

CHAPTER 4

DISENGAGING GEARS

The lizardman chief nodded at the latest war report.

It had been four days since his conference with Soei. Three days remained until the two armies would come together formally, but for that day, it looked like they could pass yet another night without any major losses.

The orcs’ attack was, as they expected, severe. The corridors were teeming with them, pouring in like a flood. As labyrinthine as the caverns were, that didn’t matter as much if it was covered from corner to corner with the enemy. They had set traps in some of the chambers to whittle down the numbers a little, and that was about all the offense they had attempted.

But not a single lizardman life had yet been lost. They had focused on the defense effort, trying to keep casualties as low as possible, and it was paying off. Their knowledge of the caverns played a major role, as did the lizardmen’s ever-rising morale. The network of cave paths ensured that their escape routes and emergency access passages remained untouched. The teams facing the brunt of the orc attack switched in and out in shifts, ensuring that only the bare minimum of troops engaged the enemy at any one time.

The lizardmen had their chief’s uncommon leadership skills to thank for their success so far. But the chief refused to rest on his laurels. He knew that things were still under control mainly due to the promise of coming reinforcements. The warriors who had actually fought the orcs reported on the astonishing amount of strength their foes exhibited—a far cry from anything an orc should be capable of. It was clearly the result of their orc lord’s special skills, and if they had opted for a full-frontal clash, the lizardmen would have been decimated.

They had lost nobody, but only because of their single-minded focus on defense. The lizardmen’s elite troops had not seen their defensive networks penetrated yet, but with the sheer numbers they faced, they couldn’t let their guard down for a moment. They had to keep their foes from growing any more powerful, no matter what.

For now, everyone among the lizardmen had to admit that the chief was right. He had strict orders in place—if any fighter was wounded, he was to be replaced on the front lines immediately. Anyone dying in battle would be consumed by the orcs, and that would only make them stronger. Everyone understood that they needed to be careful, thorough, and that the defensive lines must be protected at all costs.

And it was only for three more days. Three more days until the reinforcements came, and they could stage a counterattack. Then they could use the caverns to their advantage and fight back—or, at least, devote more men to offense instead of defense. Little by little, they all believed, it would turn the tables and bring this seemingly endless stalemate to an end.

It was a hopeful scenario for the chief to picture, one that relieved him a little.

And it was at that moment when an aide told him that Gabil was back…

Gabil was beside himself with anger.

What is this? he thought as he hurried to the chief. The proud lizardmen, burrowing in their holes like cowards, hiding from the pigs… Well, no worries now. I have returned. And now we can fight with the pride of true lizardmen.

“It gladdens me to see you again, Gabil. Were you able to gain the confidence of the goblins?”

“Yes, my lord! They only number approximately seven thousand, but I have their support, and they await our orders.”

“I see. Hopefully they will be of service to us.”

“Are we off to battle, then?” Gabil asked, his tone already growing confrontational. He was back, and he had no interest in letting the pigs have the initiative. He was sure the chief—his father—had been waiting for his arrival with bated breath.

But the reply he received was nothing like what he expected.

“Mm? No, not yet. While you were away, we received a request to form an alliance. Their forces are set to arrive here three days from now. I plan to wait for them, formally agree to the alliance, then discuss strategy at that point. After that, we will go on a full offensive.”

The news was a complete surprise to Gabil. It did not sit well.

What? Our chief wasn’t waiting for me at all?!

Relying on these mystery reinforcements from who knows where, all for the sake of defeating a stupid little herd of pigs? It was unacceptable to Gabil.

“My chief, if I take the lead, the pigs will be eliminated in a flash. Please, give me your order to strike them down!”

“No,” came the cold reply. “We begin three days from now. You had best rest yourself today. You must be exhausted.”

The chief was wholly uninterested in the idea. Gabil seethed with anger. Tossing him aside in anticipation of these reinforcements? Unforgivable.

“Chief… Father, you have to get ahold of yourself! I fear your advanced age is making you fail to see reality!”

“What?”

“What is the meaning of this, Sir Gabil?” the head of the chief’s guard asked, while the chief himself eyed his son suspiciously.

Gabil sized the two up, his gaze filled with pity. He felt oddly calm now. He had been patient with his father as the leader up to this point. There was much about him that he still respected—even he had to acknowledge his innate leadership skills.



He certainly did not hate his father, the leader of all lizardmen. If anything, it was his desire to earn the praise of his chief that drove him from day to day. The refusal to give him any rankled Gabil. In that case , he reasoned, let me stand above him and make him recognize me . That was the best way to word it, though Gabil’s pride made that difficult for him to accept, deep down.

He nodded, then sent the signal to his men.

“Father,” he bellowed across the chamber, “your era has ended. Starting today, I will serve as the new chief of the lizardmen!”

With the declaration, a battalion of goblins swarmed into the chamber, stone-tipped spears aimed at the chief and his guard. Gabil’s own elite guard stood by him, ensuring there would be no unwelcome resistance from the outside hallway.

