

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.