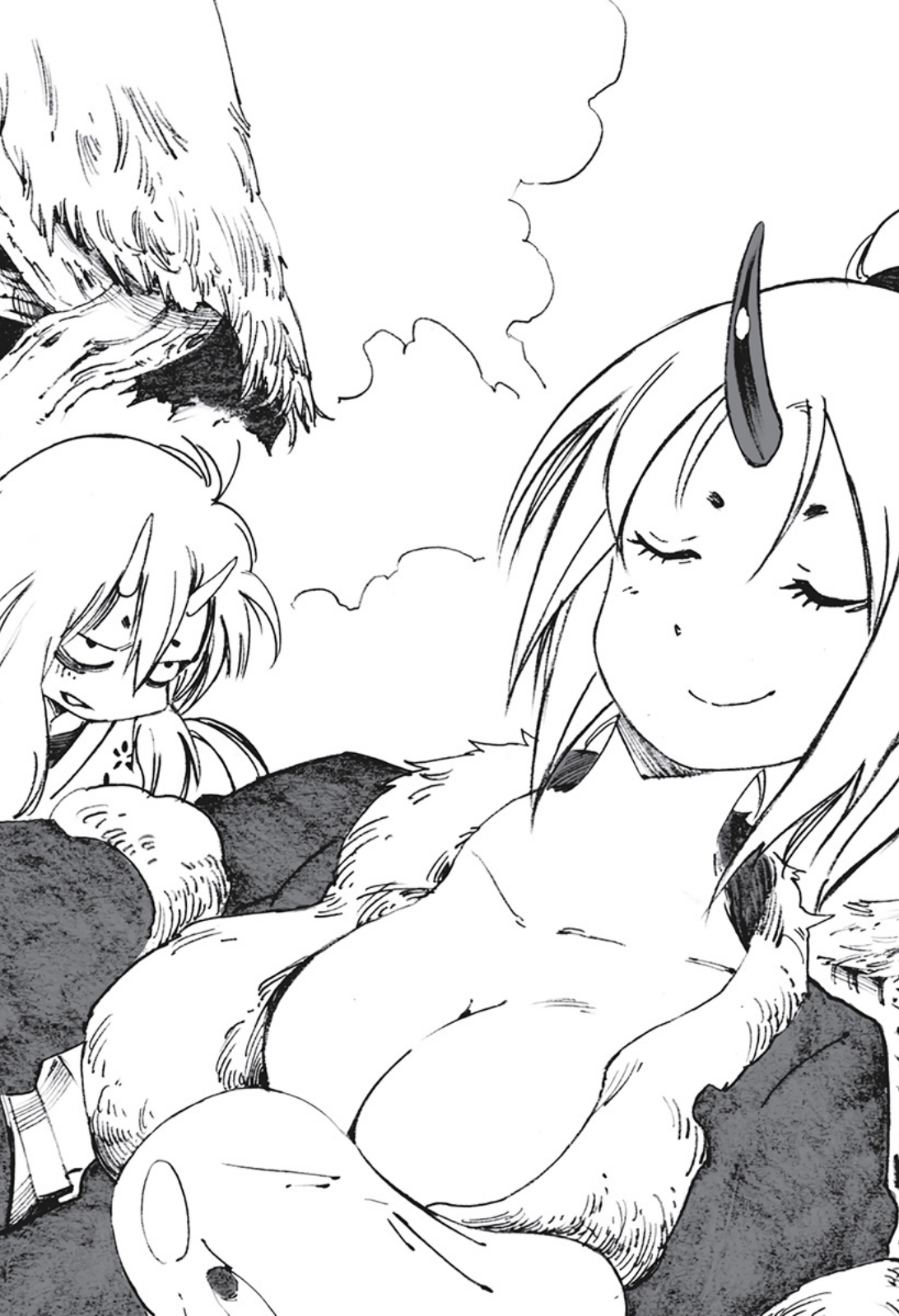
"Very well! I'm glad to be counted on like that!"

Shuna smiled. This was enough for her, I suppose. *Well, good. Let's just leave it at that.* "Thank you!" I replied. She nodded cutely in response.

"Absolutely! I will gladly serve as your shamaness whenever you need!"

"Shamaness?"

"Yes! You have accepted me as your Oracle, the one who will revere and serve you, have you not?"



Um, did I? Because I think I would've remembered that! But I hesitated to say so, sensing it might be a tad dangerous.

"Oh, er… Yeah? Yeah. Sure. Have fun being my Oracle, then."

I was welcomed with a rosy smile.

"You are in good hands, Sir Rimuru!"

So cute. I was ready to let her say just about anything to me.

"In that case, Sir Rimuru, we had best be off!"

Shion, of course, took the opportunity to ruin the moment, briskly lifting me up.

"Um, thanks?"

"You're welcome, sir!" Shuna chirped, her smile taut against her face, as if she had just emerged victorious from some manner of epic battle.

Glad to see that was settled, then. I felt like the temperature around us had chilled a bit, though I'm sure it was my mind playing tricks on me. With a lot of things in the world, it's better for everyone to just chalk it up to their imagination.

Now we were off to Benimaru and crew. They were no doubt busily testing their newfound abilities, and I wanted to find out what they had discovered so far.

We arrived at the underground cavern to find Benimaru and Hakuro crossing swords with each other. Benimaru's wooden blade was, for some reason, shrouded in a white aura. When he slashed it at Hakuro, it emitted a bright arc of light that surged forward. It slipped right through Hakuro's body, instead slicing a boulder behind him cleanly in half. The next moment, Hakuro appeared behind Benimaru's back, his own wooden sword against his opponent's neck.

This, apparently, signaled the end of the battle.

…U-umm… These guys are ogres, right? Because that little snippet I just witnessed looked so refined. Those moves. And that white light…? What's up with that? Why're wooden practice blades enough to smash up rocks? Why bother with the sword at all, then…?

Hakuro was the first to notice me. "Ah, hello to you, Sir Rimuru," he said. "A rather nice place, this is. Quiet, too."

"I do apologize you had to see me like this, Sir Rimuru."

"Oh, no, no. I heard you were training, so I thought I would see how it's going. Doing well, I suppose?"

"I think we are coming to grips with this, yes," Benimaru said. "Hakuro's regained enough of his youth that he's as strong as a man half his age."

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! Indeed, it is as Lord Benimaru puts it. I can feel the power flowing into this withered old frame!"

"Ah, but it's only just begun for the two of us, Hakuro! I am still stronger than you, remember, which should have been enough to win, but…"

Benimaru's face visibly soured. I could tell that his stores of magicules did outclass his foe's.

"Indeed, young master—or should I say, Lord Benimaru? I fear, however, that you rely upon your strength reserves too much. You must lend an ear to your sword, the way I do, and become one with it. I would hate to let myself lose to you until you achieve that."

Even before he evolved, Benimaru was a masterful enough fighter to sneak up behind my back. I still remembered how he evaded my Magic Sense long enough to slice right through my arm, even with Multilayer Barrier and Body Armor protecting it. I didn't want to dwell on the thought much, but he might just be strong enough now

to finish the job for good.

"Yeah, you lopped my arm off not long ago, didn't you?" I said. "If you don't mind my honesty, that threw me, man."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! And then you regenerated it at a moment's notice! I believe I was the one nearing panic."

Well…that was true, yeah. Accurate, but it only happened because I stumbled upon Ultraspeed Regeneration on my feet back there. What Benimaru didn't know wouldn't hurt him, though.

"I was pretty impressed with how you managed to completely hide yourself like that, though. How did that work?"

"That is a skill known as Battlewill. It uses my aura, which places it in a different family of skills from magic."

As Hakuro put it, Battlewill was a unique sort of Art, or technical skill, that transformed the magicules within the body into fighting spirit, thus powering up the wielder's physical form. If one's aura is what comes out while you're not doing anything, fighting spirit is what your body releases while, well, fighting—although given the auras already available to high-level monsters, it struck me as six of one, half a dozen of the other.

There were a few other Arts, too. Instantmove, for one, which allowed exactly that, or Formhide, which forced your opponent to lose sight of you. Modelwill, which strengthened your fists and weapons, was more of a beginner Art, and that was the white light I had just witnessed—they could fire it off like a projectile. It was all a bit like magic, except not magic. No casting time, for one, which made it more useful to put into practice in a pinch.

Given how anyone with the right level of intelligence could learn Arts, I guess the sight of ogres busting them out shouldn't have been a surprise. Shuna had that illusory magic on her side, too. I suppose it should be a given that high-level monsters had this kind of thing handy, as a rule. Great if they're on my side, really annoying if not.

If your garden-variety adventurer ever ran into a monster with that kind of arsenal at their fingertips… I couldn't guess how many unlucky sods met their ends that way. I took a moment to say a silent prayer for them.

This Battlewill thing, though, was interesting. I definitely wanted to learn about Formhide, which Magic Sense was apparently powerless against. My human form gave me normal sight, but if I hadn't had that, I would've been wide open to that attack back there. As they put it, the Art begins by suppressing your sound, then your smell, then your temperature, then your spirit—and once you reach that level, you no longer even disturbed the magicules around you.

Definitely a skill I wanted to have.

"Lord Hakuro was our teacher," Shion explained, "and the most powerful swordsman among our retainers."

"Neat. So, Hakuro… I want to learn that Battlewill thing, and I'd like the hobgobs to get trained in it, too. Mind flexing your muscles some more for me as my official Instructor?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! You seek a favor from this decrepit old man?" He fell to one knee. "It gladdens me to hear! If it be for your sake, Sir Rimuru, I would be overjoyed to exert my weary bones one more time!"

"Sir Rimuru," Benimaru added, "you said you planned to build a nation in this land, yes? You were serving as king, and Rigurd as your top minister? I know nothing about government myself, but when it comes to military issues, I believe there are few who could equal me. If you wish to appoint me to a role along those lines, I would gladly accept it."

"Fine by me…but that's kind of a step down for you, isn't it?"

"Nothing of the sort. We serve you now, Sir Rimuru, and we have offered our loyalty. If I may fulfill this by serving as your vassal, then I would gladly put everything I can offer on the line."

Hmm. I wonder how to handle this. He certainly seems earnest. He'd made a similar request a few days ago, but I honestly hadn't given it serious thought yet. *Maybe I'm the one who owes him some more respect.*

"All right. I hope I can count on your strength, then."

I had to repay his resolve one way or the other, I figured. Now was the time. The time for me and these ogres to firmly, finally, walk hand in hand.

"That is terribly unfair! Sir Rimuru! If this is how it will be, I would like to be appointed to a post as well!"

Sheesh. She startled me.

Shion, still firmly holding me up to her chest, was visibly pouting. Oh brother. Did she think I was kicking her out of the cool kids club or something? *Guess I'll need to whip up something for her, too.*

I jumped out of her arms and to the ground, transforming into human form as I did. Before I touched solid earth, I produced a change of clothes from my stomach and put it on—a move I had been practicing in secret. Benimaru and Shion looked surprised, but they kneeled silently before me instead of saying anything.

"Well then, Benimaru, I hereby appoint you to be my Samurai General. From here on in, you will be responsible for running my nation's military affairs."

"Yes, my lord! I will serve you well, on and off the battlefield!"

"And you, Shion, I hereby appoint as my Royal Guard. Your duties will remain chiefly secretarial, I suppose, but either way, do your best, all right?"

"Thank you so much, my lord! I will make a full effort every day to serve you as best as I possibly can!"

So now I've not only named them all, but I've given them three "classes" to work with. They couldn't have been more rapt with joy. Kurobe seemed to be loving his own job, too. I should've given them all formal titles earlier. Shuna and Soei deserved something, too.

Just as the thought occurred, a figure suddenly appeared next to Benimaru. It was Soei, and it looked like he had pretty much jumped right out from Benimaru's shadow—the result, he explained, of the Shadow Motion skill he earned as part of his own evolution. I knew it involved harnessing people's shadows to move from point A to point B in the shortest time possible, but I wasn't too deep on the specifics.

I had learned it myself—it was part of what I had picked up from the direwolves—but I'd yet to actually try it. Probably more useful than I thought at first sight. I had so much stuff at this point, I hadn't had the time to fully experiment with it all. *I'd better get to grips with that soon, at least. Especially if Soei's already well versed in it. It'd be great for gathering intel, I think.*

Upon noticing me, Soei fell to one knee. "Reporting, my lord!" he barked.

"Y-yeah?"

"I have completed my cocoon-gathering mission, and on the way back, I witnessed a group of lizardmen on the move. Spotting them so far away from the marshes they call home seemed highly unusual, so I thought it best to report to you as quickly as possible."

Soei seemed perfectly serene. His breath wasn't ragged or anything, but I was sure he must've hurried right over. My Sense Heat Source skill told me his body temperature was slightly higher than normal.

"Lizardmen? That is odd," Benimaru said thoughtfully.

So lizardmen *and* orcs…? Something was definitely happening now.

“Soei,” I said, “I’d like you to handle some intelligence work for me. Starting today, I want you to serve as my Covert Agent, gathering information for me and our cause.”

“I could dream of nothing better, my lord,” he replied, quietly but resolutely. “I was always told that my ancestors were gifted in the so-called dark arts—and I look forward to exercising those skills to their fullest extent for you.”

So now the ogres and I were one big happy family, more or less. I had a small group of loyal agents working under me. They had evolved into ogre mages, and they had regained a fair number of their ancestors’ abilities.

When they first evolved, I had guessed they were all through the wall and well into the top of the A-ranked range. But now that they were obtaining skills and getting used to their new bodies, their individual ranks were changing. Head and shoulders above the rest of the village in strength, but still, changing.

I had the feeling that my assigning jobs, or “classes,” to them had helped cement the exact amount of magical force each had to work with. The same had happened with the hobgoblins who were assigned classes.

In the end, success in battle had less to do with brute strength and more to do with how you matched up with your foe skill-wise. It was really my skills that defeated Ifrit, not whatever my slime body did for me. Seeing these ogre mages obtain unique skills in the same way was fascinating.

I had a feeling that Shuna had forced my hand a little bit, but I didn’t mind. She *did* used to be a shamaness, I guess, so the class I gave her worked well enough for me. She seemed happy enough with it, too.

So now I had six ogre mages working under me, each with their own class. Benimaru the Samurai General; Shuna the Oracle; Hakuro

the Instructor; Soei the Covert Agent; Shion the Royal Guard; and Kurobe the Swordsmith. I liked it.



Gabil was finding some very receptive minds among the goblin villages he'd paid personal visits to. They didn't need any lofty speeches about how strong he was—they were eager to follow him practically at first sight. That's how the weaker races worked, he supposed. And if they showed any sign of defying him, he was ready to whip them into submission.

The chief's orders no longer figured in Gabil's mind. He had the able warriors of each village gathered together, bringing whatever food supplies they could scrounge up from their storehouses. They numbered seven thousand in all, dressed in flimsy leather armor and bearing crude spears with stone-hewn spikes. Not worth relying on in battle, but this was fine for now. The ones too scared to fight had already fled anyway.

"Elders!" he bellowed. "Are there any other villages in the area I should be aware of?"

The elders exchanged glances with one another, then one finally stepped up timidly to respond.

"Well…perhaps not a village, exactly, but there should be one other settlement, yes."

"Settlement?" The elder's choice of words rankled the lizardman. "What of it? What is so worrisome about this 'settlement' you speak of?"

The elders responded with an astonishing tale—the story of a goblin band riding direwolves. It made no sense to him. Those were strong monsters, those canines, roving in packs to rule over the plains. On their home turf, even the lizardmen warriors would watch their step. Why would they bend to the will of such a low-level species like goblins? It was preposterous.

And the elders' tales grew even taller as they continued. Apparently, they were being led by a slime, of all things. *Ridiculous*, Gabil thought. The lowest level of monster there ever was! Maybe they could find a way to charm the minds of the equally stupid goblins, but direwolves? Come on.

Gabil needed to see it for himself. Perhaps there was a trick behind the founding of this "settlement" he could appropriate for his own ends. If all went well, perhaps even these alleged direwolves would join his side, turning the vast plains into his personal hunting grounds. So he sprang into action, letting his desires move him.

The location Gabil was given bore no village. This annoyed him, but he let it slide. If he wanted to gain control over the direwolves, he had to expect a hitch here and there. Being released from any sense of duty to his lizardman superiors made it impossible for him to rein in his lust for power, but still, he knew patience was key.

Right now, the existence of his chief was nothing more than an obstacle on the way to his army's objectives. If he could gain the cooperation of the direwolves, the other lizardmen would no doubt recognize their new king by then. The lords of the plains, paired with the king of the marshes? Who had anything to fear from those low-level pigs now, no matter how much of a mob they were?

Nobody. Gabil was sure of it. He would quickly suppress them, and then he would rule over the Forest of Jura.

And that, I imagine, would prove worthy enough a feat to place upon Sir Gelmud's feet.

Picturing the joy his master would show him upon hearing the news made it easy for Gabil to remain patient. He already had men stationed at Lake Sisu, awaiting additional orders. Supplies were still tight, so they had to take action soon. There was no time to waste.

One of his men reported spotting fresh tracks in the area. He immediately placed an order. A group of ten elite fighters, himself

included, would ride upon their hover lizard mounts toward their objective. Gabil didn't even bother to hide their presence in the plains. The direwolves were a concern, but if they were doing the bidding of *goblins* of all things, they couldn't have been any threat now.

I will need to train them, he thought, *and bring them back to their former glories!*

He had no idea what was waiting for him. His head was too full of pride at the idea of serving Sir Gelmud, the only master he truly loved.



THE ENVOY AND THE MEETING

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 3

THE ENVOY AND THE MEETING

Several days had passed since I had appointed my pseudo cabinet of ogre mages.

Just as they had said, things appeared to be going well between them and the hobgoblins, Rigurd included. Soei was providing raw materials to Shuna, and she was already successfully spinning silk thread from it. The fabric it produced had made her the target of astonishment from the village's goblinas. Which made sense. Compared to the simple hemp from the goblin era, this was in a whole other dimension.

Shuna was now instructing the goblinas under Lilina's leadership—including Haruna, right up front—on the Art of sewing. The ogre was now serving as the de facto head of the clothing workshop. She was working closely with the armorer Garm as well, exchanging opinions on making comfortable clothing and trying to improve their output.

It wouldn't be long before we had a line of formal and everyday wear available to us. I was looking forward to it.

In much the same way, Kurobe was heading up our weapon forge. It was a learning experience for him and Kaijin, and they were both better artisans for it.

Kaijin was more focused on overseeing our efforts at mass production—it's not like any single person had the stamina to bang away at metal every single day for weeks on end—but he still had a wealth of knowledge to glean. He probably thought it best to leave the nuts and bolts of weaponsmithing to Kurobe while he focused on his passions in the realm of research.

It was already producing results. I caught him when he was talking with Kurobe about some kind of weapon hobgoblins could use while

mounted. Hopefully, they'd remain a solid team for a good while to come.

Soei, meanwhile, was leading a small group of hobgobs as they built a sort of security network around town, lined with small-scale devices along the way that would sound an alarm whenever someone approached. At the same time, he was constantly gathering intel and relaying it to me as needed.

That was thanks to Replication, which Soei could now use to create up to six copies of himself at once. We could also keep up with each other through Thought Communication, and since there didn't seem to be any distance limit for these clones, he could send them out across the land to conduct espionage as needed.

It was worth noting that the clones generated through Replication had exactly as much ability in battle as their original bodies. The difference lay in stamina, or lack thereof. The clones had almost none, in fact, which meant they lacked the energy to launch any mystic arts. Skills were another matter, and using abilities like Shadow Motion and Sticky Steel Thread was no problem. Talk about useful.

Soei's abilities seemed more than a little inherited from mine, in a way, and he had already fully mastered them. It was interesting, actually, seeing how different people could use the same skills with such differing degrees of virtuosity. Not like I was a dunce, I don't think—it was more like Soei was a genius at it.

To tell the truth, I had actually sent out a scout or two of my own before I formally employed Soei for the job. Intel gathering was a fundamental part of my mission, and if the orcs and lizardmen were acting suspicious, I couldn't simply assume that our neck of the woods was safe. The hobgobs were still amateurs at that kind of thing, though. The best they could do was observe their faraway neighbors from a distance.

As irritating as that was, they'd be in danger of capture if they came too close to anyone—and even if they escaped, they'd still tip off

our presence to potential enemies.

Putting Soei on the task was absolutely the right answer. These were the products of Replication, after all. If they were spotted, he could just make them vanish. And having Thought Communication handy was huge—in a world without so much as a cell phone, we could now talk and trade info far more quickly than before.

"Should I go on reconnaissance, Sir Rimuru?" I remember him asking, cool as a cucumber. "Would you mind?" I'd said, and he'd immediately replied, "Right away, my lord" and simply disappeared. A textbook Shadow Motion maneuver.

Soei seemed coolheaded, not the kind of guy to make any brash moves. He was well suited for recon, in other words. The perfect Covert Agent.

Benimaru, meanwhile, was conferring with Rigurd and the other elders about how to keep this town secure.

I had established a new department of the army and left him in charge, although the only other member at this point was Hakuro. Rigur and the rest of the town's security force were busy securing food and natural resources; I couldn't draft them into the army that easily. I'd probably have to reorganize them at some point and field volunteers.

That appeared to be what Benimaru was talking about with Rigurd.

"I'd like to create an organization suited for combat," he told me, "selected from worthy candidates willing to dedicate themselves to battle duty. Would that be all right with you?"

"Sure," I said. "Sounds great. Let me know once you've got a roster handy."

I wanted to leave the whole thing to him, really, but that felt a tad too irresponsible, even for me. I was charged with making the final

decisions, and I had to fulfill that duty, at least.

We were still basically a collection of monsters, but little by little, I felt like we were forming an actual nation of sorts. It was nothing I could've done—or at least, done this quickly—without Benimaru and the other ogres. I'd hope I could rely on them for a while to come.

That just left Hakuro—standing in front of me even now, wooden practice sword in hand. He was a master of the sword; there was no doubting that. You underestimated him at your own peril. He was elderly, but his spirit was like nothing else.

Having this new human form and everything, I thought I'd learn some sword skills of my own. This was, to say the least, extremely optimistic, as was the prospect of learning new Arts for myself anytime soon. My last experience with that sort of thing was back in middle-school phys ed, and I'd never even held a sword before. No way it'd be that easy.

I figured I'd be a quick study, what with Hasten Thought and all that, but Hakuro quickly taught me the error of my ways. He had that, too, it turned out, so I had no advantage at all from the get-go. The end result? I basically stood there and let this ogre mage beat me up for an hour or so.

The ease with which I had been learning skills had probably spoiled me. Unlike those, Arts were earned strictly through training and concerted effort. It was never going to be quite that easy for me. And while magic seemed a bit like Arts, they essentially ran on two different engines.

Yeesh. Icicle Lance came to me just like *that*, too, when I absorbed it. No point complaining, though. I might be able to do the same with Arts as well, but it looked tricky. There would be no shortcuts with this—I'd just have to give up and admit that it'd take constant, extensive practice.

Oops. Now was no time for mulling over this. I had my own

practice sword in hand. Manifesting as an adult slowed down my reaction time, which meant I was in child form so I could devote my all to this.

Launching Magic Sense, I honed my consciousness on the world around me. Sense Heat Source and Keen Smell were also activated.

Question. Enhance Ultrasonic Wave to evolve the extra skill Sense Soundwave?

Yes
No

Ah. Good job, Sage. Just what I was hoping to hear. I thought "yes" to myself, and with that, I opened up a treasure trove of information—the movements, temperature, smell, sound, and everything else related to the magicules surrounding us. Now there was nothing that could escape my senses.

That gave me an extra jab of confidence as I took on Hakuro, his sword casually lifted up to his chest. The next thing I felt was a dull blow to the crown of my head. It couldn't have been a cleaner strike—no pain, no damage. He didn't put any force into it at all. Still, though… That was *skill*, not speed. We were on completely different levels.

"What was that?"

"Hoh-hoh-hoh! I call that Haze," he explained with a smile. "It is part of my Formhide skill set, and the more magic I invest, the more I can dilute the presence I project. I believe you have the ability to obtain it for yourself, too, Sir Rimuru."

It didn't sound very likely. It apparently took him a good century or so to learn, so I didn't like my chances that much.

"Yeah, I… I'd sure like to, sometime."

Hakuro nodded approvingly.

It hurt my feelings a little, but I couldn't do much about it. Arts weren't skills, after all. They took time. And whatever advantage I had in skills—and I had a big one, I was sure—it was nothing compared to what Hakuro could do.

I didn't think I was acting all high and mighty, but he sure humbled me there. And maybe I could just cast a Flare Circle and be done with him, but that wasn't the point. This was a swordsman. One born as a nameless ogre, tirelessly practicing his skills in the shadows, away from public sight. No wonder he was the strongest in his tribe. I doubted he had shown a full effort yet, and I was sure his newfound youth only made him tougher.

In an ideal world, he'd be known across the land for his talents. That's what I honestly thought.

"Right," Hakuro said, smiling like a doting grandfather. "One more time, then."

Before we could make another move, though, we heard the sound of a large bell ringing. Something had triggered Soei's alarm system. Thank heavens for that. I had no chance of beating Hakuro, and I was ready to call it a day. So we headed for Rigurd's residence instead.

He ran right up to us once we were in sight. He tended to do that a lot. Maybe my mere presence stressed him out a little.

"I have news to report, Sir Rimuru," he said, half in a panic. "A lizardman envoy has come to visit!"

Lizardmen? I was expecting that unwelcome visit sooner or later, but I guess they're here, huh? Ahead of the orcs, no less. Well, I was ready to deal with either. Let's hear this one out.

*

I headed for the town's entrance to greet this envoy. They hadn't

arrived yet, instead sending an advance messenger who told us to bring everyone in the village out front. I asked why the guard didn't just shrug him off, but he was riding a hover lizard, a fairly large mount reserved only for the knight classes, and I'm sure that must've made Rigurd pee his pants.

If this was a troop of knight-level lizardmen, no goblin village would stand a chance. They'd be ripped apart. And if a knight was first to greet us, I could only imagine what the main outfit looked like. We'd need to mind our manners.

There were four of us there at the entrance—me, Rigurd, Benimaru, and Hakuro. I made sure everyone knew to tread carefully. "Absolute politeness, unless I say otherwise," I said.

"Yes, my lord," Rigurd said, the rest nodding with him.

"Hmm? Where is Shion?" Benimaru said. Apparently, the word *politeness* reminded him of something.

"Oh, I think she's been cleaning my place since morning, but…"

"Wh-what?!"

For some reason, Hakuro appeared shocked at my reply.

"Um, is that a problem?"

"N-no… Not at all…"

"Indeed," Benimaru added. "She has grown. It should be all right…"

This was starting to concern me. And as it turned out, I should've been alarmed. Shion was soon there at the entrance, providing tea. Working hard as my secretary, I figured. I wanted to compliment her on it—and then I took a sniff.

Um… This is *tea, right?* There were these weird, seaweed-like

leaves flopping over the edge of my cup. It could not have been any potable beverage.

I looked to Rigurd, seeking out a possible explanation. He averted his eyes. *What the heck?* Benimaru, meanwhile, had his eyes firmly closed, not giving me a second glance, and Hakuro had vanished, using his Arts to become one with the wind.

They knew, didn't they? And all the time, as I hesitated, Shion was looking right at me, waiting for my praise.

How am I supposed to heap praise on her for this? My instincts were screaming at me to dash the cup against the ground, but was I doomed to this fate all along…? Why the hell did *I* have to be human right now?! It would've been a lot easier to deal with this as a taste bud–free slime. Just use Predator to take it apart, and I'd be perfectly safe.

Too late to curse my bad luck now, though. Steeling my resolve, I slowly reached out for the cup in Shion's hand. Just as I did…

"Ooh, some tea? I was just feeling a bit thirsty!"

Gobta, freshly back from his patrol detail, grabbed the cup and emptied it in one gulp.

Nice one, dude!! Perfect! A warm round of applause for the man!! Shion's face was now a mask of pure anger, but Gobta didn't bother noticing. Or to be more exact, he was in no shape to notice. When a small plume of foam escaped his mouth, he immediately collapsed, twitching in a spasm. Yeesh. That could've been me, man.

Shion looked on quizzically, apparently not expecting this. It was a cute piece of body language with her looks, but I wasn't fooled. From now on, she was banned from any work involving food or drink.

"Uh, Shion," I said, "next time you make anything you want people to eat or drink, make sure to run it past Benimaru first, all right?"

Benimaru shot me an icy stare. Like I cared. *You're the boss, man*, I silently replied. *You handle it.*

He joined Shion in staring awkwardly at the ground.

I still felt vindicated. If anyone had actually gotten hurt here, what would they do then? ...Oh right, I guess Gobta did, kinda. *But... Ahh, he'll be fine.* I'd have to thank him later for serving as my inadvertent taste tester. And I'd also have to count on Benimaru to keep the body count from rising any more.

*

By the time we heard the full lizardman envoy thundering toward us, about an hour had passed from the initial alarm call. I reverted to slime form, enlisting Shion to hold me in her arms. *Just in case*, I explained. I couldn't help but feel overall safer as a slime.

Shion was all gung ho about her guardian role, too, and there was no reason to throw shade on that. *I bet she wants to make up for that tea disaster, besides. Wonder how she did cleaning my place, though, come to think of it?* ...No, I couldn't let that bother me now. I shook off the ill omens in the back of my mind and focused on the envoy up ahead.

There were around ten lizardmen, and after a moment, one of them, chest puffed out, dismounted his hover lizard and sauntered up.

The leader, I guess?

"Thank you for greeting me! I will give this village, too, the chance to submit to my rule and authority. I hope you will consider it an honor!"

Talk about a ridiculous opening line. This wasn't a negotiation so much as it was a declaration. I was too dumbfounded to have an easy response. What was this idiot going on about? And none of my companions knew what to make of it, either.

“I apologize, sir,” Rigurd offered, “but asking us out of the blue to submit to you like this—”

“Pfft! Have you not heard yet? Those pigs, the orc race, are on the move! They will attack this very village before long. And I am the only one who can save your puny, pathetic hides!”

According to this lizardman, at least, we were already his loyal subjects.

Certainly, if we were about to be overrun by an orc horde, seeking solace under the direction of the lizardmen was one option. I was still waiting on Soei’s report, but until we knew exactly what we were dealing with, it paid to work together, perhaps.

Still, though…

“Ah yes! I understand there are some among you who have tamed the direwolf race to do your bidding. Whoever accomplished this task, I will gladly appoint as one of my top advisers. Bring him here now!”

Ummm…

Okay. We could fight together, yes, but what if the team we aligned ourselves with was a pack of idiots? “The great thing to fear is not a competent enemy, but an incompetent ally.” Napoleon or someone said that, right? It sounded true to me.

An incompetent ally would be nothing but a drag on my style. Especially in an environment as volatile as a battlefield. And *especially* if the ally was my boss. Simply entertaining the thought made me shudder.

I gave Rigurd a glance. He was silent, mouth agape. Benimaru was scratching his head, looking at me like he was asking permission to rip this guy apart. I wasn’t about to give it…but I still wasn’t sure how to react. I was struck dumb, even more so than I was with Shion’s “tea.”

Hakuro crossed his arms and closed his eyes, wordless. Was he sleeping? Shion, meanwhile, still had me in her arms, which she had tensed up out of anger. *Whoa, you're crushing me, lady!*

I jiggled a bit to remind her I was still there. She apologized, breaking into a cold sweat.

She had a hair-trigger temper, it seemed. I'd have to remember that. Being held by her sure wasn't bad, I thought, but it came with some danger. She had obtained the dual skills of Steel Strength and Strengthen Body, making her one book you absolutely couldn't judge by its cover. Based on her act just now, she wasn't in full control of her own powers, and getting strangled to death wasn't on my bucket list. I'd have to watch my back around her.

But…yeesh. I had no idea the envoy would be such a damn fool.

"Okay," I said, trying to move things along. "Um… I guess I'm the one who tamed the direwolves. Or, more like made friends with them, maybe?"

"Huh? You, a lowly slime? Enough joking. Let me see some evidence. Then I'll decide whether to believe you."

This guy had a bad habit of giving orders from whatever mountain peak he believed he was standing on. I was starting to get irritated. Refusing to listen to the other side in conversations like this… Someone needed to knock this dude off his high horse.

I occasionally had to deal with company presidents and government officials in my construction job back home, but not even they treated me like such an idiot. One thing I learned quickly with those guys was that the only way to beat them was refuse to play their game in the first place. Teaming up with idiots would earn you nothing.

So I decided to switch tactics.

"Ranga."

“Here, sir.”

He stepped out from my shadow. He had been adopting it as a sort of standby post as of late—another way to adapt Shadow Motion, I supposed.

“Good. This guy wanted to ask you a thing or two. Could you hear him out?”

That’s right. I tossed the ball over to Ranga. Not because I was lazy or anything—I just figured Ranga would be more effective at dealing with this bozo than I’d ever be. Assuming I wasn’t worth the space I took up in the world just because I was a slime was ruder than even Rigurd was when we first met. Could anyone blame me for wanting to bow out? Besides, this dude hadn’t even noticed my aura yet. He couldn’t have been anyone special.

It was all pretty weird, really.

So Ranga, accepting my order, turned to face the lizardmen. A single glare from him was enough to make even the stout-looking guards in their iron chest pieces take a step back in self-defense. And why wouldn’t they? Ranga was huge. Not shrunken down at all. The whole of him was right there.

“My master has ordered me to interact with you. Speak, and I will listen.”

Ranga was using Coercion as he talked. It struck home among the warriors, who were now frozen in place. One, though, wasn’t—the envoy, who looked a tad groggy but still maintained his stately, puffed-out posture. I had to hand it to him; maybe he had more willpower than I thought.

“Ah… Yes. It is you, then, the ‘alpha’ or what-have-you of the direwolves? I am Gabil, warrior lord of the lizardman tribe! I am charmed to make your acquaintance. I am, as you have just heard, a named lizardman. Will you abandon this slime and join with me instead?”

How utterly brazen. I wanted to knock him out, but I held back. I had to take the high road here. Just let it slide.

I'm a grown-up, so just chill. And you chill, too, Shion. You're going to permanently dent me with that vise grip you've got on me. A few more jiggles, and she bowed in apology. *I really wish she could bottle up her anger a bit more.*

Why was this lizard Gabil acting like he owned the world, though? I didn't know him from a hole in the ground. I silently cheered Ranga on. *Go get 'im, boy!*

"You filthy lizard… How dare you mock my master?"

He gritted his teeth, eyes turning red as he silently seethed in anger. *Uh, not too much, okay, Ranga? I'm not sure if this lizard can take it.* If he tried anything funny—well, he had it coming, but I wanted to avoid that if he really was some higher-up lizard guy.

"It would appear," he said, "that you have been deceived. Very well. Let me use my powers to defeat this so-called master who has taken control of you. Who wishes to take me on? I would gladly handle all of you at once, if you like!"

Whoa… What the hell's he saying now? Talk about a bad joke. This lizard really needs to know his place. You're the weakest guy here, dude.

…Okay, I take that back. There's Rigurd. He could probably whip Rigurd.

But that's still a B rank we were talking about; king of the hobgoblins and probably their strongest warrior. If your average hobgob was a C-plus, that's a pretty damn big leap—and with the Kaijin-forged armor he had on, I'd peg him at a high B right now.

That being said, he hadn't really learned much of anything in terms of swordsmanship or battle tactics. Against a professional, I didn't like his chances. I had learned not long ago that the presence,

or lack thereof, of Arts could vastly change your worth in battle. And while Gabil had a big mouth and a pointless amount of swagger, he seemed to be well trained enough as a fighter in my eyes. He was certainly brimming with confidence anyway.

Our eyes met.

So who should I pit against him to start out…?

"Huh? What're you guys up to?"

Gobta, without a doubt the best in town at popping up at the exact wrong time, executed this skill perfectly by waking up.

"You're all right?"

"Oh, you have to listen to this!" he replied with a carefree smile. "I was swimming across the river, and this kind voice said I had obtained Resist Poison or something like that! So I felt a whole lot better, and then I woke up!"

Something told me it was a lucky thing he didn't make it all the way across that river… I thought it'd be kinder if I didn't say that.

"Wow! Resist Poison, huh? That's pretty neat. I don't even have that one."

"R-really? Ooh, neato!"

Gobta seemed honestly proud. But his knack for terrible timing had already sealed his fate.

"Heh-heh-heh," Ranga growled. "Very well. If you are capable of defeating one among us whom we deem to be worthy, we will listen to your story."

Then he motioned toward Gobta. I knew he would.

"Wh-wha?!" he protested, eyes wide open. "What are you…?!" But it had been decided. Which was good for me. I wasn't sure who to

pick, myself. Everyone on our side was ready to beat the crap out of this lizardman, their eyes lowered in a threatening stance. In a way, it helped me keep my own head cool. Whenever someone gets visibly pissed off, it tends to put the brakes on everyone else in the room.

Really, though. Ranga can be pretty mean, too, huh? I could see it in his eyes, even. He was putting Gobta up as a sacrificial lamb.

It wouldn't exactly be honorable to hurt this envoy, but if he struck first, that was enough of an excuse. I imagined that was Ranga's way of thinking about it. Clever of him. Wonder where he got that from.

"Are you sure?" Gabil asked me, a triumphant look. "Because I would be happy to challenge you instead. Though, perhaps you'd prefer to have one of your underlings step up for you, rather than reveal to the world how powerless you are!"

Now he was just dissing me. He seriously thought I was running some large-scale con on Ranga and the rest. I wanted to punch him, full-strength. My head was distinctly no longer cool.

"Don't show him any mercy, Gobta. Get him! Lose, and I'll have Shion cook a five-course meal for you!"

"W-wait a second, sir! I—I guess you've already made your decision…but I'd like some kind of reward if I win, at least! And please, anything but Shion's food…"

"I do not appreciate this line of conversation," Shion sullenly added.

He was right, though. I had the stick; now I needed a carrot. I figured a taste of Shion's homespun efforts would be enough to make him fight like his life depended on it. I knew it was pointless—I mean, he had no chance—but I wanted to think of a reward, then.

"All right," I said. "In that case, I'll have Kurobe make a weapon for you. How's that sound?"

“R-really?!”

“Come on, Gobta, have I ever lied to you?”

“N-no, not lie, exactly…maybe kind of withheld things from me sometimes, but…”

“You’re just imagining it.”

“Am I? Oh, all right!”

This was why I liked talking with Gobta. He was so easy to work with.

Sensing our conversation was over, Ranga threw a signal my way. I nodded in reply.

“If you wish to lend us your power,” he said to Gabil, “then show us what you possess first. You may begin!”

With that, the battle kicked off—Gobta, ready for anything, and Gabil, calmly carrying his spear. Gobta had a cavalry lance on him, too, making it a duel between two long-range weapons. He had no chance, to be sure. His usual weapon of choice was a dagger.

“Hmph,” Gabil replied, lecturing his foe despite the fact that the fight had already started. “You may be more than a mere goblin, but even a hobgoblin is no threat to me! We are the lizardmen, the mighty descendants of dragons…”

“Aren’t you coming? Well, here I come, then!”

Ignoring the boast, Gobta hurled his spear right at Gabil. He was serious about this, more serious than I expected.

“Impudent fool,” Gabil listlessly muttered as he batted down the missile. That, apparently, was exactly what Gobta wanted. For just an instant, Gabil’s attention was focused on the thrown spear—and the hobgoblin took that instant to disappear.

Wait… What…?!

If my eyes weren't deceiving me, Gobta had just executed a perfect Shadow Motion move to hide. Perfect enough that even Gabil lost sight of him. "Where are you?!" he shouted, furtively looking around. But by then, the battle had already been won.

Flying out of the shadow behind Gabil's back, Gobta flung himself into a midair spin as he executed a kick.

