

CHAPTER 1

THE NAME OF A NATION

Recalling the report from his covert informant, Gazel Dwargo, king of the dwarves, pondered the information. He had asked this spy to observe a certain slime he was concerned about, but the briefing he received seemed far too preposterous to believe.

The monsters are building a full-scale city.

The dossier handed to King Gazel began with that sentence. The rest of it only confused him further. He thought it was some kind of joke at first, but his team was not one to play pranks on him. This spy was giving him the clear, unvarnished truth, and so he remained calm and ran his eyes across the rest of the report.

It read as follows:

Orc hordes have begun to rampage.

Number: approximately two hundred thousand.

The ogres, a prominent race in the forest, are reportedly eradicated.

The lizardmen are galvanizing their military installations to prepare for war.

Existence of an orc lord confirmed. Danger level: estimated at A.

A major confrontation in the Forest of Jura is unavoidable.

—Overall danger level: Special A (estimated).

All this was accurate as of their delivery the other day—the results of his covert team’s investigations, relayed to the king by magical means. This team, sent to keep an eye on the mysterious slime, had discovered a gathering of monsters constructing a town. As they kept surveilling them, the team discovered other unusual events around the forest. With Gazel’s permission, more men were added to the covert team to more effectively perform operations across the forest…and this was the result.

The birth of an orc lord couldn’t be ignored. King Gazel immediately declared a state of emergency. Not because of this uber-orc alone—depending on how the battle in the forest worked out, the Dwarven Kingdom could very easily be exposed to hostilities before long. If an army of orcs numbering in the six figures knocked on their door, the very fate of the kingdom would be at risk. The king’s spies reported that the orcs were advancing away from the Dwarven Kingdom, but that was little comfort.

So by royal decree, he summoned the Pegasus Knights—a group of stout fighters, armed with the best weapons their artisans could forge, each mounted upon their own winged steed. Together, each knight worked as one with their ride in the skies, making them easily A-ranked opponents. They numbered five hundred in all, and within the Armed Nation of Dwargon, they were praised as the strongest corps of knights.

If worse came to worst, these Pegasus Knights could buy the kingdom time for the general infantry to prepare for battle. It was a last resort, one that pained King Gazel to opt for, but even an Armed Nation required time to fully mobilize itself.

Soon, Dwargon had transitioned into a wartime economy, quietly preparing itself for conflict. The air was tense around the kingdom as King Gazel awaited further reports. When it finally came, it told him this:

—The war is over, thanks to the intervention of several high-level magic-born.

Our surveillance efforts were discovered and interfered with, so details remain unknown.

The magic-born are believed to be under the rule of the slime from before—

Addendum: In order to carry out our mission fully prepared, we hereby request that our equipment be replaced with the highest level available.

King Gazel used a nearby candle to burn the sheets.

“What do your spies tell us, Your Majesty?” his knight captain asked as he took a moment to ponder this, eyes closed.

“…We seem to be out of danger. The war has ended.”

“It has?!”

The captain couldn’t hide his surprise, and the Pegasus Knights behind him were already murmuring among themselves.

“—Wait. I am not fully ready to believe this yet.”

The knights fell silent, straightening up at the king’s words.

His covert team reported that one of the magic-born had rooted out their surveillance network. The fact that a team so gifted in the art of camouflage would be discovered was hard to swallow, but they had apparently managed to dodge their pursuers.

However, the spy leader, judging any further approach to be too dangerous, had sent a request for access to all levels of equipment, reflecting the added level of danger to their work.

They were right. Gazel needed more details. Another investigation would be in order once the postwar chaos had settled down.

“I will have further orders later. For now, I want the Pegasus Knights to stand by and remain in a battle-ready state. For the rest of the forces, I will lower the alert level to a state of elevated battle preparedness. We must prepare for every contingency.”

“““Yes, my lord!”””

The news that all was calm in the forest was good, but now was no time to breathe a sigh of relief. Thus, King Gazel decided to accept his covert team’s request and enlist them to conduct a more detailed investigation of the area.

Three months passed.

The leaders of the kingdom were assembled in the king’s receiving room, waiting for word from him. Whatever he had to say would mark the final conclusion to the past several days’ worth of debates and discussions, conducted with barely even a break for sleep.

For the moment, at least, any damage caused by the sudden onrush of monster activity in the forest was surprisingly light. Things were stable around its boundaries, giving no clue that any war had taken place at all. There were a few more monsters around than in the days of Veldora, perhaps, but no more than what would be considered a “busy” year for Jura. Dwargon was expecting at least twice as much damage as this.

The slime, they all believed, was more than tangentially related. As was the massive orc army that dominated, then disappeared. And the presence of high-level magic-born of mysterious origins who were powerful—and observant—enough to realize the kingdom was watching them.

And now, according to reports, this horde of two hundred thousand were dispersing across the forest—peacefully. That, and they had evolved into high orcs—a state of affairs completely beyond King Gazel’s comprehension.

This town the slime was building featured a largely hobgoblin population, all born from regular goblins, and Gazel knew the mysterious ball of jelly had to be involved in this sudden rash of evolution.

I cannot ignore this, he thought as he reread the report. Special A is one thing, but this could easily be classified as an S before long—

In other words, yet another danger that struck at the core of Dwargon. As king, he could not simply sit here and wait for things to happen.

Levels of danger were assigned based on the level of damage that could result from them, as follows:

Special  S:

Also known as catastrophe level. This could be applied to some demon lords, as well as dragons and their kin, and reflected the kind of threat that no single nation could handle. It would require international cooperation to give the human race even a chance at survival.

S:

Also known as disaster level. Normally applied to demon lords. Small nations would have no chance against such a threat, and a larger one would need to expend all its resources to handle it.

Special A:

Also known as calamity level. A threat that could topple a nation’s government, caused by the maneuvering of high-level magic-born and demons.

A:

Also known as hazard level. A threat that could potentially cause widespread damage to a single town or region.

These were simply general guidelines, of course, but they had been widely adopted as a handy way to quickly reference the strength of a given monster. And Gazel’s covert team had already applied a Special A rating to this group.

An orc lord by itself was an easy A—nothing to sniff at, but also nothing a team of Pegasus Knights couldn’t feasibly handle. But if a massive crowd of armored, frenzied orcs stampeded into a city, the casualties would be unimaginable. A smaller kingdom would be swallowed whole.

There was no saying if, or when, the potential threat’s attention might shift focus to Dwargon. It wasn’t a problem that could be solved merely by hoping for good fortune. Along those lines, Special A sounded about right to the king.

