

CHAPTER 3

THE ENVOY AND THE MEETING

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was already producing results. I caught him when he was talking with Kurobe about some kind of weapon hobgoblins could use while mounted. Hopefully, they’d remain a solid team for a good while to come.

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

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

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

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

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

As irritating as that was, they’d be in danger of capture if they came too close to anyone—and even if they escaped, they’d still tip off our presence to potential enemies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure,” I said. “Sounds great. Let me know once you’ve got a roster handy.”

I wanted to leave the whole thing to him, really, but that felt a tad too irresponsible, even for me. I was charged with making the final decisions, and I had to fulfill that duty, at least.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oops. Now was no time for mulling over this. I had my own practice sword in hand. Manifesting as an adult slowed down my reaction time, which meant I was in child form so I could devote my all to this.

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

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

Yes

No

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

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

“What was that?”

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

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

“Yeah, I… I’d sure like to, sometime.”

Hakuro nodded approvingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, I think she’s been cleaning my place since morning, but…”

“Wh-what?!”

For some reason, Hakuro appeared shocked at my reply.

“Um, is that a problem?”

“N-no… Not at all…”

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

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

Um… This is tea, right? There were these weird, seaweed-like leaves flopping over the edge of my cup. It could not have been any potable beverage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He joined Shion in staring awkwardly at the ground.

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

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

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

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

The leader, I guess?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, though…

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

Ummm…

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I decided to switch tactics.

“Ranga.”

“Here, sir.”

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

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

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

It was all pretty weird, really.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You filthy lizard… How dare you mock my master?”

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

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

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

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

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

That being said, he hadn’t really learned much of anything in terms of swordsmanship or battle tactics. Against a professional, I didn’t like his chances. I had learned not long ago that the presence, or lack thereof, of Arts could vastly change your worth in battle. And while Gabil had a big mouth and a pointless amount of swagger, he seemed to be well trained enough as a fighter in my eyes. He was certainly brimming with confidence anyway.

Our eyes met.

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

“Huh? What’re you guys up to?”

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

“You’re all right?”

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

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

“Wow! Resist Poison, huh? That’s pretty neat. I don’t even have that one.”

“R-really? Ooh, neato!”

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

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

Then he motioned toward Gobta. I knew he would.

“Wh-wha?!” he protested, eyes wide open. “What are you…?!” But it had been decided. Which was good for me. I wasn’t sure who to pick, myself. Everyone on our side was ready to beat the crap out of this lizardman, their eyes lowered in a threatening stance. In a way, it helped me keep my own head cool. Whenever someone gets visibly pissed off, it tends to put the brakes on everyone else in the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right,” I said. “In that case, I’ll have Kurobe make a weapon for you. How’s that sound?”

“R-really?!”

“Come on, Gobta, have I ever lied to you?”

“N-no, not lie, exactly…maybe kind of withheld things from me sometimes, but…”

“You’re just imagining it.”

“Am I? Oh, all right!”

This was why I liked talking with Gobta. He was so easy to work with.

Sensing our conversation was over, Ranga threw a signal my way. I nodded in reply.

“If you wish to lend us your power,” he said to Gabil, “then show us what you possess first. You may begin!”

With that, the battle kicked off—Gobta, ready for anything, and Gabil, calmly carrying his spear. Gobta had a cavalry lance on him, too, making it a duel between two long-range weapons. He had no chance, to be sure. His usual weapon of choice was a dagger.

“Hmph,” Gabil replied, lecturing his foe despite the fact that the fight had already started. “You may be more than a mere goblin, but even a hobgoblin is no threat to me! We are the lizardmen, the mighty descendants of dragons…”

“Aren’t you coming? Well, here I come, then!”

Ignoring the boast, Gobta hurled his spear right at Gabil. He was serious about this, more serious than I expected.

“Impudent fool,” Gabil listlessly muttered as he batted down the missile. That, apparently, was exactly what Gobta wanted. For just an instant, Gabil’s attention was focused on the thrown spear—and the hobgoblin took that instant to disappear.

Wait… What…?!

If my eyes weren’t deceiving me, Gobta had just executed a perfect Shadow Motion move to hide. Perfect enough that even Gabil lost sight of him. “Where are you?!” he shouted, furtively looking around. But by then, the battle had already been won.

Flying out of the shadow behind Gabil’s back, Gobta flung himself into a midair spin as he executed a kick.

I figured Gabil had no idea what happened. The rear attack came as a total surprise, and he took it straight to the back of his neck, immediately causing him to black out. Gobta had aimed right where neither Gabil’s armor nor his helmet could protect him, and he aimed well. Even the stoutest built of lizardmen couldn’t hold up against a direct attack on such a vulnerable collection of nerves. His scales would keep the blow from turning lethal, but he would no doubt take a while to recover.



Which meant…

…that Gobta actually won.

“It is settled! The victor is Gobta!!”

Ranga’s proclamation was almost drowned out by the cheers and applause from the ogres. Gobta soaked it up for a moment or two.

Man…

Gobta, of all people, dominating a warrior-lord lizardman? I figured Gabil was B-plus or so, and he was down in one stroke.

I had to hand it to Gobta. He’d matured. I was shocked, and I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.

“Well done, Gobta,” Ranga said as he nodded approvingly. “I always knew you had it in you.”

“Yes!” chimed Rigurd. “Excellent! You have shown the world what hobgoblins are truly capable of!”

“He might just be right,” Shion observed. “I think I’ll forgive what you said a moment ago after all.”

“A masterstroke,” Benimaru said. “You have grown stronger than when we last fought.”

“Indeed,” Hakuro said, eyes sharp and focused on Gobta. “Quite impressive. I wonder how he may respond to further training.”

Damn. Being complimented by the likes of Hakuro? This day might just change Gobta’s life. If that old taskmaster of an ogre sage saw potential in him, I was all for it. It’d help divert Hakuro’s attention away from me in training, at least.

Though… Wait a second. Was everyone else here expecting him to win? I took another look around—and that was that vibe right now. I was the only one who doubted him.

Better make amends for that. I knew how to read a room.

“Um… Yeah, good job, Gobta. That blew me away! I’ll make Kurobe start on your weapon before nightfall.”

So what about Gabil and his lizardman entourage?

The warrior lord had no external injuries. He was knocked out but otherwise unaffected.

As for his men, they had been frozen in place before they even had a chance to form a cheering section. They still had no idea what had just happened.

“Hey, uh, we won, okay?” I yelled at them. “And I gotta turn down the offer, too, all right? If you want help fighting the orcs, we’ll think about that, but for today, you mind leaving us in peace? And don’t forget to take him with you.”

That was enough to stir them to action. And with that, our attempts at a cross-species summit were over.

I was happy to see that idiot go, really, but we still needed to formulate a future plan. I gathered us together in a small hut I had built next to the largest lodging quarters in town for meeting purposes, ordering Rigurd to call for everyone else we needed.

“I will summon them at once,” he said, sending Gobta out for them as I used Thought Communication to get Soei over.