I figured Gabil had no idea what happened. The rear attack came as a total surprise, and he took it straight to the back of his neck, immediately causing him to black out. Gobta had aimed right where neither Gabil's armor nor his helmet could protect him, and he aimed well. Even the stoutest built of lizardmen couldn't hold up against a direct attack on such a vulnerable collection of nerves. His scales would keep the blow from turning lethal, but he would no doubt take a while to recover.



Which meant…

…that Gobta actually won.

“It is settled! The victor is Gobta!!”

Ranga’s proclamation was almost drowned out by the cheers and applause from the ogres. Gobta soaked it up for a moment or two.

Man…

Gobta, of all people, dominating a warrior-lord lizardman? I figured Gabil was B-plus or so, and he was down in one stroke.

I had to hand it to Gobta. He’d matured. I was shocked, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.

“Well done, Gobta,” Ranga said as he nodded approvingly. “I always knew you had it in you.”

“Yes!” chimed Rigurd. “Excellent! You have shown the world what hobgoblins are truly capable of!”

“He might just be right,” Shion observed. “I think I’ll forgive what you said a moment ago after all.”

“A masterstroke,” Benimaru said. “You have grown stronger than when we last fought.”

“Indeed,” Hakuro said, eyes sharp and focused on Gobta. “Quite impressive. I wonder how he may respond to further training.”

Damn. Being complimented by the likes of Hakuro? This day might just change Gobta’s life. If that old taskmaster of an ogre sage saw potential in him, I was all for it. It’d help divert Hakuro’s attention away from me in training, at least.

Though… Wait a second. Was everyone else here expecting him to

win? I took another look around—and that was that vibe right now. I was the only one who doubted him.

Better make amends for that. I knew how to read a room.

"Um… Yeah, good job, Gobta. That blew me away! I'll make Kurobe start on your weapon before nightfall."

So what about Gabil and his lizardman entourage?

The warrior lord had no external injuries. He was knocked out but otherwise unaffected.

As for his men, they had been frozen in place before they even had a chance to form a cheering section. They still had no idea what had just happened.

"Hey, uh, we won, okay?" I yelled at them. "And I gotta turn down the offer, too, all right? If you want help fighting the orcs, we'll think about that, but for today, you mind leaving us in peace? And don't forget to take him with you."

That was enough to stir them to action. And with that, our attempts at a cross-species summit were over.

*

I was happy to see that idiot go, really, but we still needed to formulate a future plan. I gathered us together in a small hut I had built next to the largest lodging quarters in town for meeting purposes, ordering Rigurd to call for everyone else we needed.

"I will summon them at once," he said, sending Gobta out for them as I used Thought Communication to get Soei over.

Most of the town's important figures were there. Among hobgobs, there were Rigurd, Rigur, Rugurd, Regurd, Rogurd, and Lilina. They were joined by the dwarf Kaijin and the ogre mages Benimaru, Shuna, Hakuro, Shion, and Soei. Twelve in total, not counting me, and they

encompassed most of the town's managerial duties, apart from production.

Kaijin represented the town's building and production interests. Lilina handled management, and Rigurd, Rugurd, Rogurd, and Regurd were the top political brass. Rigurd was in charge, and the other three were his ministers, although I hadn't assigned them concrete duties yet—better get on top of that. Benimaru and Hakuro were our military, Soei our intelligence, and Rigur our security.

This meant our government now consisted of six departments, with the military and covert-ops sections newly founded by me. We were still weak as an organization, but it had worked well enough so far. Once the framework was in place, it'd be easier to fill out the details over time. For now, at least, we had roofs over our heads and food in our bellies.

Thinking about it, Rigur was doing a damn good job for us all. The grease on the wheels, I suppose.

Benimaru was deliberating over who to recruit for the army. I heard he and Rigur were discussing a list of possible candidates they could take from the security detail. Which was good. I'd only just appointed him, but I would need some action on that fast, what with the orcs and lizardmen running around. It was a heavy burden to place on Benimaru, but I was sure he'd do his best.

Lilina was a hard worker. Quick-witted, too. She was our city manager of sorts, but in terms of her duties, she was mainly responsible for our agricultural efforts. She had picked up some wild potato plants and succeeded in cultivating them. They grew quickly and provided a great deal of nutrients, which did wonders for our food situation. She was also involved with things like taming magical beasts for livestock and building fish hatcheries—a pretty decent range of projects. This was in addition to managing all our stocks—the things we made, the resources we harvested, the materials we gathered. The secretary of agriculture, forestry, water, and livestock,

all in one.

We were still small, which was what made that possible, but going forward, we'd have to adapt with the times. If we started building trade relationships with the human race, I'd love to pick up some vegetable seedlings from them. By then, Lilina would probably have too much on her plate, so I'd need to appoint more managers.

The rest of the goblinas were pitching in, too, learning sewing from Shuna and so forth. We had a lot of winning people among them, Haruna included. I figured we were in good hands.

On the architecture and production front, I was still leaving well near everything to Kaijin. He was trained as a blacksmith, but after collaborating with Kurobe, he had kind of drifted upward to the position of floor supervisor. They had divided their workload pretty well, as I saw it—Kurobe at the forge, Kaijin working on new ideas. "We're still pretty busy putting everything together," he told me, "but once things settle down, I'd like to devote myself more to creative things."

I had a feeling Kurobe would be joining him before long, once the current wave of weapons production wrapped up. Hell, I wouldn't mind joining them, even. But before that, I just needed things to—as Kaijin put it—settle down.

*

Once Soei returned from his latest recon trip, the entire gang was at the conference room. Time to kick this off.

With my signal, Soei began his report. It was generally divided into three parts—the state of things in the other goblin villages, what was going on in the marshlands, and the orcs' advance. Each area had two Soei clones devoted to it, nimbly gathering intel. A few were still out in the field, rooting around for more.

We all fell silent, listening to his tale.

First, the goblin villages. Most had affiliated themselves with Gabil, warrior lord of the lizardmen.

Ah, the one who just paid us a visit. They're following that idiot? Fickle bastards.

The goblins who refused to this had run for the hills in a state of panic, several attempting to flee to human territory. No one gave them much of a chance at survival. It was one thing if they lived in humble forest villages in uncharted lands, indeed another if they crossed the border. It's natural for anyone to want to keep their homelands protected, and the humans would undoubtedly give them no quarter.

I didn't know what kind of firepower the nearby humans had, but I was sure it'd make quick work of exhausted goblin stragglers. Which meant the goblins had little choice but to live hidden in secrecy, which didn't exactly paint a rosy picture for their future.

Soei had some more information on Gabil for us, too. He had apparently gathered the fighter goblins from the assorted villages to assemble a force some seven thousand strong. They were now camped at the foot of the mountain range near us.

Quite a number. They had accepted the exact offer given to us—safety against the orcs, in exchange for whatever food resources they had. I suppose it was the best decision, but with all their food in the hands of others, they were doomed to starve, regardless of how the orc battle turned out.

It was completely careless, really—thoughtless of the village elders who agreed to the proposal. Guess they figured it was better than getting their heads caved in by an orcish ax. Or were they betting that a substantial number would survive the war? That there'd be enough to keep going afterward?

It was something we all would have to consider, too. This town wasn't complete yet, but I couldn't bear the thought of abandoning it at this point. If we let the orcs invade this far in, they'd ransack the

surrounding forest and make it hard to keep ourselves fed.

If we wanted to retain the lives we enjoyed now, we'd have to repel the orcs—and repel them at the marshlands, not here.

Speaking of the marshes, the lizardman chief had been summoning some armies of his own. A force of ten thousand had already been assembled, safe and well-fed from the fish in nearby Lake Sisu. They were holed up in a maze of natural caves and caverns, ready to resist an orcish siege for as long as necessary.

So they thought the orcs were that much of a threat, then? The lizardmen, a strong bunch of fighters despite Gabil's little display, were already in a state of near-total war preparedness—to the point where they were even recruiting the weaker goblins.

Finally, I asked about the orcs.

"The orc forces number…" Soei paused for a moment. "Approximately two hundred thousand fighters."

"Two hundred thousand?!" someone shouted.

I think it was a few thousand that laid waste to the ogre's fort…

"So you mean to say that the force that attacked our home was merely a fraction of the entire army?"

"Indeed," Soei reported. "That is what I found in my investigations. We believe the total number involved to be two hundred thousand. The main force is working its way along the Great Ameld River from the south, covering a relatively broad range as they do. My estimate is based strictly on the length of their marching forces and the width of the roads they are using, but based on that, they can number no fewer than one hundred fifty thousand. I've confirmed that some squadrons affiliated with them are making inroads here and there into the forest as well, so I would warn against lowballing our estimate."

A massive parade of orcs, occupying entire roads for miles on end, as far as the eye could see.

"Do we know where they're headed?"

"Yes, my lord. The force is aiming for the marshes that spread around Lake Sisu, working straight through the lizardman territory. However…"

"However?"

"However, with their current trajectory, they will reach human territory immediately afterward. It is unclear where their ultimate objective lies, but if they continue along a straight line, they will be unable to avoid confrontation with a number of different human kingdoms."

Wow. What're they thinking? Wait a second… If all they wanted was control over the forest, would they simply stop once they destroyed the lizardmen? What did they want anyway?

"What do you think about all this, Soei? Are the orcs seeking to destroy the lizardmen? Or will they continue their conquest into human lands?"

"It is hard to say as of yet, my lord."

I suppose not. I had only a dim idea of the geography involved anyway.

"Well, I think finding out about that should be the next priority. Do we have a map or something handy, Soei?"

"What do you mean by…'map,' sir?"

"Huh?"

……

……

…

This was a bit of a surprise. The concept of a map was seemingly alien to most everyone in the room.

Kaijin, bless his soul, knew what I was talking about. He knew, but he didn't have a lead on one we could purchase. Apparently, the way the world was at this point in its history, maps were still considered confidential military intelligence.

Well, so be it. I had the assembled members line up a number of wooden boards on the table and then craft something simple for me so I could see where things were, relative to one another. Most monsters had Telepathy, which let them share a pool of information with one another. This was helpful, but it had the adverse effect of delaying the development of printed, or recordable, media.

Hakuro started by drawing the general area around the ogre homeland, using what he heard from his grandfather as reference. The lack of paper was really starting to bother me, but I had more boards brought in so we could draw up the region around our town. Thought Communication came in handy for this, letting people pick up on exactly what one another was picturing in their minds. Too handy, really, given how it let people exchange accurate information without putting it down on paper. I wouldn't necessarily call it an improvement over life on Earth. It was a dilemma, honestly, even if it posed no hindrance to day-to-day monster life.

It was a given that humans were a lot better at transmitting knowledge down to future generations than monsters. That was the core behind developing a civilization, after all. The monsters around me might dismiss this mapmaking as a needless extra step for now, but I was sure they'd thank me later.

I had the Sage collate all the information people were feeding me with their minds. Once I had it all, I neatly jotted it down on the wooden boards. The result was a fairly serviceable map. The distances and such were bare estimates, of course, but it could stand up to

practical use well enough. Sucked that I had to waste a bunch of time on this map before we got to the main subject, though.

On to business.

"So this is what a map is," I said. "A way of showing what the land looks like that everyone can understand. I want you to look at this as I speak to you."

Everyone gathered around the boards in the middle of the table. I linked it with everyone via Thought Communication to ensure we were all focused on the same thing.

"Okay. I'm going to use this map to predict how the lizardmen and orcs are going to act. We're trying to figure out what the orcs are thinking here. If we can grasp that, it'll be easier to plot our next move."

They all nodded.

I had Soei place a small piece of wood on the orc force's current location. I had written ORC on it in big letters, like a game piece.

From the center of the Forest of Jura, there were three basic directions an army as large as the orcs could go. All involved tracing the Ameld River, which stretched out from the Canaat Mountains. This river forked into two tributaries near the center of the forest, one flowing into Lake Sisu. The larger branch moved upward in a north-south orientation, traversing nearly the entire continent. Toward the end, it made a slow curve before dumping out into the ocean to the east.

The forest hugged this river for much of its outward flow, and generally speaking, the area east of it was occupied by the Eastern Empire—human lands. After exiting the woods, the Great Ameld fed the fertile plains that were ruled over by demon lords. That plurality was important. Shizu had said as much as well, that the demon lord Leon was just one of them. It sounded a bit odd, the idea of multiple

demon lords, but there you go. For all I knew, Leon and the one who gave Rigurd's son his name were two different people.

The topic deserved more exploration, but that would have to wait. We were trying to suss out the orcs' invasion route and ultimate objective.

According to Soei's report, after leaving their habitat near the demon lord lands, the orcs had been making their way along the Great Ameld. It was the only route large enough to hold an entire army, but apparently, they had also been sending squadrons into the forest, picking off the stronger monsters that might threaten them along the way—including the ogres. They were after food, I wagered, but it still seemed odd.

"What do you think?" I asked as I moved other wooden pieces around to simulate the orcs overtaking the ogre fort.

"In what way, my lord?"

"I mean, why would they send a splinter force off like this? Why couldn't they just march right through the forest?"

"Moving such a large force," Hakuro said, "would be very difficult, what with all the trees in the way."

Made sense. But in that case…

"Why raze our homeland at all?" Benimaru asked. "If we weren't in the way of the main force, why couldn't they have left us be?"

"Hmm… A good question, actually," Hakuro replied.

They were right. The orcs didn't seem to have any motivation for picking off higher-level foes not directly in their path of advance. They could seize their food stores, yes, but if that was the sole objective, they paid an extremely dear price for it. The orcs numbered several thousand, but that was still a pittance compared to the main force. Why devote so relatively few fighters toward such an obviously tough

opponent? Was food really the only reason they were willing to accept so many casualties?

"Remember," Benimaru said, "they didn't even offer to hire us as mercenaries. I can only conclude they were prepared to kill us all from the moment they arrived."

Shuna nodded. "Very true. My Sense Threat extra skill told me as much. They were fully hostile toward us—nothing more, nothing less."

So the orcs wanted the ogres dead. And that wasn't all.

"Judging by the routes the main force and this splinter team took," Hakuro said, eyes focused on the map, "they would likely regroup in the marshlands."

Everyone looked down as he moved two ORC-labeled pieces forward. He was right. Proceeding in a straight line, they met right at the marshlands the lizardmen called home. A region large enough for the main orc force to regroup and prepare for the battle ahead—assuming they didn't mind the lack of dry land to work with.

"So they'd definitely run into the lizardmen sooner or later, right? Did they want to eradicate them so they could be king of the forest or whatever?"

"Put that way, I'm not so sure… It makes little sense."

"Or maybe they're in cahoots with a demon lord, like you said?"

"They are receiving support, no doubt about that, but I cannot say whether it is demon lord support. We had best not jump to conclusions."

"Okay, but even if they *are* working with someone, what does annihilating the main powerbrokers in the forest achieve?"

Everyone on hand offered their own response. In the end, though, no one had a definite idea about what the orcs wanted—the most

important question.

“Plus,” Shuna whispered, “how are the orcs feeding an army of two hundred thousand?”

The observation made everyone freeze for a moment.

“How?” Benimaru ventured. “That’s what they’re seizing food supplies for, no?” Then he fell silent, realizing how dubious that sounded.

Shuna had a point. It just didn’t seem right.

“Soei, did the splinter force have a supply team with them?”

“…I did not see any, no. The main force appeared to have a caravan carrying food supplies in the rear, but… Indeed, not nearly enough of one, in terms of size. Nowhere near enough to keep an army of two hundred thousand nourished.”

Marching near the river eliminated any worries about fresh water, but they were essentially unable to supply themselves. Whatever food they had would dwindle quickly. Both forces needed *something*, didn’t they? I doubted the orcs had perfected some just-in-time method of supplying a full military force nobody was aware of, but I also doubted they would just let all those orcs starve while they fought.

And if they didn’t bother to supply the splinter force, no way they’d seize the ogres’ food, then just deliver it all back to the main army. They had their own mouths to feed. And “splinter” force or not, we were still talking several thousand grown orcs, and that was an awful lot of people to force into potential starvation.

I noticed Soei step up to say something, only to catch himself.

“What is it?” I pressed. “Did you want to say something?”

“This is just speculation on my part, but I wonder if, perhaps, they

were…foraging upon the bodies of those who died of starvation or battle wounds. I say this because, while I conducted thorough investigations of the battlefields they fought in, I found not a single corpse."

"What?!" Benimaru exclaimed. "Including our own homeland?"

"…Yes. There was absolutely nothing, and no one, left."

"How?!"

"Oh no…"

The ogre mages were at a loss for words. Oof… I could see why. *That's what orcs are like?* Just imagining it made me queasy.

"That's… That's just too hard to accept…"

"They are omnivorous, I know, but… Really?"

Soei eyed Rigurd and Kaijin stoically. "It is simply speculation," he repeated. "But wherever they were known to be, I found not a single corpse—and our homeland was completely devoid of anything. That is the full truth. And that brings to mind a certain skill…"

He stopped, and his face twisted.

"No!" Benimaru shouted. "An orc lord?"

"Indeed. I have not confirmed it, but I cannot deny the chance that an orc lord has appeared. I have, at least, confirmed the presence of high-order orc knights. Our attackers, likely."

"Indeed. They would have to be, judging by their strength. I could imagine orc generals among them, even."

"That would certainly explain everything…"

The ogre mages' faces grew more and more concerned. They seemed to know who this orc lord was—not that it meant anything to

me, Kaijin, or the other hobgoblins.

"Whoa, who's this orc lord guy?" Kaijin asked, finally unfreezing himself. "Could you maybe include us in this conversation, please?"

"Yeah," I added. "If you don't mind?"

That was our first insight into exactly how fearsome the orc lord was.

To put it briefly, an orc lord was a unique monster with advanced leadership skills. They appeared one at a time, out of the blue, once every few hundred years, to spread chaos across the world. One bad hombre, in other words.

What made them so nefarious was the skill they were born with—the unique skill known simply as Ravenous. It allows the caster to make his allies devour everything around them, like a swarm of locusts, afflicting them with a severe hunger they never have any hope of sating. It sounded like torture for the victims, but it had great benefits for the caster. It very efficiently removed all organic matter from entire regions at once, transforming it into energy for yourself. And even if it starved your people—hell, *because* it starved them, the ultimate effect was tremendously powerful.

But the scariest thing of all was that whatever monsters the hordes consumed in their mad dash for sustenance, their skills would be transferred over to the caster. Monster powers, physical attributes, even skills. It wasn't a sure thing every time, but the more monsters you consumed, the better your chances. In other words…

"The orcs aren't trying to eradicate the forest's higher-level monsters at all? They're trying to take their powers for their own?"

Silence fell upon the room. It indicated, once and for all, that my compatriots had already made that conclusion.

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We all paused for a few moments. The air had grown heavy around us, whether we had solid evidence of an orc lord in our midst or not.

We weren't helpless against this threat, of course. This monster had appeared on the scene before, multiple times, and there was already a known strategy for dealing with them.

"And this is?" I impatiently asked. The ogre mages responded by giving one another awkward looks. Kaijin and Rigurd stared at them, a tad put off.

"It embarrasses me to say it," Shuna finally began, "but the orc lords of the past have all been defeated by human efforts. Ravenous is a powerful unique skill, no doubt about it, but it works only by seizing the powers of those the orc lord defeats. While monsters may have intrinsic skills or other magic-oriented effects an orc lord can take for itself, humans bear none of that. They bear Arts, not skills, and those are strictly the fruits of practice and effort. That's what enables a human nation, or band of nations, to defeat such a threat."

Huh. Don't feed the beast, and it won't grow, huh? I suppose they hesitated to say it because it meant we'd have to get humans involved, sooner or later.

Well, at least we had something to go on now. We had a general idea of the skills the orc lord might've seized, and we could find ways to counter them. It might not be that much of a threat yet, assuming it hadn't been around for too long.

Maybe this'll be easier than I thought? Maybe not. He already had a knight corps, for one, not to mention that two-hundred-thousand-strong horde of slavering, starving orcs. That, and whatever organization fronted the funds to equip and armor all those guys. No point being too optimistic. If it gained any intelligence boosts through Ravenous, it could even become a demon lord in time, I bet.

Bad news all around. Definitely should've gotten to him quicker. But ah well. Right now would have been a great time for some lofty hero to show up, but I didn't have one handy, to my regret.

“All right. Let’s see if this orc lord exists or not, before anything else. If one’s really been born, I suppose we should get a message over to Kabal and the rest of my adventurer friends.”

“Yes, my lord!” Rigurd nodded at the idea.

They had mentioned they were affiliated with a group—the guild, they called it—that provided assignments. Maybe the guild could help us out, if Kabal provided an in. I was expecting more pushback, really, but none made itself known. Kabal and his friends were certainly kind to us before, at least. No stereotyping or the like.

I figured I could sell a few hunks of magisteel I had left to raise the money for the guild’s help. They might turn down passing monsters, but they couldn’t turn down the right price—that, or I could just have the dwarf brothers negotiate on our behalf. An orc lord would threaten the humans as much as us. We had a lot of chips to bargain with.

In fact, if we knew that humans would play a key role in this, perhaps we should send a message out ASAP. If the lizardmen were already goners, the orcs would very likely be going after human kingdoms next. And whether they could “feed” off humans or not, two hundred thousand orcs would be a life-or-death threat to pretty much any nation out there.

For now, we needed more information. That was my watchword as I continued the conference—but suddenly, Soei stiffened, wincing.

“What is it?”

“Well,” he began, “one of my Replication clones has made contact with someone who insists upon communicating with you, Sir Rimuru. What do you think…?”

“Contact? And they name-dropped me, even? Who the heck…?”

I still didn’t have many acquaintances in this world, really. Was it Kabal, maybe, speak of the devil? Nah. It took them several weeks to

travel here from their home base, they said. Over a month's round trip. Not possible.

"This contact has not given me a name, my lord. She simply seeks to send you a message, and she is quite adamant. She is a dryad."

Everyone's eyebrows whipped up in surprise. A pretty well-known monster, I guess.

"No!" Rigurd exclaimed. "It has been several decades since a dryad has last made itself known, has it not?"

"They have practically vanished! Why would one appear now?!"

To the hobgoblins, they were all but mythical figures. And judging by the ex-ogre Soei's response, they must've been pretty high level. One who had spotted and made contact with Soei, despite how gifted he was at concealing his Replications. That proved the caliber we were dealing with. *Better not get this dryad angry, then.*

"All right. I'll meet with her. Guide her over here."

It would appear my thought was correct. Not long after I gave consent, the conference room door opened to reveal a new figure. It had not lost a second to the Soei Replicant, even when he used Shadow Motion to guide him back.

Calling her an "it" would be rude. She was a woman, and a beautiful one. Her hair was green, her skin light, her figure well toned—chiseled, even, like a Nordic goddess. Her luxuriant lips were a shade of light-blue, matched perfectly with her deep-blue eyes. She looked about twenty years old by human standards, but human she definitely was not. She was semitransparent, and any observer could tell that her body had no weight or actual physical presence.

Dryads were, indeed, descended from the fairy races, as close to a form of spiritual life as one was likely to ever witness. I later learned they served as the guardians of the treants, the living tree people that were another high-level presence around the forest. In terms of

ranking, they were easily A or better—up there with Ifrit, and no doubt a terrifying presence for Rigurd and the hobgobs.

But what did she want?

The conference table was enveloped in silence. The dryads, long-lived though they were, rarely left their holy sanctuaries. They were heralded by some as the wardens of the whole Forest of Jura, and only a few lucky ones would see one for themselves. They were fabled to exact divine punishment upon the wicked—those who damaged the forests.

Benimaru and the other ex-ogres reacted much the same way as Rigurd. But the dryad didn't let it faze her. She sized up the room for a moment before locking her eyes upon my figure.

"My greetings to you, Leader of the Monsters, and your followers. I am Treyni, a dryad. It is nice to meet you all."

She smiled, like a bud sprouting into a flower. That was all it took for me to wonder, *Am I being too wary of her, perhaps?* She had a fairylike beauty, that was absolutely true.

"Um, you too. My name's Rimuru. We can keep it casual here, okay? None of that 'Leader of the Monsters' crap."

I hated nicknames enough on Earth. I didn't want any here, so I made sure to do away with it before the rest of the room could introduce themselves.

"So," I said, still trying to overcome my embarrassment, "what did you want to see me for?"

"Thank you. I have come here to discuss the events taking place in this forest—events which, I imagine, you all are aware. As one of the Forest of Jura's appointed wardens, I cannot allow this series of calamities to go unaddressed, and so I have appeared before you. I do so because I hope to join in your conference."

She nodded in turn to each of the participants before turning back to me.

Treyni, huh? A named monster, then. High level, no doubt.

"But why here?" Benimaru dared to ask. "Surely there are races more powerful than the goblins you could have turned to for assistance."

"This is the most powerful outpost in the nearby region," the dryad replied. "The others no longer exist, their people now affiliated with the lizardman known as Gabil. The treants are incapable of moving from location to location and thus interact little with other races. If they were blighted by an outside enemy or natural disaster, there would be little they could do to defend themselves. We dryads are granted permission to travel to the outside world only in these spiritual forms, and I regret there are but few of us… If the root cause of all this were to attack the treant community we share our lives with, we lack the numbers to provide them an effective defense. That is why I wish to tap your strength, if I may."

She closed with another cheerful smile.

In contrast to her astounding looks, the way she spoke was oddly calming. They must have been a long-lived race, indeed—she must've seen a lot over the years. The issue was whether she could be believed. Someone as strong as Ifrit—several of them, living in this community or whatever—not even they could handle the orcs. Did she want to use us as bait, maybe? Or was there some other goal?

"You speak of a 'root cause,'" Hakuro said. "Does that mean you know what is happening in the forest now?"

"I do," Treyni responded without hesitation. "An orc lord is invading it with a vast force in tow."

The freely given revelation plunged the conference room into silence once more.

“Should we take that to mean,” Benimaru finally said, “you have confirmed the orc lord’s presence?”

“You may. And if they were to turn their sights upon our community of treants, we have no effective way to resist them. They cannot move from where they are rooted, and their mystical magic can do little against an orc race unafraid of death. We could perhaps sear them with flame magic, rendering them into ashes, but that could backfire upon the tree people, and none have mastered it anyway. And anything more powerful than that—anything that could strike an entire army at once—would wipe the treants out with it. That…”

Treyni paused, sizing us all up before once again focusing her gaze squarely upon me.

“In addition, we have found that a high-level magic-born is working behind the scenes to support this orc lord. As dryads, we must prepare for this. We are unsure which demon lord might be behind them all, but we are not interested in letting these intruders do whatever they like with our forest.”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle even more as she spoke. As one of the most powerful creatures of the forest, Treyni exuded a presence in the room that was electric. It was like energy coursed across her entire body.

“Well, we’d like to help, but what did you want us to do, exactly?”

“I would like you to defeat the orc lord,” Treyni immediately replied.

This rendered everyone speechless. “Whoa,” I protested, “this monster is, like, crazy-ass strong, isn’t it? Why would someone like me have to take him on?”

Treyni responded with a quizzical look. “But the ogre mages here are intending to fight against the orcs, though, aren’t they? And you plan to contribute to the effort yourself, right? You were the one who extended a hand to save all those defenseless goblins, not long ago. I

had thought you would show similar kindness to us and the treants."

She smiled again.

I wasn't sure what sources she was tapping, but Treyni seemed to know a remarkable amount about what happened in this forest. She must have looked at my assorted exploits in this world and concluded that I was a sort of omnipotent good samaritan. Perhaps the secluded lives the dryads led caused them to assume the best of everybody they met.

Did it ever occur to her that we—okay, *I*—might stab her in the back? The smile made it impossible to tell, but as our eyes met, I could feel it in my gut—this was no liar in front of me. I decided to trust my instincts.

If her story was true, we really did have an orc lord on our hands, as well as a high-level magic-born lurking around behind him. I didn't know exactly how I could contribute to the cause yet, but if she trusted in me, I might as well repay the favor.

I took a deep breath. But before I could speak: "Of course! To our leader, Sir Rimuru, the orc lord is no more of a threat than a passing cockroach!"

Shion stole my thunder, a bold look of determination on her face. *Geez. I'm not a god or anything. Wish she could've conferred with me first. And why's it already a given that I'm the one doing the orc slaying around here?*

Before I could protest, Treyni gave me another smile. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Then it's just as I have heard. I wish you great luck against the orc lord, then!"

And that was that.

*

I had been more or less pushed into the orc lord–slaying role by

Shion, but that didn't mark the end of the conference. We kept going, while Treyni joined us for the rest.

On the map, in the marshland area, was a wooden board with LIZARDMEN written on it. Behind it, another one marked GOBLINS. In front of it was the spot where the two different orc contingents were going to cross paths. Putting it all down on the map like this made the sheer size of the orc force stark in our minds, but my eyes were turned elsewhere.

"You know," I said, "if that idiot from before decided to stage an attack on the lizardman HQ right now, he'd seize it pretty darn quick, wouldn't he?"

Indeed. Gabil, the so-called lizardman envoy. If he decided to raid the lizardmen's home turf while their main force was busy tangling with the orcs, he'd be greeted with only skeletal resistance. The caverns would be his in the blink of an eye. And the goblin forces were already in perfect position for it.

"You're sure these are the right positions, Soei?"

"I am, sir," Soei said. "The goblins are encamped in the plains by the foot of the mountain range. If they deploy their forces from there, they will do so right in the spot indicated."

I trusted him at his word—but why were they just sitting around there instead of joining up with the other lizardmen? That was the thing. But I had to remind myself that I was making some pretty big assumptions, too. Gabil had no reason to attack his fellow lizardmen. The odd way he chose to position his forces gave me pause, but there was little reason to dwell on it, I thought.

"Ah, maybe I'm overthinking it. I'm kind of an amateur at this, so —"

"...No," interrupted Hakuro, eyes sparkling. "I think you may have a point. If the main lizardman force is deployed directly in front of them, it would be easiest to try to strike from the rear. But the orcs

clearly don't have the time to try to circle behind them, and even if they attempted such folly, they could easily be attacked and routed from both sides while their lines are stretched thin. There is no reason to keep an army here."

"But what would the point be?" Benimaru countered. "Even if the goblins defeated the lizardmen, all they'd have waiting for them is death at the hands of the orc onrush."

"Perhaps. But Gabil seemed to style himself as a leader. He may want to seize the position of chief for himself."

"It is possible. And really, I see no other reason for him to position his forces here."

Gabil was certainly confident. Dreaming big. But was he really *that* brazen? "If that's what you think," I said, "if you think it's possible, then that's all the more reason why we can't team up with him."

Nobody offered any disagreement.

"Do you believe Gabil may be rebelling against his own people?" Treyni asked.

"Yeah, it looks possible, the way this map is showing it. He offered to have us join his army, but I don't think that's such a good idea anymore."

"...I see. Perhaps there is someone compelling him to do this. I will investigate."

I appreciated the gesture. But if she was covering Gabil for us, what should the rest of us be doing now?

"I would very much like to forge an alliance with the lizardmen," Hakuro said. "By ourselves, our numbers are too low. I would hate to leave them alone and defenseless, besides."

Nods around the table. Nobody seemed to have any concerns

about that.

“But whether we have an alliance or not, we’re never gonna outnumber the orcs,” I countered. “You sure they wouldn’t just treat the offer like an insult?”

The hobgoblins seemed to view that as a problem. The ogre mages laughed them off. “Sir Rimuru, you worry far too much!” Hakuro commented. “Each one of us is as powerful as an entire army. I highly doubt they would look down upon the likes of us!”

I thought he was giving himself far too much credit. It sounded like something Gabil would say, really. But apparently, he meant it.

“I will go and negotiate with them myself,” Soei said. “Is it all right if I speak with the lizardman chief on your behalf, Sir Rimuru?”

I sized him up as he awaited my reply. He certainly seemed confident. I wasn’t sure where it came from. But he seemed worth relying on.

The map had just told us to expect a clash between orcs and lizardmen before long. Assuming that was true, we had more time to save this town than I first thought. Having a general idea of the near future helped everyone else calm down a bit, too.

“Right. So we’re gonna take two different tacks. I’ll lead an advance force over to the lizardmen, and we’ll bash up the orcs together. We’ll try to win the battle, but if it starts looking bleak, that’s when we’ll go to Plan B—where, basically, we abandon the town, regroup where the treants are, and focus on defending them. We’ll probably need to call upon human aid if it comes to that, so I’ll contact Kabal the adventurer and have them help us rub out the orc lord. He’s just as much of a threat to them as he is to us, so I’m sure they’ll step up to help. Of course, this is all dependent on forming an alliance with the lizardmen. You’re gonna be key to that, Soei. Make it happen.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Soei nodded back at me. I had faith he'd come through, certainly.

"Right! In that case, feel free to talk to the lizardman chief whenever you can. Just make sure we're both equal partners in this alliance. Nobody's serving anyone else!"

"I understand," he said, then promptly disappeared, as if fading into the shadows. *He works fast, doesn't he?*

"Good. Now, if Soei messes up his job, we'll jump right to Plan B. I want all of you to be prepared for that, should it come to it."

The rest of the room nodded in agreement.

"Thank you all for accepting my sudden request," Treyni said, bowing low in my direction. "I will do my best to ensure this relationship is beneficial to us both."

"Oh, no, uh, same to you," I stammered.

She smiled a little in reply, perhaps finding my hesitation cute or something. "We will meet again, then, Leader of the Monsters—or Sir Rimuru, I should say." Then she was gone, casting her own magic to return home.

So we had our orders. It'd be great if we could form that alliance, but if not, we'd have to think on our feet a little.

"By the way, Sir Rimuru, have you any interest in contacting Gabil again?"

"Hmm… Good question, Hakuro. I think I'd like to save that for Plan B, when we get to seeking human support… Hmm, but the kingdoms are gonna need time to mobilize their forces when push comes to shove, huh? You think maybe we could just tell them there's an orc lord out there for the time being?"

"It sounds like a good idea, my lord. I will leak word to the kobold merchants. They will spread it well enough after that."

“Thanks.”

That should work for now. They’d probably want some solid evidence about the orc lord’s birth before joining forces with us, besides.

Rigurd was already outside of our conference-room hut, carrying out my orders. Even as goblin king, he still ran around all day like a chicken with its head cut off. Things were starting to happen. It was beginning to make me nervous, but there was no point stewing over it. We had to do what we could, and right now, that meant we had to prepare.

An orc lord, though, huh? Sounded pretty tricky. Stealing people’s skills sounded awfully unfair, not that I was really one to talk. But I had been sweet-talked into confronting him, and I couldn’t disappoint Treyni now. I wasn’t at all sure about my chances, but I had made the agreement, and I’d go at him with everything I had.

If I screwed this up, I’d have no chance of carrying out the promise I made to Shizu. I had to think about the future, even if the thought depressed me a bit.



The orcish army stormed across the forest, feet stamping against the soil; entire trees toppled along the way.

Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them!

Such was the thunderous chant of the orcs as they marched along, their yellow eyes sparkling with rage.

They were not capable of thought in the normal way. In their eyes, anything that moved was prey. They were eternally hungry, and the whole of their consciousness was devoted to filling their empty stomachs.

Whump.

Another one down. Those surrounding him were overjoyed. They had prey now. At one point, they might have been friends—but now, he was just a slab of something edible. He looked like he was still breathing, but all that meant to the others was that his meat was fresh.

Those lucky enough to have been marching alongside him immediately took to taking the body apart. The liver was taken to the leader of their little group, with the rest snatched up on a first come, first served basis.

Crunch, rip, smack.

The air was quickly filled with the repulsive sounds of flesh and bone being torn apart.

They were forever hungry. And the hungrier they got, the more powerful they became in battle. That, right there, was the hidden benefit of the unique skill known as Ravenous. The more orcs that fell and were eaten—the hungrier the survivors grew—the stronger it made the entire army.

They numbered two hundred thousand, a city's worth of famished slaves under the orc lord's rule. There would be no salvation for them, as they worked feverishly to fill their stomachs…

It was all too futile an effort in this endless hellscape.

Now the homeland of the ogres was before them. The orcs were D-ranked monsters. The ogres, with a grade of B, made them cower in fear—never in their dreams would they dare challenge them to a fight.

But look at them now…

Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them!

They never stopped. If anything, the hunt for prey made them go faster.

Their comrades fell as the ogres raged, exercising the full brunt of their powers, slashing them apart, caving in their skulls with the handles of their axes…

But all it meant was that the orcs suddenly had a bountiful supply of fresh meat. They were thrilled, hoping against hope that it'd help stave off the hunger for at least one passing moment.

An ogre fell. Several orcs immediately pounced, bathing in his blood as they gnawed at his body. But…ahh, it didn't work. It filled nothing.

But now look. The orcs' bodies were changing. The power of the ogre was now within them. And now the ogres were swallowed up by the supposedly inferior orc hordes, screaming their last, pained at the seeming uselessness of their powers.

And slowly but surely, some among the orcs began to manifest new, unexpected abilities.

The strength of the companions I eat becomes my own!

The power of the prey I consume becomes my own!

The eating continued.

None were afraid of death. Any sense of fear in their minds had been consumed right alongside the flesh of their comrades. And the power flowing within them was now making its way to the king. Their king. The orc lord, the one at the top of the food chain.

The march continued. Their next prey was right in front of them.

The lizardman chief shuddered when he heard the report. The thing he feared most was now reality.

According to the messenger, the stronghold of the powerful ogre race was destroyed before the day had even ended. As if swallowed whole by the orc horde.

There was no longer any doubting it. The orc lord was here.

In terms of sheer statistics, these were still D-ranked orcs, two hundred thousand of them or not. Ten thousand C-plus-level lizardmen, playing on their home turf in the marshes, had every chance of fighting evenly, or better. But if the thing he feared the most—an orc lord—was on the scene, nothing about them was D rank any longer.

If they had completely overwhelmed the ogres, that was an indicator of their power—from the guy up top, all the way down to the lowliest peon in the army. They may not be as powerful as ogres, no, but you could put a plus sign next to that D, at the very least. And any orcs who were at knight level or higher would be at least a C. Hell, at this point, they might be leaning toward C-plus, matching the lizardmen's grade.

It would be hard enough to fend off such a massive army attempting to strike them at their weakest link. But if there was no meaningful difference in strength at the infantry level now, they had no chance. The presence of the orc lord meant that holing up in the caverns and attempting to weather out a siege would be pointless. It was one thing if they had reinforcements, but shutting off all potential exits would simply make the lizardmen starve, not the orcs.

They would simply have to throw themselves against them. It was a bitter decision for the chief, but one that had to be made.

Gabil, sent away to gain the goblins' support, had yet to report back. They couldn't waste time searching for him—it would only make their foes even more of a threat. The chief began to fear that he would

have to lead the forces himself.

A soldier ran up, shouting.

"Chief! We have an intruder! He wishes to meet with you in the limestone grotto entrance!"

The chief's guards readied their spears in response. "Calm yourselves," he said. He could feel the presence of a strong aura nearby—more powerful than anything he had felt before—and he realized it wouldn't pay to do anything to stoke its owner's anger. Any battle would lead to untold casualties, most likely, and he couldn't detect any hostility to the aura anyway.

"Whoever it is," he said as he composed himself, "he is very brave, coming here alone. I would like to see him. Bring him over."

"But what about the risk, my lord?"

"This aura is on the level of a magic-born's. If we wish to drive him away, we will have to pay dearly for it. He does not seem to be an immediate threat, so we have no reason to immediately threaten him."

"Shall we line the chamber area with our elite troops, then?"

"Please. But I want no one to move an inch until I give the order. Make that clear."

"Yes, my lord!"

The chief nodded to his royal guard and waited for the uninvited guest to appear. They were in a natural labyrinth, one with countless hidden nooks and crannies. If this magic-born-level foe attempted to cause any trouble, they would have ways of handling it—if it came to the worst-case scenario, that is. The chief's hope was that they could talk this out instead.