But in a way, this wasn’t even the issue. The real concern was this person, or presence, that stopped such an overwhelming threat. One who had several powerful magic-borns at his beck and call—creatures powerful enough to see through the king’s A-level spies and their concealment magic—and enact some mysterious evolution process on all his subjects. The conclusion of the staff assembled in the king’s chamber was that the true nature of this presence needed to be uncovered, and quickly.

If we make an error in handling this, it might spell the end of the kingdom.

Thus, he concluded that he needed to gauge matters with his own eyes.

The chamber was shrouded in silence. Everyone inside swallowed nervously, waiting for the king’s speech. Gazel looked down upon their impassioned faces for a moment, then solemnly began.

“I feel that I must meet their leader.”

The declaration visibly shook the others in the room. But no one spoke up. The king’s word was final, and they knew there would be no defying it. Instead, responses sprang up from four people among them.

“Allow me to join you, then, my lord.”

“—And I, as well. I could hardly allow you to shoulder the burden alone.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee! Perhaps a little outing once in a while would be nice, yes.”

“In that case…allow the Pegasus Knights to personally guarantee your safety.”

They were, in order: Henrietta, fetching knight assassin and leader of Gazel’s covert team; Vaughn, admiral paladin and the nation’s top military officer; Jaine, arch-wizard and a crafty old woman; and Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights and an officer who reported directly to the king. Together, they led the strongest of Dwargon’s military forces, and it would be the first time that all four would leave the kingdom together since Gazel’s crowning as Heroic King.

“Very well. Then allow me to see this through…personally.”

Upon their king’s words, everyone in the room sprang into action.

Which way would the pendulum swing on this? Gazel wanted to avoid making needless enemies, but if their intentions were evil in his mind, then this was one noxious weed that needed to be plucked out sooner than later. Such were his thoughts—and either way, this potential root of evil could no longer be left unaddressed.

His decision made, the king began to take action.

I have to say, this town was really starting to look nice. A lot nicer than I had thought it’d be.

Thanks to planning the city out from scratch, the buildings had all been arranged in very neat order. Nice to see my efforts didn’t go to waste. Though all I really did was yell at people to do my bidding.

The homes were in such orderly rows, like pieces on a checkerboard, that things could get a bit tricky if you lost your bearings—but that didn’t really matter, I felt.

My main concerns were things like toilets, water supplies, pest prevention, and bath equipment. I know what the standards were like in Japan, and I had no reason to lower my expectations over here. I knew the levels of civilization I was working with, among all the monster races, and I had every right to ignore their standards. So I planned things out the way I wanted, from the start.

This was about where I pictured things would be, once we had water and sewers worked out—but really, it was even more perfect than I was planning for.

Just look at the toilets, for one. At first, I had a toilet stall carved out of wood—which didn’t work at all, so I had it changed out.

A wooden toilet, unlike the squat toilets you see across Asia, made cleaning a nightmare. Splatter them with waste, and you’re never getting that smell off, trust me. Let the cleaning slide a bit, and they’d start to rot. You shouldn’t let the cleaning “slide” in the bathroom, of course, but either way, going with pure wood presented too many longevity issues to be acceptable. Steel or metal were ruled out—we had far too few resources for that, and expending them on such luxuries was bound to be frowned upon.

So I decided to go with a toilet made out of something close to the porcelain I recalled in my memory. Good ol’ Thought Communication helped a lot with this. I was able to use it on anyone I liked, which made getting my point across child’s play. Concepts too difficult to impart with words or pictures could be “imagined” in my mind and transmitted without any discrepancies creeping in.

The rest, I left up to our dwarven artisans. Porcelain did exist in this world, and a number of daily necessities were even made from it, so the seat itself wasn’t hard to make. We just had to select the right kind of soil from the local area, then cook it up to high temperatures with the furnace I prepared. It was a trial-and-error process for them, but once they hit on the right formula, the rest was easy. In a flash, they recreated the exact sort of sit-down toilets I recalled from Earth. Combine that with the wooden seats we had already made, and we were all set.

So with that, every home now had a working toilet and drainage system. It never failed to amaze me how handy these dwarves were. But that was only the first surprise.

For example, running water. I had projected into their minds the image of turning a knob to make water run out of a faucet, but I had all but given up on them managing to implement that. They spoke of devices that used highly refined magical stones to collect water from the atmosphere, but they were both expensive and bulky. Procuring such stones was an avenue that only the filthy rich could afford anyway.

By the way, not even the dwarves had ever seen a flush toilet in action. The idea of using magic stones and other high-end equipment for something like that must’ve seemed silly to them. Outhouse-style numbers were the norm around Dwargon, and even that was considered the peak of bathroom technology by this world’s cultural standards.

Still, the concept of a clean-water transport system was clear enough to them, even when imparted through the eyes of a “foreigner” like me. So they began development on it—without telling me. They never asked for budget approval, so I was caught totally unaware.

Thinking about it, building a new water and sewer system from scratch would’ve required a ton of cash. We couldn’t just snap our fingers and put one in because it seemed useful or whatever. I was expecting a gradual implementation, perhaps over several decades. But my common sense didn’t apply to this town. We started with bare land, after all, and I was the leader. I could develop this city any way I wanted to. We had already laid out the design for the water system; pooling the dwarves’ knowledge together to install pipes and such was a cinch after that.

But it wasn’t flawless. Providing a constant water pressure, like in my world, was a thornier issue. So we took advantage of gravity instead, like the rooftop water towers you see on high-rises. We had no pressurized pumps, so these rooftop tanks would need to be refilled with water manually. This, thankfully, wasn’t much of a problem for a monster. If you had a Stomach like mine, or Spatial Storage like some others, then transport was never going to be a problem.

Still, these newfangled structures were restricted only to the buildings we had in the center of town. Your average home-owning monster family would still need to trek over to the well for water. We did have smaller-size tanks positioned by each home’s toilet and water-driven facilities, though—fill those up and you were all set. A specialist had to stop by once a week or so to purify the tanks in each home, but by and large, things worked as I pictured them.

I had to hand it to Kaijin and Mildo. I thought they were just a bunch of anvil-hammering blockheads at first. Guess you never know until you ask. Our water system was going to be a long-term headache, I once thought, but it wound up being addressed in record time.

After that, we needed to get the monsters in the habits of keeping areas around water clean, as well as handwashing and gargling. I had no idea if germs could survive long on monsters; I might have been wasting our time with that. But it was a just-in-case kind of thing.