Most of the town’s important figures were there. Among hobgobs, there were Rigurd, Rigur, Rugurd, Regurd, Rogurd, and Lilina. They were joined by the dwarf Kaijin and the ogre mages Benimaru, Shuna, Hakuro, Shion, and Soei. Twelve in total, not counting me, and they encompassed most of the town’s managerial duties, apart from production.

Kaijin represented the town’s building and production interests. Lilina handled management, and Rigurd, Rugurd, Rogurd, and Regurd were the top political brass. Rigurd was in charge, and the other three were his ministers, although I hadn’t assigned them concrete duties yet—better get on top of that. Benimaru and Hakuro were our military, Soei our intelligence, and Rigur our security.

This meant our government now consisted of six departments, with the military and covert-ops sections newly founded by me. We were still weak as an organization, but it had worked well enough so far. Once the framework was in place, it’d be easier to fill out the details over time. For now, at least, we had roofs over our heads and food in our bellies.

Thinking about it, Rigur was doing a damn good job for us all. The grease on the wheels, I suppose.

Benimaru was deliberating over who to recruit for the army. I heard he and Rigur were discussing a list of possible candidates they could take from the security detail. Which was good. I’d only just appointed him, but I would need some action on that fast, what with the orcs and lizardmen running around. It was a heavy burden to place on Benimaru, but I was sure he’d do his best.

Lilina was a hard worker. Quick-witted, too. She was our city manager of sorts, but in terms of her duties, she was mainly responsible for our agricultural efforts. She had picked up some wild potato plants and succeeded in cultivating them. They grew quickly and provided a great deal of nutrients, which did wonders for our food situation. She was also involved with things like taming magical beasts for livestock and building fish hatcheries—a pretty decent range of projects. This was in addition to managing all our stocks—the things we made, the resources we harvested, the materials we gathered. The secretary of agriculture, forestry, water, and livestock, all in one.

We were still small, which was what made that possible, but going forward, we’d have to adapt with the times. If we started building trade relationships with the human race, I’d love to pick up some vegetable seedlings from them. By then, Lilina would probably have too much on her plate, so I’d need to appoint more managers.

The rest of the goblinas were pitching in, too, learning sewing from Shuna and so forth. We had a lot of winning people among them, Haruna included. I figured we were in good hands.

On the architecture and production front, I was still leaving well near everything to Kaijin. He was trained as a blacksmith, but after collaborating with Kurobe, he had kind of drifted upward to the position of floor supervisor. They had divided their workload pretty well, as I saw it—Kurobe at the forge, Kaijin working on new ideas. “We’re still pretty busy putting everything together,” he told me, “but once things settle down, I’d like to devote myself more to creative things.”

I had a feeling Kurobe would be joining him before long, once the current wave of weapons production wrapped up. Hell, I wouldn’t mind joining them, even. But before that, I just needed things to—as Kaijin put it—settle down.

Once Soei returned from his latest recon trip, the entire gang was at the conference room. Time to kick this off.

With my signal, Soei began his report. It was generally divided into three parts—the state of things in the other goblin villages, what was going on in the marshlands, and the orcs’ advance. Each area had two Soei clones devoted to it, nimbly gathering intel. A few were still out in the field, rooting around for more.

We all fell silent, listening to his tale.

First, the goblin villages. Most had affiliated themselves with Gabil, warrior lord of the lizardmen.

Ah, the one who just paid us a visit. They’re following that idiot? Fickle bastards.

The goblins who refused to this had run for the hills in a state of panic, several attempting to flee to human territory. No one gave them much of a chance at survival. It was one thing if they lived in humble forest villages in uncharted lands, indeed another if they crossed the border. It’s natural for anyone to want to keep their homelands protected, and the humans would undoubtedly give them no quarter.

I didn’t know what kind of firepower the nearby humans had, but I was sure it’d make quick work of exhausted goblin stragglers. Which meant the goblins had little choice but to live hidden in secrecy, which didn’t exactly paint a rosy picture for their future.

Soei had some more information on Gabil for us, too. He had apparently gathered the fighter goblins from the assorted villages to assemble a force some seven thousand strong. They were now camped at the foot of the mountain range near us.

Quite a number. They had accepted the exact offer given to us—safety against the orcs, in exchange for whatever food resources they had. I suppose it was the best decision, but with all their food in the hands of others, they were doomed to starve, regardless of how the orc battle turned out.

It was completely careless, really—thoughtless of the village elders who agreed to the proposal. Guess they figured it was better than getting their heads caved in by an orcish ax. Or were they betting that a substantial number would survive the war? That there’d be enough to keep going afterward?

It was something we all would have to consider, too. This town wasn’t complete yet, but I couldn’t bear the thought of abandoning it at this point. If we let the orcs invade this far in, they’d ransack the surrounding forest and make it hard to keep ourselves fed.

If we wanted to retain the lives we enjoyed now, we’d have to repel the orcs—and repel them at the marshlands, not here.

Speaking of the marshes, the lizardman chief had been summoning some armies of his own. A force of ten thousand had already been assembled, safe and well-fed from the fish in nearby Lake Sisu. They were holed up in a maze of natural caves and caverns, ready to resist an orcish siege for as long as necessary.

So they thought the orcs were that much of a threat, then? The lizardmen, a strong bunch of fighters despite Gabil’s little display, were already in a state of near-total war preparedness—to the point where they were even recruiting the weaker goblins.

Finally, I asked about the orcs.

“The orc forces number…” Soei paused for a moment. “Approximately two hundred thousand fighters.”

“Two hundred thousand?!” someone shouted.

I think it was a few thousand that laid waste to the ogre’s fort…

“So you mean to say that the force that attacked our home was merely a fraction of the entire army?”

“Indeed,” Soei reported. “That is what I found in my investigations. We believe the total number involved to be two hundred thousand. The main force is working its way along the Great Ameld River from the south, covering a relatively broad range as they do. My estimate is based strictly on the length of their marching forces and the width of the roads they are using, but based on that, they can number no fewer than one hundred fifty thousand. I’ve confirmed that some squadrons affiliated with them are making inroads here and there into the forest as well, so I would warn against lowballing our estimate.”

A massive parade of orcs, occupying entire roads for miles on end, as far as the eye could see.

“Do we know where they’re headed?”

“Yes, my lord. The force is aiming for the marshes that spread around Lake Sisu, working straight through the lizardman territory. However…”

“However?”

“However, with their current trajectory, they will reach human territory immediately afterward. It is unclear where their ultimate objective lies, but if they continue along a straight line, they will be unable to avoid confrontation with a number of different human kingdoms.”

Wow. What’re they thinking? Wait a second… If all they wanted was control over the forest, would they simply stop once they destroyed the lizardmen? What did they want anyway?

“What do you think about all this, Soei? Are the orcs seeking to destroy the lizardmen? Or will they continue their conquest into human lands?”

“It is hard to say as of yet, my lord.”

I suppose not. I had only a dim idea of the geography involved anyway.

“Well, I think finding out about that should be the next priority. Do we have a map or something handy, Soei?”

“What do you mean by…‘map,’ sir?”

“Huh?”

………

……

…

This was a bit of a surprise. The concept of a map was seemingly alien to most everyone in the room.