Now the aura drew nearer, its size telling the chief everything he

needed to know. *Anything foolish*, he thought, *and not even a hundred of my elite force may be enough to defeat him.*

After a few more moments, one of his men brought a single monster into his chamber. He was dark-skinned, his hair black with hints of blue, and eyes a lighter blue that were cold as ice. He was about as tall as your average lizardman—not gigantic by monster standards, but he looked composed, impervious, ready for anything.

The power he seemed to exude was overwhelming in itself, even as he was surrounded by several lizardman warriors to keep him in check. A hundred other troops were stationed around the chamber, ready to leap at this visitor whenever their chief instructed.

The chief looked at the visitor, then resigned himself. *If this goes wrong*, he thought, *I may have just wasted the lives of everyone in this room*. Such was the extent of this monster's aura, exponentially larger than anything he knew.

"My apologies," the chief began. "We have been so busy with our own preparations that I fear I cannot provide you with the proper courtesy you deserve. May I ask what brings you here?"

His choice of words angered the younger lizardmen in the chamber. What need was there for all this politeness before a complete unknown like this? The chief appreciated their concern, but now he was anxious. If they did anything to displease this visitor, they may never step out of this chamber again. The young warriors had far too little experience and lacked the ability to accurately gauge their foes. They hadn't lived as long as the chief nor developed their danger-sensing skills like he had.

But not caring at all about the chief's concerns, the monster spoke.

"My name is Soei. There is no need for excessive ceremony. I am merely a messenger."

Betraying the chief's worst fears, the monster serenely introduced himself. There was nothing savage about his demeanor as he regarded

the chief, not caring at all about the grumbling guards around him.

Soei, is it? A named monster. That would explain the overwhelming sense of power anyway. And this named monster was being employed by someone else—a thought that made the chief imagine a cold sweat running down his back.

"Allow me to state my business. My master wishes to form an alliance with you and has requested that I make the necessary arrangements. I feel we have good news for you—my master cannot bring himself to simply watch idly as the orcs decimate your ranks. That is why he has requested this alliance."

It was no nightmare scenario for the chief after all. This "master" did sound a tad uppity and forceful, yes, but some aspects of the offer deserved to be heard. The chief thought—about this monster, Soei, and the goals of the one he served. Whoever he was, he was working against the orcs, at least.

"Before I respond to your proposal, may I ask you a question?"

"Let me hear it."

The reply was simple, but it confirmed to the chief that the other side was willing to negotiate. It came as a relief.

"Well, then… If it is an alliance you seek, is it safe to assume that your master is willing to work alongside us as we confront the orcs?"

"Indeed. As I told you, he does not wish to see you annihilated. He wishes to fight alongside you, if possible."

"Then let me ask another question. What does your master think is the root cause behind this orc activity?"

Soei fell silent for a moment. A bold smile began to cross his face. "Are you asking whether it is an orc lord we are dealing with? Then let me give you a piece of information I guarantee is the truth. My master, Sir Rimuru, has received a request from the dryads, the

wardens of the Forest of Jura, to slay the orc lord. He has solemnly promised to do the deed. I hope you will consider that as you make your decision."

This reply offered even more for the chief than he expected. The revelation that dryads were involved caused everyone in the room to stir. And the man before him had just confirmed that the orc lord was very, very real. Whatever master this monster served—did he have the power, truly, to defeat this menace?

Considering Soei had dropped the name of the dryads, one of the top-level presences in the forest, it seemed safe to assume he was telling the truth. Nobody was dumb enough to speak of dryads if doing so would spark their ire. It was said they could see all and hear all, through the very trees that populated the forest. All forest residents knew that their names must be handled with respect.

The term *alliance* suggested that the lizardmen would not be subjected to servitude. They would be treated as equals. It was an offer, the chief reasoned, that had to be taken.

But before he could speak, another group of lizardmen bounded into the chamber.

"Chief! There is no need to listen to such talk!"

"Indeed! We are the proud lizardman race! Why does some total stranger think he can simply stroll in and curry our favor?"

They were Gabil's men, part of the group that stayed behind while their leader set off to secure the goblins' support. The chief had bidden them to stay, fearing them too hotheaded to be useful in delicate negotiations with the goblins, and now he was paying for that error.

He wished he could click his tongue and make them vanish. Certainly, there was no telling exactly how powerful this master and his people were. But simply dismissing them out of hand, over the authority of their chief?

This visitor was demanding a lot, it was true, but he was a messenger, and these rank-and-file lizardmen had no right to treat him like garbage. Besides, the visitor's demands were not, in themselves, a problem. The envoy represented a monster powerful enough to be relied upon even by dryads.

In terms of level, he must have been equivalent to the lizardmen or higher. And in the world of monsters, it was all about survival of the fittest. Here was a higher-level presence seeking their help. Any perceived rudeness could be quickly forgiven. Even this envoy possessed a frightening amount of force, a magic-born through and through. Get on his wrong side, and he could easily become their enemy—and taking on a magic-born like this before the orc horde arrived would be the epitome of foolishness.

The chief eyed Soei, trying to read his emotions. The envoy's eyes were still squarely upon the lizardman leader. *Whew*. That was a relief. He couldn't afford to let a witless bystander ruin this offer.

"Silence!" he shouted, shutting down the chamber as he signaled to his guards with his eyes. "I will be the one who decides what we do. You do not have the right to intervene. Take them to the brig! A night spent in there should help them see the error of their ways."

The two transgressors were quickly whisked away, shouting "Chief, please reconsider!" and "Sir Gabil will never allow this!" But they no longer mattered. He turned back toward Soei and lowered his head.

"Please forgive the rudeness of my people. I think I would like to pursue this alliance with you. However, the affairs I must deal with at the moment force me to remain here. Under normal circumstances, I would love to confer with your master at the location of our choice, but I am afraid I cannot spare a single moment. Would it be possible for him to come to me instead?"

He swallowed nervously. This was asking a lot, he knew, of someone much more powerful. He knew it could anger the envoy easily enough—but Soei showed no concern at all.

“I accept your apology. I am sure my master will be delighted to hear your reply, and I look forward to working together with you. In that case, I will make the necessary arrangements to bring our forces here—you will get to meet Sir Rimuru yourself then, I imagine.”

Soei’s demeanor suggested he never thought for a moment the chief would turn him down. *Or*—the chief suddenly thought—*if I* did *turn him down, that would be it. The end of the lizardmen’s luck.*

And that is no idle speculation, he thought. *Without this meeting today—without this alliance—our people could very well have perished.*

The envoy, Soei, had declared that the orc lord was real. The worst-case scenario in the chief’s mind was already in motion, and now there was a glimmer of hope that they could survive it. It filled the chief with a great sense of relief.

“Let us convene together, then,” Soei said, “seven days from now. I ask that you do not hurry yourselves into any type of conflict before then. I would also advise you to watch your backs for the time being as well.”

“Very good. I look forward to meeting your master.”

The monster nodded at the chief, then disappeared from the spot, without a sound, as if fading into the shadows.

Seven days. *That would be enough*, he thought. Hole up in their caverns to keep the orcs from getting any stronger, and wait for their reinforcements. He didn’t know what kind of numbers his newfound friend would bring, but even someone as powerful as Soei alone would be a great help. If his so-called master was taking on the orc lord himself, then the lizardmen needed to grant him all the support they could. It was an uncertain, wait-and-see approach, but it certainly beat risking their lives in a confrontation that offered almost no chance of survival.

Now, at least, the chief knew what must be done.

“Prepare for a siege, men! We must reserve our fighting strength until the reinforcements arrive!”

“““Yes, my lord!”””

And so the lizardmen holed up in their natural labyrinth, lying low and quiet for the clash to come.



Gabil opened his eyes. It took a moment for him to recall what had happened. When he finally did, he shot out of bed, livid.

“Are you awake, my lord?!” the lizardman serving him said.

“Yes. I apologize for alarming you. I must have fallen into his trap…”

“His trap?”

“Indeed. That impudent fool and his clever tricks…”

“…Meaning, sir?”

“Meaning that fighter who defeated me was the *true* leader of the village.”

“What?!”

His men began nervously conversing with one another, digesting this devastating piece of news. It explained a lot, in their minds.

“The little sneak pretended that slime was their leader to distract my attention. He played the part of some foolish peon, then struck me right when my guard was down!”

“Of all the dirty tricks, my lord!”

“And to think the direwolves, of all the monsters, are willingly cooperating with such a small-minded weasel. So much for the so-

called masters of the plains! Just a bunch of mangy dogs, in the end."

"The work of a coward, through and through! Unworthy of ever crossing blades with a warrior such as yourself, Sir Gabil!"

"Quite, yes. I offered him a chance to duel with me, fair and square, and now I see how much of an error in judgment that was!"

"Ah, I…I see, sir. Indeed, there would be no other way I could imagine you tasting defeat otherwise."

"Bah! Curse those wretched direwolf beasts and those conniving hobgoblins! Just because they happened to be blessed with a round of evolution, my lord, they walk around like they own the world! If they think they can measure up to the lizardmen, we had all best relieve them of that idea with haste!"

Gabil gave his men an appreciative nod. It was true. He couldn't imagine any other reason why he lost that confrontation. That, and the direwolves proved to be a sore disappointment. All that talk of their pride, their flawless teamwork, and here they were sharing their fates with a bunch of underhanded lowlifes.

"Anyone who uses such cowardly tactics against me is worthless!" he spat out, still livid.

"Perhaps it was for the better we did not side with them, then."

"I would say so, yes!"

"Indeed, indeed…"

Gabil basked in the ego-massaging from his men. Then he let out a hearty laugh. As far as he was concerned, he wasn't defeated at all.

"Come to think of it," another man said, "I do find it odd, Sir Gabil, that you have remained at the rank of warrior lord for all this time."

"What?" Gabil replied, sneering at the lizardman.

“N-no, I…I do not mean you are unworthy of the post, my lord. Quite the opposite! I just feel it a wasted opportunity of sorts, you serving that feeble old man for all this time.”

“Keep going.”

Now Gabil was on his side. The lizardman straightened his posture, relief coursing over him.

“I feel, Sir Gabil, it is about time we allow our chief to go into retirement and establish you as the new lizardman chief. Ah, if only that were already the case! Then, perhaps, we would not be so thrown by the orcs as we are now.”

The others quickly stepped up to agree.

“Exactly! Once Sir Gabil shows his true strength, that stubborn old fool will soon take the hint and step aside. It will be a new era for the lizardman people, and nothing would make me happier than seeing it come to life!”

“Very true! It is time for a new wind to blow across our homeland!”

Gabil nodded at the shouted adulation. He felt, finally, that the time was ripe.

“Ah,” he said, “so you were all thinking the same thing? I was just considering that the time had come to act myself. Will you be willing to fight alongside me, then?”

He sized up his men. They were all looking at him, eyes full of passion. He liked what he saw. They were envisioning a new epoch in lizardman history, one they would have a direct part in engineering. Soon, Gabil felt, they would be his most trusted advisers, offering the support he would need as he led his species to a new generation of bountiful glory.

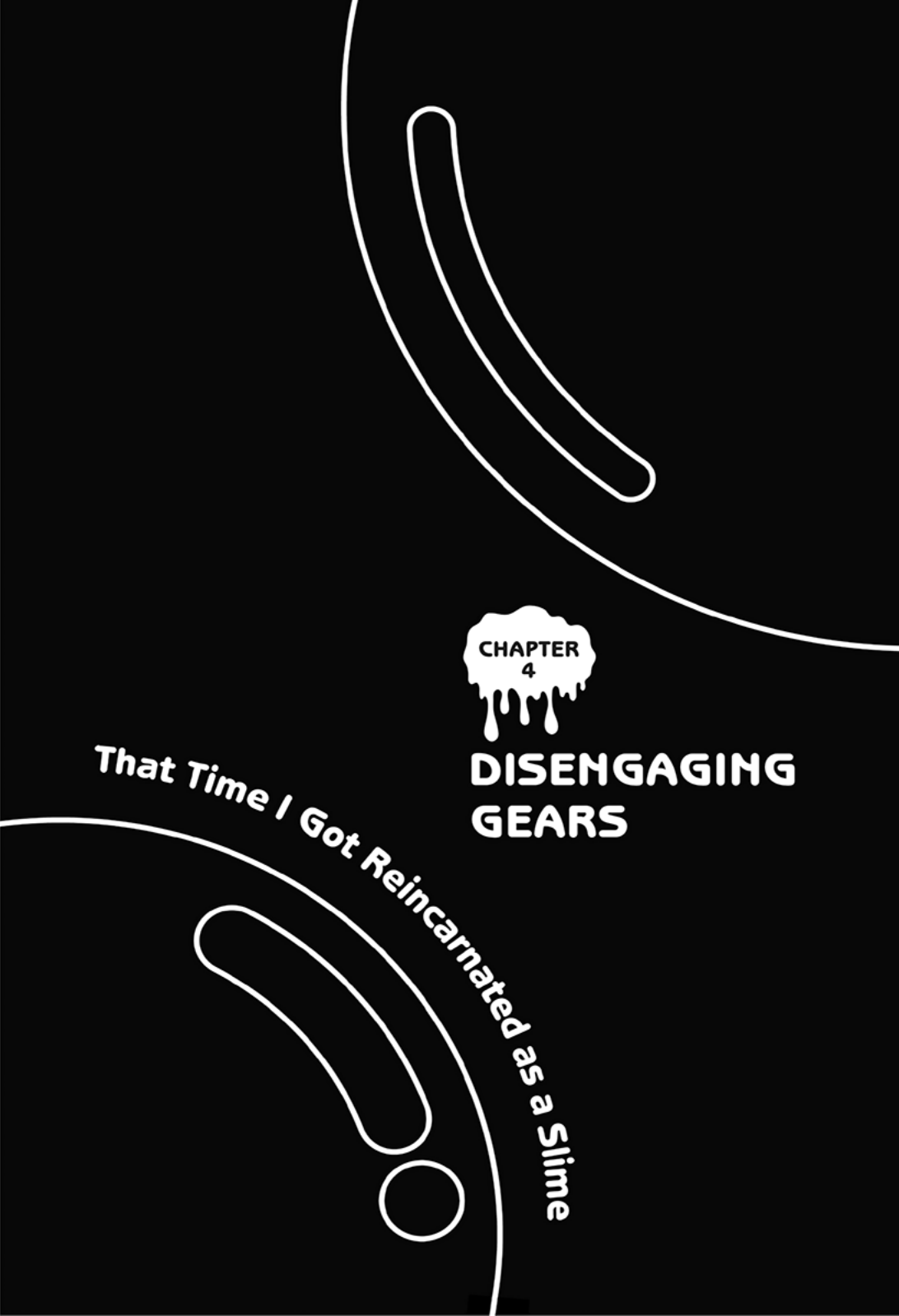
“We will, sir,” one said, “if you are willing to lead us.”

That was the chance Gabil was waiting for. He nodded sagely.

“Then the new era is here,” he proclaimed. “Very well! Let us all stand together!”

The echoes of the ensuing cheers lingered for what seemed like minutes afterward.

The fool had finally climbed onstage. The farce was about to begin.


CHAPTER
4
DISENGAGING
GEARS
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 4

DISENGAGING GEARS

The lizardman chief nodded at the latest war report.

It had been four days since his conference with Soei. Three days remained until the two armies would come together formally, but for that day, it looked like they could pass yet another night without any major losses.

The orcs' attack was, as they expected, severe. The corridors were teeming with them, pouring in like a flood. As labyrinthine as the caverns were, that didn't matter as much if it was covered from corner to corner with the enemy. They had set traps in some of the chambers to whittle down the numbers a little, and that was about all the offense they had attempted.

But not a single lizardman life had yet been lost. They had focused on the defense effort, trying to keep casualties as low as possible, and it was paying off. Their knowledge of the caverns played a major role, as did the lizardmen's ever-rising morale. The network of cave paths ensured that their escape routes and emergency access passages remained untouched. The teams facing the brunt of the orc attack switched in and out in shifts, ensuring that only the bare minimum of troops engaged the enemy at any one time.

The lizardmen had their chief's uncommon leadership skills to thank for their success so far. But the chief refused to rest on his laurels. He knew that things were still under control mainly due to the promise of coming reinforcements. The warriors who had actually fought the orcs reported on the astonishing amount of strength their foes exhibited—a far cry from anything an orc should be capable of. It was clearly the result of their orc lord's special skills, and if they had opted for a full-frontal clash, the lizardmen would have been decimated.

They had lost nobody, but only because of their single-minded focus on defense. The lizardmen's elite troops had not seen their

defensive networks penetrated yet, but with the sheer numbers they faced, they couldn't let their guard down for a moment. They had to keep their foes from growing any more powerful, no matter what.

For now, everyone among the lizardmen had to admit that the chief was right. He had strict orders in place—if any fighter was wounded, he was to be replaced on the front lines immediately. Anyone dying in battle would be consumed by the orcs, and that would only make them stronger. Everyone understood that they needed to be careful, thorough, and that the defensive lines must be protected at all costs.

And it was only for three more days. Three more days until the reinforcements came, and they could stage a counterattack. Then they could use the caverns to their advantage and fight back—or, at least, devote more men to offense instead of defense. Little by little, they all believed, it would turn the tables and bring this seemingly endless stalemate to an end.

It was a hopeful scenario for the chief to picture, one that relieved him a little.

And it was at that moment when an aide told him that Gabil was back...



Gabil was beside himself with anger.

What is this? he thought as he hurried to the chief. *The proud lizardmen, burrowing in their holes like cowards, hiding from the pigs... Well, no worries now. I have returned. And now we can fight with the pride of true lizardmen.*

"It gladdens me to see you again, Gabil. Were you able to gain the confidence of the goblins?"

"Yes, my lord! They only number approximately seven thousand, but I have their support, and they await our orders."

“I see. Hopefully they will be of service to us.”

“Are we off to battle, then?” Gabil asked, his tone already growing confrontational. He was back, and he had no interest in letting the pigs have the initiative. He was sure the chief—his father—had been waiting for his arrival with bated breath.

But the reply he received was nothing like what he expected.

“Mm? No, not yet. While you were away, we received a request to form an alliance. Their forces are set to arrive here three days from now. I plan to wait for them, formally agree to the alliance, then discuss strategy at that point. After that, we will go on a full offensive.”

The news was a complete surprise to Gabil. It did not sit well.

What? Our chief wasn’t waiting for me at all?!

Relying on these mystery reinforcements from who knows where, all for the sake of defeating a stupid little herd of pigs? It was unacceptable to Gabil.

“My chief, if I take the lead, the pigs will be eliminated in a flash. Please, give me your order to strike them down!”

“No,” came the cold reply. “We begin three days from now. You had best rest yourself today. You must be exhausted.”

The chief was wholly uninterested in the idea. Gabil seethed with anger. Tossing him aside in anticipation of these reinforcements? Unforgivable.

“Chief… Father, you have to get ahold of yourself! I fear your advanced age is making you fail to see reality!”

“What?”

“What is the meaning of this, Sir Gabil?” the head of the chief’s

guard asked, while the chief himself eyed his son suspiciously.

Gabil sized the two up, his gaze filled with pity. He felt oddly calm now. He had been patient with his father as the leader up to this point. There was much about him that he still respected—even he had to acknowledge his innate leadership skills.

CHAPTER 5

THE GREAT CLASH

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

He certainly did not hate his father, the leader of all lizardmen. If anything, it was his desire to earn the praise of his chief that drove him from day to day. The refusal to give him any rankled Gabil. *In that case*, he reasoned, *let me stand above him and make him recognize me*. That was the best way to word it, though Gabil's pride made that difficult for him to accept, deep down.

He nodded, then sent the signal to his men.

"Father," he bellowed across the chamber, "your era has ended. Starting today, I will serve as the new chief of the lizardmen!"

With the declaration, a battalion of goblins swarmed into the chamber, stone-tipped spears aimed at the chief and his guard. Gabil's own elite guard stood by him, ensuring there would be no unwelcome resistance from the outside hallway.

"Gabil, what is the meaning of this?!" the chief spat out, at a higher octave than usual. It was a rarity to hear—and it only made Gabil feel even more superior.

"Father, I thank you for everything you've done for us. Now, I want you to leave the rest to me and enjoy life in retirement."

With another order, Gabil's team disarmed the chief and his guard.

"Answer me, Gabil! What is the meaning of all this?!"

"Perhaps, Father, using our mazelike corridors to fight the orcs was a good idea. But it spreads our fighters out too sparsely around the entire structure. We have no way of staging a useful counterattack, and it dooms us to exhaustion sooner or later."

"Don't be ridiculous… I told you, once we confer three days from now, we will get back on the—"

"Too little, too late! We are lizardmen! We are strong, and that strength is at its best in our homeland, the marshes. It is in those

muddy, flooded regions where we are at our most mobile, and our enemy at its slowest. Our greatest of natural weapons. And what ruler of the marshes simply holes up in the dark and waits for their problems to go away?!"

He took the chief's weapon in hand, a spear that served as the symbol of the lizardman leader. It was a Vortex Spear, a magical weapon to be wielded only by the strongest of tribal warriors, and as far as Gabil was concerned, he was born to hold it.

Now he could feel the power within it, a sure sign that the spear had accepted its new master for all time. Looking down at the chief and his guard, he held his new weapon high in the air for them to see.

"The spear has accepted me. Lizardmen require no alliances! Allow me to prove that to you!"

"Wait, Gabil! I cannot allow you to do this! At least wait until the reinforcements arrive!"

"You may leave the rest to me," he replied, ignoring the shouted plea. "You may find things a tad uncomfortable until the battle is over, but do try to hold out for me."

"Sir Gabil! My brother! You dare to betray us?!"

"Could we save family concerns for later, my sister? I am not betraying anyone. As I told you, I am going to show you what the new era will be for us lizardmen."

"That's nonsense!" replied Gabil's younger sister, the head of the chief's guard. "Everyone knows what a talented warrior you are. Why now, of all times? Is this what you truly want for us?!"

"Do you think I am joking? Get out of my sight. Take her away."

He could hear his sister shouting as the goblins hauled her out of the room. It didn't matter to him any longer. He had no intention of killing her or anything of the like, but he didn't want anyone in his

way. He would defeat the foe that the former chief found impossible to overthrow. The results would turn him into a new hero, the perfect event for establishing his position at the peak of lizardman society.

Then, he thought as his heart raced, *my father will admit it. He will admit that he was proud of me all along!*

His men were already dealing with anyone who sided with the chief, with goblins to hammer the message home. They wouldn't be expecting it anyway, their attention too focused on the orcs in front of them. They'd never expect their fellow lizardmen to attack them through the emergency tunnels.

Before long, the news had arrived—all opposition had been suppressed. Gabil sat down on his father's seat, the picture of calm composure. And then, as if waiting for this exact timing: "How's that chair feel to you, then?"

"Ah, Sir Laplace. Thanks for your hard work. It went even easier than I expected."

"Oh, lovely, lovely. Glad to be of service."

It was a masked man, one with an asymmetrical smile that made it look like he was sneering at anyone he showed it to. His clothing stuck out, too, clown-like with its rabble of colors and patterns. It was a ridiculous sight, but Gabil was unfazed. This man, Laplace, was in the employ of Gelmud, the man Gabil loved more than almost anyone else.

He had first appeared before Gabil as he was returning to his homeland with his newly earned goblins. "Laplace is the name," he began. "I used to be vice president of the Moderate Jesters, a group of…jacks-of-all-trades, you could say. Lord Gelmud has hired me to serve you—anything you need, I provide."

This Laplace did with efficiency, freeing Gabil's men from the dungeon and providing regular reports on the lizardmen's moves. It was Laplace who removed the seal on the Vortex Spear for him,

ensuring his coup ended in success.

The original plan called for Gabil and his elite guard to suppress the chief and his men while the main force was out fighting in the marshes, but with the army hunkering down in the caverns, that idea was a bust. It angered Gabil immensely, but Laplace offered an alternative path. He brought the goblins, and Gabil's own troops, right to the chief himself without arousing any attention. It was like magic, the way he led them through the escape corridors without a single lizardman noticing.

In short, Laplace was the triggerman for the entire coup.

"Aw, c'mon, Gabil," Laplace laughed. "I'm really nobody that special, no." But he was to Gabil, this man working for Gelmud.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Enough modesty, Sir Laplace," Gabil replied. "We are coworkers, after all, under the watchful eye of Lord Gelmud. Let's make it a useful relationship."

"Sir Gabil, we have all the tribal leaders in our grasp."

It was the news Gabil had been waiting to hear. Now, at long last, every branch of the military was under his control.

"Oops! Sorry if I'm in the way here. I'd best head off to my next job, then…"

"Ah yes. Sorry to detain you, Sir Laplace. I think it's time I whip those orcs and show my strength to Lord Gelmud, once and for all!"

With one final, sneering bow, Laplace disappeared from the cavern.

"You were quite helpful to me, Laplace. Lord Gelmud has so many talented people working for him… I'd best hold up my end of the bargain, then."

Gabil stood up, supremely confident. It was time to attack. He

couldn't even imagine defeat at this point, and the advice from his father failed to reach his ears. His loyal followers were now cheering his every move, especially the younger lizardmen who formed his most passionate support base.

He called each tribe leader to his chamber, ordering them to prepare for an all-out attack. To teach those pigs exactly how daring and brave the lizardmen truly were, as he put it. The order was greeted with cheers from every tribe, weary from days of siege warfare. Their former chief's order to hold the fort and prevent casualties at all costs had, ironically enough, made it all the easier for Gabil to consolidate his own power. He was giving the people what they wanted, and that made things go his way.

Gladdened by the response, Gabil sat back down. His time was here. He was confident about that. Defeating the orcs, at this point, was just a minor detail.



How could this happen…?

Waves of despair rankled the chief.

Soei's final advice—to watch his back—was referring to this, no doubt. He thought he had the people under his full control. Even the more hawkish were faithfully following his orders, solidifying their defenses. And then his own son betrayed him.

Desperation overtook him. This was a terrible situation. If it kept up, the lizardmen would be ruined before tomorrow, much less in three days.

He looked down at his chief guard—his other child, Gabil's sister. She noticed the signal and nodded. "Go!" he shouted, and the chief guard immediately slipped out of her shackles and ran off.

The alliance forces needed to be notified as soon as possible. They might get caught up in all of this otherwise. He had to prevent that.

His pride as a lizardman, and as a leader, demanded it.

That envoy, the man named Soei, didn't bother hiding his aura from him. Once they were out of this natural fortress, they might be able to follow it to wherever he was now. It was a slim chance, but it was all he had to offer his chief guard.

The lizardmen guarding the dungeon had taken measures to restrain both of them, but—perhaps out of distaste at the idea of abusing their former leader—they were not doing so with very much fervor. She quickly took advantage of that to escape.

For now, the chief felt relieved. He would have to stay here; that was his responsibility for now. All he could do was pray his daughter could complete the mission he gave her.

Only seven days. That was what he promised, and he had failed. He cursed his own worthlessness, there in his cell, and hoped it would not lead his allies to abandon him. Soei offered that alliance because, to his master, the lizardmen held some sort of value. If this coup made him change his mind, that would seal all their fates.

If this battle costs us the lives of those faithful to Gabil, so be it. Perhaps they had it coming. I just wish we could keep our women and children safe…

They had yet to even formally enact the alliance. The chief fully understood that he was wishing for the stars. But one desire still ruled over him—the desire that this tragedy wouldn't spell doom for all the tribes he oversaw. He felt he owed them that much, after all these years, and no one could blame him for it.

The chief had a good idea of what was about to happen. Once Gabil was in control of all the tribes, he would immediately order an attack. They would have nothing left in the corridors, not even any defense mechanisms. Without any fresh soldiers to replace the wearied frontline fighters, and against an orc force that grew stronger as the fight wore on, it would only be a matter of time before their defense began faltering.

The women and children of each tribe had been evacuated to a chamber deep in the heart of the maze. They would then have nobody to protect them.

How did this happen?

Wailing about it now was pointless.

I will have to be the cornerstone of our final defense. I have to…at least…buy them a little more time…

Just a little more time. That was the best he could offer right now.



On that day, the marshes were completely covered in orcs. An observer in the air would have seen them swarming for the cavern entrances like so many ants.

But even that was only a small part of the horde. Many were still in the forest, making their way toward the marshland region. And the main force, marching northward along the river, was still coming. They faced no resistance, nothing preventing them from covering the marshes and descending upon the caverns like an avalanche.

Now, though, there was a commotion in one small corner of the horde—the first clash between orc and lizardman out in the marsh.

In these lands, the lizardman was king. Powerful in combat, they were capable of nimble, quick movements in the muddy, overgrown swamps they called home. That was how the battle began—a handful of fighters hiding in the tall grasses, sneaking up on a clutch of orcs.

Everything was going exactly as Gabil had hoped. His father, the former chief, and all those still loyal to him were shut up in a large underground chamber, and now he was back on the surface to reorganize his newly united troops, taking full advantage of the twisty access paths that crisscrossed over one another inside. The defensive

forces were still in place—Gabil planned to wrap up the fight before they exhausted themselves.

He didn't have an exact bead on the number of troops at the orcs' disposal, but judging by the natural abilities of the two races, he figured there was nothing to worry about unless they were outnumbered ten to one or so. So what if they were throwing a ton of orc bodies at them? That didn't change the core fundamentals of this matchup.

Plus, he had ordered his fighters to take a stick-and-move approach, dealing a blow or two and quickly falling back, just in case. Staying on their toes like that would let them regroup as often as necessary, readying themselves for the next strike.

Over time, it would cull the orc numbers drastically, dealing them a decisive blow. The orcs on the inside would lose contact with the outdoor forces, and with that, they'd be forced to retreat.

The lizardmen's natural agility in these marshes made that strategy possible. Gabil was no talentless fool. He lacked his father's ability to instantly gauge the entire theater of war in one glance, but the way he led his fighting men and women was worthy of praise. He had inherited a lot of talent from the former chief. Lizardmen were naturally attracted to the strong, the powerful—merely talking a big show wouldn't be enough. Gabil's men loved him, and the love proved that he was more than just bravado and mindless courage.

But would it be enough?

The final line of defense, the forces tasked with guarding the largest underground chamber, numbered a thousand strong. That room was now filled with nothing but women and children—noncombatants. The grown women could fight if it came to that, but there was no use relying on them. That was why a thousand fighters were defending them, spread out across the assorted hallways linked to this room.

Each defensive line planned to gradually fall back over time, grouping en masse around the site of the final stand. Everyone else—seven thousand goblins, around eight thousand battle-ready lizardmen—was under the direct control of Gabil. The new chief believed they could win in straight combat, without using whatever geographical advantages the labyrinth offered. Thus, only a skeletal defense team was left inside, every remaining available soldier sent off to the marshes.

The initial strike came as a complete surprise to the orcs, who found their battalions cut off from one another and heavily damaged. The stragglers who managed to flee the lizardmen were subsequently isolated, making them ripe for the picking by the gangs of goblins. For a bunch of freshly minted soldiers, they performed magnificently, following Gabil's orders to the letter. As they should have. Their lives were riding on this, too.

It was hard to predict in advance, but the armies under Gabil were showing a remarkable amount of synergy. So far, so good.

Behold! Gabil thought. *There was no need to fear this herd of pigs at all. My father's age has clouded his mind. He fretted far too much about matters. Once he sees what I am capable of out here, I am sure he will recognize me as the new chief. We'd best clear the marsh of these pigs before long…*

Gabil wanted this to be decisive. He wanted no room in his father's mind for doubt about his son's superior abilities. And even now, the cheering he heard in the distance seemed to indicate he was on the right track.

Look at that! These orcs could never hold a candle to us lizardmen!

He liked what he saw, as he surveyed the marshes before him. But this would be the end of his streak of luck. He had been expecting piles of dead orcs, and their foes' morale subsequently crumbling. He was not aware of what made the orc lord a truly terrifying foe. His

father did—and now, that single difference of opinion was making its presence known.



Splish, crunch, splish, crunch.

The orcs appeared to be advancing over the bodies of their kindred, on all fours, attempting to gain purchase over the muddy land. It was only when one grew closer that the truth became clear.

It was actually a banquet, a feast upon the dead, and it was enough to make an observer's hair stand on end. Even the most seasoned fighters on the lizardman side felt sick to their stomachs viewing it.

An eerie aura began swirling around the orcs. One fighter, rearing back in horror at the scene, lost his footing. The orc soldiers immediately seized upon his body, dragging it through the mud, ripping all the limbs off. The first lizardman casualty of the battle, and the turning point for the entire war.

The orcish infantry gnawing on the bare flesh were transferring the lizardman's abilities to the orc lord himself. It would not be a perfect duplicate like the ones Rimuru could engineer with his Predator skill, but it had one advantage: It could give the caster not only the consumed victim's skills, but also their innate physical traits. Whatever the orc lord managed to absorb from the body, he could then feed back to the rest of his army.

This was known as the Food Chain, another ability unlocked by the Ravenous skill. It let the orcs function both as a horde, and as a single conscious entity. Ravenous did not work the way a well-trained direwolf pack did, but the effects it could have on an enemy could be just as devastating.

It was exactly why the lizardman chief feared, above everything else, losing any of his men in battle. Doing so meant losing any inherent advantage his species brought to the table. Even if the orcs

couldn't fully seize the skills of their foes, they could still gain some feature of the lizardmen—and it would instantly be gifted to every member of the horde. Perhaps they'd grow webbing around their feet, letting them more freely move through the mud. Or perhaps scales would spontaneously appear over the more vulnerable points on their bodies, boosting their defense. They were little changes, yes, but they would have dramatic effects on how the battle would turn out.

"Do not fear them!" Gabil shouted. "Show them the power we enjoy as the proud lizardman race!"

It was enough to inspire his men that little bit further. They knew they were fighting on familiar territory, and they were certain they had the mobility advantage. The orcs would be too bogged down to catch up with them. And even if they were outnumbered, a nimble attack on their flank would cut them off, just like before.

Or so they thought…

Matching the army's movements step by step, the orcish army stayed in formation, following their foes unerringly. They were now perceptibly quicker than before.

Huh? The orcs are moving differently…?

But by the time Gabil noticed, it was already too late. With newfound speed, the orcs spread out to the left and right, enveloping the advancing lizardman force.

In perfect order, the twenty-thousand-strong force had completely sealed off the escape route Gabil's men used to have. The new chief had pushed his men too far into the fray, placing too much confidence in their mobility and figuring they could easily get away if need be. But right now, Gabil's force was pitted against the ten-thousand-strong splinter force that had attacked the ogres, plus another thirty thousand, the advance force from the main horde. Half that number were now behind the lizardmen.

It gave Gabil pause, but only for a moment. He decided to try

breaking through the army in front of him. If things turned against him here, the lizardmen would be surrounded on all sides and annihilated—to say nothing of the much slower goblins. And while Gabil didn't see the goblins as much more than cannon fodder, he wasn't heartless enough to simply abandon the whole lot at once.

"After me, men!" he shouted as he began to run forward. "We're breaking through the orc encirclement!"

If this was a typical orcish army, one not under the effects of Ravenous, Gabil's desperation tactic might have had a chance. But now, that was only a hypothetical. The reality was much harsher.

In a moment's time, the powerful attack the lizardmen launched at the orcs before them ended with a whimper. And at that moment, the lizardman army—and by extension, Gabil himself—doomed themselves to defeat.

The encirclement was almost fully complete now, and more orcs from the main horde were flowing in. There was no refuge from the enemy, in any direction. They were like a bug surrounded by a boundless number of army ants. As much as they wanted to resist, they were doomed to fall sooner or later.

Gabil was not incompetent. In an instant, he recognized the dilemma his army faced. But as for *why* it had happened—that was beyond his intellectual skills. He knew they had been the overwhelming favorite, and all of a sudden, their attacks were having next to no effect. It was unthinkable to him.

Yet, he pressed on, trying everything his army was still capable of doing. He called for his troops, attempting to rally them back into position. The goblins were almost hysterical, and their panic was beginning to affect the lizardmen as well. He had to prevent that, no matter what, because once panic took over, the entire chain of command would fall apart. Then came defeat, and then annihilation.

He considered a retreat, but only for a moment. He knew there was no escape route left. Even if they could punch their way through

this encirclement, there was no place to escape *to* anymore.

Once he had wrested control from his father, he had ensured that all the troops under his command had exited the caverns safely—but the caverns were too tight to let them all back in. It would be a stampede if he gave the order, the entrances quickly becoming choked with crushed and mangled goblin bodies, and they would be left waiting for death at the orcs' hands.

Assuming they could even reach the caverns now. There was always the forest to flee to, but with the orcs suddenly quicker on their feet than before, all the forest offered was a future where they'd be chased down and picked off.

So no retreat. Gabil could understand that much. And now, finally, he understood why his father had taken such a conservative approach. He knew how impossibly stupid he had been.

But it was too late for regrets. What could he do right now? Not much. Nothing, in fact, apart from rallying his forces and doing whatever he could to calm their anxieties.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha!" he shouted gleefully. "Don't you start panicking on me, boys! I'm right here with all of you! We could never lose to these pigs!"

By now, he was having trouble believing it, but he had to say it anyway. His troops needed inspiration, even as their fates were quickly catching up with them.



Haah...

The chief, too, was full of regret—regret that he couldn't convince Gabil that the orc lord was a real threat and not some fairy-tale bogeyman. Now he realized that his son needed things explained in more concrete, visceral terms. He didn't place enough importance on that, and now he hated himself for it.

This is all my fault, he thought. If he had a more accurate idea of what the orc lord could do, perhaps Gabil would have been a bit more careful. But that didn't matter anymore. The chief sighed as he quelled the thought from his mind.

He still had things to do. His brethren were still in that large underground chamber, anxiety all over their faces.

In that chamber, there were four wide routes to the marshlands, along with one escape route behind them. That route connected directly to a hilltop near the foot of the mountains. It would be the long way to the forest, but it was safely away from the marshes themselves—and the corridor was a straight shot, ensuring that women and children could evacuate through it without getting lost.

Which meant that the four pathways at the front of the chamber were the main worry right now. The forces that had been launching attacks at the interior orcs had slowly, but surely, retreated back through them all. The final line of defense deployed in each one numbered around fifteen hundred at this point; not all the platoons had made it fully inside yet.

The orc numbers were high. With so many, they would discover this location soon enough. Before they did, the chief at least wanted the entire force back there, if he could.

He shot a glance back at the escape route. This was a large chamber, but it was now crowded with so many lizardmen that the space felt cramped. If the orcs swarmed in here without warning, he doubted they could all flee in time. They had best start evacuating now, while things could still be kept orderly. It would take just a single spark, a moment of panic, to plunge this room into chaos.

But what if they did all make into the forest? Would the orcs simply find and massacre them over there? It seemed plausible. And even without the orcs, the forest presented an unclear future for everyone.

For now, they needed more time. Time to wait for reinforcements,

despite the chief having no idea if they were coming or not.

But the chief didn't get to enjoy the dream for long. The sounds of battle began echoing from a corridor, accompanied by the smell of blood mixed with sweat and metal.

They're here…

Anxiety pervaded the chamber. The chief sprang into action, bringing the women and children to the rear of the chamber and positioning those who could fight up front, just in case the orcs had broken the blockade. The fighters formed an arc ahead of them, readying their spears far earlier than they expected.

All four corridors in front should have been fully blocked off. The lizardmen were instructed to pick off the orcs as they appeared, giving them no quarter regardless of how much weaker they were. The hallways were narrow enough that only a few orcs could engage at once, a welcome advantage. In a one-on-one fight, a lizardman could make quick work of any orcish soldier—and this formation, the chief thought, offered them at least a few advantages.

Things worked as the chief thought they would, at first. The orcs were stronger than normal, it was true, but the lizardmen were handling them well enough.

The forces assigned to each of the four corridors devoted themselves to staving off the hordes. They took turns at the front lines, ensuring they were careful with their work, but not even they could last forever. The corpses piled up near the exits, but the orcs simply consumed them and kept pushing forward. It was such a horrid sight that even the hardiest of the lizardmen couldn't deny the fear it began to strike in their hearts.