Kaijin told me that most adventurers either quickly required someone who knew the Clean Wash skill (allowing them to purify items or people near them) or learned it themselves. Hygiene was a top priority among them, to the point that failing at it made embarking on a quest impossible. Long journeys mean running into some filth now and then, I suppose, and around here they tackled that with magic. I can’t imagine it had more than a placebo effect, though. Even the goblins were aware of Clean Wash, so I figured it was safe to assume monsters could catch illnesses here.

So there you have it. We had realized my dreams of flush toilets, and as long as your home reserve tank was full, you could turn a knob and get water from the faucet. We were truly a city of culture, as much of an ill match it may’ve been with the rest of the world.

The next issue to tackle was bugs.

We were in a forest, and there were loads of them. They needed to be addressed, or else all the stinging alone would be incredibly painful. It didn’t bother me, but the hobgoblins seemed pretty distressed.

A bigger concern was insects as potential disease carriers. No matter how hygienic we were, it wouldn’t matter if some mystery virus was literally flitting around in our midst. Keeping things clean naturally kept insects at bay, but there wasn’t much we could do for our winged visitors from the forest.

So we had an issue to address, and my first idea for it was window screens. The homes in this town were Japanese-style wooden affairs made from natural materials, and we needed a way to keep bugs from getting in through the gaps.

We used some processed spider silk to create screens. The result not only kept insects at bay—the silk even provided a bit of an anti-theft system, repelling low-level monsters entirely. An unexpected, but welcome, side effect.

Word was that human-built towns used a magical barrier or the like to keep insects out—one per town. Building one for each home would be financially unfeasible, and homeowners wouldn’t have the funds to keep them in service anyway. Along those lines, having an anti–home invasion system in every single house in town certainly wasn’t the way of doing things on this world. But hey, I didn’t care.

Finally, we needed to bathe—an integral part of civilization.

For our own house, in the center of town, we had a bath with water piped in from a faraway volcanic hot spring that I could use at any time. Soei and I used Shadow Motion to install the necessary plumbing—Shadow Motion retained the original temperature of whatever it transported, so I was always guaranteed perfectly heated water, fresh from the spring.

I had left the design of the bath itself to the dwarves, and they had come up with a wonderful marble piece. The entire facility could hold ten or so people, and really, it couldn’t have been more luxuriant and comfortable. More than satisfactory work, I figured, for someone like me, working hard as the big boss around here. The bath was divided into male and female sections, allowing one to use it anytime without worrying about other people—another plus. Some of the monsters were apparently ignorant of that, but that’s what they get for not using their brains a little.

So I had the ideal bath at our own headquarters, but that didn’t solve the bigger problem. It’d be easy to install baths in each of our residential homes, but providing warm water to them via pipes was a bridge too far for us. Even if we wanted to branch out the plumbing from the hot spring, the Shadow Motion trickery involved would be too convoluted to be practical. We’d be building more homes going forward, no doubt, and it just wasn’t realistic for Soei and me to be doing home bath installations for them all. (It also went without saying that, deep down, it sounded like a supreme pain in the ass.)

If the act of bathing grew more popular and people began to demand warm water in their own homes, I suppose they could learn Shadow Motion for themselves. Let it be their problem, not mine.

So I had given up on that idea, but I had to admit, it would make winters pretty tough. I had to think of a way to provide some kind of hot water.

Part of my motivation for this stemmed from the fuel problems we were facing. The goblins hadn’t had much opportunity to harness fire before in their lives. If they used it for anything, it was for roasting meat. Now, with all those high orcs joining our ranks, it was becoming vital.

For now we had an ample enough supply of cast-off wood and such to work with, but it wouldn’t last forever. Chopping down trees in the forest and cutting the trunks into firewood would take a massive amount of labor. We just didn’t have the time to think about securing a more stable fuel source, and applying any kind of practical plan would require more investigation. In the meantime, though, I couldn’t just let people burn whatever they wanted.

Just when I thought it was time to do something, Dold, the middle of the three dwarven brothers, stepped up. He had been devoting himself to crafting dyes and accessories, but once most of the town was equipped well enough, he had some free time on his hands. So I asked him to make some tools using the inscription magic he was adept at.

These were generally known as magitools, and unlike most magic items and their high prices, these were made for general use. These magitools ran on magic stones, which were extracted and processed from the magic crystals taken from the cores of monsters. Magic stones were mostly created by humans, who used spirit engineering to produce them; they also existed in nature—but were quite rare.

A pure enough magic crystal was, according to Dold, much more effective raw material for crafting a magitool than run-of-the-mill magic stones, but any monster who could offer that level of purity would have to be A rank or so.

As he put it, there just weren’t many avenues for obtaining magic stones in the first place. Their production required a large-scale workshop, and only one of those had ever been built, at the central Free Guild headquarters. Guild branches would take the magic crystals harvested on rare occasions from monsters and send them to the home office—which, in turn, provided support payments in exchange. That kind of system. Which meant adventurers fought monsters for commercial reasons, too, not just to prevent harm to others.

This was the way the dwarves put it to me, and it sounded pretty darn efficient, really. I tried cutting to the chase.

“So you don’t think we could build a workshop like that here?”

“Ooh, no, no, boss, that’s just asking too much…”

So much for that. We’d have to purchase magic stones with cold, hard cash, then?

Understood. It would not be a problem to directly harness the energy from a monster’s core. Through the use of certain revisions in carving methods—

The Great Sage suggested a pretty startling idea out of the blue.

It wasn’t a problem? Huh. I was pretty dubious, but I told Dold about it anyway. So just as doubtful himself, he began crafting a tool.

“So just change the carving right here?”

“Yeah. Apparently, that’s all.”

“‘Apparently,’ boss…?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Don’t worry. It’ll be fine!”

I tried to laugh off Dold’s concerns as he created a showerhead and applied a carving to its handle. Grasping it triggered a magic response that would warm the water flowing through it. It’d use magic from the user’s body, but no more energy than would be used for other household spells. With just a little magic, anyone could use it, and that went double for monsters.

It was a groundbreaking magitool, and with a little effort, you could also modify it to draw a hot bath whenever you wanted. With the right temperature-adjustment carving on the tub, you’d just fill it with water, apply magic for a bit, and wham, it would be heated to a lovely temperature.

Ironically, it was the creator himself who was the most shocked at this.

“Whoa, is this for real? I know I’m not one to speak, but this little method was all you needed? I mean, equipment like this installed in every home? I don’t think you’ll find another town like that, boss…”

Plainly, though, this invention had stimulated Dold’s creativity. He was curious about what else he could research—and along the way, we could create an environment that used a limitless supply of magicules to ensure we never ran out of fuel. Only a monster town could pull that off, and soon, we’d have a litany of magic stone–free magitools at the ready. I’m sure he’ll develop a ton of other useful things for us soon.