“Gabil, what is the meaning of this?!” the chief spat out, at a higher octave than usual. It was a rarity to hear—and it only made Gabil feel even more superior.

“Father, I thank you for everything you’ve done for us. Now, I want you to leave the rest to me and enjoy life in retirement.”

With another order, Gabil’s team disarmed the chief and his guard.

“Answer me, Gabil! What is the meaning of all this?!”

“Perhaps, Father, using our mazelike corridors to fight the orcs was a good idea. But it spreads our fighters out too sparsely around the entire structure. We have no way of staging a useful counterattack, and it dooms us to exhaustion sooner or later.”

“Don’t be ridiculous… I told you, once we confer three days from now, we will get back on the—”

“Too little, too late! We are lizardmen! We are strong, and that strength is at its best in our homeland, the marshes. It is in those muddy, flooded regions where we are at our most mobile, and our enemy at its slowest. Our greatest of natural weapons. And what ruler of the marshes simply holes up in the dark and waits for their problems to go away?!”

He took the chief’s weapon in hand, a spear that served as the symbol of the lizardman leader. It was a Vortex Spear, a magical weapon to be wielded only by the strongest of tribal warriors, and as far as Gabil was concerned, he was born to hold it.

Now he could feel the power within it, a sure sign that the spear had accepted its new master for all time. Looking down at the chief and his guard, he held his new weapon high in the air for them to see.

“The spear has accepted me. Lizardmen require no alliances! Allow me to prove that to you!”

“Wait, Gabil! I cannot allow you to do this! At least wait until the reinforcements arrive!”

“You may leave the rest to me,” he replied, ignoring the shouted plea. “You may find things a tad uncomfortable until the battle is over, but do try to hold out for me.”

“Sir Gabil! My brother! You dare to betray us?!”

“Could we save family concerns for later, my sister? I am not betraying anyone. As I told you, I am going to show you what the new era will be for us lizardmen.”

“That’s nonsense!” replied Gabil’s younger sister, the head of the chief’s guard. “Everyone knows what a talented warrior you are. Why now, of all times? Is this what you truly want for us?!”

“Do you think I am joking? Get out of my sight. Take her away.”

He could hear his sister shouting as the goblins hauled her out of the room. It didn’t matter to him any longer. He had no intention of killing her or anything of the like, but he didn’t want anyone in his way. He would defeat the foe that the former chief found impossible to overthrow. The results would turn him into a new hero, the perfect event for establishing his position at the peak of lizardman society.

Then , he thought as his heart raced, my father will admit it. He will admit that he was proud of me all along!

His men were already dealing with anyone who sided with the chief, with goblins to hammer the message home. They wouldn’t be expecting it anyway, their attention too focused on the orcs in front of them. They’d never expect their fellow lizardmen to attack them through the emergency tunnels.

Before long, the news had arrived—all opposition had been suppressed. Gabil sat down on his father’s seat, the picture of calm composure. And then, as if waiting for this exact timing:

“How’s that chair feel to you, then?”

“Ah, Sir Laplace. Thanks for your hard work. It went even easier than I expected.”

“Oh, lovely, lovely. Glad to be of service.”

It was a masked man, one with an asymmetrical smile that made it look like he was sneering at anyone he showed it to. His clothing stuck out, too, clown-like with its rabble of colors and patterns. It was a ridiculous sight, but Gabil was unfazed. This man, Laplace, was in the employ of Gelmud, the man Gabil loved more than almost anyone else.

He had first appeared before Gabil as he was returning to his homeland with his newly earned goblins. “Laplace is the name,” he began. “I used to be vice president of the Moderate Jesters, a group of…jacks-of-all-trades, you could say. Lord Gelmud has hired me to serve you—anything you need, I provide.”

This Laplace did with efficiency, freeing Gabil’s men from the dungeon and providing regular reports on the lizardmen’s moves. It was Laplace who removed the seal on the Vortex Spear for him, ensuring his coup ended in success.

The original plan called for Gabil and his elite guard to suppress the chief and his men while the main force was out fighting in the marshes, but with the army hunkering down in the caverns, that idea was a bust. It angered Gabil immensely, but Laplace offered an alternative path. He brought the goblins, and Gabil’s own troops, right to the chief himself without arousing any attention. It was like magic, the way he led them through the escape corridors without a single lizardman noticing.

In short, Laplace was the triggerman for the entire coup.

“Aw, c’mon, Gabil,” Laplace laughed. “I’m really nobody that special, no.” But he was to Gabil, this man working for Gelmud.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Enough modesty, Sir Laplace,” Gabil replied. “We are coworkers, after all, under the watchful eye of Lord Gelmud. Let’s make it a useful relationship.”

“Sir Gabil, we have all the tribal leaders in our grasp.”

It was the news Gabil had been waiting to hear. Now, at long last, every branch of the military was under his control.

“Oops! Sorry if I’m in the way here. I’d best head off to my next job, then…”

“Ah yes. Sorry to detain you, Sir Laplace. I think it’s time I whip those orcs and show my strength to Lord Gelmud, once and for all!”