Then, the decisive moment came. A yellowish aura covered the orcs.

What on…? the chief thought, just as an even greater nightmare

attacked him. The orcs used to be a level below the lizardmen in strength. Now, it was disturbingly even. The difference wasn't dramatic, but it was more than enough to destroy the equilibrium from before. Quickly and efficiently, it removed any advantage the lizardmen enjoyed up to now.

Observing the battle, the chief realized they'd be lucky to last the day like this. The reinforcements would come after three days, if they came at all. It was untenable, and already they were losing good lizardmen at the defense lines.

They had to get the women and children out. It beat waiting for their doom in there.

"Listen to me! I will have to ask you all a favor. It is a grim one, but it must be carried out, or else the history of our people ends right now, on this very day. We must survive. And I will provide you the time to do it!"

Escape was pointless. It would just extend the misery they all experienced before their ultimate deaths. He knew that…but there was still one final dream he could hope for.

"You must get out of here, now, and place your trust upon the monster known as Rimuru! Now, go! Go, all of you!"

"Heh-heh-heh-heh! The path is blocked, my friend!"

A group of orcs walked out from the escape route, firmly crushing the chief's final hope. They were orc knights, clad in full-plate armor—and as they entered the light, screams began emanating from one of the four outer corridors.

Appearing behind the shouts of pain was a hideous-looking orc, his body covered in jet-black armor that was spattered with blood from head to toe. This most unusual orc was a bizarre sight, the fires of insanity burning in his eyes.

Is that…the orc lord?!

The chief was stunned as he beheld the figure, far larger than even the orc knights. But if anything, the truth was even worse.

"You will all serve as an offering to our mighty orc lord," the orc in black intoned. "We will not let a single one of you escape."

Now the chief knew who he was. He was not even the orc lord, just another one of his servants—and yet, all this power he wielded. He was an orc general, and now he was here, a heavy long-handled halberd in his hand. The mere sight of him called to mind a boundless hellscape of despair.

This is it, the chief thought, his heart crushed. *But I won't…I won't go down that easily…!*

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! You will be a worthy adversary for me, orc general. I gladly accept the challenge!"

The chief knew this was the end for himself, calmly readying his spear as he approached the general. He would be the last chief of the lizardmen, the one who led them to their final fates, and he intended to do so with pride…

●

The chief guard of the lizardmen ran through the forest, the orders still fresh in her mind. Her exact destination, though, wasn't clear. As much as she honed her senses, searching for a trace of the aura that belonged to the envoy known as Soei, she could find nothing. So instead she ran, trusting in her instincts.

Lizardmen were nimble creatures in the marshes, but less so on dry land. Her breathing was ragged, her heart felt like it would explode, and she could feel herself growing more fatigued by the second. But she never stopped running. She had a bare minimum of duty for the monster who offered them an alliance, and she intended to fulfill it.

It had been around three hours since she began running. It had

been a constant run ever since she slipped out of her bonds, and while her mind was still strong, a single moment's distraction and she was likely to fall on the spot.

She knew the truth well enough. There was no guarantee that the monster Soei was anywhere ahead of here. If he was, there was no guarantee he would lift a finger to help. The thought was starting to occur to her—maybe she should just keep running? For good? Away from home?

No! How could I betray my people? My own father?

She tried to banish the thought, focusing on other matters.

As far as she was concerned, the charge engineered by her brother Gabil was something she should have stopped. She knew that, above everything else, what her brother wanted was their father's approval. But she could never bring herself to tell the chief. She respected Gabil too much—as her brother, and as a lizardman warrior—and she thought he would become a splendid chief in time without her butting in on his affairs.

And now look at what that earned them.

Perhaps this was just the result of a hundred happenstances coinciding at once, knocking everything out of whack. But she couldn't help but think it. If only she talked things over with him more, as a sister, maybe they could've avoided all of this. And if that was the case, she had a responsibility to uphold.

No, she couldn't abandon her homeland. If she stopped running now, she'd never run again. So she kept at it.

Someone was watching her. Someone that she, running with all her might, could never have noticed. He was nimbly leaping from tree branch to tree branch, following her every move without a sound.

Now he smirked to himself, a bit of drool falling from one edge of his lips. He was waiting for the moment. The instant when her

exhaustion took her, and she could no longer move…

And when it did, he soundlessly descended in front of the chief guard.

His arms were long, like a gorilla's, his legs those of a carnivorous animal. His head and torso, however, unmistakably identified him as a member of the horrifying orcish race.

"Geh-heh-heh… You appear tired. Your muscles must be so well-toned, so delicious."

Pain filled the chief guard's eyes as she looked at the monster. He was a high-level orc, no doubt about it. And he had more with him, a few dozen behind his back. Survival was not in the cards for her.

"You…"

"Geh-heh… Bah-ha-ha-haaaaa! I am one of the generals of the orcish army. Consider it an honor to take up residence in my stomach!"

"An…an orc general?!"

The chief guard readied the spear on her back. But it was clear to everyone involved how this fight would go. She was already slowed by her fatigue, totally bereft of the strength she would need to defeat the orc general and his men.

She knew it was hopeless. But she was ready to fight anyway. Her pride dictated it.



"Oooooh yeah! Now this is getting good!"

The mysterious man did a little dance where he stood, his cheerful voice booming. His eerie-looking mask and clothing were like nothing else on this planet.

Laplace, the man who had exchanged a few words with Gabil earlier, was playing with three crystal balls, as if teaching himself how to juggle. Each one was about the size of a person's head, and images were visible inside them all. A keen-eyed observer would be able to see that each one depicted a scene from a battlefield.

All three were valuable magical items by nature, capable of seeing through the eyes of any person of one's choice and projecting their field of vision into the crystal. Only one person could be followed with each ball, and that person had to physically touch the orb to make the connection work, so Laplace could only track three at once. But that was more than enough for his needs.

He had connected the crystals to three of the orc generals he found easiest to control, and now he was using them to steal glances of the current battle. It wasn't something he took a prurient pleasure in. It was his job, part of the duties his client placed upon him. But Laplace was still taking full advantage, apparently having a blast as he peered into each orb in succession.

The war was unfolding just as he wanted it to—just as he had been enlisted to make happen. "Nice! That oughta please the boss," he said to nobody in particular.

But something was different this time. He actually got a response.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"What're...?!"

A woman appeared before the confused Laplace, a fleeting beauty to her form. Her green hair was as tangled as a wall of ivy, loosely covering her entire body, and its translucence made the contours of her frame visible.

"I am Treyni, one of the dryad wardens of the forest, and I have no intention of letting the monster tribes do as they please here. Thus, I'm afraid I must remove you."

The moment she completed her declaration, she began casting a spell. This unnerved Laplace.

“Whoa! W-wait a second! I ain’t in no monster tribe!”

“Silence. The disturbance you have caused to the forest already makes your crime clear.”

The magic began to take effect.

“Wait! Wait-wait-wait! What’s that spell…?!”

“Come to me, spiritual summon Sylphide. And with you, I summon the extra skill Unify!!”

The dryad constructed a shell of magicules over her own spiritual body. It was similar to Rimuru’s Replication—although she did not, strictly speaking, have any physical form at all, apart from the holy tree that housed her soul. Those properties allowed her to unify her spirit with others like her.

“Unified” with the high-level Sylphide, Treyni now had the ability to wield the full powers of that spirit. And what she unleashed next was one of Sylphide’s most powerful magics.

“Your judgment is here. May you pray for your ultimate forgiveness. Aerial Blade!!”

The spiritual Unification meant Treyni no longer had need for long casting times. In an instant, Laplace was locked inside a gap in the air itself—one occupied solely by great blades of air that rent everything they slashed through. There was no escape once imprisoned.

It was a fearsome move, and Laplace, if anything, weathered it well. His own intrinsic Anti-Magic skills let him escape mortal injury. All it managed to take from him was a single arm—and with a puff of smoke, the arm went into so-called Stealth Mode. This was an original skill, exclusive to Laplace, that combined illusory magic like Deception, Infiltration, and Concealment, and he was so deft at

casting it that it even let him deceive the spiritual senses of a dryad.

"Yikes. Prone to violence much, lady? You coulda let me at least get a word in edgewise… Well, my work's done here anyway, so I think I'll get while the gettin's good. See you around!"

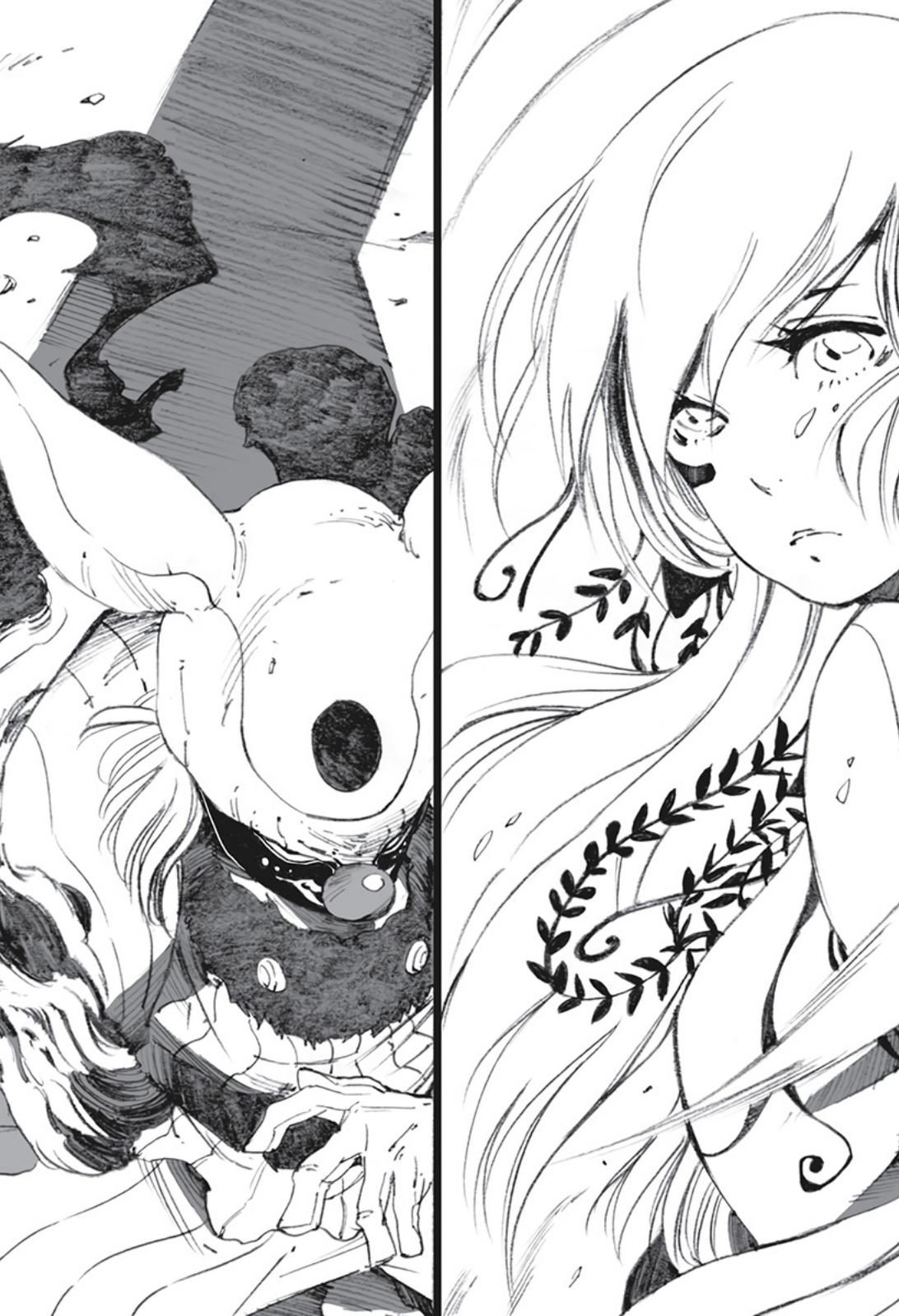
He had apparently set up several potential escape routes for himself in advance. When the smoke cleared, Laplace was gone.

"…I cannot believe he escaped my grasp," Treyni whispered. "But… not from a monster tribe? Then who are those people…?"

No one was there to answer. Treyni filed the question away for later, instead turning her eyes toward the battlefield. Running her mind through the roots of the plants that surrounded her, she used her dryad skills to swim in an ocean of information.

"Things do not appear to be going well… I wonder how much I should really be trusting him."

The whisper disappeared into the wind, just like the one before it. Traces of concern began to manifest themselves upon her face.



She should have been the one taking care of the orc lord. But she could sense someone maneuvering behind him. Until she could grasp who, she couldn't make any rash moves. And while it might not be likely, if the orc lord managed to absorb her as well, it could spell the creation of a new demon lord and make it impossible for her own sisters to handle him. That prevented her from doing too much in public.

It also prevented her from going very hard on the magic-born Laplace, giving him the chance to escape. That hurt her. The lizardmen were being consumed by the orcs out there, and she couldn't do anything about it.

But Treyni was still focused on her own role as a warden of the forest, and what that meant to her.



Gabil continued flailing away in his desperate battle. Things were getting more and more one-sided.

The orcs seemed to know no fatigue, attacking them without pause or end. The federated goblin-lizardman forces, unable to escape from their encirclement, found themselves picked off one by one. And even if Gabil tried to break through, how many of his men—wounded and in a state of total exhaustion—would follow him?

It seemed clear that now was the time to abandon the slower goblins for good. There was no room for retreat, but by this point, Gabil had to think about guaranteeing himself as many survivors as possible. Warfare, in general, stopped once it became clear who the victor was—but these orcs seemed intent on completely wiping Gabil and his force off this plane of reality. There would be no terms offered; just murder, and then the feast.

The orcs saw them as nothing but prey, and it triggered a primal sort of fear. The formation began to fall apart at the seams, the weaker-minded ones succumbing to terror like frogs being eyed by a

snake. The goblins were already a lost cause, running around like mad in search of any solace, and the orcs weren't having any of it. They chased them down, killed them, and consumed them. Not even three thousand functioned as a fighting force any longer—and to the lizardmen, a good fifth of which had fallen, the news was no less grim.

It was already becoming difficult to lead them as a cohesive army. But Gabil kept pressing his teams forward, prodding the orc lines for any possible route of escape. His tactics were impeccable, his abilities being used to their fullest.

Then a group of those orc soldiers in the black armor began to move. A well-ordered team, unlike the common rabble, and each one protected from head to toe by metal. They might have been as physically strong as any other orc, but they functioned as a trained army, and their equipment was a massive upgrade.

The orc leading them bore an aura that overwhelmed all the others, proving how much stronger he was than the rest. An orc general, as powerful as an entire tactical squadron all by himself. And he—just one of five among the horde—had two thousand stout orc knights following him. His rank was A-minus, and he answered directly to the orc lord himself, the leader's most trusted of officers.

It's over…

In Gabil's eyes, the demonstration of power was decisive.

No escape, either. Best prepare to die in battle, then…

If he wanted anything right now, it was to die like a warrior, at least.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So it's the leader of these cowardly pigs! Do you have the courage to duel me?!"

He could never win. Gabil's scale mail was already in tatters, the fatigue building across his body. His foe's armor was a work of art, enhanced with magical protection, and the aura he exuded told of his

strength.

If he accepted this invitation, at least Gabil would enjoy a glorious end on the battlefield. Perhaps he could take a general with him, if things went well enough.

“Guh-huh-huh… Very well. Let me take you.”

Striking down the enemy leader, crushing the last true support his lizardman fighters had to rely on, would make the massacre that much easier to carry out. That was the orc general’s thought, and Gabil was aware enough of that. He also knew that struggling any more than this would only lengthen the agony. Any thought of the reinforcements the chief apparently counted on was gone from his mind.

He had already selected this patch of land as the last one he would ever stand upon.

“I thank you.”

Then all was solemn as they began their duel.

Holding his magical Vortex Spear, Gabil sized up his foe, searching for any weakness.

“Come on!” the orc general howled.

“Bring it! Vortex Torrent!”

With all his remaining force, Gabil released the most powerful attack he could—a killer move, combining his latent lance skills with the magic his current weapon provided.

But…

“Chaos Eater!!”

The orc general spun his own spear in the opposite direction,

canceling out the force of Gabil's vortex. It began whirling faster and faster, unleashing its own aura that took on a sickly yellow color before descending upon the lizardman.

Is he trying to eat me?!

He rolled to the side, relying on instinct, but the aura continued to close the distance.

"Geh-heh-heh! Just another reptile," the general laughed. "Your kind deserves to slither along the ground!"

Gabil refused to give up. At least one strike; that was all he wanted. He grabbed a clod of earth, throwing it at the orc general—as childish as it must have looked, he had to deliver at least one clean blow. The attack disappeared futilely within the yellow aura, showing exactly how outclassed he was.

Gabil was too occupied with dodging the aura to focus on any other strikes.

The orc general thrusted his spear at him, a twisted smile on his face…

"Whoa! Better not get distracted, there!"

A familiar voice reached Gabil's ears. At the same time, he felt himself being launched backward, just barely avoiding the hilt of the orc general's spear.

Wh-what happened?! the confused Gabil thought. Then came a roar that deafened the battlefield, like the heavens had fallen upon it. Gabil thought it was another orc trick at first, before realizing it wasn't. Even the orcs, with their insurmountable advantage, were visibly panicking.

The tides were changing anew, and violently so.

ROUGH SKETCH



CHAPTER 5

THE GREAT CLASH

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 5

THE GREAT CLASH

Just as Gobta was reaching out to rescue Gabil, I was checking out the battle from above.

It was a pretty fearsome sight. The orcs must've thought they had a massive advantage, and now we'd just flipped the chessboard on them… Just us, and a few ogre mages, really. I couldn't blame them for freaking out. I kind of was, too.

……

……

…

After I sent Soei off to the lizardmen, I decided to start assigning battle posts. We wouldn't all head out there; I wanted a setup that could work quickly on its feet. We didn't know what we'd be dealing with, so I had to be sure we could extract ourselves fast if need be.

That was my watchword as I gave the order to prepare for war. The construction effort across town was continuing to go without a hitch, but we still had no real defenses in place. Not even an outer wall, since it'd get in the way of the building boom. No way we could weather out a siege or anything. It was much more logical to picture ourselves bringing the battle to them.

Along those lines, I told the people not joining me to prepare to travel to the treants. They might have to set off before we made it back to town.

Before any of that, though, I had to assemble all the monsters in town and tell them what we had decided on. I tried to act as kingly as possible.

"The final battle will be waged in the marshlands," I began. "If we

win there, we're good. If we don't, I'll let you know via Thought Communication, so I want you to abandon this place and flee to the treant settlement. I'll also ask the humans for help, if it comes to that, and you'll likely fight alongside them against the orcish army. I'll be honest with you; this isn't some gang of little kids. I'm planning to win this, but if I don't, don't use that as an excuse to lose your heads. You gotta stay calm and follow the plan!"

I was once again up on some kind of pedestal, like an offering to the gods. Delivering these lofty speeches was honestly embarrassing, and this whole setup made it even worse. In some ways, the idea of giving lectures like this ever again was more distasteful than the horde of orcs.

Perhaps that was why I hardly felt scared at all about our predicament. Monsters can be sensitive things and succumb to the emotions of the crowd pretty quickly. They all listened intently, picking up on the confidence I was inadvertently radiating, and I guess it worked. Maybe that embarrassing display was worth it after all.

"Now, the people joining me in the primary force…"

The monsters slowly grew more excited, not knowing what to expect. I guess they all wanted part of the action—I didn't remember them being so warlike, but who knows? Whatever. I didn't let it bother me as I continued.

"For this battle, we will deploy with a team of one hundred goblin riders with Benimaru as their commander. Hakuro will be his aide-de-camp, and Shion will be our main point man on the field. Soei will be joining us, although he's elsewhere at the moment, and I suppose Ranga will be my transport. That is all. Any questions?"

I could hear small commotions arise among the crowd. A hundred must have seemed like an awfully small number. I saw Shuna make her way to the front, serving as their voice.

"Sir Rimuru," she asked, "isn't that far too few people? And I didn't

hear my name called, either. What is the meaning of this?"

The meaning? Well…you know. As a princess and all, I hesitated to expose Shuna to a life-and-death situation—that was one reason. But I had another, even more valid one. This whole operation was focused on speed. We'd only have a hundred and change on our side, although Ranga could probably command a few more. I wanted speed, and that meant the infantry would stay home. Shuna and her lack of skill as a tempest wolfsman would be a liability.

Plus, I was still only working with around six hundred hobgoblins, evenly divided by gender. Around a third were assigned to Rigur's security force, another third devoted to the construction effort, and the rest were women and children unsuited for physical labor. My force was small, yes, but how much could we spare, really?

"Yeahhh, well… You know, Shuna, I'll need someone to lead the rest of the people here. If we have to negotiate with treants and dryads later, Rigurd's gonna have a hell of a lot on his plate, right? Your presence would do a lot to give the women and children some peace of mind, too."

It sounded plausible enough, as I tried to convince her with it, and it basically seemed to work. "In that case, I will live up to the role," she said, which was a relief. She did have a fan base around town, and I thought it was a good role for her.

Shuna was still giving me and Shion glances, so I'm sure she still had a few questions, but she seemed accepting enough now. Which was fine by me. No need to go out searching for land mines to step on.

"Sir Rimuru," Rigur said, raising a hand, "why did you not call upon me?"

That question was a lot easier.

"Rigur, I want you to command the remaining security forces and beef up your patrols outside town. You know how crazy this forest is right now. If something happens after we head off, I'm leaving you

responsible for them all. Make me proud!”

I had both Rigur and Rigurd nodding at my reply. A number of powerful magic beasts, the kind that usually dwelled deeper in the forest, had started showing up here and there closer by. With that in mind, it was pretty easy to have them see things my way.

So with everyone on my side, we all began to prepare.

After the speech, I received word from Soei. *Sir Rimuru, do you have a moment?* he asked via Thought Communication.

I had asked him to help us get an alliance going, but what happened? Did he, like, not know where they were, or something? After his flashy exit, if that was all he had for me, I might have to drop the “gentle” act a little…

It worried me a bit, but I should’ve known that wasn’t the reality. Unlike me, Soei was actually somewhat capable.

I was able to meet with the lizardman chief. He seemed willing to accept the alliance, but he asked for you to personally come see him, my lord…

Hmm. That was surprising. It wasn’t even half a day since our conference ended, and he had already extracted a promise from the guy. Talk about capable! And handsome, to boot. I almost resented him.

As I tried to get that under control, I replied, *Sounds good. We’re gonna fight this out in the marshes anyway. Like, you’re already there?*

Oh, um, yes, my lord. Shadow Motion made the voyage to the marshes rather smooth sailing. It allows me to immediately travel to any individual I personally know, but tracking down the chief’s exact location took me some time…

As he put it, Soei used Shadow Motion to reach the marshes, then

deployed his army of Replicants to scope out the area. Gobta could only travel via Shadow Motion for as long as he could hold his breath, so Soei outpaced him. It appeared that his physical corpus was already back.

I wondered if having a Replicant contact the lizardman chief was really the best thing. The mere fact he could control multiples at once still astonished me. It was nothing I could pull off. Well done.

So when would you like to hold the discussions, sir? he asked, shrugging off my compliments in a way Shuna or Shion never would.

Hmm… We'll probably need time to prepare, and the goblin riders will need a few days for the journey. A week from now, maybe?

It'd be more like two weeks if we were going on foot, but a goblin rider wouldn't need five days. I reckoned we'd take around two days to prepare, so a week should be fine.

Gabil had his own transport beast, but it didn't look nearly as fast as a tempest wolf. If we arrived at the lizardman caverns before he and his men returned, we might wind up getting caught in…whatever he was planning. I wasn't completely sure it was a coup yet, but it always paid to watch your back at times like these. We needed to stay on top of the situation if we wanted to keep the initiative on our side.

A little late, in this case, would be just right. So seven days.

Very well. I will work to make it happen.

He ended the link.

I wanted this alliance to be firm, in writing, as soon as possible, but I knew it'd be hard to trust someone you'd never met before. But if we waited to prepare until after we shook hands and declared the alliance done, the orcs would be knocking on our collective doors in an instant.

If the whole thing fell through, I was planning to pull back our forces at once. If they weren't willing to work with us, we'd wait for the orcs to swarm them, then hustle off to the treants' sanctuary. It sucked for them, but I wasn't here to give them lip service. This was war, and I had people counting on me. There had to be a line in the sand.

They sounded open to the idea, though, so maybe I was just catastrophizing again…

Either way, though, I had to hope it'd work out.

*

Kaijin already had my next order—a hundred sets of goblin rider weapons and armor, as soon as possible. Benimaru and Hakuro needed some, too, not to mention Shion, but they could wait. Soei would be home soon anyway; they could get it arranged then, together. Kurobe was taking care of our weapons, Shuna and Garm our armor, and they'd be done with it soon enough.

So while I waited for Soei, I decided to organize our goblin riders. Their leader, to start with. I inadvertently locked eyes with Gobta. He was second-in-command with the security forces. It seemed suitable enough.

"Hey, Gobta, are you free?"

"Nhh?! Whenever you say that, I have a feeling it never works out too well for me…"

"Ah, you're just imagining things. You're going, too, right?"

Gobta stopped short of replying. I smiled at him. He froze. "Of course!" he shouted nervously.

I didn't appreciate the weirdness of that act, but I chalked it up to the ominous aura I could feel behind me. Well, huh. Guess a smile from Shion was more effective than anything I could cook up in slime

form. She nodded at Gobta's reply, looking down at me as I mulled over the power she wielded.

So Gobta was our goblin rider leader. No one had any complaints—despite his occasional wobbles, they recognized how capable a hobgob he was. Rigur was just as enthusiastic about the decision, so I didn't foresee any problems.

"By the way, have you asked Kurobe about the weapon you promised me yet?"

Boy, I sure didn't, huh?

"Oh yeah, of course."

"Really? 'Cause you look kind of like you forgot."

Damn, he's sharp.

"Ha-ha-ha! You're such a worrywart, Gobta, my boy! I've got the most wonderful shortsword coming your way, so be patient!"

"R-really?! Ooh, I will be!"

Nice. Dodged that bullet. Good thing Gobta is so easy to work with. *Better tell Kurobe before I forget again*, I thought as he merrily skipped away.

That left a hundred members to select. It was a pretty simple process—I just selected the original goblins who were already paired with their rides as opposed to the relief members in the security force. I handed their names over to Kaijin, asking him to get their equipment ready.

Just as I was done wrapping this up, Soei came back. "I apologize for the delay," he said as he appeared from Benimaru's shadow like some master ninja. You could just fall in love with him, the way he moved.

So let's get started, then.

We headed over to the production workshop, the nerve center of all our manufacturing. It was a wooden structure, about the size of a small gymnasium. We were planning to reinforce the walls with mortar later, but we lacked the free hands for it right now. It was still one of the largest buildings in town, and it certainly stood out as such.

When we went inside, we were greeted by several people loudly working on something—the hundred-man battle gear order, no doubt. The security force's equipment would have to wait for now, sadly.

We moved deeper inside. There was a room devoted to sewing work, but at the moment it was a private office of sorts for Shuna. Her skills were so masterful, it'd take a while for the goblinas to catch up, so she was alone for now. They were gung ho about learning, don't get me wrong, but at the moment I had them making hemp fabric and other clothing materials under the watchful eye of Garm. Once everyone had more equipment, I was sure Shuna would recruit some of the more talented seamstresses to help with the silk. We needed clothing before we needed armor, after all.

I was now headed for this sewing room, greeting Shuna as I stepped inside. She smiled back at me, now wearing a beautiful, kimono-like dress she must've sewn herself at some point. It looked meant for a priestess, but designed to be as easy to move in as possible. The top was pure white in color, but the skirt part was a light-pink, like Shuna's own hair, and it made for a cute-looking picture. One look and you could see what kind of techniques she had at her fingertips. I was expecting great things.

Shuna took out several outfits and lined them up on her worktable. "Thank you for being patient," she said. "I've prepared your clothing, Sir Rimuru, along with a little something for my brother, I guess."

"You guess...?"

This made Benimaru laugh. "Hoh-hoh-hoh! Can you blame her?"

“Your silk fabric is so exquisitely made,” Hakuro added, “having even a scrap of it is a great honor. Do you have an outfit for me, too, perhaps?”

Soei was wholly uninterested in the banter. Shion was probably the one with the biggest emotional stake in it. She was a bit more boorish than the others, but she was still a woman.

“Here you are!” Shuna said, completely ignoring the others as she presented some clothing to me. Afterward, she distributed outfits to everyone else, which was just the sort of thing she’d do.

Once we all had our respective gifts, she guided me to a small changing room.

She had given me two outfits, along with a set of armor from Garm. “He gave that to me,” she explained, “and I made sure the clothes would be comfortable underneath.” I didn’t see Garm around. I’d have to thank him later.

So there I was, in the changing room. My first outfit was a base layer—a shirt and some short pants. She had done a great job reproducing the crude illustration I gave her. *It felt great for everyday wear*, I thought, and she had created three sets for me, so I didn’t have to go naked while having the laundry done.

The second set of clothes, meanwhile, was for battle. A real tour de force from Shuna. Transforming into my child version, I immediately set to strapping it on. It felt so glossy and slick on my fingers—more wonderful than even the highest-quality silk I knew—and the pants and shirt were done up just as I had designed them.

It was an incredibly pleasant surprise. The cut, and the fabric, were better than anything I wore back home. Some of my Sticky Steel Thread was woven in, too, so it’d protect me more than well enough. I had the Sage analyze it for me, so I knew.

This outfit, though… The moment I had it all on, it was like I was born to wear it. Perfectly sized. A sort of magic item, I supposed. I had

absolutely nothing to complain about, as I felt its magicules intermingle with my own. It already felt like another part of me. Just to test it out, I morphed into my adult version—and just as I thought, the clothes adjusted themselves to match. A perfect piece of work.

I moved on to the armor Garm had provided. He said he'd given it some extra attention, and it fit me just as well as the clothes. There was a dark jacket made from tanned leather, tied together with string in front instead of sporting buttons. It looked like a plain old jacket, but it was also magical, and a perfect match for my aura. Maybe it was because I had the original pelts stored in my stomach before handing them over to Garm. That must've turned it black in color, matching well with my aura.

Once again, no complaints. All I had left was the coat to wear over the clothing. This was a long jet-black coat made from the original direwolf boss's fur. Another Shuna special, and since it lacked any sleeves, it was light as a feather. The front was open, but that didn't make it annoying to wear at all, oddly.

Putting it on, I wound up wearing it sort of like a robe. The rear had a high part like a collar to protect my neck, and I could remove this if I wanted or use it as a scarf. A scarf that, apparently, would keep me warm in winter and cool in summer, somehow.

I didn't think it mattered much with my Cancel Temperature, but I had to give it a shot regardless. And thanks to that Sticky Steel Thread in there, it really did have some resistance to cold and heat. The coat also came standard with Self-Repair, which went way beyond basic seam fixes. Enough magic force, and I could basically regenerate it from scratch. Keep it clean, too. Ultraspeed Regeneration at work, I supposed. It made sense. This fantasy world, man—it was a treasure trove of fun stuff to play with.

So I put it all on and stepped outside. Shuna stared at me spellbound, clearly blushing, as the rest of the ogre mages tried their own clothes on. It turned out everything she sewed had the same magical properties of my outfit, absorbing the wearer's aura to match

their body perfectly. Thus, they were all natural fits.

Benimaru's kimono-like robe was bright red, almost like velvet. On a normal person, it would've looked unnecessarily gaudy, almost clownish, but he had the natural good looks to pull it off. Hakuro, meanwhile, had an outfit of pure white, like a mountain hermit—no excessive decoration to get in the way of battle here. Between that and his sharp eyes, nothing could've suited him better.

Soei's robe and pants were both a dark shade of blue—light, airy, and no doubt hiding an arsenal of covert weaponry inside. Shion went with a Western-style dark suit of purplish-blue, exactly what I had drawn up, and framed her as the capable executive assistant she was.

All these outfits, mine included, became magical by nature the moment they contacted our skin. *Really fantastic results*, I thought, and apparently we were free to customize or transform them as we liked. That was thanks to the "magic thread" used, the mixture of hellmoth cocoons and my own Sticky Steel Thread; their magicules could be freely remixed and adjusted, much like how weapons of magisteel morphed to meet the needs of the carrier.

This meant the clothing would grow with the wearer's body, but I thought it made for some neat fashion applications, too. I doubted there was much else like this in the world. I didn't know what sort of magic items humans used in their day-to-day lives, but I had to assume Shuna was among the best in her field. Weaving clothing that magically merged itself onto people's bodies had to outclass whatever they bought off the rack in their realms. I wondered how much my outfit would go for on the open market.

"Oh, I have this for you, too," Shuna said as she handed me a pair of shoes made of leather and resin. "I think they'll go wonderfully with your cute little legs, Sir Rimuru."

I tried them on. They fit and offered supreme comfort.

"Ooh, these're nice!"

“Dold made these for me,” she said, smiling. Apparently, both he and Garm were too nervous about how I’d react to hand them over directly. So why weren’t they too embarrassed to ask Shuna? They probably just wanted an excuse to talk to her…

She had pairs for everyone—shoes for me, Soei, and Shion; sandals for Benimaru and Hakuro. Even the sandals were top-notch pieces of work. I was sure enough of that, given how well my own everyday sandals felt.

So we had our new clothes, sort of reinventing ourselves in the process. We left the workshop in a state of near bliss, waved off by Shuna’s gentle smile.

Next up was Kurobe’s forge.

I hadn’t seen our smith lately, busy as he was with the creative process. He hadn’t even appeared at the deployment speech I gave earlier. I knew he was doing fine; he was just the type to get totally absorbed in whatever he tackled. I did ask him to make weapon production his top priority, too, and he had apparently been spending well near every waking hour on the effort. Kaijin told me as much before our conference.

The door to the forge was open when we showed up. It was fully equipped with tools he brought over from Kaijin’s workshop, with the raw materials for his work kept in an adjacent storage room. I had granted him a pretty decent supply of magisteel; he had everything he needed along those lines, but he was a little nervous about the lack of other metals on hand. We needed to examine the nearby mountains for a permanent ore supply, but our lack of time and resources meant that had to wait. Until the construction frenzy died down a little, staff shortages were going to be a chronic issue.

I could hear banging from inside the forge, waves of heat wafting out from the door. This was the only high-temperature forge in town, run by a furnace made from clay blocks heated with Control Flame. It turned out better than I anticipated. We were planning to build more

once we got to grips with this one. Lots of things in the works, not enough time to tackle them. A real pain.

So we went inside and grabbed Kurobe's attention. Once he noticed, he greeted us with a smile. "I was expecting you!" he said. "There's somethin' I'd really like to show you all."

I could tell he was eager to show off his latest work. A little too eager, in fact. He spent the next two hours talking about everything he had crafted, my eyes glazing over along the way. *Yes, I know, it's all great, can I get out of here, please?* I almost said it out loud a few times before stopping myself—he just looked too happy.

I was hoping Shion would step in, always eager to have her say on anything, but she just sat there and stared at all the weapons lined against the wall, enrapt. Weaponry was a hobby for her, I guess, as it was for all the ogre mages. They carefully studied every inch of what they were given, grasping it in hand as they took in every word of Kurobe's guidance.

Benimaru had an elegant, flowing longsword, Hakuro a large staff with a sword hidden inside, Soei a pair of ninja-style blades. They all looked happy with them, and I could see why—each one was a perfect fit for their owner.

One thing did bother me, though. *Shion's war blade... It's kind of too big, isn't it?*

"Oh, it's fine," Shion said with a laugh. "The scabbard's covered in magical power, so I can make it disappear with a moment's thought."

That's great, but it wasn't what I asked. Isn't it kind of impractically large? But Shion's smile informed me that further protest was useless. If she could handle it, fine, but it was far too large for a regular person to pick up. I doubted even Kaijin could've made that—dwarves were pretty strong, but they would need two hands just to move it. Shion, meanwhile, could unsheathe this massive hunk of iron with a single arm. I realized, at that moment, that angering her would never be a good idea.

“This is probably the largest weapon I’ve ever built,” Kurobe said, smiling confidently as he watched Shion. “I figured she could take advantage of it.”

And he was right. Shion couldn’t have looked happier.

Finally, it was time for my own weapon.

“For you, Sir Rimuru, I got this. It ain’t complete yet; this is just the beginning. You talked about a sword with magic ore in it, and that’s what I’m aimin’ for. Kaijin and I are doin’ some research, but we’re gonna need a mite more time for it. Until then, if you could get used to this sword…”

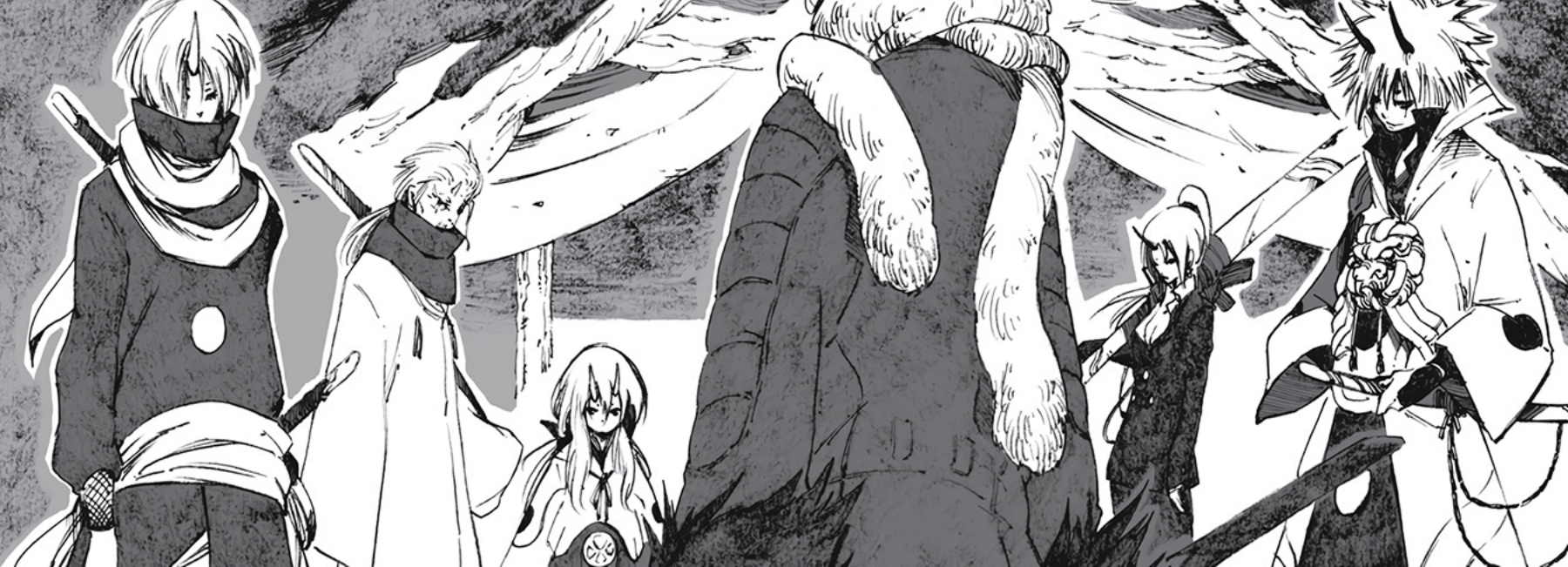
I was handed a long, straight sword. So he was actually going through with that idea? Sweet. It made me excited—and glad I offered the suggestion in the first place. Sitting through two hours of esoteric blacksmith discussion paid off after all.

“All right,” I nodded, storing the sword in my stomach. I could bend it to my will more easily in there.