So basically, all of my biggest hang-ups were already taken care of.

Our homes for everyone had been completed. And that, of course, meant we now had to focus on the residents’ own issues.

Compared to before their evolutions, the monsters’ reproductive rates had shrunk down to around the same as human families. You could expect five to ten offspring per live birth before, but now it was just one or two. That wasn’t a bad thing at all—they were high-level hobgoblins from birth, which proved that these really were evolved creatures I had “created.” But it meant I had to come up with a formal marriage system before long.

When it came to goblins and orcs, the stronger members of the tribe reportedly had the right to select any partner they wanted. It was a custom meant to ensure their children were as hardy as possible.

The question, though: Should I be allowing polygamy, or what? It seemed practical in the case of (for example) female widowers who lost their husband, but I didn’t want the alpha males hoarding all the ladies exclusively for themselves. That would cause all kinds of discontent. The ogre mages told me they could procreate with one another, although they chose not to. But if, say, Benimaru or Soei decided to start a harem, I wasn’t sure too many of the females would turn them down.

However, as Benimaru put it:

“You know, Sir Rimuru, you’re about the only creature in the world who doesn’t have to worry about exhausting their magicules. A monster’s magicule count is similar to a human’s life force, you could say. Sometimes, giving a name to one of your disciples would sap your magicules to the point that you never recovered. You wouldn’t even see a demon lord–class creature tossing out names to everyone, you see? And if we do something like sire children, my lord, that would affect our strength gravely.”

This shocked me. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! I’ve given out, like, a zillion names, man! Don’t tell me that now!”

“Y-you didn’t know, Sir Rimuru…?!”

I hated it when Benimaru gave me that disgusted look.

Maybe I should thank my lucky stars that my magicules have kept refilling up to now. Going forward, I’ll really have to start thinking about who I name and when. I thought it was a given that you recovered your magic force over time. I was sure it was fine, but… Yeah, let’s be more careful.

Anyway.

Apparently, with monsters, there were two different ways of creating offspring. The normal way, where you simply impregnated the female, and then the “let’s do it for real this time” way. With the former, the child would have some of the parents’ abilities, although it’d start out pretty weak. This method consumed very few magicules, so a male could have at it pretty much all he wanted, although the threat of bottoming out his magicule count still loomed with too much activity.

The latter, meanwhile, made the resulting child quite powerful and a bearer of all the parents’ skills—but doing it “for real” could even affect the father’s life span.

To quote Benimaru: “I’m fine with being single. Evolving added more than a few years to my life. I don’t care about leaving any descendants anyway.”

“More than a few” didn’t begin to describe it. A run-of-the-mill ogre had a life expectancy of around a hundred years; for an ogre mage, it was over a thousand. No kidding, you didn’t need kids. I could see why Benimaru was so disinterested.

With ogre mages like Benimaru, at least, I wouldn’t have to worry much about population control. But what about the stronger of the hobgoblins? I decided to ask them, and while they weren’t quite as adamant about it, they largely shared the ogre mages’ views on parenthood. Monsters didn’t work like humans—produce a child, and it’d rob you blind of your magicules. Sometimes, beyond what you could recover.

So basically, nobody was stupid enough to just go mating willy-nilly. Childbirth didn’t affect the regular goblins as much—they had to produce a lot of offspring if they wanted the tribe to survive another generation—but for hobgoblins, it took up a huge amount of magic.

As they rather bluntly put it, the moment you consummated the act, you knew right then and there whether the impregnation “worked” or not. Kind of graphic, but it was the truth. If a healthy pregnancy resulted, it would cost the father around half of their maximum store of magic. This would fill back up over time, but not if you kept at it repeatedly—that might permanently dent your magicule capacity.

Thus, I suppose, even if you had a bevy of girls to choose from, you couldn’t just go and sire a huge herd of children. Realistically, a man would take multiple wives just so he could protect them, not to build a family.

This didn’t apply to the females, by the way. In fact, the way they put it, they were capable of willfully refusing impregnation, unless the sheer strength of the seed overpowered their bodies.

Therefore, if an undesirable partner violated ethical boundaries to commit the act, a child still wouldn’t result. Only those whom the women deemed worthy had the right to become fathers—and this was also true for other high-level monsters and magic-born.

You could say, surprisingly enough, that monsters mated strictly out of love a lot more than you’d think.

Sub-race demi-humans who crossbred with the human race didn’t quite have this level of influence over the outcome; they were hardly different from humans that way. I suppose, if you asked me which way was better, I’d have trouble providing a comment on that.

So I decided to make a rule:

“With regards to leaving behind descendants, polygamy is allowed strictly with widowed females seeking children.”

Widowers who didn’t want offspring could receive subsidized care from the nation, I figured. If this caused problems, I could always change it later. Like, maybe have a kind of ceremony at the start of each month where residents could confess their love to one another, and then we’d give out homes to the couples it created. That’d be a nice tradition to start. Single men or women could live in the dorms, although those with higher posts could have the right to a freestanding house, too.

These were the kinds of things I thought about as I watched a few intimate monster couples pass me by. I can always fine-tune things later, I thought. Gotta make sure everyone stays happy.

With our homes in place, my initial goals were all but complete. We had food, shelter, and clothing.

Shelter, I just got done explaining. For clothing, meanwhile, the goblinas apprenticing under Garm and Shuna were cranking out new clothes like no one’s business. Our recent upswell in population, meanwhile, made food a bit chaotic. All the new high orcs made procuring provisions for everyone rather difficult.

Fortunately, during his outer patrols, Rigur—the captain of our security force—had bagged a fairly massive amount of prey for us. He had beefed up the number of units under his control, and by now, he had roughly a thousand hunters procuring supplies in every direction. Growing vegetables and such, meanwhile, was Lilina’s jurisdiction, and it was going well. Shuna was also evaluating the wild grasses and such that Rigur’s teams brought in and making seedlings from them, producing even more edible goods.

The next job for our construction crews, meanwhile, was developing the area at the outer limits of town. Our fields grew at a dizzying rate, doing wonders to improve our food situation. Barring disaster, we no longer had to worry very much about famine.

We now looked, by and large, like a real town.

There’s one other person I ought to mention. Gabil.

About a month ago, that fool traipsed into town like he didn’t have a care in the world, eating our food like it belonged to him.

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, you see, Sir Rimuru, I, Gabil, hurried over at once because I wanted to serve you!”