With one final, sneering bow, Laplace disappeared from the cavern.

“You were quite helpful to me, Laplace. Lord Gelmud has so many talented people working for him… I’d best hold up my end of the bargain, then.”

Gabil stood up, supremely confident. It was time to attack. He couldn’t even imagine defeat at this point, and the advice from his father failed to reach his ears. His loyal followers were now cheering his every move, especially the younger lizardmen who formed his most passionate support base.

He called each tribe leader to his chamber, ordering them to prepare for an all-out attack. To teach those pigs exactly how daring and brave the lizardmen truly were, as he put it. The order was greeted with cheers from every tribe, weary from days of siege warfare. Their former chief’s order to hold the fort and prevent casualties at all costs had, ironically enough, made it all the easier for Gabil to consolidate his own power. He was giving the people what they wanted, and that made things go his way.

Gladdened by the response, Gabil sat back down. His time was here. He was confident about that. Defeating the orcs, at this point, was just a minor detail.

How could this happen…?

Waves of despair rankled the chief.

Soei’s final advice—to watch his back—was referring to this, no doubt. He thought he had the people under his full control. Even the more hawkish were faithfully following his orders, solidifying their defenses. And then his own son betrayed him.

Desperation overtook him. This was a terrible situation. If it kept up, the lizardmen would be ruined before tomorrow, much less in three days.

He looked down at his chief guard—his other child, Gabil’s sister. She noticed the signal and nodded. “Go!” he shouted, and the chief guard immediately slipped out of her shackles and ran off.

The alliance forces needed to be notified as soon as possible. They might get caught up in all of this otherwise. He had to prevent that. His pride as a lizardman, and as a leader, demanded it.

That envoy, the man named Soei, didn’t bother hiding his aura from him. Once they were out of this natural fortress, they might be able to follow it to wherever he was now. It was a slim chance, but it was all he had to offer his chief guard.

The lizardmen guarding the dungeon had taken measures to restrain both of them, but—perhaps out of distaste at the idea of abusing their former leader—they were not doing so with very much fervor. She quickly took advantage of that to escape.

For now, the chief felt relieved. He would have to stay here; that was his responsibility for now. All he could do was pray his daughter could complete the mission he gave her.

Only seven days. That was what he promised, and he had failed. He cursed his own worthlessness, there in his cell, and hoped it would not lead his allies to abandon him. Soei offered that alliance because, to his master, the lizardmen held some sort of value. If this coup made him change his mind, that would seal all their fates.

If this battle costs us the lives of those faithful to Gabil, so be it. Perhaps they had it coming. I just wish we could keep our women and children safe…

They had yet to even formally enact the alliance. The chief fully understood that he was wishing for the stars. But one desire still ruled over him—the desire that this tragedy wouldn’t spell doom for all the tribes he oversaw. He felt he owed them that much, after all these years, and no one could blame him for it.

The chief had a good idea of what was about to happen. Once Gabil was in control of all the tribes, he would immediately order an attack. They would have nothing left in the corridors, not even any defense mechanisms. Without any fresh soldiers to replace the wearied frontline fighters, and against an orc force that grew stronger as the fight wore on, it would only be a matter of time before their defense began faltering.

The women and children of each tribe had been evacuated to a chamber deep in the heart of the maze. They would then have nobody to protect them.

How did this happen?

Wailing about it now was pointless.

I will have to be the cornerstone of our final defense. I have to…at least…buy them a little more time…

Just a little more time. That was the best he could offer right now.

On that day, the marshes were completely covered in orcs. An observer in the air would have seen them swarming for the cavern entrances like so many ants.

But even that was only a small part of the horde. Many were still in the forest, making their way toward the marshland region. And the main force, marching northward along the river, was still coming. They faced no resistance, nothing preventing them from covering the marshes and descending upon the caverns like an avalanche.

Now, though, there was a commotion in one small corner of the horde—the first clash between orc and lizardman out in the marsh.

In these lands, the lizardman was king. Powerful in combat, they were capable of nimble, quick movements in the muddy, overgrown swamps they called home. That was how the battle began—a handful of fighters hiding in the tall grasses, sneaking up on a clutch of orcs.

Everything was going exactly as Gabil had hoped. His father, the former chief, and all those still loyal to him were shut up in a large underground chamber, and now he was back on the surface to reorganize his newly united troops, taking full advantage of the twisty access paths that crisscrossed over one another inside. The defensive forces were still in place—Gabil planned to wrap up the fight before they exhausted themselves.

He didn’t have an exact bead on the number of troops at the orcs’ disposal, but judging by the natural abilities of the two races, he figured there was nothing to worry about unless they were outnumbered ten to one or so. So what if they were throwing a ton of orc bodies at them? That didn’t change the core fundamentals of this matchup.

Plus, he had ordered his fighters to take a stick-and-move approach, dealing a blow or two and quickly falling back, just in case. Staying on their toes like that would let them regroup as often as necessary, readying themselves for the next strike.