Kurobe, with a nod, handed me another blade. “This is just a test run,” he explained, “something we were experimenting with. Feel free to use it for now, though.”

It looked like a plain old Japanese-style katana, but since it was made by Kurobe, I was sure it was a masterful piece of work. I’d want to take care of it. And besides, Hakuro was currently beating all his swordsmanship knowledge into me. *It’d be nice to have one to carry around*, I thought, and in a moment, I had it around my waist. That alone made me feel a little stronger, for some reason. Weird.

Finally, I asked Kurobe to make a shortsword for me. He looked a tad confused momentarily, but he smiled and nodded at the request. I didn’t know what he thought about it, but I didn’t really care, either. This would be Gobta’s weapon, after all. I could hand him a plastic fast-food knife and he’d worship me for it.



So he ventured back to the forge. We were all armed now.

On our way out, Garm stopped us. Apparently, Benimaru's armor was done. Without much ore at hand, iron was in very short supply, so he couldn't provide him with a full-plate package. Ogres weren't really into that sort of thing anyway, though. It didn't go too well with kimono, besides.

Instead, Kurobe brought over a set of scale mail crafted from monster-harvested materials. The completed version of what he had given Kabal the adventurer before, and an outfit that melded with the wearer's aura as well. Glad to see my magisteel was being put to such good use. It was much more sturdily built than the test run, designed exclusively for Benimaru and matching remarkably well with his red kimono. There were pieces for his chest and thighs, as well as gauntlets and shin guards. Benimaru instructed him not to bother with a helmet, as that wasn't his style. It was flashy, but again, it worked perfectly with his good looks.

I asked him about armor for the rest of us. "Oh, I'll have Shuna handle that for you all," he replied—apparently, he'd deliver each piece to her once it was done. He really liked having an excuse to see her, I suppose. For now, though, he provided three sets of chainmail for Hakuro, Soei, and Shion. They would wear it directly over their base layers, so it would be well hidden. Garm and Shion had worked closely together on these, too, and they were designed not to distort the look of their outfits at all. Plus, Garm got to hang out with Shion more, which I'm sure was all the inspiration he needed to do such a great job. I kind of wished his work ethic wasn't inspired by getting to hang with beautiful women, but I couldn't complain.

I already had my dark jacket in hand, so I didn't need anything else. I made sure to thank Garm while I had the chance.

The next day, the goblin riders were by and large ready to roll, lined in a perfect row with a week's worth of provisions strapped to their backs. We needed to be quick and decisive in this fight, so I gave

them only the bare minimum of food. If I had to provide a full supply, it'd slow us down too much. Speed would be everything, and if it was called for, we'd need the ability to zoom outta there on short notice. Each rider carried enough food for themselves, and that'd be sufficient.

I figured we might as well get going so we could scope out the geography in advance.

"We've got an orc lord to take down!" I shouted at them. "Let's make this quick!" I deliberately kept the pep talk short. No point getting too eager. We need to keep our eyes focused on the situation around us, and the simpler the objectives, the better. The riders, nonetheless, gave their war cries of approval in response, the deafening roar echoing across town.

Most of these hobgoblin soldiers were survivors of our first (and last) battle against the pack of direwolves. There were a few newbies, but all were elite troops, each entrusted with a tempest wolf of their own. Morale was high, and watching them prepare to ride helped relieve some of my own anxiety as well.

Maybe we *could* win this. Or at least escape unhurt if we couldn't. It wouldn't pay to be too optimistic, but there's no need to assume the worst in this battle, either. So off we went, spirits lifted as we made tracks for the marshes.

*

Three days had passed since we left town. The trees were thinning out, indicating we were near the marshlands. We were ahead of schedule, thanks to keeping our luggage to a minimum. There were no watering holes on the way, so I supplied the force's water from my Stomach stores instead, and that apparently gave the liquid a strength-boosting, fatigue-reducing effect. It let the wolves run longer with fewer breaks in between.

I should have thought about that, actually. The water in my stomach must've been packed with magicules, which can affect

monsters in all manner of ways. Maybe that morphed the water into some sort of healing elixir.

For now, though, we were resting here. I figured we would chill a bit, checking out the area before we contacted the lizardmen. We weren't due to meet with the chief for three days, and if we were this far along, there was no need to hurry. I ordered everyone to stand by, make camp, and rest up.

Time for a little recon work.

"I will scope out the area, Sir Rimuru," Soei quickly offered. He was definitely the man for it.

"All right, Soei. Let me know what you find. And try to figure out where the boss of the pigs is, if you can."

I'm sure he could, what with his consummate scouting skills. Once I saw him off, Benimaru approached me. "Sir Rimuru," he asked, "is it all right if we go all-out in this battle?"

I wasn't sure what he meant. Even if I did, I still didn't know what kind of "battle" we'd be facing.

"Huh? Well, sure, but if I give the signal to retreat, you better follow it, okay?"

Benimaru flashed a fearless smile. "Oh, I doubt you'll need to, my lord! We've made it this far, and we're ready to annihilate them all! Right?"

He certainly sounded confident, at least. It was a good match for his naturally rugged looks. Hopefully we'd have a victory to back that up. It wouldn't look cool if he gave me all that bravado and lost. I was sure he'd be bursting with shame, but I wondered if the thought of losing had even occurred to him. I doubted they ever worried much about such things. But ah well.

Shion, meanwhile, was still marveling at her sword, smiling as she

whispered “I’ll let you crack as many skulls as you want soon” and other creepy reassurances to it. At times, she acted mega-ditzy, and other times she exhibited this serial-killer streak. The more I knew about her, the more danger I sensed from her. *Let’s just pretend I didn’t see that, actually.*

Hakuro, for his part, was as cool as always. As serene as a mountain pond, you could say, the sign of a well-seasoned veteran of battle.

Then I heard him whisper, “I do hope some of them will provide a challenge.”

Oh great. Him too? I was at a loss. Where did all this ogre self-confidence come from? *They’re about to fight an army they’ve already lost to once—I’d figure a little more caution would be in order*, I thought as I sighed.

About an hour into our camping prep, I received a message.

Is now a good time, sir?

My Thought Communication sprang into action as I rested, watching everyone at work.

What is it? Did you find something?

Well, I found a group engaged in battle.

What?! Gabil?

No, not him. There’s only one lizardman, someone I believe to be a close aide to the chief. Here against a group of orcs—one high-level orc, plus more under his command. Around fifty in all.

A close aide? All alone?

Yes, my lord. The battle has only just begun, but I feel the outcome is already clear. It would appear one of the higher-level orcs is

seeking to torment the lizardman in order to show off his strength. What should we do?

Could you defeat this higher-level orc and his men?

It should be simple, sir.

More of that confidence. I figured I could trust Soei on that. But what about that lizardman? I couldn't just let him die, but if the orc wanted a fight, now would be a good time to scope out their abilities.

Thought Communication allowed me to see the world through Soei's eyes—a pretty handy feature, in my opinion—but unlike myself, Soei couldn't keep the link going indefinitely. He needed to rest that muscle, so to speak, on regular occasions. This applied to everyone else, too; they could receive all the thoughts they wanted, but sending them was subject to certain restrictions. If anything, the fact I could send all I wanted made me a freak of nature. We could've linked together more closely if Soei weren't so far away, but no point complaining to him about that.

All right. Try to observe them for as long as you can and relay what happens afterward. I feel bad for that lizardman, but keep your distance for the time being. Step in if you think the battle's gonna turn fatal.

Yes, my lord!

The connection expired. *Sounds like something's up, then. No way a lizardman would be alone in the outer regions of the forest otherwise.* I was hoping to rest and take my time gauging things, but I guess that wasn't going to happen.

I gathered everyone together. "Listen, people," I said, "we're not camping. It sounds like something's going down."

I saw the faces of the goblin riders tense up. "So we're fighting?" one asked.

“Likely, yeah. Our enemy numbers approximately fifty, so I want to see two of you tackle each one. Remember, the orc lord’s capable of absorbing the abilities of dead enemies. So don’t push it. If you think you’re in trouble, get out of there. Are we clear on that?”

““Yessir!”” they cheered, Gobta leading them on.

“Right. I’ll get their position from Soei. Once we’re there, I want you to surround them, then rub them out as quickly as possible. And remember, don’t push yourselves.”

“Aren’t you worrying a little too much about this, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru interjected. “Because I think we have an extremely capable crew of riders here, to say nothing of us.”

“You think? Well, I suppose it’s up to you guys, then. Get moving.”

“Yes, my lord!”

I watched as Benimaru and Hakuro led the riders off. Shion was staying with me. The riders could handle the infantry-level orcs, but I wanted to see this “high-level” officer for myself. The more I knew about our enemy, the more I’d have to work with in the upcoming battle. I had Soei and Shion working on my side—I doubted it’d be too dangerous for me.

Thus, we mounted Ranga and made a beeline for Soei.

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We reached Soei as he deflected a sword slash from an orc that had just jumped off a tree limb. The orc bore a pair of heavy scimitars, curved to look like enormous meat-cutting knives but thick enough to slice through bone.

The long arms on the orcish races made it hard to estimate their offensive range. Soei engaged in a little back-and-forth with him, his constant array of leaps and dodges bringing him precariously close to defeat at times, to an outside observer.

I wasn't worried, though. This orc was, in my eyes, pretty weak. Unlike Hakuro, whose strikes seemed impossible to avoid even with the instincts of a born hunter, I could still predict this orc's moves just by looking at him. It was cute, in a way.

"Gehh! Who are you?" the long-armed orc shouted at me, his face a mixture of pig, wild boar, and human. "Here to be consumed by an orc general?"

Ah. This was the high-level one, then? The orc general?

"How dare you act so rude around Sir Rimuru!" Shion fired back, staring the general down with her unnervingly cold eyes.

"Oh. You…"

I looked down at this new, faint voice. It belonged to a lizardman, looking up at me. She appeared to be cowering, wounded from head to toe and just barely breathing. She had lost a lot of blood. I doubted she'd last long unaided.

I knew I had asked Soei to remain impartial for as long as possible, and I guess he followed my orders to the letter. He wasn't at fault for that, but now I wish he had stepped in a bit earlier. I was starting to look like a total villain, and I figured it was time for a good deed to make up for it.

"Drink this," I said, tossing the lizardman a recovery potion. She hesitated for a moment but quickly drained the bottle. The effect was dramatic—in an instant, all the cuts and bruises were gone.

"What on…?!"

"Impossible…"

The orc general and lizardman both expressed their surprise simultaneously. *Nice. That oughta improve my rep a little. Good thing I earned some brownie points with these guys before the big meeting with the chief.*

As I patted myself on the back, the lizardman approached me.

“P-please, sir! Please, I need you and your envoy to rescue my father, the lizardman chief…and Gabil, my brother!”

She was on one knee, head bowed down, as if praying to me.

“What—?”

I was about to ask what happened to her when the orc general came rushing in. “Get in my way, and I’ll eat you first!” he bellowed, crossing his scimitars in front of him. He was probably trying to catch me by surprise, but with my Magic Sense, that was never going to happen. I nimbly leaped backward to dodge the incoming strikes, but I didn’t even need to bother with that—in a flash, Shion was in front of me, landing a single slash with her heavy blade.

The orc general instinctively recrossed his swords to block the attack, but Shion’s sheer force knocked them right out of his hands. The extra skill Steel Strength put her power off the charts, even by nonhuman standards, so I should’ve expected as much.

“Worthless beast,” she murmured, angrily staring the orc general down with her well-defined face. “You cannot stand still for a single moment while Sir Rimuru is deigning to speak?”

“Dammit! All of you, seize this wench at—”

None of the orc underlings responded to the order. It was understandable, given how they no longer existed.

“They hardly put up a fight at all,” Benimaru said, riding up to me. “Hardly worth my time!”

“Yeah, Sir Rimuru,” added Gobta, riding alongside him. “Boy, talk about a letdown, huh? Going two on one almost made me feel bad for them.”

They had apparently wrapped up the encirclement and massacre,

just as I ordered. The speed with which they had carried out those orders shocked me into silence. Hakuro was just cutting down the few surviving orcs behind them. Maybe I *was* worrying too much.

"Y-you're kidding me!" the orc general managed to gasp out. Then things got even worse for him. Just as I was about to order Soei to interrogate him, everything finished.

"Die!"

The voice was accompanied by a single flash of light, backed up by a low rumble. And with it, the orc general ceased to exist in any physical sense.

"What is that idiot doing?" I whispered.

Soei had the same intention as me, approaching the orc general to extract whatever information he could. But Shion had no similar thoughts.

"I have given this impudent fool the divine punishment he deserves, my lord!"

She smiled at me, anticipating the praise that was no doubt coming. I didn't know whether to compliment her or scream at her.

"Uh, yeah," I ventured. "Let's try to capture 'em alive next time, all right?"

"Ah, yes, Sir Rimuru! We need to make them fully understand what happens when they cross the likes of you!"

No, nothing like that. At all. But I didn't want to bother explaining it to her. She said yes to my request, and that was good enough. The entire squad was now dead, and while I would've liked some of the orc general's intel, I was willing to call this a success. No point dwelling on what's already done.

I mentally shifted gears as I turned to the lizardman. At least we

wouldn't be interrupted any longer.

"There's still a few days until our meeting. What happened?"

She looked at Soei and me in succession before setting her eyes upon me. "I am the daughter of the lizardman chief," she said, conviction clear in her voice. "I serve as the head of his royal guard. In advance of our alliance, my brother Gabil has overthrown the royal family and imprisoned the chief. He intends to wage open battle against the orcs, but he vastly underestimates their strength. If this keeps up, we will lose, and the lizardman race will be wiped off the land."

She paused for a moment, searching for the right words.

"The chief instructed me not to put an undue burden upon you as I related this message. But…please, as the one who offered us this alliance, I beg you to help us!"

Now she was fully prostrate on the ground at me.

Well, huh. Gabil was the son of the lizardman chief, it turned out, and his sister was right here with us. They must have all had good genes. It was a pity how Gabil turned out.

Still, I couldn't let anything happen to the chief.

So now what…?

"Well, keep in mind that we haven't forged this alliance quite yet. The chief knew he couldn't count on us to get involved with an internal dispute at this point, so he sent you over to keep me informed of things. Is that how it is? If so, then why're you asking me for help?"

It sounded mean, I knew, but I wasn't bound by any debt to the lizardmen. It'd be one thing after I signed on the dotted line, but it'd still be a lot more intelligent for us to get out of there. I was also starting to resent her not having a name, either. I had heard monsters could tell one another apart via the subtle vibrations they emitted as

part of their emotions, but as an ex-human, it was all Greek to me. I felt weird calling her a "lizardman" and "chief's guard leader," though.

As my mind was veering off track, she looked straight up at my face. "I thought," she said, "that ones who have evolved to be as powerful as yourselves may have the strength to rescue us all. If the dryads who watch over this forest have recognized your skills, then I only hope you have the mercy to help. I fully know how selfish this is, but please…"

"Ah, well said!" Shion suddenly burst out. "You have a great deal of potential, indeed, if you have noticed the full glory of Sir Rimuru's strength. I am sure the lizardmen shall be saved, just as you hope they will. We're already dedicated to destroying the orc forces, besides!"

Great. Here we go again. I had the weirdest sense of déjà vu all of a sudden. I had appointed Shion to be my secretary, but she had a real knack for tossing more and more work into my in-box.

Ah well. We were in for a fight anyway. Might as well cooperate as much as we could—as long as we didn't get hurt along the way.

"Soei, can you Shadow Motion yourself to where the chief is?"

"I can, sir."

"All right. I hereby order you to rescue the lizardman chief. If anything gets in the way of our alliance, eliminate it."

"Yes, my lord!"

"So you'll…?! Oh, thank you so much!!"

The lizardman was beside herself with gratefulness. Which I was fine with. But again, I had no intention of getting myself killed for her.

"Keep in mind, I'm not planning to sacrifice myself or my people for this, all right?"

“I would expect as much, yes. I would also like to serve as your guide, if you like…”

Good. Glad to see she wasn’t offended. She probably knew she was asking a lot, and that she couldn’t heap all the responsibility on our shoulders alone. There wouldn’t be much point to calling it an *alliance* otherwise.

“I appreciate the thought,” I replied, “but Soei will reach the chief a lot faster operating by himself, I think—”

“Can you hold your breath for approximately three minutes?” Soei asked.

“Yes, absolutely! I can hold out for five, in fact.”

“All right. You can join me, then. Is that all right, Sir Rimuru?”

“Sure, no problem. Take these, too.”

I gave Soei a few recovery potions. If he was fine with it, I was, too. I had no reason to refuse her as long as she wasn’t a drag on my men.

“You could probably dilute these to a tenth of the strength and they’d still do the trick, as long as the injury’s not too serious. Use ’em on anyone who needs ’em. If anything happens, I’m just a Thought Communication away.”

“Yes, my lord.” He nodded and saluted me. “We’re off, then.”

The lizardman bowed deeply before turning to Soei. He placed his hands on her hips and began Shadow Motion, disappearing from our sight in an instant.

“I’m sure the chief is in good hands with him,” Benimaru said approvingly. And given Soei’s skills, I figured he was right.

⁎

With Soei taking care of the chief, I went back to my original work of

surveying the battlefield. Things had ramped up, apparently, so I didn't have time to waste.

"All right. Let's go see what this Gabil guy is up to."

"Can we help him, do you think?" Shion asked.

I shrugged. "Depends on him, I suppose. I can't say if he's still alive or not."

We had agreed to rescue the lizardman chief. I hadn't breathed a word about Gabil, and I certainly wasn't going to expose ourselves to danger for his sake…

For now, I wanted to check out the state of the war.

"You aren't planning to venture into battle yourself, are you, Sir Rimuru?"

"That's my plan, Benimaru. And I'd like to see things with my own eyes before deciding on anything."

Scoping out the situation was basic stuff, I thought, and I did want to check and see if Gabil was alive. Benimaru, however, was vehemently opposed.

"My lord, wait a moment. Hakuro and I could handle the job well enough by ourselves. You and Shion could simply observe us from afar, instead."

"Indeed, Sir Rimuru. You are my leader, and the leader of us all. I am sure it would be wiser to leave this battle to us, in this case…"

Guys, guys, that's not gonna work. All we had here were Benimaru, Hakuro, and a hundred goblin riders. Everyone had to pitch in.

I had been planning to work out a more detailed battle plan at a conference once the alliance was set in stone, but I already had the

general idea in mind. We'd use the lizardman force as bait, and I'd have Benimaru and the other ogre mages take care of the higher-level orcs for me. In other words, I basically wanted to create a scenario where I'd be fighting one-on-one against the orc lord. I wasn't interested in sending a hundred people to their suicides against two hundred thousand.

"Whoa, whoa, calm down, guys. Do you seriously intend to defeat two hundred thousand screaming orcs with a band of a hundred Riders?" I pointed out with more than a little disbelief.

"Yeah!" Gobta chimed in enthusiastically. "You tell 'em, sir!" I couldn't blame him. You couldn't expect someone to follow an order to jump off a cliff.

"I figured, where there's a will, there's a way," Benimaru grumbled. Only Hakuro and Shion agreed with him. I was starting to wonder if all these ogres had a screw loose somewhere. *"Will" can only get you so far, guys!*

I was planning to give them a fair bit of leeway, but maybe I should tighten the reins a little instead. They had already lost to the orcs once—they should know how scary they all were. That was my take on their reaction, but I didn't verbally share it with them. They were all acting like their evolutions had wiped the slate totally clean.

"Well, anyway, I'm gonna be watching the situation from the skies above. I'll give out orders depending on how things go, so I'll let you handle the details on the ground, Benimaru."

"All right. Fair enough, then."

That seemed to appease him well enough. But I was still nervous. I'd never done anything like commanding an army before. I played a lot of strategy games on the PC, but I had no experience directing actual flesh and blood around. So my intention was to watch the action from overhead and stick strictly to handing out orders. I'd use Thought Communication to link up with everyone and keep them abreast of developments. Benimaru would then use that to command

the ground forces, although I'd have ultimate authority over whether we retreated or not.

"So is that clear?" I said to the assembled goblin riders. "You are to follow the orders of Benimaru, unless I give specific orders myself. Also, don't do anything you think might get you killed! This isn't gonna be our last stand, so don't fool yourself into thinking it is."

""Raahhhh!""

The riders roared their approval once more. I warned them not to get too hotheaded, but war was war, and they were rarin' for one.

"We will not let you down, Sir Rimuru!" Shion said, Benimaru nodding next to her. Hakuro was as unaffected as always.

...Ahh, I'm sure it'll work itself out. But between the way-overconfident ogres and the level of excitement among the goblin riders, I had a feeling I was getting in over my head. So I swore to myself—*If things get too hairy, retreat, retreat, retreat.*

*

I was about to sprout wings from behind my back when I realized that my clothes would get in the way.

Wings granted me the ability to fly—that I knew from past experimentation—but this was an unexpected snag. Then I recalled what Shuna told me. The magical thread used in the clothing could transform itself, to some extent, based on the will of the wearer. Now I know what she meant.

Picturing myself with wings, I could feel two holes automatically open over my back. The wings came out, and the holes closed themselves. *This customization is pretty nice. Better thank Shuna and Garm again later.*

It would take about an hour of running to make it out of the forest, but in the air, it took barely any time at all. Now I was above the

battlefield, checking out the entire situation. I was a bit too high up to distinguish between the two sides, but I could use Magic Sense to figure it out well enough.

It was almost like I was a satellite, taking photos of the land below from sub-stratospheric heights. And come to think of it, having a bird's-eye view of the entire battle like this gave us a killer advantage, didn't it? And using that info to send Thought Communication messages to any of the troops I needed… It was like bringing the latest advances in war technology to a medieval battle. I had access to information that no general in this world could've ever imagined.

It was just what I needed to make the numbers work with the small force we had. In fact, this approach was probably best suited for handling small, mobile armies like ours. I marveled at my good luck at stumbling across this tactic as I scoped out the battlefield.

To sum up, it wasn't looking great for the lizardmen. They were clearly surrounded with no escape route, and it was only the wild rallying from their leader that let them hold out. There was no telling how long they'd last.

Squinting, I recognized Gabil as the leader. I thought he was some random idiot at first, but maybe I underestimated him. Given how obviously devoted his sister was to him, I should've recognized that he was a decent person at the core. The first impression he gave was disastrous, though.

As a commander, he lacked the ability to see the big picture in battle, which might ultimately doom him. But it wasn't like leaders were born capable of doing that, without any experience. If he survived this and learned from it, he'd very likely become a great general someday.

Now a single orc appeared before Gabil. Another group, clad in black armor, formed a circle around him. Definitely higher-level ones, decked out in full plate and showing a military discipline none of the other orcs had. The one facing Gabil was likely an orc general like the

one Shion had erased from existence a bit ago; he clearly projected a much stronger presence than the orcs in the circle.

Then the duel began. Gabil fought courageously. His considerable nimbleness and skill with a spear as he faced off against the orc general made me wonder if Gobta had had any chance at all, in fact, without that shadow-skipping trick.

Sadly, though, the difference in strength between him and the orc general was just too much. Little by little, Gabil's body was being ravaged by cuts and wounds. I hated to let him die. And if that's what I thought, the answer was clear. I gave my orders.

Ranga, can you Shadow Motion yourself to Gabil?

Yes, my master.

As with Soei, Ranga could directly travel to anybody he'd personally met before. Which simplified things for me, definitely.

Gobta, you go there, too!

Geh! R-really?! It's, like, a huge army there—

I heard a scream of pain through the transmitted thought. Gobta was cut off for a moment, then the line came back.

He will gladly accept the mission, Sir Rimuru.

Now it was Shion inserting herself into my mind. I didn't know what had happened to Gobta, but I suppose I didn't need to.

Great. I want you two to rescue Gabil for me. Get going!

Gobta would get to Gabil first while Ranga was distracting the rest of the horde. He'd then work with the lizardmen and goblins to forge a path out of that hellhole.

Off they went, together. But not even they could last long amid the sheer number of orcs, I thought.

Sir Rimuru, Benimaru asked, *are we allowed to go…all out, then?*

Help the lizardmen first. They need it. After that, do whatever you want. Pay attention to whatever orders Hakuro gives you, but otherwise, have at it.

Yes, my lord! We will show them exactly what the ogre race—or should I say, the ogre mages can do!

He sounded happy. Which was good. Because things were about to happen, and quickly.

My orders complete, I checked on the state of the battle.

The lizardman defensive ranks were about to collapse. It wouldn't be long now. And if that's how it was outside, the caverns where the chief was might be just as infested right now. I sent Soei in there by himself; would he be all right? I wasn't too worried about Ranga, but what about Gobta? To say nothing of Benimaru and his crew…

Oh well. No point fretting about it now. I gave the orders, and they accepted them. If any agreed to do something they knew they couldn't accomplish, it was their own damn fault.

When I was still new at my company, the boss would yell at me all the time about taking on more work than I could handle. If things got delayed as a result, it negatively affected everyone on the team, according to him. The same went for managers, too—if they were too unobservant to realize they were overtaxing their employees, they deserved what was coming to them.

It was key to do the work that was best suited to you. A boss's job was to gauge his team's abilities and distribute the work correctly.

I still didn't have a full grasp on these guys' capabilities. It was hard to figure out whether I was asking them for too much or not. I just hoped they knew themselves better than I did—and that *I* wasn't dumber than I thought.

It was an irresponsible thing to think, but I had to believe in it for now. And since a boss's task was to step in and help whenever things went awry, I had a duty to keep watch over them. If anyone ran into trouble down there, I didn't want them to be alone.



A single swing of the halberd broke the spear in the chief's hands.

The fact the chief had survived this assault so far was worthy of praise in itself. He gave a proud sneer as he looked at the orc general.

"Pah-ha-ha-ha! I can fight all I want to without a weapon!"

All the bravado in the world didn't convince anyone else in the room that he meant it. His armor was already shattered, cracks in his proud scale mail obvious for all to see. With nothing left to protect him, the chief was a hairbreadth away from death.

"Listen!" he shouted with as much authority as he could muster. "Come forward, my guard! Protect as many of the women and children as you can. I refuse to let you give up! Buy us as much time as possible and wait for help to arrive!"

"Ch-chief… These reinforcements cannot truly exist…"

"Don't say that!" he replied, admonishing the vice general of his royal guard. "Believe in them! We can never abandon hope. Protect the pride of the lizardmen until the very end!"

The chief never wanted to show a moment of weakness. He was a symbol of the lizardman strength, their final hope. To the lizardmen with no place else to flee to, they had nothing to lean upon apart from his words.

"Plus," he added to his team with a smile, "as long as I can beat this foe, we can open a new path for ourselves."

He was right. If they could defeat the orc ringleader blocking the

exit, they would have a literal path to survival. There was no despair among the lizardman warriors.

Even if their chief fell, they knew they would stand up and fight. This much they had learned over the years, seeing him stand for his people. They would fight to the last man, and as long as they evacuated as many of the innocents as they could, no greater victory could be obtained.

They had to find a connection to the future. But even that hope was crushed before the orc general.

"You old fool! All the ridiculous chatter in the world won't save you now!"

A flash, and the halberd in the orc general's hands sliced its way into, and then through, the chief's chest.

"Argh!!"

He fell, coughing up blood on the way.

This is it…

The caverns echoed with the shouts of lizardmen.

The orc general stepped forward, aiming to land the final blow upon the chief, only to be stopped by a small team of fighters. He cut them down, resentful at this obstacle, and reached the chief's body.

"You fought well, for a lizardman," he rumbled. "Your courage proves to us that you will serve well as our flesh and blood. When you die, you will die basking in the honor of becoming part of us!"

He aimed the blade of his halberd upon the chief's neck, lifted it up, and— "I'd rather you didn't do that. We have a promise with the chief."

—was stopped by the voice of someone who appeared in front of

him.

At that moment, the arrival of this man, Soei, completely changed the destiny of the lizardman race.



Soei smiled a thin smile. He felt, truly, that he had served his master well. To him, this was nothing Benimaru could ever manage, whether he was son of the past king or not. The two had been rivals since childhood, and sooner or later Soei would have become his loyal subject, serving the lord that led the way for the entire ogre race.

But that was all in the past. Now, he had a new master in Rimuru. And the thought pleased him.

The ogres had enjoyed a long era of peace, undisturbed by any kind of conflict. To them, the monsters of the forest were nowhere near challenging enough—and as of late, they haven't even had any rampaging lesser dragons to deal with. It was a good thing, Soei knew. But he could never deny that he wanted to make full use of all the skills that had been hammered into him.

Then his settlement was attacked by orcs. He cursed his powerlessness on that day. He had assumed their end would come quickly afterward—they were rudderless, unable to avenge their friends and family.

But now, he was happy, and thankful for his happiness. Under his new master, he had been granted a chance at vengeance.

He would never let his pride weaken his guard. That single defeat had taught him a great deal. Along with the humiliating memories, he had etched into his heart exactly how foolish he had been all along.

He had polished his Arts for his master, eliminating his foes, honing everything he had within him. Nothing delighted him more than having orders to follow. And now, Soei was ready to faithfully execute them.

Looking up at the silent man, the chief recognized him as the monster who had met with him earlier. The high-level member of the magic-born races who called himself Soei, the very one who had offered the alliance. *He came for me? But we have no alliance forged yet. But, but…* Doubts and questions swirled in his mind. Yet, the chief, near the end of his life, could do little. He attempted to speak, clearing the blood from his throat.

"Lord Soei… You have come for me? After we forged ahead, ignoring your advice…? By my very life, please, help the lizardmen—"

He tried his best to entrust his people's future to Soei before he passed. But now there was another figure there. One he did not recognize before she spoke.

"Father, drink this!"

An aqua-blue container was presented to his mouth. The moment he felt the liquid passing between his fangs, his hideous-looking wounds were magically gone, as if nothing had ever been amiss. In a moment, it had brought him back to perfect health.

"Wha?!"

The chief sprang up, in a state of shock.

"My advice…? What do you mean? Well, it doesn't matter. I want you to wait here until the appointed day arrives. And try to be careful. Neither my master nor I would enjoy it very much if you were to die on us."

It sounded so out of place, this cold, oddly calming voice.

He's saying he'll keep his promise about the alliance? But…

"But now is no time for that," he said. "The orcs…"

Then he realized something was off. The orc general, halberd still high in the air, had stopped moving. His face had an odd dark-reddish tint to it, his muscles bulging as he focused all his strength on the upcoming swing.

"That… What is the meaning of…?"

"Don't worry. I've stopped him for now."

Soei's comment made the situation clear for the chief. But what did it mean…?

He gave Soei a wild-eyed look. He realized that this orc general, who had completely dominated him in battle a moment ago, was now rendered completely helpless before this envoy.

"What…? What are you…?"

"A pity, though," Soei blithely commented as he looked at the frozen orc. "I had him captured, I was hoping to torture him so he would be of some use to Sir Rimuru…but it would appear he is sharing information with some outside source. I suppose I will have to kill him, then."

For Soei, an information merchant of sorts, having data leaked out to the enemy deeply bruised his pride. That was why he always took the utmost care in observing the enemy. A blue light flickered in his eyes now, detecting minute shifts in the magicules in the atmosphere. It indicated he was using Observing Eyes, one of his extra skills, and that skill told him the orc general was transmitting what he saw to someone, perhaps through a crystal orb or other medium.

Soei decided it was better to kill the orc than to have his cover blown. But murder in itself did not interest him that much. So he decided to reveal a little more, in hopes of gauging the enemy's movements.

"But just killing you would be boring," he said with a mild smile, "so why don't I have you relay a message as well? I assume whoever's

controlling you orcs is watching me now, right? Your turn is next. And we'll make sure you will deeply regret making the ogre mages your enemy."

And with that, Soei took his eyes off the orc general, no longer interested in him. His work was done, and it was time to take out the trash.

"Die," he whispered. The next moment, the orc general was torn into millions of fine pieces by the Sticky Steel Thread Soei had wrapped around him.

Right there was the moment that the final form of Threadmaster, a battle move first conceived by Rimuru, was born.

The chief watched, stunned speechless. He tried to keep his mind from racing as he recalled what he had just heard. Then he turned to Soei, not bothering to wipe the sweat from his brow.

Ogre mage… He is among the ogre mages?!

He stared at him, as if looking at something his mind refused to parse. Then he recalled the power he had shown a moment ago. Now it made sense.

Perhaps I should have known. He is a legend along the lines of the orc lord. The next level of ogres…

Ogre mages were the evolved form of ogres, already high-level denizens of the forest. It made sense, then, that the force he exhibited was akin to a high-level magic-born. Well past A rank, and difficult to wrap one's mind around. So few among the magic-borns ever made it to that point.



But something Soei said rang in the chief's mind. He had said the ogre "mages." Plural. There were more of them. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

My decision… he thought. *My decision to accept this alliance was the best one I have ever made…*

Then the chief sank to the floor. He was sure of it now. If the ogre mages were helping him, the lizardmen would absolutely be saved.

Despite having an orc general defeated in the blink of an eye, the orcish soldiers showed zero sign of panic. The battle continued at a frenzied pace as the guard chief used the recovery potions Soei gave him to tend to the wounded.

Soei wearily eyed the hordes. "We can hardly rest easy with these annoying flies around," he said, as calm and composed as ever. "I might as well take care of them, too, while I'm at it. Give me one moment, please."

Shortly after, Soei's body appeared to disrupt into multiple images of himself. Five shadows leaped forward, each one identical to Soei, right down to his clothing and equipment. They were copies, made with his magical Replication skills, and each one silently began taking action.

Heading for the corridors, they stood before the lizardmen doggedly propping up the halls' defense. One was stationed at each of the five exits out of the chamber, including the evacuation route. The lizardmen stared in awe at them but let them through regardless.

"You may rest for now," each one said as he went down his individual paths. As they did, the lizardmen were greeted with an unbelievable sight. The orcish soldiers, who had seemed like demons from hell itself just a moment ago, were helpless as Soei mowed them down by himself. The same sight was unfolding in each of the corridors.

Demonwire Slash.

An efficient, glittering machine of death. In a moment, the Sticky Steel Thread deployed across each corridor was infused with magic power, moving exactly how Soei wanted it to. There was no place to run from it, especially in these tight underground halls.

The moment he executed the move, the orcish soldiers found themselves instantly sliced and diced. It was perhaps lucky for them that they were incapable of fear. From the lead man forward, they were being massacred without even a moment of resistance. Soei showed them no mercy, no pity for even a second, slaughtering the orcs like a hunter reaping the lives of prey caught in his trap.

The orcs to the rear feasted upon the bite-size pieces of orc chopped up by the web-like network of string, ran full-steam forward, and got killed themselves.

The corridors were a twisty mass of passages, and now they were the sole domain of Soei. He had his wires laid out in a dizzying number of ways, and he could alter their locations at any time. To him, the orcs were simply bothersome pests that needed to be exterminated, far too frail to be considered truly enemies. His Replicants silently, efficiently, followed their orders as they carried out the carnage.

The lizardmen were too shocked to say anything. The scene before them played over and over again, filling them with awe and fright. It was strength on a completely different dimension, the work of a person whose power surpassed anything they could even envision in their imaginations.

Beyond this, Soei thought, *the Replicants could take care of things themselves.* He left the sixth copy there as a contact point, just in case, and then began moving again, undetected by anyone. He was on his way back to Rimuru, his master, seeking a new role for himself.

After Gobta and Ranga went on their way, Benimaru thought in silence for a moment.

“If I could ask,” he said to the hobgoblins within earshot, “can all of you use Shadow Motion?”

The tempest wolves, Ranga’s clan, could use it—what about their partners on the battlefield?

“Not by ourselves, like Gobta can,” replied one of the riders, who sported an eyepatch. “But if we’re with our partners, we can, yes.”

“Yeah! We’re one with our partners, body and soul!”

“Good to hear,” Benimaru said, nodding contentedly. “We’re going to slash our way into the encirclement from the outside, so I want you to Shadow Motion yourselves to Gobta. Sir Rimuru sent him ahead first so it’d be easier to transport the rest of you there.”

“Oh,” another hobgob commented. “Wow, Sir Rimuru’s pretty smart!”

“Yeah! So he had Ranga divert the enemy’s attention while he had Gobta shore up the lizardmen’s position?”

“And then we charge in, regroup with Gobta, and while the enemy’s confused, we turn the tables on them. Right?”

Benimaru nodded. There was a smile on his face, betraying his delight at everyone understanding Rimuru’s train of thought.

“That’s exactly it. And if you understand it, charge in there, now!”

““Yes, my lord!!””

Thus, the goblin riders began their first onrush into the war.

That left only the three ogre mages in the area.

Benimaru began to stretch out his body, not a trace of concern in his mind. As a fighter race who worked as mercenaries and such, ogres bore a particular emotional attachment to having a "master" to rely on. Earning a master to serve for the rest of their lives was the single sincerest wish they all shared.

That, and Benimaru's warrior past changed his outlook on the world. He knew he tended to act selfishly most of the time. That was why he had hesitated to take over the role of ogre king, back in the day, not that it mattered now. Having such a lofty position would mean he would never have been allowed on the battlefield where death was a constant presence. Now, things were different. He could play a front-and-center role all day if he wanted. He liked where he was, and he had two of his friends with him, following him without complaint.

"It is coming soon," Hakuro observed, stretching out his body to prepare.

"It is," Shion chimed. "We must thank Sir Rimuru for providing this chance."

They, along with Benimaru, saw Rimuru as their master. That was why they felt so safe relying on each other. They were working together for a common master, and Rimuru enjoyed his position leading them both.

"All right. Shall we kick this off, then? The first battle in the glorious victory we will eventually offer to Sir Rimuru?"

The ogres nodded at Benimaru's words, and instantly, the three took off at top speed. They ran through the lush trees and grass, almost flying along the ground, the smell of water growing stronger in their nostrils. They were upon the marshlands in the blink of an eye, smashing through the orc hordes on the outer perimeter without dropping their speed for a moment.

A blast of energy shot out from Shion's heavy sword. The orcish soldiers crowded in front of her were blown away before they realized

what had happened—and the attack signaled the beginning of their battle.

Weak. That was Benimaru's first impression. He didn't have to bother lifting a finger as Shion and Hakuro cut down anyone foolhardy enough to approach.

To Benimaru, though, this wasn't very fun. His two compatriots were masters of close-quarters combat. Shion also had the Art known as Ogresword Cannon, which let her unleash pure energy from the tip of her blade. From an overhead perspective, Hakuro worked in little dots of activity, while Shion fired lines of lethal bolts from afar. There was no room for Benimaru to do anything else.

"All right! You pigs standing in front of me; you had better run for your lives. Do, and I will spare you."

None of the orcs flinched. They could hear shouts of "Die, bastard!" and "You will not ridicule us!" as they charged at the ogres, even more enraged than before.

"Prepare to die, then!"

Realizing his foes had no intention of fleeing, Benimaru casually thrust his right hand forward. A black ball of flame flickered to life above it, expanding to about three feet in diameter before he unleashed it. Realizing the danger, the orcish soldiers took evasive action—but they were too late. The fireball continued to expand and accelerate, faster than a hurricane, and the orcs were simply too slow to run from it.

Anyone who touched it was instantly incinerated, not even leaving a pile of ashes behind. But that wasn't what made the dark fireball terrifying. Several seconds later, upon reaching a large clutch of orcs in front of it, the flame released all the energy it had stored inside. An area three hundred feet in diameter was suddenly cloaked in a dome of pure black, centered around the fireball. Then, a mighty rumble, low and loud enough to freeze the entire battlefield, and the blood of

everyone in it.

The entire area was now quiet, robbed of the sounds of war that ruled over it just a moment ago. This was Hellflare, an incendiary attack that dominated like nothing before or since.

In his evolution, Benimaru had obtained the extra skills Control Flame, Dark Flame, and Ranged Barrier. Combining those with his own mystical skills led to this creation, an original skill exclusive to himself.