“What are you doing here?” I implored at his shameless attempt at sycophancy.

“Shall I kill him?” Shion asked, face serious enough to even give me pause. She absolutely, completely meant it. You joked around with her at your own peril. Even a slight nod from me right now, and she might really slice up that dude.

Gabil, perhaps sensing this, turned pale and promptly prostrated himself before me. “I’ve had hardly a decent meal for weeks, and I let my arrogance corrupt my head. Please, have pity upon me! We would do anything to become your loyal servants, Sir Rimuru. I promise we will be of great assistance to you, so please!!”

On cue, the hundred-odd fighters he had with him kneeled before me. That was enough to make Shion resheathe her longsword, a satisfied look on her face. Now, at least, we could get to talking.

It would seem that Gabil’s father disinherited him, leaving him with nowhere to go. It was such a pathetic tale that I agreed to his request. Besides, given the way he freely ate our food, without looking out of place at all among the hobgoblins, I figured he had a talent that I shouldn’t make light of.

We currently had no defensive wall in place, since it’d only hinder our construction efforts. It must’ve been easy for them to breach our boundaries, but I could only guess that he convinced our patrols that he was one of my men.

“This was your plan from the start, wasn’t it?!”

“Well, I hardly had anyone else I could call upon…and besides, I had not the least intention of serving any master besides you, Sir Rimuru…,” Gabil breezily replied.

“It may not seem so, but he does regret his actions. Please, if you could grant him the chance to atone for himself…,” added another member of Gabil’s entourage.

Looking more closely, I realized that it was the captain of the lizardmen’s royal guard—the team that guarded Abil, their chief. Abil’s daughter and Gabil’s younger sister, if I recalled correctly. I was pretty sure she was acting as an adviser to Abil when I christened him.

“Oh? Why are you here, too, Captain? I thought you’d be involved with building whatever new system of government Abil was working on.”

“Indeed. Unlike my brother, I have not been banished from our people. I come here by my own free will.”

The name I had given Abil, she explained, had the effect of extending his life quite a bit. For lizardmen, the average was fifty to seventy years—for dragonewts, two hundred or so. And even that figure was just from the reference books; nobody was sure exactly how long he may live.

Just like with Rigurd and the rest, I had basically turned back the clock for him. Any squabbling over his successor would thus have to wait at least a few decades. So he agreed to have his daughter travel the land, perhaps to teach her more about the world she lived in.

“My father wishes you well,” the captain closed by saying.

“What?” Gabil shouted. “I thought you had joined me out of care for my well-being!”

“I do respect you, my brother,” she countered, “more or less. But if anything, I am more enthralled by Sir Soei. If possible, I would love the chance to serve him directly.”

“Whaaa?!”

“Is this a problem?”

They really must have been related. The guard captain was just as odd as Gabil was.

Most of Gabil’s own retainer was more obviously loyal to their lord. But some of the royal guard were among them—no doubt at their captain’s request. Huh. Well, if they wanna help out Soei, let ’em, I suppose.

“If that’s what you want, I could talk things over with him. But he’s more of a covert agent, you know. Do you think you’d be of help?”

“Oh, certainly! Unlike this spoiled brat, I’ve got spirit for miles!”

“Wha?! I have sat here and put up with your carrying-on for too long! You will not berate me, you little girl!”

Not the best relationship, then. Or is it one of those deals where they fight because they love? The guard captain must’ve resented how she was also captured when Gabil hatched his coup.

She should’ve just left him alone. It was no story I wanted to get involved with, so I didn’t.

According to the story I heard later, though, there was another reason for this. It seems Abil, out of concern for Gabil, asked her to monitor the guy for him—hence why it was better for their group to travel undercover. Depending on his actions, the lizardman chief was apparently ready to welcome him back in.

That was all kept secret from Gabil, though. He’d let it go to his head the moment someone told him. Best to let him feel sorry for a while longer.

So we now had a small lizardman team on our side.

And hey, if they’re going to be working with me, they’ll probably need some names. (Benimaru hadn’t warned me off reckless naming at this time, so I was still pretty unrestrained about it. A little knowledge—or lack thereof—can be a dangerous thing.)

I started with the guard captain. “Well,” I said, “if you’re gonna be serving Soei, maybe Soka would work?”

She had four guards with her, two female and two male. For them, I went with Toka, Saika, Nanso, and Hokuso. Each received one cardinal direction in their names—east, west, south, north, in that order. To this I added “ka,” or flower, to the female names and “so,” or spear, to the males.

No particular meaning to it. Just seemed nice.

The moment I was done, the evolution began. Gabil looked on, clearly jealous, but he had a name and I saw no reason to add another.

“Quit acting so envious,” I said as I rolled by him. “‘Gabil’ is a fine enough name, wouldn’t you agree?”

But before I was wholly past him, I could suddenly feel my energy draining. Oh, crap, did I just do what I think I did? I turned around. Now Gabil was looking right at me, eyes sparkling. His body was already starting to glow—wait. Is this…evolution?

Thus I managed to inadvertently name Gabil…Gabil.

I had no idea that you could, um, overwrite them like that. Maybe the fact his original christener was dead meant the wavelengths were aligned with me instead, or something. I couldn’t know why, but either way, I named him. I was hoping to make him dwell on his crimes a bit longer, but what’s done is done.

Maybe I could have him follow in Gobta’s footsteps and show him hell at the hands of Hakuro. Otherwise, this new evolution would just make him more self-absorbed and prickish than before.

He’ll definitely need to be assigned a job later, I thought as I drifted away into my now-familiar sleep mode.

The next day, I set out to naming the other hundred lizardmen. I had spent my immobilized time thinking up names, mostly random bits of alphabet strung together. As high-level a monster as the lizardmen were, I had to take a break after around twenty of them. The while process thus took five days.

Now they were all dragonewts.

A dragonewt was classified as a sort of demi-human with dragon’s blood. Surprisingly, you could far more easily tell the males and females apart. The males didn’t look much different from lizardmen, save for the dragon-like wings, the horns, and the firmer scales. The biggest difference was the color of those scales—changing from a greenish-black to a purplish one.

The females, meanwhile, looked practically human. Rather pretty, even. They did have those dragon horns and wings, though, and with the dragonewts’ Scalify skill, they could transform their skin into leathery scales at any time—or for that matter, look even closer to a full-blooded human.

It was a bit like my Universal Shapeshift in practice, but it’s too bad they couldn’t look 100 percent like human beings. Maybe with practice, though? I suppose the males had less interest in looking human than the females, but that skill must be invaluable when conducting undercover operations in human kingdoms.