Kaijin, bless his soul, knew what I was talking about. He knew, but he didn’t have a lead on one we could purchase. Apparently, the way the world was at this point in its history, maps were still considered confidential military intelligence.

Well, so be it. I had the assembled members line up a number of wooden boards on the table and then craft something simple for me so I could see where things were, relative to one another. Most monsters had Telepathy, which let them share a pool of information with one another. This was helpful, but it had the adverse effect of delaying the development of printed, or recordable, media.

Hakuro started by drawing the general area around the ogre homeland, using what he heard from his grandfather as reference. The lack of paper was really starting to bother me, but I had more boards brought in so we could draw up the region around our town. Thought Communication came in handy for this, letting people pick up on exactly what one another was picturing in their minds. Too handy, really, given how it let people exchange accurate information without putting it down on paper. I wouldn’t necessarily call it an improvement over life on Earth. It was a dilemma, honestly, even if it posed no hindrance to day-to-day monster life.

It was a given that humans were a lot better at transmitting knowledge down to future generations than monsters. That was the core behind developing a civilization, after all. The monsters around me might dismiss this mapmaking as a needless extra step for now, but I was sure they’d thank me later.

I had the Sage collate all the information people were feeding me with their minds. Once I had it all, I neatly jotted it down on the wooden boards. The result was a fairly serviceable map. The distances and such were bare estimates, of course, but it could stand up to practical use well enough. Sucked that I had to waste a bunch of time on this map before we got to the main subject, though.

On to business.

“So this is what a map is,” I said. “A way of showing what the land looks like that everyone can understand. I want you to look at this as I speak to you.”

Everyone gathered around the boards in the middle of the table. I linked it with everyone via Thought Communication to ensure we were all focused on the same thing.

“Okay. I’m going to use this map to predict how the lizardmen and orcs are going to act. We’re trying to figure out what the orcs are thinking here. If we can grasp that, it’ll be easier to plot our next move.”

They all nodded.

I had Soei place a small piece of wood on the orc force’s current location. I had written ORC on it in big letters, like a game piece.

From the center of the Forest of Jura, there were three basic directions an army as large as the orcs could go. All involved tracing the Ameld River, which stretched out from the Canaat Mountains. This river forked into two tributaries near the center of the forest, one flowing into Lake Sisu. The larger branch moved upward in a north-south orientation, traversing nearly the entire continent. Toward the end, it made a slow curve before dumping out into the ocean to the east.

The forest hugged this river for much of its outward flow, and generally speaking, the area east of it was occupied by the Eastern Empire—human lands. After exiting the woods, the Great Ameld fed the fertile plains that were ruled over by demon lords. That plurality was important. Shizu had said as much as well, that the demon lord Leon was just one of them. It sounded a bit odd, the idea of multiple demon lords, but there you go. For all I knew, Leon and the one who gave Rigurd’s son his name were two different people.

The topic deserved more exploration, but that would have to wait. We were trying to suss out the orcs’ invasion route and ultimate objective.

According to Soei’s report, after leaving their habitat near the demon lord lands, the orcs had been making their way along the Great Ameld. It was the only route large enough to hold an entire army, but apparently, they had also been sending squadrons into the forest, picking off the stronger monsters that might threaten them along the way—including the ogres. They were after food, I wagered, but it still seemed odd.

“What do you think?” I asked as I moved other wooden pieces around to simulate the orcs overtaking the ogre fort.

“In what way, my lord?”

“I mean, why would they send a splinter force off like this? Why couldn’t they just march right through the forest?”

“Moving such a large force,” Hakuro said, “would be very difficult, what with all the trees in the way.”

Made sense. But in that case…

“Why raze our homeland at all?” Benimaru asked. “If we weren’t in the way of the main force, why couldn’t they have left us be?”

“Hmm… A good question, actually,” Hakuro replied.

They were right. The orcs didn’t seem to have any motivation for picking off higher-level foes not directly in their path of advance. They could seize their food stores, yes, but if that was the sole objective, they paid an extremely dear price for it. The orcs numbered several thousand, but that was still a pittance compared to the main force. Why devote so relatively few fighters toward such an obviously tough opponent? Was food really the only reason they were willing to accept so many casualties?

“Remember,” Benimaru said, “they didn’t even offer to hire us as mercenaries. I can only conclude they were prepared to kill us all from the moment they arrived.”

Shuna nodded. “Very true. My Sense Threat extra skill told me as much. They were fully hostile toward us—nothing more, nothing less.”

So the orcs wanted the ogres dead. And that wasn’t all.

“Judging by the routes the main force and this splinter team took,” Hakuro said, eyes focused on the map, “they would likely regroup in the marshlands.”

Everyone looked down as he moved two ORC -labeled pieces forward. He was right. Proceeding in a straight line, they met right at the marshlands the lizardmen called home. A region large enough for the main orc force to regroup and prepare for the battle ahead—assuming they didn’t mind the lack of dry land to work with.

“So they’d definitely run into the lizardmen sooner or later, right? Did they want to eradicate them so they could be king of the forest or whatever?”

“Put that way, I’m not so sure… It makes little sense.”

“Or maybe they’re in cahoots with a demon lord, like you said?”

“They are receiving support, no doubt about that, but I cannot say whether it is demon lord support. We had best not jump to conclusions.”

“Okay, but even if they are working with someone, what does annihilating the main powerbrokers in the forest achieve?”

Everyone on hand offered their own response. In the end, though, no one had a definite idea about what the orcs wanted—the most important question.

“Plus,” Shuna whispered, “how are the orcs feeding an army of two hundred thousand?”

The observation made everyone freeze for a moment.

“How?” Benimaru ventured. “That’s what they’re seizing food supplies for, no?” Then he fell silent, realizing how dubious that sounded.

Shuna had a point. It just didn’t seem right.

“Soei, did the splinter force have a supply team with them?”

“…I did not see any, no. The main force appeared to have a caravan carrying food supplies in the rear, but… Indeed, not nearly enough of one, in terms of size. Nowhere near enough to keep an army of two hundred thousand nourished.”

Marching near the river eliminated any worries about fresh water, but they were essentially unable to supply themselves. Whatever food they had would dwindle quickly. Both forces needed something , didn’t they? I doubted the orcs had perfected some just-in-time method of supplying a full military force nobody was aware of, but I also doubted they would just let all those orcs starve while they fought.

And if they didn’t bother to supply the splinter force, no way they’d seize the ogres’ food, then just deliver it all back to the main army. They had their own mouths to feed. And “splinter” force or not, we were still talking several thousand grown orcs, and that was an awful lot of people to force into potential starvation.

I noticed Soei step up to say something, only to catch himself.

“What is it?” I pressed. “Did you want to say something?”

“This is just speculation on my part, but I wonder if, perhaps, they were…foraging upon the bodies of those who died of starvation or battle wounds. I say this because, while I conducted thorough investigations of the battlefields they fought in, I found not a single corpse.”

“What?!” Benimaru exclaimed. “Including our own homeland?”

“…Yes. There was absolutely nothing, and no one, left.”

“How?!”

“Oh no…”

The ogre mages were at a loss for words. Oof… I could see why. That’s what orcs are like? Just imagining it made me queasy.