Over time, it would cull the orc numbers drastically, dealing them a decisive blow. The orcs on the inside would lose contact with the outdoor forces, and with that, they’d be forced to retreat.

The lizardmen’s natural agility in these marshes made that strategy possible. Gabil was no talentless fool. He lacked his father’s ability to instantly gauge the entire theater of war in one glance, but the way he led his fighting men and women was worthy of praise. He had inherited a lot of talent from the former chief. Lizardmen were naturally attracted to the strong, the powerful—merely talking a big show wouldn’t be enough. Gabil’s men loved him, and the love proved that he was more than just bravado and mindless courage.

But would it be enough?

The final line of defense, the forces tasked with guarding the largest underground chamber, numbered a thousand strong. That room was now filled with nothing but women and children—noncombatants. The grown women could fight if it came to that, but there was no use relying on them. That was why a thousand fighters were defending them, spread out across the assorted hallways linked to this room.

Each defensive line planned to gradually fall back over time, grouping en masse around the site of the final stand. Everyone else—seven thousand goblins, around eight thousand battle-ready lizardmen—was under the direct control of Gabil. The new chief believed they could win in straight combat, without using whatever geographical advantages the labyrinth offered. Thus, only a skeletal defense team was left inside, every remaining available soldier sent off to the marshes.

The initial strike came as a complete surprise to the orcs, who found their battalions cut off from one another and heavily damaged. The stragglers who managed to flee the lizardmen were subsequently isolated, making them ripe for the picking by the gangs of goblins. For a bunch of freshly minted soldiers, they performed magnificently, following Gabil’s orders to the letter. As they should have. Their lives were riding on this, too.

It was hard to predict in advance, but the armies under Gabil were showing a remarkable amount of synergy. So far, so good.

Behold! Gabil thought. There was no need to fear this herd of pigs at all. My father’s age has clouded his mind. He fretted far too much about matters. Once he sees what I am capable of out here, I am sure he will recognize me as the new chief. We’d best clear the marsh of these pigs before long…

Gabil wanted this to be decisive. He wanted no room in his father’s mind for doubt about his son’s superior abilities. And even now, the cheering he heard in the distance seemed to indicate he was on the right track.

Look at that! These orcs could never hold a candle to us lizardmen!

He liked what he saw, as he surveyed the marshes before him. But this would be the end of his streak of luck. He had been expecting piles of dead orcs, and their foes’ morale subsequently crumbling. He was not aware of what made the orc lord a truly terrifying foe. His father did—and now, that single difference of opinion was making its presence known.

Splish, crunch, splish, crunch.

The orcs appeared to be advancing over the bodies of their kindred, on all fours, attempting to gain purchase over the muddy land. It was only when one grew closer that the truth became clear.

It was actually a banquet, a feast upon the dead, and it was enough to make an observer’s hair stand on end. Even the most seasoned fighters on the lizardman side felt sick to their stomachs viewing it.

An eerie aura began swirling around the orcs. One fighter, rearing back in horror at the scene, lost his footing. The orc soldiers immediately seized upon his body, dragging it through the mud, ripping all the limbs off. The first lizardman casualty of the battle, and the turning point for the entire war.

The orcish infantry gnawing on the bare flesh were transferring the lizardman’s abilities to the orc lord himself. It would not be a perfect duplicate like the ones Rimuru could engineer with his Predator skill, but it had one advantage: It could give the caster not only the consumed victim’s skills, but also their innate physical traits. Whatever the orc lord managed to absorb from the body, he could then feed back to the rest of his army.

This was known as the Food Chain, another ability unlocked by the Ravenous skill. It let the orcs function both as a horde, and as a single conscious entity. Ravenous did not work the way a well-trained direwolf pack did, but the effects it could have on an enemy could be just as devastating.

It was exactly why the lizardman chief feared, above everything else, losing any of his men in battle. Doing so meant losing any inherent advantage his species brought to the table. Even if the orcs couldn’t fully seize the skills of their foes, they could still gain some feature of the lizardmen—and it would instantly be gifted to every member of the horde. Perhaps they’d grow webbing around their feet, letting them more freely move through the mud. Or perhaps scales would spontaneously appear over the more vulnerable points on their bodies, boosting their defense. They were little changes, yes, but they would have dramatic effects on how the battle would turn out.

“Do not fear them!” Gabil shouted. “Show them the power we enjoy as the proud lizardman race!”

It was enough to inspire his men that little bit further. They knew they were fighting on familiar territory, and they were certain they had the mobility advantage. The orcs would be too bogged down to catch up with them. And even if they were outnumbered, a nimble attack on their flank would cut them off, just like before.

Or so they thought…

Matching the army’s movements step by step, the orcish army stayed in formation, following their foes unerringly. They were now perceptibly quicker than before.

Huh? The orcs are moving differently…?

But by the time Gabil noticed, it was already too late. With newfound speed, the orcs spread out to the left and right, enveloping the advancing lizardman force.