In a few seconds, the dome disappeared, leaving nothing but scorched earth behind. The marsh water in the area affected had vaporized, the very soil under it turned into glass by the heat. The transformation was stark, and the several thousand orcs who had been under that dome were all now a thing of the past, never knowing what had hit them.

And it all happened within a minute of the first flicker of flame from Benimaru's hand.

This was the answer Benimaru had for this war. The evolution had turned him into a terrifying magic-born, one whose area-of-effect attacks could now wipe out entire regions at once. He grinned an evil grin.

"Open the way, pigs!" he warned, once again. Now these orcs knew fear. The Ravenous unique skill inoculated them to it to some extent, but Benimaru's tactical strike was more than enough to stoke the fear at the deepest pits of their stomachs.

This was an attack they could never withstand, no matter what they did. It was on a level they had never experienced before. Magic, they had measures against, but not even the orc generals, equipped with anti-magic full-plate mail, could survive the incineration. Innate resistances to fire, the orcs reasoned, were useless, and they were right—your garden variety of magical immunity wouldn't work here. This attack was a fearsome antipersonnel weapon, equal to a high-

level forbidden incantation.

There was nothing any of the victims could have done. And not even their ashes remained, robbing the survivors of the ability to consume the corpses and strengthen themselves. No orc soldier could handle a high-level magic-born, and his debut struck fear in their hearts.

In a panic, they began to stampede, totally out of control. Nothing could knock them back to their senses now; the only thing in their minds was running, quickly, anywhere away from there.

And it was that opening salvo that signaled to Rimuru and his forces that it was time to join the fray.

Tossing a glance at the chaos he had just unleashed, Benimaru began striding forward. He was perfectly casual, as if taking a stroll in the park, and the two ogres with him were the same. There was nobody left to challenge them, and now they could see the army that engaged Ranga and his comrades.

The orcish soldiers, to them, were no longer an obstacle.



Just as he had come to terms with his upcoming death, Gabil found himself saved. He turned around, intending to offer a word of thanks. These figures looked familiar, but it took a moment for the memory to return to his brain.

Ah! Yes! The ruler of that village that tamed the direwolves!

Gobta's dimwitted expression matched Gabil's recollection of the noble hobgoblin that had defeated him in battle.

"Ahh!" he couldn't help but blurt out. "You! You are the master of that village, yes? Have you come to our assistance?"

Gabil had dismissed him as a scheming coward before, but now

that his reinforcements were here, he figured he had the wrong impression all along. Gobta, meanwhile, wasn't sure how to respond. *What's he goin' on about?* he thought, dumbfounded. This lizardman made so little sense to him that he decided not to grace his madness with a reply.

This completely unexpected gift allowed Gabil a moment to survey his surroundings again. There was a great commotion from afar, indicating something else going on. *Probably had something to do with that rumble from before*, Gabil imagined. But Gobta knew what it really was—a signal from Benimaru that the ogres were on the scene.

"Oops! Guess we're getting started. Ummm, you're Gabil, right? Bring your allies together and get back in defensive formation!"

"Mm. Yes. I know."

Each had no idea what the other was talking about, but they still had the mental capacity to unite toward a common goal. They both hurried off, both with a new responsibility to handle.



Outside of Gobta and Gabil's scope of attention, Ranga was sizing up the orc general.

"You wish to get in my way?" the fighter said, spear pointed straight at the wolf, a little unnerved by these new events but still in control of his wits. "Who are you?"

These wolves were a concern to him, certainly. The orc general had a feeling that the low rumble from before was a sign of even clearer danger, but he couldn't simply leave the wolves unchallenged.

"I am Ranga," came the low, half-growled reply, "the faithful servant of Sir Rimuru!"

The two glared at each other.

“Rimuru, you say? I’ve never heard the name, but if this Rimuru seeks to defy us, we will destroy him.”

Now the orc general had no interest in Ranga. If he wasn’t aligned with a demon lord or high-level magic-born whose name he was familiar with, he felt free to kill him without regret. That rumbling roar suddenly seemed a lot more important to investigate.

He distractedly thrust his spear forward, attempting to skewer Ranga and end this fast. Ranga effortlessly reared back, dodging the strike.

“Crafty little dog!”

Now the orc general gave Ranga a closer look. Then he noticed—this wasn’t any regular wolf at all. *What? Come on. Just a simple magical beast… Why am I letting him worry me so much…?* He assumed his sudden trepidation was just his mind playing tricks on him.

“How dare some lowly animal bare its fangs at me!” he shouted, giving orders to his team of elites. The orc knights fanned out, surrounding Ranga in a perfectly timed maneuver. Following their general’s direction, they focused each of their spears on the wolf. *There was no point challenging some animal to a one-on-one duel*, he thought.

Ranga chuckled. He hadn’t felt this heartened in ages, able to release his full instincts as an apex predator.

With a howl as long and loud as he could muster, he unleashed his aura. After spending so long in the shadow of Rimuru, he had been heavily exposed to his beloved master’s aura and used it to picture himself as the magical beast he was. Something drove him to pursue this form of himself, and now Ranga realized it was time for his instincts to awaken.

He could feel the power surging within. His muscles grew,

propelling him to his full, sixteen-foot-tall frame. His claws enhanced themselves, his fangs transformed into steel-like daggers—but what stood out most were the two horns that now grew from his forehead.

This was the form of his master, the one he saw in the past. The tempest starwolf. And now he had evolved into that.

The howl made the orcish soldiers shudder, but they felt no fear from it. Their orc general was right by their side, and the Ravenous skill had dulled their hearts. Ranga gave them a disinterested snort as he glanced at their leader. This was no threat to him now. He could feel his true strength, and it was time to show it off.

Sensing the flow of power, he focused his magic on his horns. The orc general picked up on this higher-level transformation, and he knew the danger involved. He hurriedly ordered his soldiers to spread out, but he was too late.

A flash of light ran across their ranks. Then the sound came—the crack of thunder as pillars of electricity shot up from the ground to the heavens, accompanied by a small army of tornadoes.

Ranga had obtained the Dark Lightning skill—and while he couldn't directly control lightning the way Rimuru could, his two horns allowed him to define its range and power. And he had something else—the extra skill Control Wind. This was, in a way, an inferior version of the Control Particles skill Rimuru had picked up. It let Ranga raise and lower the local atmospheric pressure to generate wind gusts, and combining it with Dark Lightning provided a lethal one-two punch.

Ranga knew that—his instincts told him so—and he used it on his foes without a moment's hesitation. Control Wind was his now, and he used it to generate a staggering pressure difference in the air above. This was the area he used Dark Lightning on, and the ensuing beams of electricity filled the exact area he wanted. The result was a writhing maelstrom of upward and downward air currents, eventually gathering themselves into a single massive vortex.

This led to several large tornadoes, exuding electricity as they ran roughshod across the battlefield like a great death-dealing storm. The orc general was instantly rendered into a pile of carbon, and his nearby soldiers were quickly picked off by the storm and thunderbolts.

Once the tornadoes left the scene, there were no more orcs nearby. Ranga's broad-range attack skill—Deathstorm—thus made its first impact on the world.

Ranga watched contentedly as his tornadoes stormed across the land. It had not affected any of the lizardmen, and even at maximum range and force, they did nothing to damage him. It emptied his magical reserves, of course, but not enough to render him immobile.

He wagged his tail, realizing it had worked perfectly. He let out another long, happy howl, more than enough to terrorize the orcs observing from afar. Ranga watched them flee in a panic, sitting down as he silently refilled his magic. The battle wasn't over yet. He would have more opportunities to contribute. There was no need to hurry things along.

Gobta appeared to be doing well, too. The lizardman force was starting to gather itself back together under the watchful command of Gabil. The goblin riders had rejoined Gobta, and together they were mowing down the orcs that had so tormented the lizardmen and goblins not long ago. It wouldn't be long before Gabil's men were a coherent force again.

And now—they could see Benimaru and his friends, walking in from far away. Ranga nodded to himself. Victory seemed assured now.



Gelmud was looking into his crystal ball. He didn't like what he saw.

"Damn those worthless bastards!"

In a fit of rage, he dashed the orb against the ground, shattering it into a million pieces. It had been showing the proceedings in the forest from the eyes of an orc general—Gelmud had chosen that vantage point to take in what he expected to be the ultimate realization of all his ambitions. But now, the last of his intact crystal balls was a murky shade of black. All three of the soldiers he had entrusted orbs to had died in combat.

Gelmud had been pushing forward with preparations for the upcoming ceremony for the past three years. A ceremony to mark the birth of a new demon lord.

It had all been left in Gelmud's hands to arrange, and the assignment filled him with glee. If all went well, it'd create a demon lord who would listen to his orders. It was too tempting a treat to ignore.

The demon lords of the world had forged a pact with one another that defined the Forest of Jura as untouchable, not belonging to any dominion. That was, however, just a formality, and small-scale interventions into the wood were a daily occurrence. Gelmud himself had several different operations under way below the surface.

What he was doing was planting the seeds of conflict across the forest.

Gelmud was personally giving names to the most powerful among each race that dwelled in the wood. Naming a creature consumed a great deal of magical energy, draining his powers for months at a time. It was a dangerous game to play, but the "named" treated Gelmud like a parent and listened to anything he told them.

Slowly, carefully, he had been building a small clique of protégés for him to manipulate forest-wide. Some had been uprooted from the ground before they could fully sprout, but others had fully blossomed. Some were goblins, some lizardmen—and there were other races involved, too, all participating in the war as named monsters. It was poisoning the well to cull the weak from the herd—powerful against

powerful, the survivors fated to be evolved into a demon lord.

Gelmud's plan had been going without a hitch.

These great wars among entire races shouldn't have occurred until three centuries after Veldora's disappearance. Whether sealed away or not, triggering a war while Veldora was still alive was playing with fire. It could break the seal itself, in fact.

So he had taken his time, gathering more pawns under his control and adjusting the power balance among the races. And now that Veldora had vanished far earlier than he anticipated, the whole thing was starting to fall apart.

But luck hadn't fled Gelmud's side yet. An orc lord was born—and while he hadn't been expecting that, he did successfully bring it over to his side. It was Gelmud's trump card, and now that plans were going well and truly awry, Gelmud had no choice but to play it. It would be better to let things work out naturally with a plan like this, but the way he saw it, he had no other choice. It was a bit like fixing the entire tournament, he knew, but he decided that the orc lord would be the next demon lord, no matter what.

The lack of time had forced him to speed up the plan a little, and Gelmud still didn't have enough strength to bring the higher-level races of the forest under his rule. He had wanted to sow some seeds among the ogres and treants as well, but that had fallen by the wayside this time.

To be exact, the ogres turned down the naming offer. He had tried to negotiate with them, but they steadfastly refused. As a warring race, the ogres were reluctant to quickly change allegiances. They were high level, yes, but Gelmud concluded that they could not be controlled.

The experience riled him enough that he decided to have the orc lord target the ogres first. The way they easily steamrolled over the ogre homeland assured Gelmud that he was on the right track. He had

sent a magic-born employee over to keep tabs on things, but it wound up being unnecessary. The orc lord was growing steadily, and even his underlings were now nearing A rank. It made Gelmud rest a lot easier at night.

Rubbing out those annoying ogres first eliminated the last seed of anxiety for him. The treants were harmless as long as their lands were not directly threatened. He could take his time crushing them. Everything was proceeding as planned.

He had once feared the demon lords who ruled over him, but now, it was Gelmud's turn to man the strings. It wouldn't be long now—and when he topped it all off with the lizardmen's destruction, all he'd have left to tackle were those stupid goblin weaklings. And once the orc lord had supreme control over the forest, Gelmud intended to have him keep going and destroy a human city.

It would be his declaration to the world that a new "demon lord" had been born, and that declaration would be supported by facts once he wiped away the dryads and treants from the forest.

Soon, very soon, Gelmud would have a demon lord doing whatever he wanted. He would take his rightful place as one of the most powerful rulers in the world. He could see it all so clearly in his mind, but now…

He hadn't bothered to renew the contracts with the people he spent a fortune to hire.

Gelmud's master was the one who introduced him to the Moderate Jesters. They were a creepy little band, and while they offered a wealth of powerful magic-borns to him, the plan was going so well that there just wasn't much work he could offer—not without revealing his entire plan, which he wanted to avoid.

They had warned him to mind his business around the dryads. That was why he devoted so much effort to building an arsenal of magic-resistant armor and equipment. Problem solved, as far as

Gelmud was concerned.

The orc lord's army had conquered the majority of the forest. One more step, and everything would be theirs.

But now…

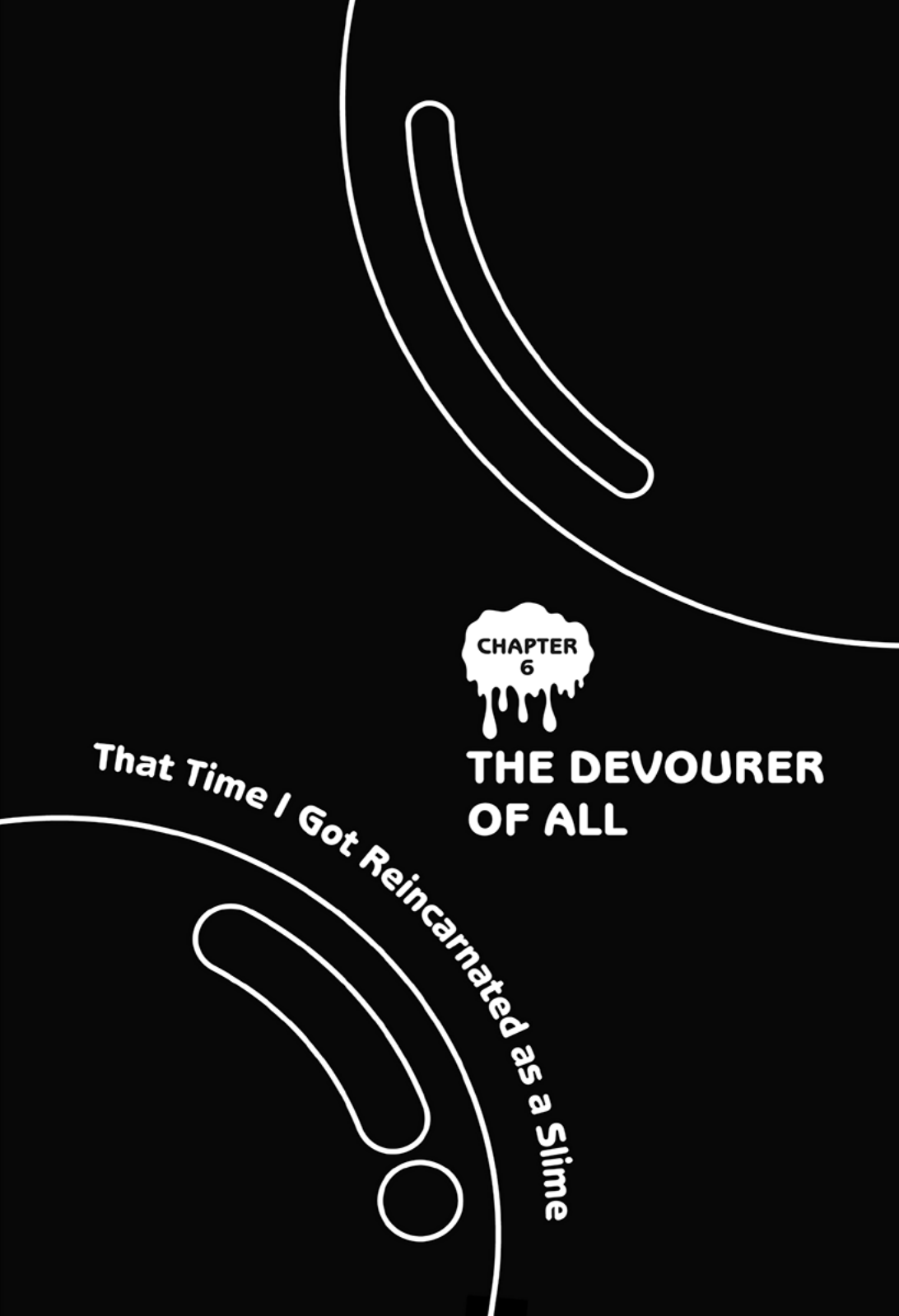
Just as the orc lord was about to enjoy his new life as a demon lord, an unexpected presence had thrown a wrench into the gears.

All of a sudden, one of the crystal orbs went black. One of the five orc generals, the commanders who answered directly to the orc lord, had been killed. Gelmud grew confused, then panicked. He realized that if things went awry, not only would there be no place in the table among the world's elites for him—his master might decide he wasn't worth having around any longer.

The realization came to him at around the same time his third crystal ball went silent. All hope seemed lost for his ambitions—and for himself.

Gelmud flew outside, casting a flight spell to propel him forward.

There was no time to bother formulating a plan now. He had to get to the marshlands, and he needed to be fast.


CHAPTER
6
THE DEVOURER
OF ALL
That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 6

THE DEVOURER OF ALL

It was a sight to behold.

I kept up my vigil on the battlefield from above, taking in the reality unfolding on the ground. Flashes of light ran from corner to corner, blowing away dozens of orcs at once. A loud roar rumbled in the sky as a black dome-shaped something appeared, then disappeared after a few seconds and left nothing but a bunch of glass fused into the earth.

All the orcs there must have been burned into nothing. I could tell what had happened easily enough, but I felt like my heart was still having trouble accepting it. Before it could, tornadoes swirled across the field, sending gale-force winds in all directions and burning the orcs alive with bolts of lightning. It looked like one of the black-armored orcs had either been incinerated or torn apart.

My honest appraisal of all this: *What the heck?*

With every swipe of her sword, Shion was cutting down great quantities of orcs. Her blade was glowing a dim shade of purple, infused with her aura. A flash of the same color shot through the air with every slash, cutting orcish soldiers in half with the shock waves. The sword was no kinder to those it physically struck—some literally exploded. A single slash had a range of twenty feet or so, slicing through everyone unlucky enough to be in its path.

She smiled a graceful, fetching smile as she danced her way through the hordes. The attacks just kept coming, uninterrupted, and not a single orc could lay a claw on her.

Her strength was simply overwhelming.

But there were a couple other guys in battle that made Shion look like a rank amateur. Those were Benimaru and Ranga.

Let's tackle Benimaru first. What was up with that freaky black dome thing? I had a vague idea when I first saw it, I'll admit. A combination of my Control Flame, Dark Flame, and Ranged Barrier, I guessed. He used a barrier to freeze the space, Control Flame to accelerate the particle motion inside, and then Dark Flame to convert the excited particles into searing flame. It'd instantly cook everything in the enclosed space, like Ifrit's Flare Circle except with an even larger range. It disappeared in the space of two seconds, but with temperatures this high, that was enough.

It was a scarily efficient killing device, and the neat thing was how, unlike a nuclear bomb, it didn't affect the outside area one bit. Not a single shock wave or burst of energy leaked out from the barrier. He must have ranged it carefully to control the temperature inside, and I could only imagine how hot it must've been. No way anyone could've survived.

The only real problem, I supposed, was the way he took this incredibly dangerous skill—he developed it himself, I later heard, naming it Hellflare—and tossed it around with hardly a second thought, apparently.

Now for the other guy—er, wolf. Ranga.

Transforming into a tempest starwolf out of nowhere was kind of freaky, I thought, but it was the skill he immediately unleashed afterward that really threw me.

I suppose that was how you were supposed to use Dark Lightning, without placing any limits on it. And he even controlled the wind to enhance its effects. Dang. What *was* that?

Understood. I believe the individual Ranga combined Dark Lightning with the extra skill Control Wind, taking advantage of the differences in temperature and atmospheric pressure to create bursts of up-and-down-flowing currents, thus creating whirlwinds.

Huh. Neat. I don't get it.

So he generated tornadoes to attack a wider range than he could with just lightning? Well, it sure worked. It knocked out an entire section of the orc horde.

It consumed a ton of his magic, though, so I doubted a second strike was coming any time soon. Which, I mean, if he could rapid-fire stuff like that, I think we'd need to redefine everything about how war even worked on this planet.

Gauging all of this made me realize something. The brakes I had subconsciously been applying to myself all this time—*they* had nothing like that. No concept that some skills were a little too dangerous to unleash and just lobbed them willy-nilly at enemies. That was a given in the survival-of-the-fittest world they were born in, I imagined, and really, maybe I was the one being weird about it. It'd suck if I held back and my friends paid dearly for it.

Over in my old world, there was this tacit agreement that, yes, we've got all these devastating weapons and stuff, but we can't actually use them. They were more for deterrence. But was that really the case? What's the point of spending so much money on weapons you could never use? Taking all that time to develop them? They're meant for launching when the times call for it, no? And if you're not supposed to use them on innocent citizens, did that suddenly make it okay to use them on the battlefield? I think if you got your brains blown out in a war, you probably wouldn't care much about the exact murder weapon that did the deed, wherever you wound up.

Maybe that was the whole point. You needed to show people that you were strong if your weapons were ever going to serve as a deterrent. Maybe there was nothing wrong with that at all, actually. Look at Ranga, for one—he's just sitting there, observing, and nobody's daring to go near him. They're as deterred as they can get.

I mused absentmindedly to myself for a while.

The battle had been raging for around two hours.

Benimaru had popped off four of those dark-dome attacks. Not even he could deploy them in rapid succession, but I guess they didn't sap that much of his energy. Ranga's attack, meanwhile, was proving more of a one-and-done thing. I guess he put his all into it, which explained his current comparative silence. It certainly helped cow his opponents into submission anyway.

As I saw a bunch of orcs running around in a panic, trying not to get caught in Shion's attack range, I decided to analyze the situation a bit. I felt oddly calm now. Benimaru decided where to attack first, but I had ultimate authority over where to go last. I wanted to strike the enemy hard on a specific spot, attracting our foes to Shion and hitting them where it hurt.

Hakuro was busy handling the commander-class enemies for me, and I would hardly call that a battle. He approached them soundlessly and diced them up in an instant. The Ravenous unique skill let the armies boost their leader's strength by consuming the dead, so making the bodies themselves vanish was apparently a priority for him, which I appreciated. Part of his Modelwill Art, maybe? I could see him release an aura from his palm, burning the corpses—or melting them, really.

We proceeded along those lines for a while, with me spotting an enemy commander and sending Hakuro over to erase him. We were overwhelming the orc armies, and zero cost to ourselves. I kept up my watch, trying to stay as efficient as possible.

Even the more eager ogres realized that the tables had turned by now, I was sure. They weren't attacking as frantically as they were before. They kept their distance from Benimaru and Ranga, fanning out their formations so they weren't bunched together.

At that point in time, the orcs had suffered about twenty percent casualties. Over forty thousand had lost their lives. And it wasn't until then that the enemy's nerve center—the orc lord—finally took action.

*

The orc lord, a pig-headed monster who redefined ugliness, came to the front. He had two orc generals with him, both clearly a level above the orcs from before. Their dull, yellow eyes were brimming with hatred, and I could see their auras all the way from up here.

Benimaru, Shion, Hakuro, and Ranga were now lined up together to engage them. Even Soei was there, now next to Benimaru. They were clearly ready to rock.

So how strong's this orc lord, then? I had no idea, really, but it seemed that all the powers he gained were starting to make him lose control of his own sense of self. Maybe that was why he was so late to react to us. I wasn't so sure I needed to worry much about him.

Either way, though, we couldn't let him get any stronger. Now that Benimaru and everyone else had arrived, I figured the sooner we took him down, the better. I took my mask out from my pocket and put it on. *Time to teach him a lesson*, I thought as I descended to the ground.

Just as I was about to touch land…

Tiiiiing.

…there was a sharp, ear-piercing sound. As it rang in my mind, my Magic Sense noticed something flying toward the area at high speed—aimed right at the middle of the marsh where the two armies were fighting away.

It was a man, dressed rather oddly and with a distressingly strong aura. One of those upper-level magic-borns I'd been hearing about. I landed on the ground, following his trail, Ranga and Benimaru sidling next to me.

The man gave us a sideways glance. "What in blazes is going on here?!" he shouted, wearing his emotions on his sleeve. "Who dares to disrupt the plans of the great Gelmud himself?!"

*

I think I had an idea of what we were dealing with. This was the bad guy, wasn't he? I knew it. And the way he revealed who he was without anyone asking indicated he might be a bit of an idiot, too.

He looked minion level, but I didn't want to read this book by its cover. His clothes were odd, but each component seemed to be magical by nature. I'd best not let my guard down, I thought. If I had to guess, this was the guy setting the orc lord on the general populace. And now that his plans were going awry, he looked seriously pissed.

"L-Lord Gelmud!" Gabil stammered as he ran up to him. "I never would have expected you to come to my aid at a time like this!"

Gelmud just looked at him the way someone would look at a giant pile of garbage. "You worthless wastes of space!" he spat out at the orcs all around him. "If you had just eaten these stupid lizards and other fodder and evolved into a demon lord, then I, the great Gelmud, wouldn't have to *be* here right now!!"

Well, that's kind of mean. Does he understand what he's saying, really? He means that the lizardmen and goblins were just meant to be food for the orc lord? Not that it matters to me, but…

…Wait, haven't I heard the name Gelmud before?

Understood. My information indicates the magic-born that gave the goblin called Rigur his name was himself named Gelmud.

Oh right. Gelmud was the guy who named the first Rigur, the older brother of the current one. Did he name Gabil, too, then? The lizardman himself spoke up before I could pursue the question further.

"Eaten these…lizards? Ha…ha-ha-ha! Talk about your gallows humor, eh? You'll find I am still perfectly hale and hearty, Lord Gelmud. Ever since you granted me your name, I have done my best

to exercise the full potential of my abilities…"

Ah, so it *was* him. But naming a monster just so the orc lord could consume him? That…made an awful lot of sense, actually. Eating a named monster with enhanced skills and strength and all that, would make the orc lord that much more powerful.

But why not name the orc lord himself, then? A lot of this guy's M.O. still made little sense to me.

"Huh? Oh. You, Gabil?" Gelmud asked while I was pondering this. "I wish you could've fed yourself to the orc lord sooner than now… As blundering and worthless as you are, you still bother to haunt this world? Well, so be it. Now that I am here, I might as well help you shuffle off to your grave. Gabil, I hereby command you to become the orc lord's strength. Your death will be the greatest thing you have ever done for me!"

He was gesturing wildly at the orc lord now. The orc lord didn't budge. He simply looked at Gelmud with his sunken eyes and opened his mouth.

"Evolve…into demon lord… What is that…?"

"Dahh! Your brain must be the size of a walnut," Gelmud mustered. "It seems all that prey has avoided your brain entirely and gone straight to your muscles. We are out of time. I am forbidden to meddle in this…but I have no other choice."

He turned his bloodshot eyes to Gabil now, showing an open palm. Then, without any further warning, he shouted "Die!" and launched a bolt of magic.

"Look out, Sir Gabil!"

"Get, get down!"

A small detail of lizardmen scurried toward the awestruck Gabil to protect him, forming a living shield as they warned him of the danger.

That single magic bolt was enough to send five high into the air. But it didn't kill any of them. Whether the force of the blast was dissipated among all the bodies or the lizardmen were really just that tough, nobody was dead from it. Seriously injured, yes, but very much alive.

"Wh-what are you…?!" Gabil exclaimed. "Lord Gelmud, why did you do such a thing…?!"

So he was using and abusing Gabil all this time, and now that things weren't going perfectly according to plan, he was gonna kill him? Something told me that I probably wouldn't get along too well with this Gelmud guy.

Gabil's face twisted itself in despair, betrayed by the one person in this world he believed in.

"S-Sir Gabil, it's too dangerous!" one of his injured troopers advised him. "Please, get out of here as quickly as possible."

He certainly had some nice people under him—or maybe it was more like Gabil was a great boss to them. Judging by the state of things when I arrived, he hadn't used the goblins as the throwaway pawns I expected him to. Perhaps he was using them as a first-line tactical defense, but I could see he had a good reason for it.

The beloved commander, huh…?

"You cocky inferior races… If you wish to die that badly, I'll kill the lot of you right now! Perhaps you'll finally be of service to me once you're in the orc lord's stomach!!"

Gelmud began focusing his aura above his head, attempting to launch an even more powerful magical bolt. Or was it magic? Because he took almost no time to cast it. All he did was close his eyes and gather his magic at a particular point in the air. Not that it mattered.

I walked ahead, in front of the lizardmen—and in front of Gabil, who was now digging down to protect his men, even in his current daze. I knew he couldn't see my face through the mask.

What does Gabil think about me right now? I couldn't shake the thought.

Why was I standing in front of him? That was an easier question—because I liked him. I wanted to help him.

That was the only reason, and that was all I really needed. I wasn't afraid to do whatever I wanted in life—in fact, I'd sworn it to myself.

Gabil looked up at me in awe. I doubted he understood what was going on. Things had vaulted beyond what his brain could process. *Don't worry, though. I don't expect any favor back. This guy here? He's just pissed me off.*

"Sir Rimuru, I…"

I held Benimaru back with an arm and took a step forward. Gelmud paid no attention, still focused on the gigantic magic bolt he was conjuring up.

"Ba-ha-ha-ha! Let me show you what a high-level magic-born can do to you all. Time for you to die! Death March Dance!!"

Gelmud had an expression of crazed joy. He intended to do us all in at once.

The bolt, when he finally launched it, split into countless smaller bolts in the air, all arcing toward us. Each one was about as powerful as the first bolt he produced, and now tons were raining down upon us, one by one, as if forming an orderly line. Gelmud, I'm sure, was expecting us to be helpless, perishing with nowhere else to run to.

Sadly, though, they didn't work on me. I slowly brought a small hand forward, and that was all it took to absorb all the bolts with my Predator skill. A quick round of Analysis produced instant results. This wasn't magic, but an Art—one where he could roll his aura energy together, mix it with magicules, and give it destructive power.

The fundamental idea was the same as Hakuro's Modelwill, I

figured. But while the energy Gelmud expended on it outclassed anything Hakuro had, splitting that force into so many smaller bolts made the overall impact equal or less. He wasn't too well-versed in the move yet—and if that was all the power he could cobble together, I was in no danger at all.

"Hey," I said, "is that all you got? You want me to 'die' just with that? Maybe you could give me a demonstration in how to die first?"

I focused my own magic and tried launching a bolt of my own. But nothing came out from the right hand I thrust at him. I could feel the magic and aura flow within me, but I couldn't quite control it. Even if I understood how it worked, that didn't mean I could execute it that easily.

So unlike magic, I couldn't just analyze this to grab it for myself…? Practice really does make perfect. *After that killer line I just gave him, too. This is a little embarrassing*.

Thus, to cover up for my mistake, I shot off an Icicle Lance. It wasn't like I was married to Modelwill or anything. I just wanted to see how well I stacked up against a so-called upper-level magic-born at this point.

And once I get bored of it, I'll "consume" you, too.

My Icicle Lance accelerated in the air before contacting Gelmud. He had his arms in front of him in an attempt at defending himself, and then instantly froze. He screamed in agony—magic worked well enough on him, which I wasn't expecting.

Of course, no magic-born of the upper ranks would be finished by that alone. He immediately shattered the ice off his arms and fired an even larger bolt of magic at me. No fancy tricks this time; just a big, blunt hunk of magic, crafted with everything he had.

"Die! How dare you inflict pain upon me… I'll blast you to smithereens!!"

But he couldn't. I just ate it up with Predator again. He let out a surprised yelp, shocked that I snuffed out the attack once more.

"No! What— What *is* that you're…?!"

He began shaking fearsomely. I sent a Water Blade his way. He tried to dodge, but the speed of it caught him off guard, cutting a deep gash in his side.

"Gaahh!! Y-you… That was not magic…?"

So it wasn't that he couldn't guard it—he just didn't. He apparently thought Water Blade was magic, so he attempted to counter with an anti-magic barrier instead of expending the energy to dodge it. That barrier was probably why the Icicle Lance didn't do much lasting damage.

Gelmud began chanting a spell, fervently attempting to heal himself. *Wow, he's got that kinda thing, huh?* He looked like a freak, but maybe he was more multitalented than I thought. Guess the "magic-born" name wasn't there for show. Maybe I ought to exercise the ol' arsenal a little myself.

Benimaru, Ranga, and the others were keeping a safe distance away, staying on the ready but apparently content in letting me handle matters. Shion was probably expecting me to go all-out, I imagined, but she didn't look disappointed in me. She was hooked, in fact, eyes sparkling with delight as she watched. Hakuro and Soei, meanwhile, were ready to join me at a moment's notice, just like I figured they would.

The orc lord and his minions didn't seem like they were going anywhere, either. Now was the time, I supposed. I casually sauntered forward, stopping once I was next to the still-cowering Gelmud.

"Hey, can we get serious now? You were gonna show me what a high-level magic-born can do, weren't you?"

Then I kicked him. Hakuro could've easily dodged it, I was sure,

but Gelmud took the full brunt of it. I could feel the sensation of bones breaking against my foot.

Must've been a more telling blow than I thought…or was Gelmud that much of a wuss? Oh wait… I have Multilayer Barrier and Body Armor on me, don't I? That probably had something to do with it.

"Y-y-you…?! I am a magic-born, and you…"

As I pondered over what I had just done, Gelmud began to unleash his full aura in a rage. Yep, he sure was an upper-level guy. But it was still at only about the level of Shion or Soei—lower than Benimaru, in fact. Did that make him an upper-level magic-born? I knew I shouldn't have worried.

With a sudden dash, I launched myself toward Gelmud's chest, aiming a fist right at the pit of his stomach. I felt no pain as I propelled it through his magical defenses. They dulled the effect of melee attacks, apparently, but they couldn't fully dull the effects of my punch.

A look of anguish spread across his face. I paid it no mind, landing a flurry of strikes. He could do nothing to keep up with them. His aura was huge, but in terms of physical strength, he was nothing. Long-range strikes must have been his forte—and most projectile attacks were completely helpless against Predator.

I never thought much about it, but against long-range attacks, I had a pretty insurmountable advantage, I supposed. *Let's try some long-range moves of our own, then.* I adjusted the Water Blade I fired a moment ago, creating a ball of liquid. Then I tried infusing it with Poisonous Breath and Paralyzing Breath, seeing if it could all mix together.

I then tossed the resulting ball, about the size of a fist, at Gelmud. It wasn't as fast as I thought it'd be, given that it wasn't pressurized like Water Blades. It was slow enough for Gelmud to react to, and he fired back with a magic bolt of his own. That Water Blade from before must've taught him to do away with the taunts and such.

But it wasn't done yet. The ball exploded into a spray of fine mist, spreading all over Gelmud's body.

"Garhh!!" he shouted in anguish, writhing in the mist. Just as I hoped. Now I knew how to modify the Water Blades themselves. And…wait.

I think I had my finger on something here. When I created that ball just now, that feeling I had…

I pointed my right hand at Gelmud, who was still in pain and desperately attempting to heal himself. *Will this work?* When I made that ball, I didn't take any water out from my stomach for it—I just rolled it out from my aura. Maybe if I tried that with magicules instead… *There we go.* I now had a fist-size piece of spirit above my right hand. So far, so good.

Now, how to fire this at him… Slowly, I pushed it forward, as if executing a breath-type attack. I felt something push lightly against my palm, and then the ball of spirit shot forward as fast as a Water Blade. *Guess it worked.*

Hakuro's eyes burst wide open. "He's learned Modelwill," I could hear him whisper. "Still unrefined, though."

So now I had my own magical bolts. We'll just ignore the second thing he said for now. Once I learned something, things would fall into place pretty quickly. I was sure I could burn more magic to boost its strength, too.

That shot just now missed, sadly. *I'll hit the next one*, I thought as I stared Gelmud down.

"What are…you…?! How?! Not even an upper-level magic-born such as I could—"

He was interrupted by the bolt of magic knocking him cleanly off his feet. I was still just practicing, so I didn't put too much force into it, but it still beat one of my punches, it looked like.

Next I fired several in succession. Smooth sailing. It'd just be a matter of time before I fully mastered it.

Time for more practice, I decided as I targeted several shots on Gelmud. I then simply stood there as they all hit home. *Geez, I'm more merciless than I thought. I think I got a little too excited about learning this new attack.*

Still, this dude was way too weak. His store of magic was definitely beyond A level, I'd grant him that, but he still felt weaker than the ogre mages. What's with that?

Understood. The ranking system, as defined by the human race, makes its calculations based on the quantity of the subject's magicules. However, even if two subjects with the same quantity of magic fought each other, the competitor with skills and Arts that consume this magic more efficiently would have a decided advantage. A subject's "level" is an arbitrary figure, with no official method of calculation, and is thus not reflected in an individual's ranking.

Ahhh. So levels didn't count as far as the Sage was concerned. Not like you can really say what "level" you are in life, and have anything to back that up with. This wasn't a video game, after all—some things you could only figure out by actually fighting dudes and seeing how you stacked up. Maybe that was why Hakuro, already high level to start with, exhibited such a startling change in physical strength with his evolution.

You could have all the power in the world, and it meant nothing if you couldn't harness it. Gelmud proved that much. I couldn't lose.

"Ya know," I said tauntingly, "you can go around calling yourself a high-level magic-born all you want, but you don't look like much of anything to me. Or do you have some kind of last resort you're hiding?"

Yeah, what kinda skills does he have? 'Cause I didn't feel like I was

in any kind of danger, but I wanted to glean as much intel as I could. I wasn't letting my guard down—my mind was on the orc lord's potential moves, but he still didn't seem interested in moving at all.

"All right," he said. "I will let you join my cause. Soon, I will—"

I punched him.

Does he listen to anything people say?

"Agh! S-stop, stop! Wait a minute! I have the backing of a demon lord behind me! You will not get away with this—"

Oh, now he comes out with that. Man, what a pain in the ass.

"So?" I asked. "And what're you gonna say when you run back crying to this guy? You don't think he'd actually let you stay alive after this, do you?"

Gelmud began visibly shivering, face painfully tense.

"Gaahhhh!! Get away from me!" He stammered the words as he crawled backward. "You're dead! The demon lord will never forgive this!!"

The demon lord, huh? Leon, hopefully—I had a date with him already. I doubted I could take him right now, really, but I was curious how strong he was.

I knew there were multiple demon lords running around, but were they all about the same, power-wise? This guy seemed to know a thing or two about them, and I'd love to pick his brain for a while, but I'd hate to blink once and have him slip through my fingers. I had to think about that as I interrogated him. Hopefully he'd stay just as loose-lipped as when he revealed his role in all this.

A pity I couldn't just consume him and gain all his memories. That worked for magical knowledge, for some odd reason, but even that was kind of the luck of the draw. I could always extract skills from

that, though, which almost seemed like cheating.

Speaking of that, I quickly decided to use my Sticky Steel Thread skill to keep Gelmud in place before he got any funny ideas. He had already been levitating into the air, chanting something—probably attempting to fly off, I assumed. But that was no problem now.

"Damn you!" he shouted, attempting to unravel himself as I approached him silently. "S-stop, get away! Hey! Orc lord! Over here! Help me!!"

Now he was seeking salvation from the very orc lord he called a fool and a dunderhead a moment ago. Talk about a lost cause. I always respected a leader who had the high regard of his staff, but I hated the opposite. Especially when they treated the people under them as disposable. I was merciless against that.

He probably had a lot of juicy skills on him. No need to waste any more time. But having the chance to speak to Gelmud beforehand made the thought of eating him more than a little unpleasant.

The heaps of corpses that now surrounded him made his heart cry out in pain.

—I'm hungry…

—Hungry…

—You? A high-orc kid? Why don't you just die already, you worthless brat?

—All of us are starving now… O great magic-born, grant us your mercy…

—Don't touch me! You'll get your grime all over my clothes… Hmm? Wait. You…

—Is it all right if I eat this?

—Of course. No need to restrain yourself. Eat until you've had your fill, so you can grow big and strong.