“That’s… That’s just too hard to accept…”

“They are omnivorous, I know, but… Really?”

Soei eyed Rigurd and Kaijin stoically. “It is simply speculation,” he repeated. “But wherever they were known to be, I found not a single corpse—and our homeland was completely devoid of anything. That is the full truth. And that brings to mind a certain skill…”

He stopped, and his face twisted.

“No!” Benimaru shouted. “An orc lord?”

“Indeed. I have not confirmed it, but I cannot deny the chance that an orc lord has appeared. I have, at least, confirmed the presence of high-order orc knights. Our attackers, likely.”

“Indeed. They would have to be, judging by their strength. I could imagine orc generals among them, even.”

“That would certainly explain everything…”

The ogre mages’ faces grew more and more concerned. They seemed to know who this orc lord was—not that it meant anything to me, Kaijin, or the other hobgoblins.

“Whoa, who’s this orc lord guy?” Kaijin asked, finally unfreezing himself. “Could you maybe include us in this conversation, please?”

“Yeah,” I added. “If you don’t mind?”

That was our first insight into exactly how fearsome the orc lord was.

To put it briefly, an orc lord was a unique monster with advanced leadership skills. They appeared one at a time, out of the blue, once every few hundred years, to spread chaos across the world. One bad hombre, in other words.

What made them so nefarious was the skill they were born with—the unique skill known simply as Ravenous. It allows the caster to make his allies devour everything around them, like a swarm of locusts, afflicting them with a severe hunger they never have any hope of sating. It sounded like torture for the victims, but it had great benefits for the caster. It very efficiently removed all organic matter from entire regions at once, transforming it into energy for yourself. And even if it starved your people—hell, because it starved them, the ultimate effect was tremendously powerful.

But the scariest thing of all was that whatever monsters the hordes consumed in their mad dash for sustenance, their skills would be transferred over to the caster. Monster powers, physical attributes, even skills. It wasn’t a sure thing every time, but the more monsters you consumed, the better your chances. In other words…

“The orcs aren’t trying to eradicate the forest’s higher-level monsters at all? They’re trying to take their powers for their own?”

Silence fell upon the room. It indicated, once and for all, that my compatriots had already made that conclusion.

We all paused for a few moments. The air had grown heavy around us, whether we had solid evidence of an orc lord in our midst or not.

We weren’t helpless against this threat, of course. This monster had appeared on the scene before, multiple times, and there was already a known strategy for dealing with them.

“And this is?” I impatiently asked. The ogre mages responded by giving one another awkward looks. Kaijin and Rigurd stared at them, a tad put off.

“It embarrasses me to say it,” Shuna finally began, “but the orc lords of the past have all been defeated by human efforts. Ravenous is a powerful unique skill, no doubt about it, but it works only by seizing the powers of those the orc lord defeats. While monsters may have intrinsic skills or other magic-oriented effects an orc lord can take for itself, humans bear none of that. They bear Arts, not skills, and those are strictly the fruits of practice and effort. That’s what enables a human nation, or band of nations, to defeat such a threat.”

Huh. Don’t feed the beast, and it won’t grow, huh? I suppose they hesitated to say it because it meant we’d have to get humans involved, sooner or later.

Well, at least we had something to go on now. We had a general idea of the skills the orc lord might’ve seized, and we could find ways to counter them. It might not be that much of a threat yet, assuming it hadn’t been around for too long.

Maybe this’ll be easier than I thought? Maybe not. He already had a knight corps, for one, not to mention that two-hundred-thousand-strong horde of slavering, starving orcs. That, and whatever organization fronted the funds to equip and armor all those guys. No point being too optimistic. If it gained any intelligence boosts through Ravenous, it could even become a demon lord in time, I bet.

Bad news all around. Definitely should’ve gotten to him quicker. But ah well. Right now would have been a great time for some lofty hero to show up, but I didn’t have one handy, to my regret.

“All right. Let’s see if this orc lord exists or not, before anything else. If one’s really been born, I suppose we should get a message over to Kabal and the rest of my adventurer friends.”

“Yes, my lord!” Rigurd nodded at the idea.

They had mentioned they were affiliated with a group—the guild, they called it—that provided assignments. Maybe the guild could help us out, if Kabal provided an in. I was expecting more pushback, really, but none made itself known. Kabal and his friends were certainly kind to us before, at least. No stereotyping or the like.

I figured I could sell a few hunks of magisteel I had left to raise the money for the guild’s help. They might turn down passing monsters, but they couldn’t turn down the right price—that, or I could just have the dwarf brothers negotiate on our behalf. An orc lord would threaten the humans as much as us. We had a lot of chips to bargain with.

In fact, if we knew that humans would play a key role in this, perhaps we should send a message out ASAP. If the lizardmen were already goners, the orcs would very likely be going after human kingdoms next. And whether they could “feed” off humans or not, two hundred thousand orcs would be a life-or-death threat to pretty much any nation out there.

For now, we needed more information. That was my watchword as I continued the conference—but suddenly, Soei stiffened, wincing.

“What is it?”

“Well,” he began, “one of my Replication clones has made contact with someone who insists upon communicating with you, Sir Rimuru. What do you think…?”

“Contact? And they name-dropped me, even? Who the heck…?”

I still didn’t have many acquaintances in this world, really. Was it Kabal, maybe, speak of the devil? Nah. It took them several weeks to travel here from their home base, they said. Over a month’s round trip. Not possible.

“This contact has not given me a name, my lord. She simply seeks to send you a message, and she is quite adamant. She is a dryad.”

Everyone’s eyebrows whipped up in surprise. A pretty well-known monster, I guess.

“No!” Rigurd exclaimed. “It has been several decades since a dryad has last made itself known, has it not?”

“They have practically vanished! Why would one appear now?!”

To the hobgoblins, they were all but mythical figures. And judging by the ex-ogre Soei’s response, they must’ve been pretty high level. One who had spotted and made contact with Soei, despite how gifted he was at concealing his Replications. That proved the caliber we were dealing with. Better not get this dryad angry, then.

“All right. I’ll meet with her. Guide her over here.”

It would appear my thought was correct. Not long after I gave consent, the conference room door opened to reveal a new figure. It had not lost a second to the Soei Replicant, even when he used Shadow Motion to guide him back.

Calling her an “it” would be rude. She was a woman, and a beautiful one. Her hair was green, her skin light, her figure well toned—chiseled, even, like a Nordic goddess. Her luxuriant lips were a shade of light-blue, matched perfectly with her deep-blue eyes. She looked about twenty years old by human standards, but human she definitely was not. She was semitransparent, and any observer could tell that her body had no weight or actual physical presence.

Dryads were, indeed, descended from the fairy races, as close to a form of spiritual life as one was likely to ever witness. I later learned they served as the guardians of the treants, the living tree people that were another high-level presence around the forest. In terms of ranking, they were easily A or better—up there with Ifrit, and no doubt a terrifying presence for Rigurd and the hobgobs.

But what did she want?

The conference table was enveloped in silence. The dryads, long-lived though they were, rarely left their holy sanctuaries. They were heralded by some as the wardens of the whole Forest of Jura, and only a few lucky ones would see one for themselves. They were fabled to exact divine punishment upon the wicked—those who damaged the forests.