The transformation also affected their strength, not just their appearance. Their already-honed bodies would be covered in solid, protective dragon scale, which automatically projected a Multilayer Barrier that protected them from melee and magical attack.

Dragonewts also had Resist Magic, something I discovered when the Receive part of my Glutton skill granted it to me. It made me regret expending all that effort to “Provide” them with Multilayer Barrier, but all the same, I felt like I got something out of the deal.

I probably gave them a few more skills as well, but we’ll find out what they were later. It kind of annoyed me that I couldn’t control that unless I deliberately restricted a skill from Glutton access.

Which was fine and all, but I was starting to wonder what kind of defensive skills Gabil enjoyed. Time for an experiment. Transforming into human form, I mercilessly fired off a ball of magic at him—a skill I had just learned.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” he asked, a bit shocked as he was blown several yards away.

“You dumbass!” I spat at him, making him stare blankly at me. “I’m making you pay for stabbing your dad in the back. And remember, I’m not giving you a second chance!”

It was my warning for him not to screw around with me, but it was needed, I thought, to make it clear that I would not tolerate any further betrayal. Just a little add-on to the experiment, but I didn’t tell him about that. Gabil seemed to accept it well enough. He was a dumbass, definitely, but I couldn’t hate him for it. He’d give Gobta a run for his money.

The ball of magic, by the way, didn’t seem to affect him at all. I just fired it all casual-like, so I figured it was about five times the force of me punching him with all my might, but… Well, maybe he’s too stupid to feel pain, or he’s managed to inherit my Cancel Pain skill. Dinosaurs were pretty dull to pain, too, I read somewhere, and maybe that applied to this species, as well.

Either way, I had made myself clear with him, and I think Gabil was okay with it.

So really, Gabil had gotten a fair bit stronger—from a C-plus lizardman to a straight-on B-ranked dragonewt. He still retained his previous skills as a warrior, but they were all much more powerful now, without a doubt.

But these were no ordinary lizardmen, it turned out. Soka was now an A-minus, the rest of her team B-plus rank. And Gabil had broken through the wall and reached A level. Now he would’ve been able to take on Gelmud and had a shot at whipping him.

With the right training, they might grow even stronger, albeit not up to the ogre mages’ level. I figured I’d ask Hakuro to devote particular attention to Gabil’s practice sessions.

I introduced the royal guard to Soei and left them in his hands. Under his tutelage, they could all be talented ninjas before long. He was never one to show mercy, after all.

As I expected, Soka and her team immediately pushed themselves toward Soei.

“I can use them as I like?” Soei confirmed with me as he watched them like a deer caught in the headlights. His voice was cold, enough to make me even more scared. But the royal guards didn’t mind one bit, smitten with Soei as they were, waiting expectantly for me to give the word.

“Sure,” I answered, “go ahead. Train ’em however you want, Soei.”

“As you wish, Sir Rimuru,” he replied, formally agreeing to the request.

A smile instantly erupted on Soka’s face. I couldn’t really understand why, but if they were all happy about it, I didn’t mind.

Now I had to deal with Gabil and his army.

Soei seemed to have ample control over Soka and the royal guard, but Gabil’s crew was entirely my problem. They were my forces now, so I had to give them something to do—but before that, getting them situated was the first thing.

Food wasn’t the problem, but clothing and shelter were.

The only armor they had was half-broken scale mail. They were equipped with spears, but the tips were nicked and scratched, making them almost useless. I asked Kaijin, our de facto minister of production, to prepare some new gear for them as soon as possible.

Considering their natural habitat, someplace near water would be nice for them to live in…but all we had was the river that flowed nearby, and I didn’t feel like banging together a new riverside hamlet just for the sake of a hundred people. Then, as if a light bulb went off in my head, I recalled the underground lake. The place where Veldora was ensconced, which I had used as an experimental proving ground for my skills. That would be big enough, I thought. Not too many people could make it past the sealed door at the entrance, and as a place to sleep, it would be perfect for Gabil and crew. The lack of light could be an issue, but I could teach them Magic Sense and they could work out the rest.



When I first encountered the lake, it was so densely packed with magicules that fish couldn’t even survive in it. That had thinned out quite a bit since. Maybe enough that a B-ranked monster could just barely withstand it? I was hoping we could use that magic to cultivate some more hipokute herbs, which would be the perfect job for the dragonewts. Shelter and a work assignment, just like that—two birds with one stone.

My final worry was whether they’d be strong enough to venture in and out of the cave. Gabil was in A-ranked territory—nothing could stop him in there—but the B-grade dragonewt warriors would still run into several monsters they’d have trouble with. The evil centipedes, at B-plus rank, were a powerhouse.

If I tossed them in there and they wound up being prey for the monsters, I’d sure have a guilty conscience about that.

Understood. In terms of simple rankings, the evil centipede would outclass them, but if five or more dragonewt fighters worked together, victory would be easily attainable. That was calculated using their current weapon set, so once they have more decent gear on hand, that will boost their chances at victory. With healing potion on hand, the odds of anyone dying would be extremely low.

The Sage chimed in with the perfect advice. Dragonewts had wings and flight-based abilities. Evil centipedes were strong, yes, but apparently weak against aerial attack. The centipede’s breath would need to be watched out for, but with Multilayer Barrier, no one would be critically hurt.

So trusting in their skills, I formally gave the contract to Gabil’s force.

“Gabil, I want your people to cultivate hipokute herbs in the cave for me.”

“Leave it to us, sir!” His eyes clouded up as his heart soared with emotion. “I, Gabil, will work my fingers to the bone for you!”

Perfect. I’ll do that. He sounds motivated enough.

With them living in the cave, they could serve as guards, too. I wouldn’t have to be so wary of the cave all the time, like I did now. I also made sure to forbid them from working in the cave unless they were in groups of five or more. It’d be a boon for their training, too.

Finally, I gave each one a generous supply of healing potion, in part to provide motivation for their task. They all had permission to use it whenever the need arose. Even if they were caught unawares and faced critical injury, this should save them from danger.

Gabil and his crew seemed to get the hang of things after a month or so, able to freely navigate the cave without any personal danger. With Garm’s and Kurobe’s new weapons and armor, their strength was more polished than ever.

I went down there just to check on them, but things seemed to be going great. Their eyes did nothing for them in the dark, but with Magic Sense and Sense Heat Source safely taught to them all, there were no issues. They had formed teams of five, with three teams working in tandem at all times and staying in touch with Thought Communication. Whenever trouble came along, they could respond quickly.