In perfect order, the twenty-thousand-strong force had completely sealed off the escape route Gabil’s men used to have. The new chief had pushed his men too far into the fray, placing too much confidence in their mobility and figuring they could easily get away if need be. But right now, Gabil’s force was pitted against the ten-thousand-strong splinter force that had attacked the ogres, plus another thirty thousand, the advance force from the main horde. Half that number were now behind the lizardmen.

It gave Gabil pause, but only for a moment. He decided to try breaking through the army in front of him. If things turned against him here, the lizardmen would be surrounded on all sides and annihilated—to say nothing of the much slower goblins. And while Gabil didn’t see the goblins as much more than cannon fodder, he wasn’t heartless enough to simply abandon the whole lot at once.

“After me, men!” he shouted as he began to run forward. “We’re breaking through the orc encirclement!”

If this was a typical orcish army, one not under the effects of Ravenous, Gabil’s desperation tactic might have had a chance. But now, that was only a hypothetical. The reality was much harsher.

In a moment’s time, the powerful attack the lizardmen launched at the orcs before them ended with a whimper. And at that moment, the lizardman army—and by extension, Gabil himself—doomed themselves to defeat.

The encirclement was almost fully complete now, and more orcs from the main horde were flowing in. There was no refuge from the enemy, in any direction. They were like a bug surrounded by a boundless number of army ants. As much as they wanted to resist, they were doomed to fall sooner or later.

Gabil was not incompetent. In an instant, he recognized the dilemma his army faced. But as for why it had happened—that was beyond his intellectual skills. He knew they had been the overwhelming favorite, and all of a sudden, their attacks were having next to no effect. It was unthinkable to him.

Yet, he pressed on, trying everything his army was still capable of doing. He called for his troops, attempting to rally them back into position. The goblins were almost hysterical, and their panic was beginning to affect the lizardmen as well. He had to prevent that, no matter what, because once panic took over, the entire chain of command would fall apart. Then came defeat, and then annihilation.

He considered a retreat, but only for a moment. He knew there was no escape route left. Even if they could punch their way through this encirclement, there was no place to escape to anymore.

Once he had wrested control from his father, he had ensured that all the troops under his command had exited the caverns safely—but the caverns were too tight to let them all back in. It would be a stampede if he gave the order, the entrances quickly becoming choked with crushed and mangled goblin bodies, and they would be left waiting for death at the orcs’ hands.

Assuming they could even reach the caverns now. There was always the forest to flee to, but with the orcs suddenly quicker on their feet than before, all the forest offered was a future where they’d be chased down and picked off.

So no retreat. Gabil could understand that much. And now, finally, he understood why his father had taken such a conservative approach. He knew how impossibly stupid he had been.

But it was too late for regrets. What could he do right now? Not much. Nothing, in fact, apart from rallying his forces and doing whatever he could to calm their anxieties.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha!” he shouted gleefully. “Don’t you start panicking on me, boys! I’m right here with all of you! We could never lose to these pigs!”

By now, he was having trouble believing it, but he had to say it anyway. His troops needed inspiration, even as their fates were quickly catching up with them.

Haah…

The chief, too, was full of regret—regret that he couldn’t convince Gabil that the orc lord was a real threat and not some fairy-tale bogeyman. Now he realized that his son needed things explained in more concrete, visceral terms. He didn’t place enough importance on that, and now he hated himself for it.

This is all my fault , he thought. If he had a more accurate idea of what the orc lord could do, perhaps Gabil would have been a bit more careful. But that didn’t matter anymore. The chief sighed as he quelled the thought from his mind.

He still had things to do. His brethren were still in that large underground chamber, anxiety all over their faces.

In that chamber, there were four wide routes to the marshlands, along with one escape route behind them. That route connected directly to a hilltop near the foot of the mountains. It would be the long way to the forest, but it was safely away from the marshes themselves—and the corridor was a straight shot, ensuring that women and children could evacuate through it without getting lost.

Which meant that the four pathways at the front of the chamber were the main worry right now. The forces that had been launching attacks at the interior orcs had slowly, but surely, retreated back through them all. The final line of defense deployed in each one numbered around fifteen hundred at this point; not all the platoons had made it fully inside yet.

The orc numbers were high. With so many, they would discover this location soon enough. Before they did, the chief at least wanted the entire force back there, if he could.

He shot a glance back at the escape route. This was a large chamber, but it was now crowded with so many lizardmen that the space felt cramped. If the orcs swarmed in here without warning, he doubted they could all flee in time. They had best start evacuating now, while things could still be kept orderly. It would take just a single spark, a moment of panic, to plunge this room into chaos.

But what if they did all make into the forest? Would the orcs simply find and massacre them over there? It seemed plausible. And even without the orcs, the forest presented an unclear future for everyone.

For now, they needed more time. Time to wait for reinforcements, despite the chief having no idea if they were coming or not.

But the chief didn’t get to enjoy the dream for long. The sounds of battle began echoing from a corridor, accompanied by the smell of blood mixed with sweat and metal.