Benimaru and the other ex-ogres reacted much the same way as Rigurd. But the dryad didn’t let it faze her. She sized up the room for a moment before locking her eyes upon my figure.

“My greetings to you, Leader of the Monsters, and your followers. I am Treyni, a dryad. It is nice to meet you all.”

She smiled, like a bud sprouting into a flower. That was all it took for me to wonder, Am I being too wary of her, perhaps? She had a fairylike beauty, that was absolutely true.

“Um, you too. My name’s Rimuru. We can keep it casual here, okay? None of that ‘Leader of the Monsters’ crap.”

I hated nicknames enough on Earth. I didn’t want any here, so I made sure to do away with it before the rest of the room could introduce themselves.

“So,” I said, still trying to overcome my embarrassment, “what did you want to see me for?”

“Thank you. I have come here to discuss the events taking place in this forest—events which, I imagine, you all are aware. As one of the Forest of Jura’s appointed wardens, I cannot allow this series of calamities to go unaddressed, and so I have appeared before you. I do so because I hope to join in your conference.”

She nodded in turn to each of the participants before turning back to me.

Treyni, huh? A named monster, then. High level, no doubt.

“But why here?” Benimaru dared to ask. “Surely there are races more powerful than the goblins you could have turned to for assistance.”

“This is the most powerful outpost in the nearby region,” the dryad replied. “The others no longer exist, their people now affiliated with the lizardman known as Gabil. The treants are incapable of moving from location to location and thus interact little with other races. If they were blighted by an outside enemy or natural disaster, there would be little they could do to defend themselves. We dryads are granted permission to travel to the outside world only in these spiritual forms, and I regret there are but few of us… If the root cause of all this were to attack the treant community we share our lives with, we lack the numbers to provide them an effective defense. That is why I wish to tap your strength, if I may.”

She closed with another cheerful smile.

In contrast to her astounding looks, the way she spoke was oddly calming. They must have been a long-lived race, indeed—she must’ve seen a lot over the years. The issue was whether she could be believed. Someone as strong as Ifrit—several of them, living in this community or whatever—not even they could handle the orcs. Did she want to use us as bait, maybe? Or was there some other goal?

“You speak of a ‘root cause,’” Hakuro said. “Does that mean you know what is happening in the forest now?”

“I do,” Treyni responded without hesitation. “An orc lord is invading it with a vast force in tow.”

The freely given revelation plunged the conference room into silence once more.

“Should we take that to mean,” Benimaru finally said, “you have confirmed the orc lord’s presence?”

“You may. And if they were to turn their sights upon our community of treants, we have no effective way to resist them. They cannot move from where they are rooted, and their mystical magic can do little against an orc race unafraid of death. We could perhaps sear them with flame magic, rendering them into ashes, but that could backfire upon the tree people, and none have mastered it anyway. And anything more powerful than that—anything that could strike an entire army at once—would wipe the treants out with it. That…”

Treyni paused, sizing us all up before once again focusing her gaze squarely upon me.

“In addition, we have found that a high-level magic-born is working behind the scenes to support this orc lord. As dryads, we must prepare for this. We are unsure which demon lord might be behind them all, but we are not interested in letting these intruders do whatever they like with our forest.”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle even more as she spoke. As one of the most powerful creatures of the forest, Treyni exuded a presence in the room that was electric. It was like energy coursed across her entire body.

“Well, we’d like to help, but what did you want us to do, exactly?”

“I would like you to defeat the orc lord,” Treyni immediately replied.

This rendered everyone speechless. “Whoa,” I protested, “this monster is, like, crazy-ass strong, isn’t it? Why would someone like me have to take him on?”

Treyni responded with a quizzical look. “But the ogre mages here are intending to fight against the orcs, though, aren’t they? And you plan to contribute to the effort yourself, right? You were the one who extended a hand to save all those defenseless goblins, not long ago. I had thought you would show similar kindness to us and the treants.”

She smiled again.

I wasn’t sure what sources she was tapping, but Treyni seemed to know a remarkable amount about what happened in this forest. She must have looked at my assorted exploits in this world and concluded that I was a sort of omnipotent good samaritan. Perhaps the secluded lives the dryads led caused them to assume the best of everybody they met.

Did it ever occur to her that we—okay, I —might stab her in the back? The smile made it impossible to tell, but as our eyes met, I could feel it in my gut—this was no liar in front of me. I decided to trust my instincts.

If her story was true, we really did have an orc lord on our hands, as well as a high-level magic-born lurking around behind him. I didn’t know exactly how I could contribute to the cause yet, but if she trusted in me, I might as well repay the favor.

I took a deep breath. But before I could speak:

“Of course! To our leader, Sir Rimuru, the orc lord is no more of a threat than a passing cockroach!”

Shion stole my thunder, a bold look of determination on her face. Geez. I’m not a god or anything. Wish she could’ve conferred with me first. And why’s it already a given that I’m the one doing the orc slaying around here?

Before I could protest, Treyni gave me another smile. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Then it’s just as I have heard. I wish you great luck against the orc lord, then!”

And that was that.

I had been more or less pushed into the orc lord–slaying role by Shion, but that didn’t mark the end of the conference. We kept going, while Treyni joined us for the rest.

On the map, in the marshland area, was a wooden board with LIZARDMEN written on it. Behind it, another one marked GOBLINS . In front of it was the spot where the two different orc contingents were going to cross paths. Putting it all down on the map like this made the sheer size of the orc force stark in our minds, but my eyes were turned elsewhere.

“You know,” I said, “if that idiot from before decided to stage an attack on the lizardman HQ right now, he’d seize it pretty darn quick, wouldn’t he?”

Indeed. Gabil, the so-called lizardman envoy. If he decided to raid the lizardmen’s home turf while their main force was busy tangling with the orcs, he’d be greeted with only skeletal resistance. The caverns would be his in the blink of an eye. And the goblin forces were already in perfect position for it.

“You’re sure these are the right positions, Soei?”

“I am, sir,” Soei said. “The goblins are encamped in the plains by the foot of the mountain range. If they deploy their forces from there, they will do so right in the spot indicated.”

I trusted him at his word—but why were they just sitting around there instead of joining up with the other lizardmen? That was the thing. But I had to remind myself that I was making some pretty big assumptions, too. Gabil had no reason to attack his fellow lizardmen. The odd way he chose to position his forces gave me pause, but there was little reason to dwell on it, I thought.

“Ah, maybe I’m overthinking it. I’m kind of an amateur at this, so—”

“…No,” interrupted Hakuro, eyes sparkling. “I think you may have a point. If the main lizardman force is deployed directly in front of them, it would be easiest to try to strike from the rear. But the orcs clearly don’t have the time to try to circle behind them, and even if they attempted such folly, they could easily be attacked and routed from both sides while their lines are stretched thin. There is no reason to keep an army here.”

“But what would the point be?” Benimaru countered. “Even if the goblins defeated the lizardmen, all they’d have waiting for them is death at the hands of the orc onrush.”

“Perhaps. But Gabil seemed to style himself as a leader. He may want to seize the position of chief for himself.”

