CHAPTER 7

THE GREAT FOREST OF JURA ALLIANCE

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.

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.

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.

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.