They’re here…

Anxiety pervaded the chamber. The chief sprang into action, bringing the women and children to the rear of the chamber and positioning those who could fight up front, just in case the orcs had broken the blockade. The fighters formed an arc ahead of them, readying their spears far earlier than they expected.

All four corridors in front should have been fully blocked off. The lizardmen were instructed to pick off the orcs as they appeared, giving them no quarter regardless of how much weaker they were. The hallways were narrow enough that only a few orcs could engage at once, a welcome advantage. In a one-on-one fight, a lizardman could make quick work of any orcish soldier—and this formation, the chief thought, offered them at least a few advantages.

Things worked as the chief thought they would, at first. The orcs were stronger than normal, it was true, but the lizardmen were handling them well enough.

The forces assigned to each of the four corridors devoted themselves to staving off the hordes. They took turns at the front lines, ensuring they were careful with their work, but not even they could last forever. The corpses piled up near the exits, but the orcs simply consumed them and kept pushing forward. It was such a horrid sight that even the hardiest of the lizardmen couldn’t deny the fear it began to strike in their hearts.

Then, the decisive moment came. A yellowish aura covered the orcs.

What on…? the chief thought, just as an even greater nightmare attacked him. The orcs used to be a level below the lizardmen in strength. Now, it was disturbingly even. The difference wasn’t dramatic, but it was more than enough to destroy the equilibrium from before. Quickly and efficiently, it removed any advantage the lizardmen enjoyed up to now.

Observing the battle, the chief realized they’d be lucky to last the day like this. The reinforcements would come after three days, if they came at all. It was untenable, and already they were losing good lizardmen at the defense lines.

They had to get the women and children out. It beat waiting for their doom in there.

“Listen to me! I will have to ask you all a favor. It is a grim one, but it must be carried out, or else the history of our people ends right now, on this very day. We must survive. And I will provide you the time to do it!”

Escape was pointless. It would just extend the misery they all experienced before their ultimate deaths. He knew that…but there was still one final dream he could hope for.

“You must get out of here, now, and place your trust upon the monster known as Rimuru! Now, go! Go, all of you!”

“Heh-heh-heh-heh! The path is blocked, my friend!”

A group of orcs walked out from the escape route, firmly crushing the chief’s final hope. They were orc knights, clad in full-plate armor—and as they entered the light, screams began emanating from one of the four outer corridors.

Appearing behind the shouts of pain was a hideous-looking orc, his body covered in jet-black armor that was spattered with blood from head to toe. This most unusual orc was a bizarre sight, the fires of insanity burning in his eyes.

Is that…the orc lord?!

The chief was stunned as he beheld the figure, far larger than even the orc knights. But if anything, the truth was even worse.

“You will all serve as an offering to our mighty orc lord,” the orc in black intoned. “We will not let a single one of you escape.”

Now the chief knew who he was. He was not even the orc lord, just another one of his servants—and yet, all this power he wielded. He was an orc general, and now he was here, a heavy long-handled halberd in his hand. The mere sight of him called to mind a boundless hellscape of despair.

This is it , the chief thought, his heart crushed. But I won’t…I won’t go down that easily…!

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! You will be a worthy adversary for me, orc general. I gladly accept the challenge!”

The chief knew this was the end for himself, calmly readying his spear as he approached the general. He would be the last chief of the lizardmen, the one who led them to their final fates, and he intended to do so with pride…

The chief guard of the lizardmen ran through the forest, the orders still fresh in her mind. Her exact destination, though, wasn’t clear. As much as she honed her senses, searching for a trace of the aura that belonged to the envoy known as Soei, she could find nothing. So instead she ran, trusting in her instincts.

Lizardmen were nimble creatures in the marshes, but less so on dry land. Her breathing was ragged, her heart felt like it would explode, and she could feel herself growing more fatigued by the second. But she never stopped running. She had a bare minimum of duty for the monster who offered them an alliance, and she intended to fulfill it.

It had been around three hours since she began running. It had been a constant run ever since she slipped out of her bonds, and while her mind was still strong, a single moment’s distraction and she was likely to fall on the spot.

She knew the truth well enough. There was no guarantee that the monster Soei was anywhere ahead of here. If he was, there was no guarantee he would lift a finger to help. The thought was starting to occur to her—maybe she should just keep running? For good? Away from home?

No! How could I betray my people? My own father?

She tried to banish the thought, focusing on other matters.

As far as she was concerned, the charge engineered by her brother Gabil was something she should have stopped. She knew that, above everything else, what her brother wanted was their father’s approval. But she could never bring herself to tell the chief. She respected Gabil too much—as her brother, and as a lizardman warrior—and she thought he would become a splendid chief in time without her butting in on his affairs.

And now look at what that earned them.

Perhaps this was just the result of a hundred happenstances coinciding at once, knocking everything out of whack. But she couldn’t help but think it. If only she talked things over with him more, as a sister, maybe they could’ve avoided all of this. And if that was the case, she had a responsibility to uphold.

No, she couldn’t abandon her homeland. If she stopped running now, she’d never run again. So she kept at it.