When it came to leadership skill, at least, Gabil was a born genius. They grew used to life in the caves far more quickly than I had thought—and living in an environment where battle was a near constant seemed to be growing their experience and strength. It sounded like with five of them at once, they could stop an evil centipede without having to rely on potions at all.

They couldn’t be more reliable.

It might be fun to have them engage in a mock battle with the goblin riders. A starwolf was ranked B alone, but with a seasoned hobgoblin on its back, you could add a plus sign to that. They were a seasoned unit at this point, so the goblin riders might even be above them…but with the advantage of flight, I thought the dragonewts could put up a surprisingly tense fight.

That was the sort of thing that occurred to me as I observed the dragonewts’ growth.

Now Gabil’s team was devoting itself to cultivating hipokute. About ten, relieved from cave-patrol duty, were observing the herbs’ development and changing their horticultural approach in different regions to see which one produced the highest quality.

The plan was to go with whatever proved to work best; then I could make recovery potion with it, sell it off, and earn some much-needed foreign currency. It was one way I figured I could earn some coin before I set off to observe human society.

I called for Gabil.

“Right, how’s it going?”

“Heh-heh-heh… I am so glad you asked! It couldn’t be better! Behold, the fruits of our labor!”

He handed me a few weeds. Yes, weeds. I gave him a look, then a taste of Dark Thunder. Oh, don’t worry, he wouldn’t die. I can adjust its intensity perfectly fine now.

“Gahh! What was that for, sir? What did I do?!”

“You dumbass! These are just weeds! What are you growing down there anyway?!”

“Wh-whaa—?! A thousand pardons! I, Gabil, have perhaps been hurrying ourselves along too much.”

“You don’t get this just by ‘hurrying’ a little… Ugh. Could you be more careful? With that dense lake of magicules, managing to grow weeds around it is a feat in and of itself.”

Our exchanges grew tense at times, but really, it was largely going as planned. Hipokute was a rare plant, and the dragonewts were, indeed, making steady progress. The hardest part, in a way, was teaching Gabil the difference between the herbs and plain old weeds—but it couldn’t have been easy, relying entirely on touch instead of sight for the job. I had my analysis skills to work with, but Gabil and his team had nothing as convenient as that.

Only experience would make up the difference, and trying to hurry that along was pointless. It’d be nice if there was some light down there…but we can tackle that issue later.

Gabil, for his part, acted like the de facto master of the caves these days, walking around like he owned the place. The mere sight of him made the monsters flee, and some of Gabil’s personal entourage could even whip an evil centipede singlehandedly. Part of the cave was their territory now.

I was impressed, but I definitely didn’t offer him any praise. It’d go right to his head, and then he’d screw something up. Kind of like me, in a way. Takes one to know one. That’s why I trusted him to step up and perform the work I assigned him.

We were still busy with cultivation for the moment, but once that got on track, we’d have to think about mixing next. I could produce oceans of potion with my skills, but I didn’t want to. I wanted a system that could manufacture this stuff without me.

I wanted to avoid creating a town that was incapable of anything if I wasn’t around.

You can make all the mistakes you want, so give me at least one solid success…

Thinking to myself, I left the cave.

The dragonewts were well situated now, and Gabil and the rest were fully used to life with their fellow townspeople.

A long series of peaceful days followed. Ah, nothing like peace, I blithely thought as Shion carried me around, her breasts bouncing against me in a steady rhythm as she walked.

Boing, boing, boing, boing. Ooh, this feels great…

I was just letting myself descend to ever-lazier thoughts when—

Sir Rimuru, we have an emergency. Several hundred winged horses are headed for the direction of town.

Soei sent me a cold, to-the-point message via Thought Communication.

“Shion, it’s an emergency. I’ll call for Benimaru and Hakuro, so get Rigurd to alert the townspeople for me!”

“Right.”

She lowered me down, then briskly ran off.

Thought Communication wasn’t enough to broadcast a message to an entire city. We needed to ring a special alarm bell to make everyone gather at the public square. I ran down the situation with the ogre mages, then turned my attention to the sky, turning my Magic Sense all the way up.

It let me detect something coming from the Dwarven Kingdom. A force of around a thousand. None ranked an A alone—or I should say, an A as a rider and mount alone— Wait, they had knights on flying horses?! It had to be a well-trained force, whoever they are.

Understood. Using Analyze and Assess, I have determined the knights’ rank to be A-minus. Their flying mounts are also appraised at A-minus. However, their minds are synchronized to the point where one could treat each one as a single creature, ranked perhaps slightly higher than A.

Right. So we’re talking five hundred mounted, flying knights—A-ranked cavalry, as the Great Sage put it. Even with all our forces pooled together, we couldn’t hack this one.

Gauging each mounted knight by itself, they seemed weaker than Gabil when he had just attained A rank. Let three of them surround that dragonewt, though, and I doubted he stood a chance. In a way, this was an even greater threat than two hundred thousand orcs at our doorstep.

Shion came back with Shuna, with Benimaru and Hakuro arriving simultaneously. Soei had somehow appeared behind me, too.

Geld was busy calling for the high orcs, currently handling construction and resource-gathering work in the forest. He was running all over, trying to get his battle equipment organized, but I doubted any of it would be in time. A force of C-plus high orcs would just get razed to the ground.

“Your orders, Sir Rimuru?” Benimaru asked. I couldn’t give him a clear answer.

“My orders? Well… We don’t know who they are or what they want. It’d be a losing battle if we fought them, and I’d like to avoid that, but…”

Understood. The advancing force’s destination is this area, beyond a doubt. They are traveling in a straight line toward here.

I didn’t need the Sage’s commentary to know that lying low and hoping it’d all blow over wouldn’t work too well.

“This is no problem! All we have to do is rout them all!” Shion optimistically shouted, blowing my pessimistic thoughts away.

I wanted to call her stupid, but I doubt she’d understand why. She and I had two different definitions of victory. If we could expend all the sacrifices we wanted to smash this team of five hundred, that would make things simple. If you asked me whether that was possible or not, then, sure it was. But if you want to avoid civilian casualties, I had to conclude that was impossible.

Based on the Sage’s calculations, the greatest chance of survival came if all of us immediately fled in another direction. That provided a survival rate, apparently, of around 90 percent. Staging a frontal counterattack would kill off half of us, and as the Sage put it, only luck would decide whether even I or the magic-born would make it through. And that assumed we fought with everything we had. Routing them, the way Shion wanted us to do, was not a word I wanted to bandy around.

Either way, we’d lose people. To me, the moment hostilities began, we would’ve already lost. Damage to the town, I didn’t mind, but I couldn’t abide the thought of personal injuries. That’s why I wanted to avoid battle, if nothing else.