“It is possible. And really, I see no other reason for him to position his forces here.”

Gabil was certainly confident. Dreaming big. But was he really that brazen? “If that’s what you think,” I said, “if you think it’s possible, then that’s all the more reason why we can’t team up with him.”

Nobody offered any disagreement.

“Do you believe Gabil may be rebelling against his own people?” Treyni asked.

“Yeah, it looks possible, the way this map is showing it. He offered to have us join his army, but I don’t think that’s such a good idea anymore.”

“…I see. Perhaps there is someone compelling him to do this. I will investigate.”

I appreciated the gesture. But if she was covering Gabil for us, what should the rest of us be doing now?

“I would very much like to forge an alliance with the lizardmen,” Hakuro said. “By ourselves, our numbers are too low. I would hate to leave them alone and defenseless, besides.”

Nods around the table. Nobody seemed to have any concerns about that.

“But whether we have an alliance or not, we’re never gonna outnumber the orcs,” I countered. “You sure they wouldn’t just treat the offer like an insult?”

The hobgoblins seemed to view that as a problem. The ogre mages laughed them off. “Sir Rimuru, you worry far too much!” Hakuro commented. “Each one of us is as powerful as an entire army. I highly doubt they would look down upon the likes of us!”

I thought he was giving himself far too much credit. It sounded like something Gabil would say, really. But apparently, he meant it.

“I will go and negotiate with them myself,” Soei said. “Is it all right if I speak with the lizardman chief on your behalf, Sir Rimuru?”

I sized him up as he awaited my reply. He certainly seemed confident. I wasn’t sure where it came from. But he seemed worth relying on.

The map had just told us to expect a clash between orcs and lizardmen before long. Assuming that was true, we had more time to save this town than I first thought. Having a general idea of the near future helped everyone else calm down a bit, too.

“Right. So we’re gonna take two different tacks. I’ll lead an advance force over to the lizardmen, and we’ll bash up the orcs together. We’ll try to win the battle, but if it starts looking bleak, that’s when we’ll go to Plan B—where, basically, we abandon the town, regroup where the treants are, and focus on defending them. We’ll probably need to call upon human aid if it comes to that, so I’ll contact Kabal the adventurer and have them help us rub out the orc lord. He’s just as much of a threat to them as he is to us, so I’m sure they’ll step up to help. Of course, this is all dependent on forming an alliance with the lizardmen. You’re gonna be key to that, Soei. Make it happen.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Soei nodded back at me. I had faith he’d come through, certainly.

“Right! In that case, feel free to talk to the lizardman chief whenever you can. Just make sure we’re both equal partners in this alliance. Nobody’s serving anyone else!”

“I understand,” he said, then promptly disappeared, as if fading into the shadows. He works fast, doesn’t he?

“Good. Now, if Soei messes up his job, we’ll jump right to Plan B. I want all of you to be prepared for that, should it come to it.”

The rest of the room nodded in agreement.

“Thank you all for accepting my sudden request,” Treyni said, bowing low in my direction. “I will do my best to ensure this relationship is beneficial to us both.”

“Oh, no, uh, same to you,” I stammered.

She smiled a little in reply, perhaps finding my hesitation cute or something. “We will meet again, then, Leader of the Monsters—or Sir Rimuru, I should say.” Then she was gone, casting her own magic to return home.

So we had our orders. It’d be great if we could form that alliance, but if not, we’d have to think on our feet a little.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, have you any interest in contacting Gabil again?”

“Hmm… Good question, Hakuro. I think I’d like to save that for Plan B, when we get to seeking human support… Hmm, but the kingdoms are gonna need time to mobilize their forces when push comes to shove, huh? You think maybe we could just tell them there’s an orc lord out there for the time being?”

“It sounds like a good idea, my lord. I will leak word to the kobold merchants. They will spread it well enough after that.”

“Thanks.”

That should work for now. They’d probably want some solid evidence about the orc lord’s birth before joining forces with us, besides.

Rigurd was already outside of our conference-room hut, carrying out my orders. Even as goblin king, he still ran around all day like a chicken with its head cut off. Things were starting to happen. It was beginning to make me nervous, but there was no point stewing over it. We had to do what we could, and right now, that meant we had to prepare.

An orc lord, though, huh? Sounded pretty tricky. Stealing people’s skills sounded awfully unfair, not that I was really one to talk. But I had been sweet-talked into confronting him, and I couldn’t disappoint Treyni now. I wasn’t at all sure about my chances, but I had made the agreement, and I’d go at him with everything I had.

If I screwed this up, I’d have no chance of carrying out the promise I made to Shizu. I had to think about the future, even if the thought depressed me a bit.

The orcish army stormed across the forest, feet stamping against the soil; entire trees toppled along the way.

Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them!

Such was the thunderous chant of the orcs as they marched along, their yellow eyes sparkling with rage.

They were not capable of thought in the normal way. In their eyes, anything that moved was prey. They were eternally hungry, and the whole of their consciousness was devoted to filling their empty stomachs.

Whump.

Another one down. Those surrounding him were overjoyed. They had prey now. At one point, they might have been friends—but now, he was just a slab of something edible. He looked like he was still breathing, but all that meant to the others was that his meat was fresh.

Those lucky enough to have been marching alongside him immediately took to taking the body apart. The liver was taken to the leader of their little group, with the rest snatched up on a first come, first served basis.

Crunch, rip, smack.

The air was quickly filled with the repulsive sounds of flesh and bone being torn apart.

They were forever hungry. And the hungrier they got, the more powerful they became in battle. That, right there, was the hidden benefit of the unique skill known as Ravenous. The more orcs that fell and were eaten—the hungrier the survivors grew—the stronger it made the entire army.

They numbered two hundred thousand, a city’s worth of famished slaves under the orc lord’s rule. There would be no salvation for them, as they worked feverishly to fill their stomachs…

It was all too futile an effort in this endless hellscape.

Now the homeland of the ogres was before them. The orcs were D-ranked monsters. The ogres, with a grade of B, made them cower in fear—never in their dreams would they dare challenge them to a fight.

But look at them now…

Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them! Destroy them!

They never stopped. If anything, the hunt for prey made them go faster.

Their comrades fell as the ogres raged, exercising the full brunt of their powers, slashing them apart, caving in their skulls with the handles of their axes…

But all it meant was that the orcs suddenly had a bountiful supply of fresh meat. They were thrilled, hoping against hope that it’d help stave off the hunger for at least one passing moment.

An ogre fell. Several orcs immediately pounced, bathing in his blood as they gnawed at his body. But…ahh, it didn’t work. It filled nothing.

But now look. The orcs’ bodies were changing. The power of the ogre was now within them. And now the ogres were swallowed up by the supposedly inferior orc hordes, screaming their last, pained at the seeming uselessness of their powers.

And slowly but surely, some among the orcs began to manifest new, unexpected abilities.

The strength of the companions I eat becomes my own!

The power of the prey I consume becomes my own!

The eating continued.

None were afraid of death. Any sense of fear in their minds had been consumed right alongside the flesh of their comrades. And the power flowing within them was now making its way to the king. Their king. The orc lord, the one at the top of the food chain.