Someone was watching her. Someone that she, running with all her might, could never have noticed. He was nimbly leaping from tree branch to tree branch, following her every move without a sound.

Now he smirked to himself, a bit of drool falling from one edge of his lips. He was waiting for the moment. The instant when her exhaustion took her, and she could no longer move…

And when it did, he soundlessly descended in front of the chief guard.

His arms were long, like a gorilla’s, his legs those of a carnivorous animal. His head and torso, however, unmistakably identified him as a member of the horrifying orcish race.

“Geh-heh-heh… You appear tired. Your muscles must be so well-toned, so delicious.”

Pain filled the chief guard’s eyes as she looked at the monster. He was a high-level orc, no doubt about it. And he had more with him, a few dozen behind his back. Survival was not in the cards for her.

“You…”

“Geh-heh… Bah-ha-ha-haaaaa! I am one of the generals of the orcish army. Consider it an honor to take up residence in my stomach!”

“An…an orc general?!”

The chief guard readied the spear on her back. But it was clear to everyone involved how this fight would go. She was already slowed by her fatigue, totally bereft of the strength she would need to defeat the orc general and his men.

She knew it was hopeless. But she was ready to fight anyway. Her pride dictated it.

“Oooooh yeah! Now this is getting good!”

The mysterious man did a little dance where he stood, his cheerful voice booming. His eerie-looking mask and clothing were like nothing else on this planet.

Laplace, the man who had exchanged a few words with Gabil earlier, was playing with three crystal balls, as if teaching himself how to juggle. Each one was about the size of a person’s head, and images were visible inside them all. A keen-eyed observer would be able to see that each one depicted a scene from a battlefield.

All three were valuable magical items by nature, capable of seeing through the eyes of any person of one’s choice and projecting their field of vision into the crystal. Only one person could be followed with each ball, and that person had to physically touch the orb to make the connection work, so Laplace could only track three at once. But that was more than enough for his needs.

He had connected the crystals to three of the orc generals he found easiest to control, and now he was using them to steal glances of the current battle. It wasn’t something he took a prurient pleasure in. It was his job, part of the duties his client placed upon him. But Laplace was still taking full advantage, apparently having a blast as he peered into each orb in succession.

The war was unfolding just as he wanted it to—just as he had been enlisted to make happen. “Nice! That oughta please the boss,” he said to nobody in particular.

But something was different this time. He actually got a response.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“What’re…?!”

A woman appeared before the confused Laplace, a fleeting beauty to her form. Her green hair was as tangled as a wall of ivy, loosely covering her entire body, and its translucence made the contours of her frame visible.

“I am Treyni, one of the dryad wardens of the forest, and I have no intention of letting the monster tribes do as they please here. Thus, I’m afraid I must remove you.”

The moment she completed her declaration, she began casting a spell. This unnerved Laplace.

“Whoa! W-wait a second! I ain’t in no monster tribe!”

“Silence. The disturbance you have caused to the forest already makes your crime clear.”

The magic began to take effect.

“Wait! Wait-wait-wait! What’s that spell…?!”

“Come to me, spiritual summon Sylphide. And with you, I summon the extra skill Unify!!”

The dryad constructed a shell of magicules over her own spiritual body. It was similar to Rimuru’s Replication—although she did not, strictly speaking, have any physical form at all, apart from the holy tree that housed her soul. Those properties allowed her to unify her spirit with others like her.

“Unified” with the high-level Sylphide, Treyni now had the ability to wield the full powers of that spirit. And what she unleashed next was one of Sylphide’s most powerful magics.

“Your judgment is here. May you pray for your ultimate forgiveness. Aerial Blade!!”

The spiritual Unification meant Treyni no longer had need for long casting times. In an instant, Laplace was locked inside a gap in the air itself—one occupied solely by great blades of air that rent everything they slashed through. There was no escape once imprisoned.

It was a fearsome move, and Laplace, if anything, weathered it well. His own intrinsic Anti-Magic skills let him escape mortal injury. All it managed to take from him was a single arm—and with a puff of smoke, the arm went into so-called Stealth Mode. This was an original skill, exclusive to Laplace, that combined illusory magic like Deception, Infiltration, and Concealment, and he was so deft at casting it that it even let him deceive the spiritual senses of a dryad.

“Yikes. Prone to violence much, lady? You coulda let me at least get a word in edgewise… Well, my work’s done here anyway, so I think I’ll get while the gettin’s good. See you around!”

He had apparently set up several potential escape routes for himself in advance. When the smoke cleared, Laplace was gone.

“…I cannot believe he escaped my grasp,” Treyni whispered. “But…not from a monster tribe? Then who are those people…?”

No one was there to answer. Treyni filed the question away for later, instead turning her eyes toward the battlefield. Running her mind through the roots of the plants that surrounded her, she used her dryad skills to swim in an ocean of information.

“Things do not appear to be going well… I wonder how much I should really be trusting him.”

The whisper disappeared into the wind, just like the one before it. Traces of concern began to manifest themselves upon her face.