—Thank you, o great magic-born!! I will never forget this—

—It is fine. From today forward, you may consider me as your father. Ah yes. Let me give you a name. Your "name" shall henceforth be—

Scenes from the past flashed in his mind. Memories of the first time he was picked up by the magic-born who adopted him. And now he was following his adopted father's orders, hoping to repay the favor any way he could.

The two shared the same mission—to transform the Forest of Jura, this bountiful place, into a second paradise for the orcs. So they could abandon their own starvation-racked, disease-ridden homeland, so barren of anything that even the demon lord no longer paid it any mind.

If he could only gain control of the forest, his father would have his talents recognized by the demon lord. He would become part of the demon lord's leadership, and once that happened, he promised that he would provide aid to even more of his allies.

But to do that, he needed power. He needed to consume the higher-level races of the forest, gain more strength—and build a new paradise for the orcs, a safe haven to build upon. The forest's blessings would ensure their comrades never had to think about starving again. The other races might suffer, perhaps, but they would have to accept that "survival of the fittest," that absolute, incontrovertible law, applied to them, too, in the end.

This war, after all, was a struggle to find the seeds capable of survival.

...It should have all worked out that way.

—If only you would've evolved into a demon lord already…

What did he mean? What did his father, Lord Gelmud, want from him?

For the one called the orc lord, all he could do was stare at his adoptive father, with his dull, yellowish eyes.



Gelmud, paralyzed by fear, fired bolt after bolt of magic at me, materializing them out of thin air despite having his hands restrained. A very skillful act, but it didn't help him. They harmlessly bounced off my Multilayer Barrier—the bolts counted as a melee attack, I guess, so they couldn't penetrate my defense at all. I knew that from my previous Analysis, so I knew I no longer had to bother Predator-ing them.

The former sneer on his face was replaced with a gasp of despair.

"Dammit!" he shouted. "Help me, orc lord— I mean, Geld!!"

Ah. So he had named the guy after all. I suppose he wanted to conceal his relationship to the orc lord, for reasons I couldn't surmise. He said he was "forbidden to meddle" before, which I imagined had something to do with it.

That, at long last, stirred the orc lord to action. Did he want to help Gelmud? Well, all right. He was free to do whatever. I promised Treyni that I'd take him out anyway. It looked, externally speaking, that he was little more than Gelmud's puppet, but I didn't care. It wasn't like picking off the guy behind the scenes was gonna neatly end all of this.

I had no reason to hate this orc. But that didn't mean I could let him live.

Watching him as he closed the distance between us, I gauged the

situation. None of this felt threatening in the least. I couldn't estimate his magic stores since I hadn't made physical contact with him yet, but I figured it wouldn't be too far from Benimaru's. And that was still around half of Ifrit's. If I gave this a serious effort, it shouldn't be too tricky. My main concern was what would happen once all these orcish soldiers were leaderless.

"Well, it's about time you stood up, you good-for-nothing idiot. Ha-ha-ha! I don't know who you think you are, but you're about to get a taste of *real* strength! Get him, Geld! Show him what it means to defy me and—"

With a wet, squishy-sounding thud, Gelmud's order was cut off mid-sentence. His head rolled along the saturated ground a few feet. The orc lord had done a marvelous, if somewhat forceful, job of chopping it right off his shoulders.

Crunch, splish, splorch.

Ugh, gross… He's eating the dude.

The orc lord, upon walking up to Gelmud, had not hesitated a moment in using his meat cleaver–like weapon to decapitate the man. Once that was done, he started to slash away, carving the body into small, bite-size pieces that he immediately hurled into his mouth. It was a low-born, pathetic, and all-too-suitable ending for Gelmud.

So this pig-guy wanted him dead, too, huh? Or was this his orcish instincts at work? Either way, it wasn't exactly great news for me. The dull, yellow eyes now had the glint of youth and intelligence to them. He had regained his sentience, something he had once lost to the power he gained from all the different races he had tasted. I wasn't anticipating this… Talk about biting the hand that feeds you.

The resulting aura was like nothing I had experienced so far today.

Confirmed. The orc lord's magical energy has expanded in quantity. He has begun the evolution process to a demon lord seed…

Evolution complete. The individual Geld has completed the evolution to an Orc Disaster.

Ooooh… That was the World Language talking, wasn't it? Neat.

Wait. Stay focused, man. He's really done it now. There I was, figuring I could whip him anytime I wanted, and now look. Cut me a break, man.

This was completely my fault. I knew I shouldn't have gotten so cocky. Gelmud was so much weaker than I anticipated, and I figured killing the main guy behind all this would wrap everything up, neat and clean. Boy, was I wrong. Too bad I didn't kill him when I had the chance.

Okay, new rule from now on. When you *can* kill a guy, just do it. I'd have to keep that in mind. No point making mistakes if you never learned anything from them, after all.

But getting back to the point. *What should I do with this guy?* I couldn't stew in my own juices forever. He's gonna have to be taken down, one way or the other.

Things were now moving along by themselves, regardless of what I thought. Reality wasn't willing to wait for me.

"Graaarrrgh!! I am an Orc Disaster, the devourer of all! My name is Geld— Geld, the demon lord!!"

To Geld, I suppose, he was just bringing to fruition what Gelmud wanted for him this whole time. Gelmud wanted him to become a demon lord, and he simply selected the quickest way to evolve into one. Just as Gelmud wanted. No servant could have been more loyal to his master, and I sadly didn't notice that in time. All I could do there was groan out "What a monster…"

His eyes were now youthful, full of sparkling energy and intelligence. His mere presence was intense, severe, on a scale like

nothing Gelmud had ever achieved.

This was a demon lord. A monster whose magic energy had multiplied into something almost overwhelming. He certainly deserved the title. The World Language suggested this was a demon lord seed, too—the *real* evolution had yet to happen, maybe?

I better kill him right now, I realized, or else he really *would* become a disaster for the world.



* * *

Benimaru and the other ogres were positioned for battle. They could see how much of a threat the demon lord Geld was. Their easygoing smiles were gone, replaced with stern, serious frowns.

“Sir Rimuru!” Benimaru said. “Let us handle this!” Shion, meanwhile, didn’t even bother to speak. With a flash, she whipped out her large sword and swung it home, putting all her strength behind it, enhanced further by the extra skills Steel Strength and Strengthen Body.

Geld attempted to block it with one meat cleaver–equipped hand. Even for him, it wasn’t quite enough. He brought up his right hand now, too, doing his best to resist Shion’s incessant attack.

“You think some dirty pig can be a demon lord?!” Shion shouted as she landed another strike from up high. “Don’t you dare believe that!” Kurobe’s expertly crafted blade now had a visible aura around it, as it landed with a dull thud against the demon lord’s body.

Both took a step back before clashing once more. Longsword slammed against cleaver, raining sparks upon the battlefield. It looked like an even match, but before long, the differences between the two became clear. Every muscle on Geld bulged, his very armor pulsing as if it were part of his body.

It was the demon lord who won out in the end. His muscle outclassed Shion’s, even with Strengthen Body and all of that. The evolution had greatly enhanced his physical body. It made me want to sigh in despair.

Shion was tossed back, and Geld pursued her. Realizing the danger, she attempted to deflect the blow while leaping backward to reduce the impact. The damage upon her was clear nonetheless. She winced in pain—it’d be a while before she was ready to move again.

But Shion wasn't the only one here. As Geld landed the follow-up attack, a middle-aged samurai stood strong behind him.

It was Hakuro, and with a speed even I was just barely capable of following, he drew his sword from the staff it was hidden in.

The blade glowed with a constant light, energized by the battle force housed inside the wielder. Its brightness indicated exactly how focused Hakuro was on this. No one could block or dodge him now. A streak of metal ran across the demon lord's body, cutting it cleanly in half and even slicing off the head on the way back up.

That had *to be enough*, I thought, but I was still being far too optimistic. Geld's body reconnected itself, thanks to a yellowish aura that regrouped all the parts with tentacle-like tendrils. The completed body then leaned down, grabbed its head off the ground, and reattached it like nothing was amiss.

The horror movie–like scene silenced everyone for a moment. Even Hakuro was obviously surprised.

Now I knew the most fearsome thing about the demon lord Geld was his otherworldly healing skills. For now, this monster wouldn't have any resistances, but once he gained them, he'd be impossible to kill.

Then:

"Demonwire Bind!"

Soei used his Sticky Steel Thread to apprehend Geld. He had been lurking within Hakuro's shadow, waiting for the perfect timing to restrain the demon lord's moves.

"Get him, Benimaru!" he shouted. Benimaru was already on the move, suddenly unleashing a Hellflare strike. Only a small dome opened around Geld—whether he was deliberately keeping it small or was short on energy after deploying four of them, I didn't know.

Geld, restrained, had no means of escape from the barrier as it became engulfed in high-temperature flames, doing their level best to incinerate the demon lord. The power of the heat was unaffected by the size of the dome, giving us a guaranteed death.

Or so we thought. Several seconds later, the dome was gone—and Geld was just casually standing there. Benimaru grimaced at the sight. Hellflare was a powerful move, yes, but it was designed for efficiency. It was focused on doing its deed within only a couple seconds; it was incapable of keeping the burners on for extended periods of time like Ifrit could.

Generating Ifrit-style temperatures with relatively little energy was an impressive feat, don't get me wrong. But a target with enough resistance could easily focus on defending itself to survive the blast, I suppose. If Benimaru could make it last longer, the flames would eventually overcome any resistance or regenerative skills. That, or maybe he could focus further to make the fire even hotter, capable of burning anything in the world. But no.

It wasn't wholly ineffective, though. Geld had no heat resistance; his skin was burned horribly. The resistance his aura offered was all that kept it from being a lethal blow. He had probably gained something along the lines of Self-Regeneration, like what I had in slime form. The burned skin was already sloughing off, with new skin being generated from underneath. And the moment Geld whispered something, he began to heal quicker than ever.

He must have inherited—or seized—Gelmud's own healing skills. Combined with his own inherent abilities, he could probably heal almost as fast as me with Ultraspeed Regeneration.

The battle continued as I watched and analyzed. Ranga aimed an extra strike at Geld before he could fully heal from Benimaru's damage. He focused his Dark Lightning on a single point and released it, much as I had before. Nothing fancy; just a killer amount of force. It hit Geld directly, freezing him. He was burned and blackened, and as we watched, he fell to the ground.

This time, I was sure we had won. And why not? Not even I was sure I could withstand that kind of attack. If it were a Replicant of mine, it'd be burned to a crisp.

I guess we all wound up pitching in on this kill. Hope they don't think any less of me for it. I doubted any of the ogre mages could've taken him on solo and had any chance. That attack just emptied Ranga's energy, too—Dark Lightning consumed a ton of it, with obvious results. He was now curled up on the ground, unable to move. I wish he could've kept a bit in reserve, but I couldn't blame him for not doing so at a time like this. Besides, it was over now, right?

Then I heard something.

"So this...is pain."

The blackened, charred demon lord was back on his feet.

Guess not, then?

*

"No way," I whispered.

This monster was totally beyond all common sense. I wasn't sure this was reality any longer.

Before my eyes, the demon lord had just ripped off both his arms and eaten them.

An orc general ran up to him.

"My lord, let my body join yours..."

They nodded at each other, and that was that. The orc general was killed, then casually cannibalized.

Man... And with every bite, that charred skin fell away, revealing yet another fresh layer underneath. Then he grew entirely new arms, driven by the muscle and fiber gained from what he consumed. He

could use that to cast Self-Regeneration on himself as many times as he wanted, I imagined.

Talk about an incredible healer. *I mean, seriously, if we don't kill this dude in one hit, we're never getting outta this.* Or maybe we'd have to render him into nothing but atoms to finish him. The one thing we knew for sure, though, was that my five strongest underlings could pool their abilities together and that still wasn't enough.

Then the demon lord let out a guttural battle roar. "Not enough!" he screamed, his yellow aura coursing across his body. "More! More, let me eat more! Consume them all! Chaos Eater!!"

Like sentient tendrils, the yellow aura extended its way toward the nearby piles of bodies. They instantly corroded their flesh, consuming them whole. If anything, it was this yellow aura that was the true driver behind Geld's power.

It was another application of his unique Ravenous skill. Part of that skill involved Rot—something that could literally rot anything that it made contact with. If the target failed to resist it, it was corroded and killed if it was organic. Fearsome indeed.

Instinctively sensing all this, I ordered my troops to retreat.

"Fall back!"

The moment I did, the ogres stepped back.

"Tell Gobta and the lizardmen not to come near here!"

"What about you, Sir Rimuru?" Benimaru asked.

I opened my mouth to reply. I was cut off.

"You will become my next meal. Die! Death March Dance!!"

The same attack Gelmud tried out earlier. But now it was much more of a punisher. Not only was far more energy packed into it, but

each tiny magic bolt had Rot added to it. Get hit by one, and even the ogres would be gravely hurt.

I had to do something.

I was no longer able to keep my body from quivering. This was something that came from instinct. Uh-oh. I just couldn't stop.

—Is this fear?

No.

This…is joy.

Oh. So I'm overjoyed.

Yes—

From deep within my body, I was quivering in a frenzy of joy, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

A foe that even five of my strongest fighters couldn't handle. And yet, there wasn't a trace of fear in my heart. The depression I entered this battle with was a thing of the past.

Now, this demon lord had elevated himself in my mind. He was my enemy. *Sorry I thought you were just a pain in the ass earlier. Now I'm serious!*

A flurry of magical bolts flung themselves toward me. I used Predator to consume them, and then the tendrils of yellow wrapped themselves around me.

The demon lord Geld's Death March Dance bolts danced around in the air, as if self-conscious, before coming in to swallow me. It was infused with Chaos Eater, and it had a mission to carry out.

In another moment, the elastic tendrils were around me. Even if

they were still on the other side of my Multilayer Barrier, it still didn't feel very pleasant.

—Yeah? You wanna consume me? Well, all right. Do it if you can!

Worked up as I was, my instincts commanded me to flash a weak smile.

If you wanna eat me, you'll just get eaten first.

Silently, I removed my mask and put it in a pocket.

It was time for my clash with the demon lord Geld.

*

An impartial observer would probably assume that I'd have a hard time defeating the demon lord.

But slowly, I took out my sword, the yellow aura still around me. I didn't like that aura, but it wasn't dealing me much damage. I didn't have Resist Rot in my arsenal, but it must have been dealing melee damage upon me—nothing I couldn't cover for with Ultraspeed Regeneration.

Closing the distance between us, I slashed at Geld. He cleanly blocked me with his meat cleaver, sending me somersaulting. I should've expected as much. I couldn't take Shion in a sword-on-sword clash, and she just lost to this guy. And Hakuro, who was on another plane of existence from me swordsmanship-wise, could do little against him.

I tried another slash, moving at hyper-speed to confuse my foe, trying to find any weakness I could from every angle I could think of. I knew it was pointless, but I couldn't stop going through the cycle. Whenever I was blocked or swatted away, I just kept going back, testing it all out.

It assured me of one thing. I was weak.

I thought back to the five fighters I had directly under me, as well as Shuna and Kurobe. They had each inherited part of my skills, and in terms of using them, they were already far more expert at them than I was.

A refresher:

> **Ranga:** Dark Lightning, Control Wind **Benimaru:** Dark Flame, Control Flame **Hakuro:** Hasten Thought **Shion:** Steel Strength, Strengthen Body **Soei:** Shadow Motion, Replication **Shuna:** Analyze and Assess **Kurobe:** Research

Even among the most typical of skills, the differences were obvious. The ones they inherited were either downgrades or incomplete versions of my own. Absolutely a step down, in all ways. But they were using them all far more effectively. If I fought each one-on-one, I was pretty sure I could win. Several at once? No way. That was how strong my fighters had become.

And despite that, the demon lord Geld probably could take them all in one go. And win. My Sage analysis of the battle results told me so. They all lacked a truly decisive weapon, and sooner or later they'd run out of energy and lose.

This wasn't a foe I could beat if I fought normally. Emphasis on *normally*.

The ogres could use their skills far more deftly than I could. Why was that? For Hakuro, that was mainly just his high level at work, but what about the others? There were a few reasons—they mixed the skills with their own Arts, or their instincts allowed them to unleash their full potential without holding back. They had adopted the skills for themselves, and they could use them more efficiently than I ever could. That's what made them strong.

Through my Sage-based simulations, I knew I'd have trouble defeating several at the same time. But was that really the case? And…

really, was I “weak” at all?

To answer that—

Let’s start with an assumption.

Most of my skills were wrested away from other monsters. I wasn’t born with them, so I needed to start by understanding exactly what they were in the first place. You aren’t automatically handed a driver’s license just because you’re tall enough to sit behind a steering wheel—and you sure couldn’t expect to win a professional race that way.

But when I found myself transferred to this world, I did already have a skill or two. The skills I was born with, ones I could use as freely as snapping my fingers.

So all I needed was a single order.

“All right, Great Sage. Smash that foe for me!!”

Received. Switching to auto-battle mode.

—And there was my answer.



The demon lord Geld was overjoyed. Monsters with some actual backbone to them—and five at once!

Any monster formidable enough to make Geld feel pain would be more than welcome inside his stomach. He could eat the strongest he could find, and that would put him even farther down the road to demon lord evolution.

Just as he was about to swallow them up, another monster blocked his way. Geld was hungry. He had taken severe damage, and he needed flesh and blood to heal himself. That was why this monster in his way riled him up so much, this strange creature wearing a mask.

Worthless minion, he thought. He bore almost no palpable aura and looked like just another human. He had seen him sprout wings and fly, however, so there was no doubting his monster origins.

The demon lord intended to kill this thing along with the five tidbits he already had in his sights. But it was so strange—Geld's attacks seemed to do nothing. He would lose his five snacks before long.

Now this monster was standing before the demon lord, all alone. It removed his mask, revealing its true face—though it was more girl-like in appearance than anything, with hair as silvery as the moon. It looked cute, but the smile on its face was one of pure evil. Almost like it was looking forward to this upcoming battle.

The moment the mask was off, the aura it held back began wafting across the area. Geld sensed something was off. *My imagination? I cannot even comprehend the bottom of this aura…*

But despite his apprehensions, Geld was greeted with the sight of this creature unleashing a flurry of pointless attacks. Maybe it was his imagination after all.

I'll eat you first, then!

If this puny insect got in the way of his meal, Geld had no reason to show mercy. And this creature had far more energy than he originally thought. A high-quality entrée.

Flicking away the annoying pest, Geld adjusted the grip on his meat cleaver, preparing for the final blow. But then the creature halted its silly assault, standing bolt upright on the ground.

What's it doing now?

The girlish creature's expression froze, completely bereft of emotion. And then, it looked at him. Those eyes—they shone like gold, as if appraising him. Geld wondered what it meant. Then he realized there was an arm right in front of him.

...?!

He knew what had happened, but hesitated to accept it as fact. His own left arm had been severed at the elbow in an instant, and sent flying in front of his eyes. Then it was turned to ashes with Dark Flame.

The sword in the monster's hand was wreathed in a dark flame. It burned without heat, but it had vaporized the severed arm in milliseconds. The temperature levels must have been surreal.

...An enemy?

Yes. An enemy. This thing he treated as nothing more than food before. Now, things had changed. The foe projected a much larger presence now.

The first enemy the demon lord had faced since his evolution made him anxious from head to toe. He began to feel physically uncomfortable.

No... My arm won't regenerate?!

He checked his own arm. It was burning at the end with Dark Flame that never seemed to extinguish. It was keeping him from healing, its aura now connected to his enemy's. As long as he didn't kill the foe who had put this upon him, the flame would never disappear.

Anger began coloring Geld's eyes. He ripped the remainder of the arm off at the shoulder, consuming it in several large bites, before regenerating the arm from the socket. Then he thought for a moment. If he didn't have enough power before, he could just use his skills to compensate. This foe's speed was exemplary, but Geld held the power advantage. If he could just crush it, all that speed would be his.

Matching his meat cleaver with this monster's moves—nimbler than ever before—he blocked the full brunt of the enemy's force. But the moment sword met cleaver, the Dark Flame swallowed it whole,

melting it.

No...!

The demon lord Geld reared back, shocked. Was this an enemy? No. It was a threat. He had to consume it with every power he had at his disposal. Otherwise, he finally realized, he would be the one eaten.

Geld's aura swelled, releasing a shock wave of force. He watched the monster elude it, then unleashed Death March Dance once more. The magical bolt split into eight in midair, each bolt hurtling toward its target. Each one was enhanced with Ravenous, bestowed with the Rot property.

The monster evaded them as they flitted through the air, absorbing each one of its pursuers.

Geld laughed. *Now you will be consumed!*

The five fighters from before no longer figured in his mind. All that mattered was the prey in front of him.

The monster was still distracted by the magic bolts. He confronted it, reaching out for its body. The foe noticed just in time. It turned, then began to grapple with him. Geld had the strength advantage. *I could crush it now*, he thought.

But then he fell, his balance lost. The foe had kicked him in the knee, shattering it. This innocent little girl. It was unimaginable, how quick the strike, how brutal the impact.

Geld refused to let go. *Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I like it! I'll eat you just as you are!*

The prey was in his hands, ready for the first bite. It was helpless now. A little bit of damage was of no concern to Geld. Even that shattered knee was already regenerated, good as new.

The demon lord filled his palm with the yellow aura, preparing to

infuse it into his prey. Ravenous allowed him to rot his foes directly with a single touch, arresting all their life functions and converting them into more nutrients for him.

Every fiber of his being desired to eat this creature, every ounce of energy poured toward his Rot skill. And in a moment, his opponent would stop resisting, as its body slowly melted into nothing…



Things have unfolded just as I thought.

With the full support of the Great Sage unique skill, I was now fighting with my skills at maximum efficiency. I was making complete use of them, but it wasn't because I had leveled up or anything. I wasn't "fighting" so much as I was letting the Sage do the fighting for me. It was a totally optimized approach, leaving everything to good ol' Sage. Just as I figured, it demonstrated perfect mastery of my skills.

Once I knew I couldn't overpower Geld, I placed a Multilayer Barrier over my sword and imbued it with Dark Flame. This kept the sword from deteriorating over time, greatly boosting its attack force along the way.

Even the skills I never managed to use too well were expertly handled by the Sage. It processed all the data at hand and always chose the most effective move to make next. It was covering the entire board as it figured out how to handle the demon lord, like a chess problem.

But even then, I couldn't let up. Geld was starting to keep up with me speed-wise, and if this battle kept going, it might get worse. And if Resist Flame was one of the potential upgrades, I had nothing on him.

Hell, for all I knew, we were already at that point. And besides, everything I had for myself applied equally to the demon lord Geld. He had only just evolved; he was unfamiliar with whatever he had just inherited. Whatever advantage I had, I was losing it with every moment I dawdled.

Geld was in the throes of evolution, much as I thought I was. That was why I had to wage the battle this way.

Grappling with him was exactly what the Sage predicted. It would prove difficult to burn Geld to a crisp with Dark Flame only. He healed so quickly that it'd take too much time to completely burn him up. It might be possible if we could capture him in a Flare Circle, though, and that was why I had to subdue him first.

So I had instantly overwhelmed my opponent, inviting him to fight using the skills he was most familiar with. The demon lord fell for it beautifully, accepting my test of strength.

Just like the Sage predicted, Geld wanted to rot me, then consume me. If I could deploy a Flare Circle before then, I won.

I had to hand it to the Sage—it had read the guy like a book. But now the one possibility I had given a passing thought to—the one the Sage dismissed as too infinitesimally unlikely to happen—became reality.

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! Flame doesn't work on me, you know!"

I had locked myself in a Ranged Barrier with him. The Flare Circle was now under way—and the demon lord Geld, who was supposed to be bursting into flames now that it was several thousand degrees around us, was instead heartily laughing in my face.

I hate it when these worst-case scenarios become reality.

...?! Report. Enemy confirmed to have resistance to flame. Requesting immediate alterations to plan...

The Great Sage came back online, sounding the same as always, even if I imagined it sounding a tad unnerved.

This was terrible. Horrible, really. Right at the climax of it all, my enemy had just checkmated me. But—why, though? There was still no

anxiety or concern in my heart. As if I had hoped this would happen all along.

"Oh really?" I said, flashing a proud smile. "Because you might be a lot happier succumbing to the flames soon."

The Chaos Eater that served as Geld's aura was starting to make its way through my Multilayer Barrier. It didn't hurt, but it was making me intensely uncomfortable as it wended its way around my skin. And yet—I still felt nothing but joy. It *was* what I wanted. He was my enemy, and he *had* to give me this much, at least.

I got this, I silently told the Sage, retaking control of my body. The Sage, while taking over, had allowed me to observe Geld at close range. Taking full advantage of the break, I had accelerated my thoughts a thousand times to consider what to do if the unlikeliest of events occurred.

A computer that never makes mistakes tends to see everything as a probability. It seeks efficiency, cutting away anything it deems redundant. That was why I was here. I was a ball of inefficiency, a former human with a deliberately incomplete thought process.

So don't be disappointed, partner, I whispered in my heart as I sneered at the demon lord. *You were perfect. Just leave the rest to me…*

This guy wanted to consume me. That prediction came true, at least. And that meant I had an opening.

A little while back, I was a tad overoptimistic, reasoning that I should have eaten the demon lord back when I still had the chance. *Right?* And I was, at the core, a slime. I had exactly three intrinsic skills: Absorb, Dissolve, and Self-Regeneration. They were gone now, merged with assorted other skills, but I also had a unique skill—Predator—that was an enhanced version of them all. It suited me perfectly as a slime. Nothing could've worked better with my inner essence.

I doubted that my evolved Ultraspeed Regeneration was any less incredible at healing than whatever the demon lord was sporting. Which meant that if we started consuming each other, I was bound to win in the end, right?

…Report. The probability of you executing Predator first is—

The "probability" doesn't matter. Quit worrying. I told you to leave the rest to me, didn't I? Either the demon lord Geld rots and kills me, or I consume him first. It couldn't have been any simpler, and I was ready to do it, even if my chances were exactly zero percent.

Why? Because that was my plan from the very start.

The demon lord, apparently pretty sure of his own victory, was now trying to melt me, looking every bit as elated as I was. I could take advantage of that, pretending to be rotting away—weakening—as my body fell apart. Apart, and *over* him.

From my opponent's palm, through his arm…

And by the time he noticed, the operation was under way.

Letting my instincts take the wheel, I had engaged my enemy the way that slimes naturally do. Concern now crossed his face. He tried to peel me off, but he couldn't—I was already all over his body.

"You see now? Sorry, but all that strength of yours doesn't mean too much now, does it?"

"Gnh… No…?! What are you trying to…"

"Heh. If you thought you had an exclusive license on consuming stuff, you're wrong."

Nailed him. And Geld knew it. He winced at my words.

But I still wasn't necessarily at an advantage. We were, for the

moment, at a stalemate. He was using his healing skills to resist my Predation, and I was using Ultraspeed Regeneration to keep afloat over his Rot attack. We were eating away at each other, like an ouroboros come to life. The Great Sage was too much of a perfectionist to ever come up with something like this, but it was exactly what I wanted.

Whichever side consumed the other was the winner. The rules were so easy to understand. And getting myself into this situation in the first place was a requirement if I wanted to win. It wasn't that I came up with the idea after the Sage's tactics failed; I just followed my instincts, and this was what resulted, really. Instead of relying on unfamiliar, unseasoned skills, I relied on whatever my instincts willed for me, at the root, and executed what they told me. The slime's Absorb and Dissolve skills had been merged into Predator, and so I was doing what those instincts wanted for me. I am, after all, a predator.



Geld, your Ravenous is a powerful unique skill, I'll grant you that. But you're not a predator. You're a scavenger. You can eat anything, which is incredible, but I'm adapted for catching and consuming. And that gives me the advantage. If we're gonna keep eating at each other, I'll be the one to gain new skills from it first.

My Predaceous instincts will it to be done! I can analyze and obtain skills even from living creatures, but you, Geld—you can only steal them from their corpses. And that's what will decide this.

⁎

It was hard to say how much time passed. We were still consuming each other. I concentrated on Predation, assured of my victory, when I started to hear the strangest voice.

I can't afford to lose.

I ate my own comrades.

I can't afford to lose.

I have to become a demon lord.

Because I ate Lord Gelmud.

I can't afford to lose.

My comrades hunger.

I can't afford to lose.

I must eat until I am full!

The thoughts flooded my mind. They belonged to the demon lord, I assumed.

Talk about stupid. Think whatever you like, I've already won.

But I can't afford to lose...

I ate my own comrades.

I committed...a terrible crime...

I can't afford to lose.

Look, can you forget it already?

Lemme tell you.

This world's all about survival of the fittest. And you aren't fit enough.

So you're gonna die.

But I can't afford to lose...

If I die, I leave the sins of my crimes to my comrades.

I don't mind if I, alone, am sinful.

I did whatever was needed to avoid starvation.

I will become a demon lord.

I will accept all the hunger in the world. So no one else has to feel this famine!

I know I can.

I am an Orc Disaster.

The consumer of all.

Aaaaand you're still gonna die.

But don't worry.

I'll eat up all those crimes for you.

You…what?

Eat…my crimes?!

Mm-hmm.

And not just yours…

I'll eat the crimes of all your friends, too.

The crimes…of all my friends…

How greedy of you.

You think so?

Yeah. I am greedy.

Does that make you feel better?

If it does, then just rest a bit and let me eat you already.

Ah…

I couldn't afford to lose.

But…

I am tired. It is…warm in here.

Greedy one.

You know there will be no tranquility down the road you travel.

But you are still willing to take on my crimes…

I thank you.

My hunger…is sated.

He was Geld, the Orc Disaster.

And now, his consciousness had vanished within me.

Confirmed. The Orc Disaster has disappeared. The unique skill Ravenous has been absorbed and merged with the unique skill Predator.

So I win.

There was no way someone as hungry as he was could beat me without starving himself in the process.

I opened my eyes, carrying the weight of him and all his orcish comrades on my back.

*

In the quiet, I declared my victory.

"I have won," I said. "Rest in peace, Orc Disaster Geld…"

I could hear the cheers from the goblins and lizardmen, along with cries of anguish and despair from the orcs. Their conquest was over. They knew it, and from the thoughts they shared as they cannibalized one another before, they knew it was all caused by Gelmud's nefarious plans.

What bothered me most was that the person or persons controlling Gelmud were quite likely still alive. He talked about having a demon lord patron backing him up, and there was no way to tell if that was the truth or not.

I'd probably need to be careful—but careful about what? I had no idea. And I could hardly leave these orcs to their own devices. We had problems left to solve.

The next day there was a very important meeting—one that would go down in history as the one that established the Great Forest of Jura Alliance.

ROUGH SKETCHES



That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

CHAPTER 7

THE GREAT FOREST OF JURA ALLIANCE

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The man sat alone, relaxing in an impossibly ornate room. He smiled, which was visible through his mask.

Elegantly, he waved a hand in the air, directing his servants to exit the chamber. They bowed to him, every motion carefully practiced, and left without a word. Just as they did, a jovial-sounding voice resonated from the previously empty sofa against the wall.

"Well, so much for Gelmud, huh? After all the help we gave 'im, he screwed everything up right at the last minute."

The voice belonged to Laplace, bizarre clothing and eerie-looking mask still intact. The news he brought was grim, but he didn't sound particularly affected as he walked up to the man.

"Pfft. It is not an issue. He died without breathing a word about our relationship."

"True 'nough," Laplace observed as he took a seat across from his conversation partner. "But after all that work setting it up, it's gotta hurt that it didn't result in a new demon lord, isn't it? You wanted a demon lord that'd serve as your faithful servant, rather than having to work as equals with the others. That was the whole point, yeah?"

The man gave Laplace a fatherly nod. "It would be a lot easier," he observed, "if you were willing to take that role for me."

"Ooh, no thank you! Can't say I'm up for taking on that kinda responsibility, no. Those guys're a buncha monsters! If something went wrong, it'd be my neck on the line. I mean, the last demon lord that was born…"

"Demon Lord Leon. The human—Leon Cromwell."

"Yeah…"

They could feel the temperature palpably drop around them.

The one thing that any would-be demon lord had to bring to the table, above everything else, was strength. Real strength.

Nobody in this world was stupid enough to call themselves demon lords. Anyone who attempted it would attract the ire of the current ones at the top of the food chain and probably not live for much longer. But there were some out there who could rile a demon lord, then actually fend them off in battle. These were also recognized as demon lords for the force they so clearly wielded.

But for the past few centuries, no demon lord had been born with such latent strength. The last one was the former human Leon Cromwell. His almost eerie charm allowed him to attract an army of magic-borns to his side, one after the other, before he declared himself the lord of his little frontier territory.

This enraged one nearby demon lord, known as the Cursed Lord, and he immediately declared war on Leon—only to be beaten back, at great loss of life. Not by Leon's army, but by Leon himself, acting alone. That was enough to make the "demon lord" title permanent.

Such a debut, based purely on shows of force, was a rarity. In most cases, if you wanted to safely stake your claim to the title, you needed the backup of at least three current lords. That way, if anyone tried fighting the new candidate, they'd have to tangle with his allies at the same time—so the theory went, at least.

Then a demon lord came along who figured he could game the system a little. Instead of engaging in tense negotiations and forming alliances with other demon lords, why not will a demon lord to life who was perfectly willing to do whatever you asked of it? It was a tempting thought, even if it risked the ire of one's peers.

That was how this plan worked, then—to make the new demon lord birth look as natural as possible, so no one could possibly question its authenticity. Gelmud was key to that, and it was also key

to make sure his own ambitions were stoked as much as possible along the way.

"Well," the man said, ignoring the sudden chill in the conversation, "enough of Leon. My real concern is that we have already reached out to two demon lords about this. I am sure they will be very disappointed to hear that the plan failed at this rather late stage."

The plan was meant to be put into motion a full three hundred years after Veldora's disappearance, set to unfold carefully over decades. But it was all over now, and the man would be lying if he said it didn't pain him.

"Okay," Laplace countered, "but look at these, will you? They'll show you something pretty crazy."

He produced a set of four crystal orbs. Three contained the stored visual records of three orc generals, while the other one contained Gelmud's. Laplace had linked an orb to Gelmud without his knowledge as he handed him copies of the three others.

Watching what the orbs contained, the man's eyebrows arched upward in clear surprise.

The orc general orbs retold all their valiant glories in battle. Each one ended with the sight of the magic-born people who apparently defeated them, showing off overwhelming power as they did. They were ogre mages, a high-level race that the more elderly ogres might evolve into once every few centuries. With their abilities, they held the potential to be just as powerful as orc lords, even. They were fabled to crush the earth, rend the skies apart. And there were three of them recorded on these orbs.

That, and a magical beast the likes of which he had never seen before. It wielded lightning and gale storms with ease, putting it in the upper echelons of the animal kingdom. Perhaps a direwolf that had undergone some manner of untold transmogrification, but it was hard to tell from the visuals alone.

It was certainly well beyond A rank, though, and that meant there were four monsters in this battle that shot right past A and into the stratosphere. Gelmud never had a chance out there.

The real concern, though, was what the fourth and final orb showed. A single human being, standing tall in front of Gelmud. A child, it appeared, wearing a mask. But nothing at all was normal about him. It was more accurately a monster transformed into a person. If not that, a newly born hero.

Both men in the room knew that human summoners and otherworlders could often be gifted with astounding abilities. But a child would be too immature to take full advantage of them—and he or she certainly wouldn't be participating in a war between magical beasts and creatures. Thus, by the process of elimination, they assumed this was some manner of monster in disguise.

It appeared from the visuals that this child had the four enigmatic creatures under his control. When the situation turned to battle, it was clear Gelmud was far out of his element. The image went black quickly—no doubt when some attack landed a telling blow upon him.

When all the orbs were sifted through, the man leaned forward and let out a long, deep sigh. Gelmud, an A rank, one of the greatest of those born of magic, had been overwhelmed by a child. A child with four upper-level magic-borns of his own. He was still unclear about the ultimate fate of the orc lord, but with this kind of force at play, he doubted there was much hope for him.

This kind of force. A force that could no longer be ignored.

"Pretty crazy, eh?"

"Yes, very interesting," the man ventured with a smile. "So…what now?"

Laplace took a moment to answer. Two demon lords, just as powerful as he was. And the person he had mentioned the potential birth of a new demon lord, too. There was much to consider.

“Well, keep the ship afloat for now, is what I’d say. If you think you need any help, you’ll get my regular discount, okay? Take care for now, Clayman.”

He disappeared, leaving the man—the demon lord Clayman—alone in the room. He replayed the orbs several times over, thinking quietly.



The battle was over.

That was…yeah, pretty rough. If he had fully completed his evolution, I don’t think anyone could’ve beaten him. I won precisely because we made it to him in time—just in time, as it turns out. It would’ve been so much easier pre-evolution, too; I was still kicking myself over that. But I had it coming. I should’ve killed him fast instead of getting all cocky. It was more than half luck that earned victory for me, in the end.

But the rewards I reaped from it made all my regrets look like a drop in the bucket. That’s right—it’s unique skill time!

I had obtained my fourth unique skill from the spirit of the demon lord Geld, although I guess it got merged into Predator without so much as a peep. The Great Sage gave me the rundown after the battle: *Report. Following the merger of the unique skill Ravenous with the unique skill Predator, the unique skill Predator has evolved into the unique skill Glutton.*

The Sage had the habit of combining skills that resembled one another a fair bit, although everything was still downward-compatible. I analyzed this new skill, then closed my eyes.

This skill, Glutton, consisted of four old abilities—Predation, Stomach, Mimic, and Isolate—combined with three new ones—Corrode, Receive, and Provide. The new ones worked like this:

Rot:

Performs Rot on the target, decomposing it if it is organic. Monster corpses partially absorbed in this manner will reward the user with part of the monster's skills.

Receive:
Gain the ability to obtain skills from monsters under your influence.

Provide:
Grants part of your abilities to monsters under your influence or linked to your soul.

Giving each the once-over, I had to say, this was some pretty damn sweet stuff. My Stomach got a huge upgrade—it felt maybe twice as big. And Rot sounded downright scary, although handy for things like destroying armor.

Receive and Provide were the real plums, though. This meant, basically, whatever new skills people like Benimaru and Ranga earned when they evolved, I could get 'em for myself, right? And redistribute them to anyone on my team I wanted?

Understood. You may interpret it as such, yes. However, there are restrictions to providing abilities. You will not lose the original skill, but if the receiver is not capable of making full use of the skill, they will not be able to obtain it.

Seriously…?

It appeared that my underlings tended to grow stronger whenever I did, and vice versa. Giving skills to them seemed to offer no disadvantage, but I guess the receiver still needed to have whatever latent talent the skill required for it to work. I couldn't just pass around skills willy-nilly, in other words, which was fine with me.

In a way, this skill was pretty scary, too. I couldn't use it to share personal knowledge or magic spells, and I would still need to put in

the daily effort to raise my level, but still, it was really something. I gotta hand it to that Orc Disaster. I was kind of pissed that he got Gelmud and all, but if anything, this was an even better bonus. The more I put into it, the more I got out.

By the way, it appeared that Analysis, originally part of Predator, had been merged into the Sage itself while I wasn't paying attention.

Huh? I don't remember being asked for permission on that, much less giving it. But ah well. I'm probably just overthinking it. No way the Sage—nothing more than a skill, really—would do something on its own volition. Analysis always seemed a little weird for the Predator umbrella anyway. *No point giving it much more thought than that*, I figured.

Still, the battle was over, as was all the joy and sadness and despair that swirled around the battlefield. Hoo boy. *I can't help but think this every time, but the cleanup's always much more of a pain than the battle itself.*

*

The day after the demon lord Geld fell, representatives from all the races were gathered inside a temporary tent pitched in the central part of the marshes.