The march continued. Their next prey was right in front of them.

The lizardman chief shuddered when he heard the report. The thing he feared most was now reality.

According to the messenger, the stronghold of the powerful ogre race was destroyed before the day had even ended. As if swallowed whole by the orc horde.

There was no longer any doubting it. The orc lord was here.

In terms of sheer statistics, these were still D-ranked orcs, two hundred thousand of them or not. Ten thousand C-plus-level lizardmen, playing on their home turf in the marshes, had every chance of fighting evenly, or better. But if the thing he feared the most—an orc lord—was on the scene, nothing about them was D rank any longer.

If they had completely overwhelmed the ogres, that was an indicator of their power—from the guy up top, all the way down to the lowliest peon in the army. They may not be as powerful as ogres, no, but you could put a plus sign next to that D, at the very least. And any orcs who were at knight level or higher would be at least a C. Hell, at this point, they might be leaning toward C-plus, matching the lizardmen’s grade.

It would be hard enough to fend off such a massive army attempting to strike them at their weakest link. But if there was no meaningful difference in strength at the infantry level now, they had no chance. The presence of the orc lord meant that holing up in the caverns and attempting to weather out a siege would be pointless. It was one thing if they had reinforcements, but shutting off all potential exits would simply make the lizardmen starve, not the orcs.

They would simply have to throw themselves against them. It was a bitter decision for the chief, but one that had to be made.

Gabil, sent away to gain the goblins’ support, had yet to report back. They couldn’t waste time searching for him—it would only make their foes even more of a threat. The chief began to fear that he would have to lead the forces himself.

A soldier ran up, shouting.

“Chief! We have an intruder! He wishes to meet with you in the limestone grotto entrance!”

The chief’s guards readied their spears in response. “Calm yourselves,” he said. He could feel the presence of a strong aura nearby—more powerful than anything he had felt before—and he realized it wouldn’t pay to do anything to stoke its owner’s anger. Any battle would lead to untold casualties, most likely, and he couldn’t detect any hostility to the aura anyway.

“Whoever it is,” he said as he composed himself, “he is very brave, coming here alone. I would like to see him. Bring him over.”

“But what about the risk, my lord?”

“This aura is on the level of a magic-born’s. If we wish to drive him away, we will have to pay dearly for it. He does not seem to be an immediate threat, so we have no reason to immediately threaten him.”

“Shall we line the chamber area with our elite troops, then?”

“Please. But I want no one to move an inch until I give the order. Make that clear.”

“Yes, my lord!”

The chief nodded to his royal guard and waited for the uninvited guest to appear. They were in a natural labyrinth, one with countless hidden nooks and crannies. If this magic-born-level foe attempted to cause any trouble, they would have ways of handling it—if it came to the worst-case scenario, that is. The chief’s hope was that they could talk this out instead.

Now the aura drew nearer, its size telling the chief everything he needed to know. Anything foolish , he thought, and not even a hundred of my elite force may be enough to defeat him .

After a few more moments, one of his men brought a single monster into his chamber. He was dark-skinned, his hair black with hints of blue, and eyes a lighter blue that were cold as ice. He was about as tall as your average lizardman—not gigantic by monster standards, but he looked composed, impervious, ready for anything.

The power he seemed to exude was overwhelming in itself, even as he was surrounded by several lizardman warriors to keep him in check. A hundred other troops were stationed around the chamber, ready to leap at this visitor whenever their chief instructed.

The chief looked at the visitor, then resigned himself. If this goes wrong , he thought, I may have just wasted the lives of everyone in this room. Such was the extent of this monster’s aura, exponentially larger than anything he knew.

“My apologies,” the chief began. “We have been so busy with our own preparations that I fear I cannot provide you with the proper courtesy you deserve. May I ask what brings you here?”

His choice of words angered the younger lizardmen in the chamber. What need was there for all this politeness before a complete unknown like this? The chief appreciated their concern, but now he was anxious. If they did anything to displease this visitor, they may never step out of this chamber again. The young warriors had far too little experience and lacked the ability to accurately gauge their foes. They hadn’t lived as long as the chief nor developed their danger-sensing skills like he had.

But not caring at all about the chief’s concerns, the monster spoke.

“My name is Soei. There is no need for excessive ceremony. I am merely a messenger.”

Betraying the chief’s worst fears, the monster serenely introduced himself. There was nothing savage about his demeanor as he regarded the chief, not caring at all about the grumbling guards around him.

Soei, is it? A named monster. That would explain the overwhelming sense of power anyway. And this named monster was being employed by someone else—a thought that made the chief imagine a cold sweat running down his back.

“Allow me to state my business. My master wishes to form an alliance with you and has requested that I make the necessary arrangements. I feel we have good news for you—my master cannot bring himself to simply watch idly as the orcs decimate your ranks. That is why he has requested this alliance.”

It was no nightmare scenario for the chief after all. This “master” did sound a tad uppity and forceful, yes, but some aspects of the offer deserved to be heard. The chief thought—about this monster, Soei, and the goals of the one he served. Whoever he was, he was working against the orcs, at least.

“Before I respond to your proposal, may I ask you a question?”

“Let me hear it.”

The reply was simple, but it confirmed to the chief that the other side was willing to negotiate. It came as a relief.

“Well, then… If it is an alliance you seek, is it safe to assume that your master is willing to work alongside us as we confront the orcs?”

“Indeed. As I told you, he does not wish to see you annihilated. He wishes to fight alongside you, if possible.”

“Then let me ask another question. What does your master think is the root cause behind this orc activity?”

Soei fell silent for a moment. A bold smile began to cross his face. “Are you asking whether it is an orc lord we are dealing with? Then let me give you a piece of information I guarantee is the truth. My master, Sir Rimuru, has received a request from the dryads, the wardens of the Forest of Jura, to slay the orc lord. He has solemnly promised to do the deed. I hope you will consider that as you make your decision.”

This reply offered even more for the chief than he expected. The revelation that dryads were involved caused everyone in the room to stir. And the man before him had just confirmed that the orc lord was very, very real. Whatever master this monster served—did he have the power, truly, to defeat this menace?

Considering Soei had dropped the name of the dryads, one of the top-level presences in the forest, it seemed safe to assume he was telling the truth. Nobody was dumb enough to speak of dryads if doing so would spark their ire. It was said they could see all and hear all, through the very trees that populated the forest. All forest residents knew that their names must be handled with respect.

The term alliance suggested that the lizardmen would not be subjected to servitude. They would be treated as equals. It was an offer, the chief reasoned, that had to be taken.

But before he could speak, another group of lizardmen bounded into the chamber.

“Chief! There is no need to listen to such talk!”

“Indeed! We are the proud lizardman race! Why does some total stranger think he can simply stroll in and curry our favor?”

They were Gabil’s men, part of the group that stayed behind while their leader set off to secure the goblins’ support. The chief had bidden them to stay, fearing them too hotheaded to be useful in delicate negotiations with the goblins, and now he was paying for that error.

He wished he could click his tongue and make them vanish. Certainly, there was no telling exactly how powerful this master and his people were. But simply dismissing them out of hand, over the authority of their chief?