She should have been the one taking care of the orc lord. But she could sense someone maneuvering behind him. Until she could grasp who, she couldn’t make any rash moves. And while it might not be likely, if the orc lord managed to absorb her as well, it could spell the creation of a new demon lord and make it impossible for her own sisters to handle him. That prevented her from doing too much in public.

It also prevented her from going very hard on the magic-born Laplace, giving him the chance to escape. That hurt her. The lizardmen were being consumed by the orcs out there, and she couldn’t do anything about it.

But Treyni was still focused on her own role as a warden of the forest, and what that meant to her.

Gabil continued flailing away in his desperate battle. Things were getting more and more one-sided.

The orcs seemed to know no fatigue, attacking them without pause or end. The federated goblin-lizardman forces, unable to escape from their encirclement, found themselves picked off one by one. And even if Gabil tried to break through, how many of his men—wounded and in a state of total exhaustion—would follow him?

It seemed clear that now was the time to abandon the slower goblins for good. There was no room for retreat, but by this point, Gabil had to think about guaranteeing himself as many survivors as possible. Warfare, in general, stopped once it became clear who the victor was—but these orcs seemed intent on completely wiping Gabil and his force off this plane of reality. There would be no terms offered; just murder, and then the feast.

The orcs saw them as nothing but prey, and it triggered a primal sort of fear. The formation began to fall apart at the seams, the weaker-minded ones succumbing to terror like frogs being eyed by a snake. The goblins were already a lost cause, running around like mad in search of any solace, and the orcs weren’t having any of it. They chased them down, killed them, and consumed them. Not even three thousand functioned as a fighting force any longer—and to the lizardmen, a good fifth of which had fallen, the news was no less grim.

It was already becoming difficult to lead them as a cohesive army. But Gabil kept pressing his teams forward, prodding the orc lines for any possible route of escape. His tactics were impeccable, his abilities being used to their fullest.

Then a group of those orc soldiers in the black armor began to move. A well-ordered team, unlike the common rabble, and each one protected from head to toe by metal. They might have been as physically strong as any other orc, but they functioned as a trained army, and their equipment was a massive upgrade.

The orc leading them bore an aura that overwhelmed all the others, proving how much stronger he was than the rest. An orc general, as powerful as an entire tactical squadron all by himself. And he—just one of five among the horde—had two thousand stout orc knights following him. His rank was A-minus, and he answered directly to the orc lord himself, the leader’s most trusted of officers.

It’s over…

In Gabil’s eyes, the demonstration of power was decisive.

No escape, either. Best prepare to die in battle, then…

If he wanted anything right now, it was to die like a warrior, at least.

“Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So it’s the leader of these cowardly pigs! Do you have the courage to duel me?!”

He could never win. Gabil’s scale mail was already in tatters, the fatigue building across his body. His foe’s armor was a work of art, enhanced with magical protection, and the aura he exuded told of his strength.

If he accepted this invitation, at least Gabil would enjoy a glorious end on the battlefield. Perhaps he could take a general with him, if things went well enough.

“Guh-huh-huh… Very well. Let me take you.”

Striking down the enemy leader, crushing the last true support his lizardman fighters had to rely on, would make the massacre that much easier to carry out. That was the orc general’s thought, and Gabil was aware enough of that. He also knew that struggling any more than this would only lengthen the agony. Any thought of the reinforcements the chief apparently counted on was gone from his mind.

He had already selected this patch of land as the last one he would ever stand upon.

“I thank you.”

Then all was solemn as they began their duel.

Holding his magical Vortex Spear, Gabil sized up his foe, searching for any weakness.

“Come on!” the orc general howled.

“Bring it! Vortex Torrent!”

With all his remaining force, Gabil released the most powerful attack he could—a killer move, combining his latent lance skills with the magic his current weapon provided.

But…

“Chaos Eater!!”

The orc general spun his own spear in the opposite direction, canceling out the force of Gabil’s vortex. It began whirling faster and faster, unleashing its own aura that took on a sickly yellow color before descending upon the lizardman.

Is he trying to eat me?!

He rolled to the side, relying on instinct, but the aura continued to close the distance.

“Geh-heh-heh! Just another reptile,” the general laughed. “Your kind deserves to slither along the ground!”

Gabil refused to give up. At least one strike; that was all he wanted. He grabbed a clod of earth, throwing it at the orc general—as childish as it must have looked, he had to deliver at least one clean blow. The attack disappeared futilely within the yellow aura, showing exactly how outclassed he was.

Gabil was too occupied with dodging the aura to focus on any other strikes.

The orc general thrusted his spear at him, a twisted smile on his face…

“Whoa! Better not get distracted, there!”

A familiar voice reached Gabil’s ears. At the same time, he felt himself being launched backward, just barely avoiding the hilt of the orc general’s spear.

Wh-what happened?! the confused Gabil thought. Then came a roar that deafened the battlefield, like the heavens had fallen upon it. Gabil thought it was another orc trick at first, before realizing it wasn’t. Even the orcs, with their insurmountable advantage, were visibly panicking.

The tides were changing anew, and violently so.