On my end, I was with Benimaru, Shion, Hakuro, and Soei. Ranga was inside my shadow, as per usual, and I was sitting on Shion's lap in slime form. I had pretty much revealed what I really was when I defeated Geld, so there was no point hiding it now.

Treyni was here to represent the immobile treants. She had appeared without me having to toss a Thought Communication her way, claiming she caught the "waves" the two of us released or something. What a case. She was hiding just as much power as I was, I supposed.

From the lizardmen, we had the chief, the head of the chief's

guard, and her assistant. Gabil was currently in a cell somewhere on charges of treason. Son of the chief or not, they couldn't exactly let his acts go unpunished. As idiotic as he was, a lot about him piqued my interest. But I was still in no position to provide unsolicited advice on his treatment.

The goblins were represented by each chief of the assorted villages, somewhat huddled at the far corner of the table as they marveled at all the high-level monsters surrounding them. That was understandable, given how there was a dryad in the room, something they never would've imagined seeing even if they lived to be a thousand years old.

Finally, from the orcs, there was the sole surviving orc general, along with sixteen chiefs from their tribal federation. The mood was understandably gloomy among them, given how they were the main catalyst of all this. Whether the orc lord had seized their minds or not, it wasn't like they were completely free of responsibility. They must have known that, judging by the hangdog looks on their faces.

It wasn't just guilt driving them, either. They were near the end of the food supply they had brought with them. Soei told me they carried little with them, and Geld the demon lord didn't offer much to them, either. They were in danger of starving all over again, except this time, they weren't under the spell of a unique skill that kept them pressing forward. Cannibalizing one another to do so. That certainly wasn't normal orc behavior. In fact, being freed from the spell made some of the orcs faint immediately from malnutrition.

Their current situation cast a pall over the entire tent. The orcs had no meaningful reparations to offer, everyone knew, even if they had asked. Their whole impetus for going to war, in fact, was the desperate starvation they faced in their homeland.

There were still around 150,000 left, and I doubted they had the ability to feed themselves at all. All those soldiers, and they still lacked the will to continue warring. Nothing summed up their mental state better at the moment.

Without Ravenous, they really *would* starve—and my peek into Geld's memories taught me even more. I had mentioned the number 150,000, but those survivors also included women, the elderly, and children. In other words, the entirety of every orc clan was right there, in the marshes.

The issue was a famine.

The lands ruled by demon lords were generally safe zones with bountiful arable lands, protected by the great powers of those who ruled over them. Even if a monster or magical beast stirred up trouble, the magic-borns who served the demon lord would ensure that law and order ruled the day.

All of that, of course, came at a cost—in this case, high taxes. In exchange for living among fertile lands, the citizens were required to give up a healthy percentage of their harvest on a yearly basis. And the orcs, who tended to multiply quickly when they had the resources, were an indispensable part of demon lord lands, their labor keeping the farms and mines humming along smoothly.

Failure to pay these taxes, though, meant death, though not at the hands of the local demon lord himself. The lands were dangerous. Many monsters attacked it, seeking bounties for themselves. If anyone didn't pay their due to the lord, the lord wasn't obliged to protect them. And that was that.

The orcs were normally able to take care of themselves well enough. Even if an attack killed off half, they reproduced so quickly that their numbers were right back to normal before long. But the current famine made it impossible to pay their tax to the demon lord—or lords, as it happened. The orcs' territory had the misfortune to border the domains of three different demon lords. Attempting to raid the lands of such powerful beings would mark the end of the orc species, but without the protection their taxes bought them, they had no way of surviving in the suddenly barren land they called home.

So they streamed into the Forest of Jura, all but chased away from

their homes, in search of food. They wandered around its fringes for a bit, fighting off the hunger, and that was when the orc lord was born. But even that wasn't enough to make them strong enough to fend off the monsters that harangued them constantly.

It was at that point when Gelmud extended a hand to them. Help they readily accepted, not realizing what was motivating this unexpected benefactor. And that was when their troubles began.

That was about all I knew about them. I didn't have the fine details, exactly, but I was still able to glean that much from Geld's mind just before he vanished. *Could I use that info to help them, though?* The thought weighed heavily in my mind—just like it in did in everyone else's—as we got started.

Hakuro would serve as mediator. I asked the lizardman's chief guard to take the position, but she refused. "The role is too weighty for me!" she protested. It felt weird to have the losing side in charge of the negotiation, so I threw the responsibility at—er, I mean, asked Hakuro to handle it, since he was practically born for it anyway.

Once he declared the meeting under way, silence fell. No one dared open their mouths, instead turning right toward me.

What a pain. I really hate meetings. Companies that hold lots of meetings never actually accomplish anything. The important stuff should be left to people capable of handling it, really. But ah well.

"Well," I began, "before we get down to business, I'd like to tell all of you what I know at this point."

Everyone's faces tensed up. I tried my best to ignore it as I discussed what I learned from Geld's memories, as well as what Soei had researched for me. The reason why the orcs took up arms, and the current state of their affairs. The orc delegation looked at me wide-eyed. I guess they weren't expecting this to come up. As I continued, some began shedding tears. Perhaps they didn't think they'd have a chance to give their side at all. Perhaps they were prepared to die on

the spot.

Then I gave Hakuro a look, indicating that I wanted to move on.

“Ahem! In that case,” he said. “I would like to make sure all of us are on the same page when it comes to the casualties wrought by this invasion.”

The conference slowly sprang into action, the lizardmen going first. As they reported their numbers lost, the orcs hung their heads, unable to speak.

“Well then,” Hakuro ventured, “do you have any demands you wish to make of the orcs, Chief?”

I’d never been in a war myself, so I wouldn’t know, but when it came to asking for compensation, the winning side had a lot of say in how that worked. No way I’d have the confidence to run a conference like this.

“Not particularly,” the chief replied. “This victory was one we earned through none of our own doing. It came thanks to the aid of Sir Rimuru.”

Thus, he essentially forfeited the right to ask for reparations. Not that he could’ve expected to get much out of them.

So were the orcs up next? I turned to their chiefs, wondering what they would say.

“Please, allow me to speak!” the orc general suddenly shouted, all but rubbing his head against the rough ground as he bowed to me. “All of us here, we wish to make up for this disaster with our very lives… I know even that is not enough, but there is nothing else we could possibly pay you!”

He was ready to die, I could tell that much. This monster, ranked A-minus or so, would no doubt provide us all with a wealth of magicules to harness, and he wanted to put that on the table in

exchange for our forgiveness.

I had no interest in this, and it was beside the point anyway. I was really starting to resent this meeting. All these procedures and formalities were eating away at the time we could spend actually talking matters over.

Well, screw it. Let's try things my way for a sec.

"One moment!" Hakuro said, apparently noticing my intentions. "I believe Sir Rimuru has something to say!"

The orc general fell silent, looking straight at me. So did everyone else. I was never a fan of being the center of attention, but I couldn't exactly say so.

"Um," I began, "I'm gonna have to admit that I'm not very good with big meetings like this. So let me just say what's on my mind right now, and maybe we can all mull that over for a little while, all right? First off, I wanna make one thing clear. I have no interest in charging the orcs with any crimes or whatever."

I went on to explain my reasoning. Staging an invasion of the forest was, if you had to rate it on a scale of "naughty" or "nice," pretty naughty. Whether Gelmud was using and abusing them or not, the moment they said yes to him, they were accomplices. But it was also clear that the forest offered their only possible hope for survival. All the races here might've decided to do the same thing in their shoes.

Simply asking us to accept their presence was, I suppose, tough. It would be like asking our neighbors to hand over their land. Nobody would simply roll over and say yes to that, and that was doubly true for the survival-of-the-fittest types around here.

There was no point debating over what was now firmly in the past. Right then, we needed to talk about what would happen next. We couldn't spend all day dwelling on apologies and reparations and such. Plus, I promised Geld I would take on all the orcs' crimes for him. Maybe it was pushy of me, but I wanted to make sure everyone

knew I was serious about that.

"That is my thought about this," I said, "and I'm sure you all have your own thoughts, but I see no need to punish the orcs for anything. I say this because I promised the demon lord Geld as much. I have taken on all the crimes committed by the orcs. And if any of you have a problem with that, I'd like to hear it!"

The orcs stared at me, clearly shocked.

"Benimaru," I said, ignoring them, "your homeland was annihilated by their hands. Do you take issue with this?"

"I do not, my lord, and I doubt any of my fallen comrades would. The sole, immovable rule that links all monsters together is that only the strong have the right to survive. We faced up to them without fleeing, and thus we were prepared for the worst. And, Sir Rimuru, we would never have an issue with the decisions you make."

The other ogres nodded in agreement. Everyone appeared to be with me. I then turned to the lizardmen, but the chief spoke before I could.

"We, too, have no complaint with your stance. There is one thing I wish to ask, however."

No complaints? Really? I was kind of expecting some. He was more sympathetic to their plight than I thought, maybe.

"What is it?"

"It is a good thing, I think, not to pursue the orcs' crimes any further. We were saved by you, Sir Rimuru, and are thus in no position to make any grand proclamations. However, there is one thing I wish to be fully clear on…"

The chief stopped and looked straight at me.

"Are you suggesting, Sir Rimuru, that we accept the entire orc

population's right to live in this forest?"

...And here we go. It was an obvious question, and it came at a critical time.

"I am," I said as graciously as I could. Instantly, the meeting erupted into a commotion. The orcs, shocked, discussed whether such a thing was even possible. The goblins were screaming incoherently, some foaming at the mouth. Treyni watched silently, gauging the situation with a hostile eye. Only my ogre mage friends remained undisturbed.

"Silence!" Hakuro shouted, finally bringing order back to the tent after a prolonged furor. He had waited for everyone to get over their initial surprise before giving the command.

"I understand what all of you are thinking," I said, "and I understand how the thought makes you nervous. And you're right—I have no idea whether it's possible or not. But I think it is. Like I said, I just want you to hear me out."

So I began talking about my idea. The vision of a Great Forest of Jura Alliance, a proposal that would've been dismissed as a hopeless dream at any other time.

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Even if we let every orc in the marsh off the hook right now, they were still doomed to starve. The straggler forces, left without stronger leadership, would form small raider bands that'd strike the lizardman and goblin villages before long. They had nothing to eat, no place to live, and nothing about this conference would mean anything until we tackled that fundamental issue.

Hence this alliance.

The lizardmen had plentiful water and seafood resources. The goblins had living space. We had a wealth of manufactured goods. The orcs, in exchange, could provide their labor resources.

Their settlements would have to be spread out among us all to some extent—they numbered in the six figures, after all—but I was sure we could maintain decent lines of contact. We'd need to put some in the mountains, some in the foothills, some by the river, and some deeper in the forest. My team and I could provide technical home-building assistance, although we still wanted them to handle their own affairs otherwise. We were already short on labor in my town; we didn't have the capacity to look out for others. If anything, my ulterior motive here was to obtain more stout men to beef up our own workforce.

The land the ogres ruled over was now free, of course, and I figured we'd build a town there sooner or later. Forest land extended well into the nearby foothills, offering a wealth of resources to harness. It'd have to wait until my town was finished, but by then, I wanted the orcs to be proficient enough that they could build their own. Then all the dispersed orc populations would have someplace to live together again.

Everyone in the tent listened attentively as I explained.

"That about covers it," I said. "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…"

Unlike before, the conference was now filled with a sense of excitement. The attendees' enthusiasm was starting to pervade the room, as if I had just taken their anxieties and replaced them with a flickering sense of hope. Shion straightened herself up, like she was presenting me as a prize, which I didn't really appreciate. I forgave her, though. It meant she was pushing her breasts against me, which was pretty nice, after all. I always have an open mind about that sort of thing.

The orc general was slow to react. "Us…building a town…?! It is all right for us to join in this alliance?"

“Not like you got anyone, or anyplace, to return to, do you? We’ll getcha someplace to live, but you gotta work, all right? No room for lazy orcs around here.”

“…Yes, my lord!” The orcs immediately stood up and took a knee, overcome with an emotion that drove tears to their eyes. “Of course, of course! We will dedicate our very lives to the tasks ahead!”

The lizardman chief nodded. “We have no objection. If anything, we would love to cooperate!” He kneeled as well, imitating the orcs, and the goblins hurriedly took action to follow suit. Was this the rule when forming alliances here, or…? I dunno.

I attempted to copy their lead and hop down to the floor, but Shion tightened her grip on me.

“What are you trying to do, my lord?”

“Huh? Oh. I thought this was a ceremony or something.”

“Oh dear, Sir Rimuru. It certainly is not…”

I wasn’t sure why she was speaking to me like a wayward child, but I must have been embarrassing her. And the ogres, judging by the looks they shot at me. She stood up, placed me on a chair—and then fell to one knee before me, accompanied by Benimaru and the rest.

“Very good,” Treyni said. “As a warden of the forest, I, Treyni, make the following declaration. I hereby recognize Sir Rimuru as the new leader of the Forest of Jura, and the Great Forest of Jura Alliance hereby established under his good name!”

Then she kneeled, too. I guess she had word from the treants that they were all for it.

Um, can you give me a moment, guys? Why am I suddenly the dude who’s supposed to run all this crap? Because I don’t remember any discussions along those lines. Why’d it turn out this way? I wanted to ask, but my voice was cut off by all the passionate eyes

fixated upon me.

All right. I get it, guys…

I knew the fate of the orcs rested on my shoulders anyway. *Leader of the forest? Whatever. I'll take it.*

"Well, so be it," I said, resigned to my fate. "Do me proud, guys." Everyone took that cue to prostrate themselves before me.

""""Yes, my lord!!""""

The sheer fervor was as clearly present in all their voices as it clearly wasn't in mine. The Great Forest of Jura Alliance was born, and already it was making me break out in a cold sweat.

Uh, guys? We still have a problem, right? Like, a really big, bothersome problem? I hate to rain on the party, but we'd better get to talking about that, yeah?

"Right, that's enough," I said. "So now that we have this alliance in place, we need to solve the largest problem facing us right now—the question of food supply. We have 150,000 surviving orcs here, and we need to keep them from starving to death. I'd like some ideas, please?"

The orcs had less than two weeks' worth of provisions on them, overall. Now that the unique skill Ravenous was no longer doing its thing on them, they'd be well and truly dead once these supplies were exhausted. We had no time to raise crops for them, and we'd exhaust the river of fish if we tried going that route.

It was a real thorny issue. The lizardmen had enough supplies for ten thousand people to live off for half a year. Even if they cleared all their storehouses right this instant, it still wouldn't keep the orcs going for more than a couple weeks. That meant our maximum time limit was just about a month.

So now what…?

Everyone in the tent turned their minds to the issue. Nobody seemed to be acting like it wasn't their problem, which gladdened me a bit. Maybe this alliance would work out after all.

Then Treyni stepped up, smiling. "So the issue is a lack of food supply?" she asked. "In that case, I think I might be able to help. The treants that I help protect have agreed to join this alliance, and I think they might come in handy sooner than I thought."

So they were interested, then? Well, great. And if they were that enthusiastic about handling the food issue, let them, I'd say. Not like we had any other great ideas.

With all our most pressing issues covered, we ended the conference.

And that was the day my name was first written down in the annals of history.

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The day our great alliance was formed was one which, I suppose, no monster would ever be able to forget. It was, after all, the day I decided that each and every one needed a name.

Which, yes, I said I would, and I was super-cool about it.

But why were they counting on me to come up with all those names…? I mean, yeesh, a hundred-fifty thousand orcs alone. Insane. It took me three days to come up with five hundred goblin names, guys! I couldn't imagine how long it'd take to handle *this* job.

I gave serious thought to simply up and running away this time, but I still had all those orcish crimes to gobble up for them.

Orcs were D-ranked monsters by nature, but they were more like C-plus while the orc lord was still influencing them. So basically, this was just a matter of me taking in the magicules lost to the air after Geld's defeat and breathing them back into each one. That way, I

could “name” them all without exhausting myself in the process.

The problem I had, though, was what the names should be. Simply going down the alphabet wouldn’t save me this time. Maybe I could divide them by race or start giving out last names or something, but managing all that would be even more of a hassle.

In the end, the solution I came up with was as simple as it was beautiful. The perfect series, one that I could extend for as long as necessary, all the way to infinity.

That’s right: Numbers. It was a little like assigning an ID number back in my home world, but *damn*, did it make things easier for me.

So I had all the orcs in the marsh stand in neat lines before me. I was worried they might resent being given such unfashionable names without any right to say no, but the magic they had lost could directly lead to their deaths. They might decide to take matters into their own hands if it came to that, and then the village raids would begin.

The cause of this confusion was the orcs’ numbers. There were too many, in other words, and naming them would help with that, too. Evolving into a higher-level monster would do a lot to lower their reproductive rate, something I saw for myself with the hobgobs.

Now was no time for me to moan about my responsibilities. As Benimaru said, they always had the right not to be named if they didn’t want to. I spread the word, since it’d certainly save me some time, but not a single one took me up on the offer. So much for that.

And so the ordeal began. I decided to start by assigning a basic sort of “tribal” name to each one. I devised ten of these: Mountain, Valley, Hill, Cavern, Ocean, River, Lake, Forest, Grassland, and Desert. If you were part of the Mountain tribe, your name would be along the lines of “Mountain-1M” if male, “Mountain-1F” if female, and we’d just go from there.

What about the generations to come, then? Like I gave a crap. The first son born among the Mountain tribe could be “Mountain-1-1M”

for all I cared. Simple. Though maybe it'd be nice to offer enough leeway for middle names and real word–based titles. I had a feeling things might fall apart a bit if two orcs from different tribes had a kid, too. But, hell, let them worry about that. I didn't care.

And so I consumed some magic lost from each orc and used it to name each one in succession. They were already lined up by tribe, males and females separated, so things actually went pretty quickly. It still took time, but I no longer had to think up fancy names, so at least it was efficient. Wherever each orc was among the lines they formed, those were their names. It didn't matter to me how each orc related to the next. If they didn't mind, I sure didn't.

So we breezed along; I gave the names and one member from each tribe wrote them all down in a ledger, just in case anyone forgot their own. That turned out not to be a problem in the least—it was that special for them all to finally be granted a name of their own. Having part of someone's soul infusing the name you're given must make a lot of difference.

The naming process continued anon. Once I got in the swing of things, it took maybe five seconds per orc, although I still lost time here and there. It was going to take a grand total of ten days and ten nights to wrap it all up. I had the Sage to thank for letting me pull that feat off, but I had a feeling that I'd never want to look at a number again for a good while to come.

Of course, while I was busy naming a small city's worth of orcs, my ogre mages weren't just screwing around. They were on their way to the treant settlement, guided by Treyni. I had left procuring our food supply to them, although privately, I had my concerns about how they'd come up with enough.

Treants were monsters that lived off water, sunlight, air, and magic. They didn't need food in the first place. But they *did* produce fruit from the magic they didn't need, which were beyond the reach of most—treants couldn't set foot nor root outside of their own sanctuary, so they simply collected and stored the fruit on-site.

These were magical fruits, of course, and when dehydrated, they would never go bad. People called these *dried treants*, and as I found out later, they were considered rare delicacies on the public market, going for outlandish prices among foodies and the like. Considering how treants almost never connected to the outside world, you just didn't see them all that much. But rarity alone didn't dictate the prices—dried treants were packed with an intense amount of magical energy, enough to keep you alive and well for seven days at a time without even feeling hungry. A condensed drop of manna from heaven, in other words.

It was these dried treants that we were apparently going to receive a bountiful supply of, helping the orcs stave off starvation.

I wasn't too worried about the transport process. Keeping up proper supply routes was always the thorniest part of waging war; starving the soldiers on the front lines quickly spelled total defeat. They needed to be fed, and that was always a logistical challenge—but these fruits didn't take up much space at all.

The real problem was transport time, and the tempest wolves were ready to help with that—or to be exact, the starwolves evolved from them. As a newly minted tempest starwolf and leader of his pack, Ranga was able to evolve all the other wolves in his pack to regular non–tempest starwolf status. Each one was ranked around B, making them high-level magical beasts, and while we still only had a hundred, I had a feeling we'd be caring for more soon.

As part of his newfound skills, Ranga was able to summon something he called a Star Leader, an A-minus commander wolf that would serve as his representative during the transport effort. His take on Replication, I supposed; he could summon and dispel it at will. *Geez, Ranga, you really don't want to leave my shadow, huh? …Ah whatever.*

It was worth mentioning that all the starwolves were now capable of Shadow Motioning themselves around. Not at the near-lightning speeds that Soei and Ranga could manage, but still far quicker than

their feet could take them. That was the neat thing about Shadow Motion; it always brought you to your destination in a straight line, ignoring all obstacles in between. As a rule of thumb, the starwolves could traverse this straight line at around twice their regular speed.

With their enhanced strength, the starwolves would load up with the food at the treant settlement and bring it back. A regular caravan would take over two months to traverse the roundabout path one way; with them, they could do a round trip in one day. Crazy. We'd need to build a larger cart-accessible highway sometime, but at least that wasn't a problem for now.

One little snag: The wolves' hobgoblin riders couldn't accompany them, since they could only remain in Shadow Motion space for as long as they could hold their breath. It'd be nice if they could be trained to fix that, somehow, but in the meantime they were helping me with the whole orc-naming process. I definitely didn't want them idle while I was going through this ten-day-long ordeal.

Either way, we finally had a nice, clean solution to the most present problem facing us. I was satisfied.

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Ten days later, I limped my way to the finish line. I could see nothing but numbers dancing in my head by the end, but the feeling of achievement was like nothing else. I mean, we're talking 150,000 here, you know? Think about even counting that high, and you can get an idea of how much torture it had been.

By the time I had wrapped it up, they were already starting to distribute our new food supply. Fifty pieces of dried treant per person. Each one somberly accepted their ration, fully cognizant that losing it meant death.

The naming process had evolved each orc into a high orc. I didn't use any of my own magic for it, so they didn't need to see me as their "ruler" or anything. They entered the alliance under their own free will, and I could only hope that we remained on sunny terms.

In terms of monster strength, they had gone down from their former Ravenous-driven C-plus rank to around a C—which was still better than D, so I'm sure there were no complaints. Their intelligence had undergone a nice upgrade, too, and they had retained all their intrinsic abilities. The evolution, in other words, had made them far more adaptable to a variety of new environments.

Each of the tribes thanked me in turn and set off for their new homes, guided by a squad of ten goblin riders. We were planning to send tents and other supplies once they reached the area of their choice, along with technical instruction so they could build their own settlements. It wouldn't happen overnight, but wherever they settled down, I was sure they'd have better lives than before, at least.

Treyni was sending notice to the races that lived near the areas where we were planning to have the orcs set up shop. She could teleport around magically, too, pretty much, so the notification process apparently went quickly. Nobody would be willing to turn down the request of a dryad (whatever they thought about it internally), so I hoped no major problems cropped up. We had deliberately chosen areas that weren't populated by intelligent races, so I figured we'd be fine, but you never know.

Soon, the high orcs set off on the road to their new lives.

But we weren't done yet. I turned toward the several thousand remaining souls.

It seemed that the orc general, along with the high orcs who directly served him, were insisting upon working directly under my command. I said yes, as reluctant as I was. I *did* need some spare hands to handle the work around there, and we were still chronically short on people to build the town. They wouldn't number enough to put a major dent in our food supplies, either.

So I didn't need to think too much about my decision, even though it meant a lot more people answering to me. Around two thousand, in fact—the remainder of the elite orc corps, numbering two thousand or

so, decked out in their black full-plate armor. Their strength must've been what helped them survive this long.

If they were going to be my elite guard of sorts, I couldn't very well put them in the same naming series as the rest. But if not, what, then? Given the yellow auras they emitted, I figured I'd name their tribe after that color instead.

Through the lens of Analyze and Assess—like Shuna, I could use it to analyze people to some extent via my eyes alone—I sized up the elite guard, then lined them up in the order I decided on. I then gave them numbers from strongest to weakest, without dividing them by gender.

Such was the birth of what would later be called the Yellow Numbers.

That left only the orc general to tackle. I had a feeling I'd have to contribute some magic of my own into this one. Fortunately, I already had a name picked out. Hopefully he'd be able to pick up where the previous orc lord left off.

"I hereby declare that you shall inherit the will of the Orc Disaster. You shall be called Geld from now on!"

"Yes, sir!!"

Our eyes met. His overflowed with tears. And the moment I gave the name, the orc general's body was wrapped in a yellow aura as he began to evolve. At the same time, I could feel the magic flowing out of me. *Oh crap. Not* that *much…*

Once more, I was back in sleep mode.

—I have taken the wrong path. But I am happy now. In the end, I was fulfilled.

—Lord Geld, I…I will take your name, and your will. May you rest in peace.

—Indeed. There is no need for you to suffer any longer. You did not warn your father, and no one will blame you for that. I am here precisely because he survived, back then. And your crimes will disappear as well.

—Yes, my lord. By the name I have taken up, I swear to protect the one who has taken all our sins for himself.

—Indeed… I trust you will.

All the magic I put into that sent me into a deep sleep again. I suppose the exact level of consciousness I retained depended on how much magic I spent.

I felt like I had some kind of weird dream, but I couldn't remember what it was. You'd think I would—I don't need to sleep any longer, so any dream was bound to be pretty valuable. Couldn't do much about it then, though.

I awoke to a situation that I probably should have expected by now. There were two thousand soldiers in front of me, now high orcs. Still ranked C-plus, since they were stronger than the rabble, I guess.

Geld, though…

"My loyalty is forever yours, my lord!!" he shouted as I groggily tried to get it together. I cursed him for being so damn ceremonious about everything.

Let's see. He had evolved into… Whoa, an orc king? That's pretty much the same level as an orc lord, isn't it? Hmm. About what I figured. They were functionally identical, but Geld wasn't as creepy.

He had also gained the unique skill Gourmet, which granted him abilities like Stomach, Receive, and Provide. The latter two were restricted to his own race, but apparently all two thousand of his troops had access to that Stomach. Maybe they could use that to transport supplies to faraway places? What a goofy skill. It could turn the entire transit industry on its side, to say nothing of military supply

lines. The only limitation was volume, not type of item. It could store about as much as I could, but it couldn't hold anything too big—in other words, about the size of an orc itself. A suit of armor was about all it could take in at once. (My Stomach had no such limitation.) The ability to make his men consume the corpses of their comrades was gone, thankfully. No need any longer, I imagined. Not much point retaining a skill if the user didn't want it, besides. The magical energy in him had also ballooned to the point where he was easily an A rank on the level of Benimaru.

Overall, if the demon lord Geld hadn't lost his mind, he probably would've wound up turning into a magic-born person like this, a combination of reasoned intelligence and overwhelming presence. I was glad to have more powerful people on my side, but would it really pay for him to follow someone like me? I reminded him that this wasn't exactly a salaried position, but Geld simply smiled and said that was no problem.

Well, if he said so. I'd feed and clothe him, at least. And if he decided to strike down his own path later, that was fine. I kinda doubted he ever would, though.

Thus, the Grand Naming Project ended.

Before I took my leave, I decided to wish the lizardman chief a fond good-bye.

"Hey. Sorry we never really got a chance to talk amid all this nonsense. Hope we can keep this ship sailing smoothly, huh, Chief?"

"Ah, hello there, Sir Rimuru! There's no need to call me Chief like that. It puts me on edge to hear it from you!" he exclaimed in surprise.

I knew the monsters had other ways of identifying themselves, but I wasn't delicate enough to pick up on that junk. His not having a name *really* annoyed me.

"Well, yeah, but… I know. You're Gabil's father, right? Why don't

you try calling yourself Abil, or something?"

I always had a tendency to blurt out whatever was on my mind like that.

"What?!" he exclaimed, half in shock.

And so, in the midst of a little friendly chitchat, it came to pass that I named the lord of all the lizardmen who walked the earth. Not every lizardman who existed—ugh, nothing *that* big again. Just the chief, I figured, and maybe others later, as kind of a reward for their exploits in battle or whatever.

That I inadvertently transformed him into a dragonewt just because he didn't like "Chief," well, who'da thunk?

Everything was now well and truly wrapped up. Only about three weeks had passed, but I felt like I was now a battle-hardened veteran. Really, I'm pretty sure I fought harder than anybody else in the marshes. These death matches were really trying on a body.

Let's just go home and relax a bit.



Gabil was marched up to his father—Abil, the chief.

He had been hauled off to jail the moment the battle had ended, given one morning meal and one evening meal a day, and otherwise nobody said anything to him. That had continued for two weeks straight. His crime of rebellion was obvious to all, and he had accepted this punishment without complaint. He had had the best of intentions when he did the deed, but the results had almost brought the lizardmen to the brink of extinction.

This was all his fault. He recognized that, and he could neither make excuses for it nor intended to. He figured he would receive the death penalty, and the thought did not particularly bother him.

But when he closed his eyes, he could remember the incident. It was more shocking to him than anything; and it made the betrayal of the one who believed in him seem like a petty detail by comparison.

It was the magic-born disguised as a human being completely dominating him, and then taking on the demon lord himself. Even now, he could perfectly recall the sweet little child, his silvery hair flowing in the wind. It almost moved Gabil to tears, the sight of this creature standing strong to protect him. Any pain and anger he felt at Gelmud for turning his back on him was immediately whisked away.

All that Gabil had left was his near-worshipful adulation for this creature. But what was even more shocking was the way he then transformed into a slime. The very slime he had dismissed as a low-level piece of garbage. That's right—low level. He was, but he wasn't, too. That slime was special. Not in a "unique" or a "named" way. Even more special than that.

If he ever got the chance, Gabil wanted to ask: *Why did you help me?* This slime named Rimuru had no reason to rescue this worthless, completely bamboozled lizardman, this utter buffoon. It was the one thing Gabil thought about for those two weeks.

Now he was in front of the chief. He turned his face upward, finding it hard against the heavy atmosphere surrounding him. His father stood there like a grand boulder, and his eyes opened wide. The chief was brimming with youth, such was his newfound strength.

Despite his father's power, Gabil dared to defy him just because he had a name and his father didn't. He realized his eyes had deceived him all along, and now he mourned that fact.

His father seemed far stronger than he remembered. It didn't seem possible. Gabil looked up, locking eyes with him, though the chief betrayed no emotion.

One look at his cold, calculating eyes was all Gabil needed.

Ahh… He'll put me to death…

The leader of the herd must never show any weakness. He must retain discipline at all times, or else he would set a terrible example for the rest. But Gabil didn't mind this. Those were the rules, and the rules were set in stone.

The chief opened his mouth.

"It is time for your verdict! Gabil, you are hereby expelled from our caverns. You may never call yourself a lizardman again, and you are forbidden from ever returning here. Leave us at once!"

Huh?

What…did he say?

He was taken by his father's royal guard and shoved outside the caverns, tossed out on his rear.

"You forgot this," the chief said from behind the entrance as they left, throwing something at Gabil. "Take it!"

It was a long, thin object, wrapped in cloth, that was part of his belongings. When he picked it up, the weight immediately told him what it was: the Vortex Spear, a magic weapon and one of the lizardmen's greatest treasures.

Tears fell from Gabil's eyes. He turned to his father as he tried to say something. But nothing came out. He was no longer part of them.

Instead, he saluted his father, face filled with solemn emotion. And as he hung his head, Gabil almost thought he heard his father's voice: *—Gabil, as long as I, Abil, am still healthy, the lizardmen will be safe. You may live as you please from now on—but whatever you do, you must put every fiber of your body into it. Remember this well…—*

—Y-yes, my lord! I will become a fighter worthy enough to gain your praise, as I serve underneath our savior.—

With this unspoken reply, Gabil turned and walked away, straight ahead, without another word. He still felt lost, but he had resolve in his heart, as he began to walk the path only he could take.

After a while, Gabil's way was blocked by a familiar-looking settlement.

"We were awaiting you, Sir Gabil!"

It was the hundred knights under Gabil's direct command.

"Wh-what are you all doing here?! I have been exiled from our people!"

"It doesn't matter, sir. We are here to serve none but Sir Gabil. If you have been exiled, then so have we!"

The rest smiled and cheered their agreement.

What fools, Gabil thought. The tears almost flowed from his eyes again; he just barely kept them in. Now was no time for crying. He tried to summon up all the dignity, all the majesty he inherited from his father, letting out a hearty laugh.

"Ah, you people are incorrigible! Very well, then. Follow me!"

And so Gabil walked ahead with his people—with confidence, where none existed before.

It would take another month before the small force met with Rimuru again.

That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime

FINAL CHAPTER

A RELAXING SPOT

FINAL CHAPTER

A RELAXING SPOT

I was resting in my room.

Over three months had passed since I returned. All kinds of things had happened since, but I was taking a moment to reflect on all the chaos of a time gone by.

*

After I left Abil behind, I decided to exercise my Shadow Motion skills and head home first. It turned out to be pretty useful, whisking me back far more quickly than expected.

I was quickly mobbed by townspeople awaiting good news, so I made sure to tell them everyone was safe, going into further detail with those who were interested.

Once they learned the town would have a few new members soon, people immediately set to work. Their anxieties were gone as they got down to business setting up beds for the upcoming move in. Nobody voiced any complaints as they prepared the town.

It wasn't long before Benimaru and his kindred returned. They were soon joined by the goblin riders who guided the high orcs across the forest for me. Like the rest, they too settled back to their posts, back to the old routine.

The town was coming together at breakneck speed.

The high orcs, who had reached town in less than a month's time, had learned their jobs in a flash, guided by the dwarves and the better-trained goblins. "Train 'em well enough," Kaijin told me, "and they could form a corps of engineers as strong as what the dwarves have!"

With all this new labor, we were able to tackle jobs that had been

shunted to the wayside before. The town experienced a construction boom, fueled by a steady stream of resources entering and leaving the area. We had dismantled the tents we no longer needed, sending them off to the orc settlements. The goblin riders must've done their jobs well—each of the orc tribes took root in their new lands, crafting the fundamentals needed for life. The journeys they took between our town and their homelands kept them in contact with us, as they helped ferry the needed materials back and forth.

We were in the midst of a true trade system—one where each settlement sent their specialty products to us, and we replied in kind. It wasn't much evolved from the barter systems of ancient times, but the orcs were actually thinking and taking action for themselves, which I loved seeing. They were in no shape for large-scale agriculture yet, but I was sure it would happen before long.

Speaking of that, while we didn't have many types to work with yet, we had managed to grow some pretty hardy potatoes, capable of growing even in harsh environments. They were fairly nutritious, and as long as you weren't too picky, they could be the staple of anyone's diet. We spread these plants around, teaching the high orcs how to cultivate them. And who knew? Maybe they'd be able to sustain themselves in two years or so.

Geld was a huge help in moving those tents and plants around. The Stomach that his Gourmet unique skill provided was perfectly suited for small-scale resource transfers. The "forwarding" service he offered quickly became a vital part of the transit network we were building between the high-orc settlements.

His Stomach had a lot of restrictions associated with it, but it was still almost like cheating at life. And Geld himself was helping transport larger objects that his Stomach couldn't, er, stomach. Whatever we could take apart and fit in there, following his instructions and suggestions, we did. That did the job perfectly for things like tents and bulkier materials.

The starwolves did their part, too. They roamed the lands, making

the most of their Shadow Motion, and even inspired Geld to train himself to withstand the skill's rigors. It didn't take him long, with the kind of dedication he showed to all his work, and while he couldn't trigger Shadow Motion himself, he could hop on a starwolf and have them take care of the jump for him.

After that, things went fast. A delivery run to the mountain areas that took several months on foot could now be finished in a round trip of twenty-four hours. It helped all the settlements stay closer in contact with us than ever—a kind of express mail, maybe. I was even able to write some content on wooden boards and send them to each orc colony, like a sort of neighborhood circular. Nobody else was exactly literate yet, so I didn't want to rely on that *too* much for now. We'd need to work on that, too. Thought Communication only worked at so much of a distance.

Still, we now had solid links between all the settlements. Life was starting to become more stable. And time passed.

Along the way, a group of goblins had arrived, bringing their vassals along. *I might as well name these guys, too*, I thought. I was the one who told them all not to look down on other races, after all, and I had to live up to that. If I merely let them live there without taking that extra step, I risked creating a class-based society.

These guys had kind of a greenish tone to their skin, so I decided to go with Green-[insert number here]. All that naming, though… Yeesh. Maybe Gelmud's Death March was doing its work on me after all, delayed-action style. Scary guy.

The gang would later come to be known as the Green Numbers. Together with the Yellow Numbers, they would form the twin walls of our alliance's main defense force, but that was still well in the future.

Once I was completely burned out from number assigning yet again, we finally had enough homes in town for all the monsters to live in. The goblins would have to live in groups within dormitory-style buildings, but it still beat the tents.

We had set up a water and sewer system pretty early on, but we had nowhere near the resources required to bring water to everyone's houses. Instead, we had well pumps throughout the town, which made the whole place seem a lot more culturally advanced than before.

Having real flush toilets was incredible, too. You still had to fetch water from a well and fill up the toilet tank yourself, but we were a town of overpowered, muscle-bound monsters, so it was no big deal. After all, I didn't want this town stinking of excrement here and there —that was one "must" I refused to give up.

Plus, some of 'em didn't even generate any crap to flush anyway. Me, for example.

We still had a lot of things on the back burner, but I supposed we had time. We had a town to build, and it was never gonna happen overnight.

*

So despite all the nuttiness, things were coming together. Right here, in this land, there lived over ten thousand monsters, gathered here because they believed in what I was doing, all working together to make it a better place.

They saw this as a place of peace. *Our* place of peace. A true town of monsters. And it was finally here.

PRESENT STATUS

Geld



Race	Orc Disaster
Protection	Demon Lord Seed
Title	Demon Lord in Transition
Magic	Recovery Magic
Unique Skills	Ravenous
Extra Skills	Magic Sense, Unify Armor, Steel Strength
Common Skill	Coercion, Strengthen, Scale Armor, Self-Regeneration
Tolerance	Resist Fire Attack, Resist Electricity, Resist Melee Attack, Resist Paralysis

PRESENT STATUS

Rimuru Tempest



Race — Slime (transformable into human)

Protection — Crest of the Storm

Title — Leader of the Monsters

Magic — Elemental Magic: Icicle Lance

Unique Skills — Great Sage · Deviant · Glutton

Extra Skills — Sense Soundwave · Shadow Motion · Dark Lightning · Dark Flame · Steel Strength · Strengthen Body · Multilayer Barrier · Keen Smell · Sense Heat · Source · Sticky Steel Thread · Universal Shapeshift · Control Particles · Replication · Magic Sense

Common Skill — Coercion · Thought Communication · Body Armor · Poisonous Breath · Paralyzing Breath

Tolerance — Cancel Pain · Cancel Temperature · Cancel Rot · Resist Electricity · Resist Melee Attack · Resist Paralysis

Mimicry — Fire Giant · Black Wolf · Black Snake · Centipede · Spider · Bat · Lizard · Goblin · Orc

AFTERWORD

This is Fuse. Good to see you—for the first time, or not.

I'm once again tasked to write an afterword for this book, so I thought a bit about what I should write. I'm the kind of person who likes reading the afterword first, and there are times when I commit to buying a book based on what I see there. I mean, it's rare for me to decide *against* a purchase because of that, but there are at least a few times when the afterword made me think "Yeah, let's go with this!"

So even though this is just the second afterword I've ever written, the process is already starting to make me nervous.

This second volume is a revised edition of the original web version, with a bunch of rewrites and additions to cover things that didn't get enough attention online. I was planning to write a bonus chapter for this volume as well, but we wound up adding so much to the main text that we ran out of pages and I had to give up on it.

The story still uses the web version as a base, diving even deeper into the story than ever before and even going in completely different directions. How did you like it? If you're familiar with the original, hopefully you'll see it as a much deeper tale than before. It'd be nice if I managed that, at least.

Speaking of that, I have now officially completed the web version of *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*. I have a few ideas for extra content and side stories to tackle, but either way, it's done. Now it's time to work on the published editions, and I hope to continue receiving your support as I wend my way through this!