This visitor was demanding a lot, it was true, but he was a messenger, and these rank-and-file lizardmen had no right to treat him like garbage. Besides, the visitor’s demands were not, in themselves, a problem. The envoy represented a monster powerful enough to be relied upon even by dryads.

In terms of level, he must have been equivalent to the lizardmen or higher. And in the world of monsters, it was all about survival of the fittest. Here was a higher-level presence seeking their help. Any perceived rudeness could be quickly forgiven. Even this envoy possessed a frightening amount of force, a magic-born through and through. Get on his wrong side, and he could easily become their enemy—and taking on a magic-born like this before the orc horde arrived would be the epitome of foolishness.

The chief eyed Soei, trying to read his emotions. The envoy’s eyes were still squarely upon the lizardman leader. Whew. That was a relief. He couldn’t afford to let a witless bystander ruin this offer.

“Silence!” he shouted, shutting down the chamber as he signaled to his guards with his eyes. “I will be the one who decides what we do. You do not have the right to intervene. Take them to the brig! A night spent in there should help them see the error of their ways.”

The two transgressors were quickly whisked away, shouting “Chief, please reconsider!” and “Sir Gabil will never allow this!” But they no longer mattered. He turned back toward Soei and lowered his head.

“Please forgive the rudeness of my people. I think I would like to pursue this alliance with you. However, the affairs I must deal with at the moment force me to remain here. Under normal circumstances, I would love to confer with your master at the location of our choice, but I am afraid I cannot spare a single moment. Would it be possible for him to come to me instead?”

He swallowed nervously. This was asking a lot, he knew, of someone much more powerful. He knew it could anger the envoy easily enough—but Soei showed no concern at all.

“I accept your apology. I am sure my master will be delighted to hear your reply, and I look forward to working together with you. In that case, I will make the necessary arrangements to bring our forces here—you will get to meet Sir Rimuru yourself then, I imagine.”

Soei’s demeanor suggested he never thought for a moment the chief would turn him down. Or —the chief suddenly thought— if I did turn him down, that would be it. The end of the lizardmen’s luck.

And that is no idle speculation , he thought. Without this meeting today—without this alliance—our people could very well have perished.

The envoy, Soei, had declared that the orc lord was real. The worst-case scenario in the chief’s mind was already in motion, and now there was a glimmer of hope that they could survive it. It filled the chief with a great sense of relief.

“Let us convene together, then,” Soei said, “seven days from now. I ask that you do not hurry yourselves into any type of conflict before then. I would also advise you to watch your backs for the time being as well.”

“Very good. I look forward to meeting your master.”

The monster nodded at the chief, then disappeared from the spot, without a sound, as if fading into the shadows.

Seven days. That would be enough , he thought. Hole up in their caverns to keep the orcs from getting any stronger, and wait for their reinforcements. He didn’t know what kind of numbers his newfound friend would bring, but even someone as powerful as Soei alone would be a great help. If his so-called master was taking on the orc lord himself, then the lizardmen needed to grant him all the support they could. It was an uncertain, wait-and-see approach, but it certainly beat risking their lives in a confrontation that offered almost no chance of survival.

Now, at least, the chief knew what must be done.

“Prepare for a siege, men! We must reserve our fighting strength until the reinforcements arrive!”

“““Yes, my lord!”””

And so the lizardmen holed up in their natural labyrinth, lying low and quiet for the clash to come.

Gabil opened his eyes. It took a moment for him to recall what had happened. When he finally did, he shot out of bed, livid.

“Are you awake, my lord?!” the lizardman serving him said.

“Yes. I apologize for alarming you. I must have fallen into his trap…”

“His trap?”

“Indeed. That impudent fool and his clever tricks…”

“…Meaning, sir?”

“Meaning that fighter who defeated me was the true leader of the village.”

“What?!”

His men began nervously conversing with one another, digesting this devastating piece of news. It explained a lot, in their minds.

“The little sneak pretended that slime was their leader to distract my attention. He played the part of some foolish peon, then struck me right when my guard was down!”

“Of all the dirty tricks, my lord!”

“And to think the direwolves, of all the monsters, are willingly cooperating with such a small-minded weasel. So much for the so-called masters of the plains! Just a bunch of mangy dogs, in the end.”

“The work of a coward, through and through! Unworthy of ever crossing blades with a warrior such as yourself, Sir Gabil!”

“Quite, yes. I offered him a chance to duel with me, fair and square, and now I see how much of an error in judgment that was!”

“Ah, I…I see, sir. Indeed, there would be no other way I could imagine you tasting defeat otherwise.”

“Bah! Curse those wretched direwolf beasts and those conniving hobgoblins! Just because they happened to be blessed with a round of evolution, my lord, they walk around like they own the world! If they think they can measure up to the lizardmen, we had all best relieve them of that idea with haste!”

Gabil gave his men an appreciative nod. It was true. He couldn’t imagine any other reason why he lost that confrontation. That, and the direwolves proved to be a sore disappointment. All that talk of their pride, their flawless teamwork, and here they were sharing their fates with a bunch of underhanded lowlifes.

“Anyone who uses such cowardly tactics against me is worthless!” he spat out, still livid.

“Perhaps it was for the better we did not side with them, then.”

“I would say so, yes!”

“Indeed, indeed…”

Gabil basked in the ego-massaging from his men. Then he let out a hearty laugh. As far as he was concerned, he wasn’t defeated at all.

“Come to think of it,” another man said, “I do find it odd, Sir Gabil, that you have remained at the rank of warrior lord for all this time.”

“What?” Gabil replied, sneering at the lizardman.

“N-no, I…I do not mean you are unworthy of the post, my lord. Quite the opposite! I just feel it a wasted opportunity of sorts, you serving that feeble old man for all this time.”

“Keep going.”

Now Gabil was on his side. The lizardman straightened his posture, relief coursing over him.

“I feel, Sir Gabil, it is about time we allow our chief to go into retirement and establish you as the new lizardman chief. Ah, if only that were already the case! Then, perhaps, we would not be so thrown by the orcs as we are now.”

The others quickly stepped up to agree.

“Exactly! Once Sir Gabil shows his true strength, that stubborn old fool will soon take the hint and step aside. It will be a new era for the lizardman people, and nothing would make me happier than seeing it come to life!”

“Very true! It is time for a new wind to blow across our homeland!”

Gabil nodded at the shouted adulation. He felt, finally, that the time was ripe.

“Ah,” he said, “so you were all thinking the same thing? I was just considering that the time had come to act myself. Will you be willing to fight alongside me, then?”

He sized up his men. They were all looking at him, eyes full of passion. He liked what he saw. They were envisioning a new epoch in lizardman history, one they would have a direct part in engineering. Soon, Gabil felt, they would be his most trusted advisers, offering the support he would need as he led his species to a new generation of bountiful glory.

“We will, sir,” one said, “if you are willing to lead us.”

That was the chance Gabil was waiting for. He nodded sagely.

“Then the new era is here,” he proclaimed. “Very well! Let us all stand together!”

The echoes of the ensuing cheers lingered for what seemed like minutes afterward.

The fool had finally climbed onstage. The farce was about to begin.