“Well, what happens, happens. If this turns into a fight, our first priority is evacuating our residents. We’ll buy the time to make that happen.”

“You got it. And indeed, this could be an easy win once we’re in the thick of it!”

“I’ll handle the magical support!”

“Heh-heh-heh… My longsword is seeking blood.”

“—I am only here to serve you, Rimuru.”

Good to see the usual gang was in on it, then. I assigned Hakuro and Kurobe to stay on point if we had to evacuate. Now that Rigurd was here, I also explained matters to him, ordering him to regroup with Geld’s team outside of town if we failed to talk things out with our foes.

“Wait a second,” I heard someone mutter in the group. Turning toward the voice, I saw Kaijin lost in thought.

“What is it, Kaijin?”

“Well, if these are flying knights, I’ve heard rumors about a top-secret force under the direct control of the dwarven king. Just rumors, but…”

“Huh? I thought the Dwarven Kingdom’s military was all about heavy infantry and high-powered magic corps. And you’re an ex-military officer—what kind of top-secret force wouldn’t you know about?”

“Yeah, well… The rumors came from a bunch of retired old generals. I mean, yeah, we were officers, but we were still young. I couldn’t really boss around people who had several centuries’ more experience than I did…,” Kaijin explained, grimacing.

So just like I expected, the long-lived, hard-drinking dwarves at the top of the military ladder still had a pretty heavy impact on the force. The rumors no doubt began their spread from them, at any number of taverns. A good wine can loosen anyone’s lips.

According to Kaijin, this top-secret personal army of the king’s, independent of the seven official armies, was known as the Pegasus Knights.

“The winged horses they fly are normally C-ranked magical beasts. Dwargon’s been breeding them for their flight skills. You won’t find too many A-minus ones in nature. I guess the rumors were true, huh…?”

What Kaijin said seemed to make sense. Whatever could upgrade those creatures so dramatically must have been kept under tight secrecy. Even an ex-officer would’ve only heard half-told rumors.

So was this was what we had to deal with…?

“Kaijin, if what you say is true, do you think there’s a chance the dwarf king himself is among them?”

“Per…haps? King Gazel almost never leaves the royal palace these days, but he was lauded as a hero in his glory years. If he thought it necessary, it wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility for him to personally lead a force like this.”

“Can you think of any reason why he would?”

“Well… Maybe because of the orc lord? But that’s all settled now.”

Hmm? The orc lord…?

“Hey, Rigurd, can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, my lord?”

“I told Kabal and his party to spread some rumors around their fellow adventurers, but did we ever tell them that it’s over?”

“Ah…?”

“Oh, man, I forgot… Better send a message to ’em.”

“I apologize for this oversight, Sir Rimuru…”

It wasn’t just Rigurd’s fault. I forgot, too, so we were even, pretty much. I could get the message across through Soei in a flash, so I didn’t see it as a fatal mistake. And while I wanted Soei to take care of that ASAP, I had to deal with our new visitors first.

“Do you think the dwarven king heard about this and came to help?”

Kaijin was awfully optimistic, but it didn’t seem that way to me. But there was no point speculating on what we didn’t know anyway, so I closed the subject. All we could do was wait for these uninvited guests, debating with one another about what to do should the worst happen.

A herd of winged horses was flying above town. They took sidelong glances at us as we watched them, looping around the city airspace a few times before landing in an open field just beyond its borders. We had some open space in town, too—the areas where we planned to build most of our central facilities, for one—but I suppose they didn’t immediately touch down in the city out of politeness. That’d be pretty much a declaration of war, wouldn’t it, if a nation did that to another? International law probably didn’t apply to monsters, though, and I wasn’t even sure such a thing existed in this world in the first place…

No point thinking about it.

More pertinently, we now had confirmation that the dwarven king was leading the pack. That was a tad more important, as was the reassurance that he didn’t want to attack us on first sight. He would have without hesitation if he saw us as foes.

Maybe Kaijin was right? Are these just reinforcements or something? Not if this is supposed to be an undercover force, though—and not if the king himself is on the field.

Leaving the evacuation efforts to Hakuro, Kurobe, and Gobta, I headed out of town to greet them. Accompanying me was Rigurd, who insisted that negotiations with the outside world were in his jurisdiction. Assuming we had any room to negotiate…

Obviously, Kaijin and the three dwarves were with me, too.

The knights were lined up in neat rows in the field beyond the city. In front was one whose force of presence dominated over all of them. He was flanked by four bodyguards, each obviously several times stronger than the rest of the force.

Counting King Gazel himself, that meant five incredibly powerful dwarves were before us. I couldn’t know exactly what kind of threat they were, but well into A territory, at least. Considering the aura of danger I felt when I was last placed in front of him—and considering that aura was still there now—his powers had to be on another dimension. If I had to guess, his four compatriots dated from his days on the road as Heroic King. No wonder their kingdom was so strong. If you ever bumped into these guys on the road, running was your best bet at survival, for sure.

We really have to avoid combat now. Otherwise, it’ll get ugly.

“Well, well, Your Majesty. It has been a long time—and quite an impressive showing, as well! May I ask what brings you here today?” Kaijin stepped forward and took a knee before Gazel.

Come to think of it, I’ve never directly conversed with Gazel before. I wasn’t allowed to back in his kingdom, in keeping with dwarf tradition. Instead, unable to defend myself, we were made into criminals (Kaijin did punch out the nobleman Vester, but still) and almost made into forced laborers. Their king was a fair and upright enough ruler that we managed to avoid that, so I imagined he wouldn’t spring war upon us without a fair explanation—but if he did, I was prepared to give him a piece of my mind.

“A pleasure to see you again, Kaijin…and you as well, slime. Do you remember me?”

The king was surprisingly casual with us as I sized up his approach.

Are we doing away with the obnoxious formalities? I blithely wondered as I felt something dark and ominous from behind.

In a flash, Benimaru’s smile vanished and he had a steady hand on his sword, apparently not a fan of the king calling me just “slime.”

Soei, on the other hand, kept it supremely cool—the faint smile on his face told us all how he felt. He was pissed. He normally had no expression at all, but get him mad, and he’d smile back at you. A dangerous man to trifle with, and it was pretty funny how the only way to make Soei smile was to basically bait him into killing you.

Benimaru might’ve had a short temper, but by ogre mage standards, he was showing remarkable restraint.

Meanwhile, the aura I felt from Shuna and Shion was nothing to sniff at, either. They were showing the opposite of restraint, actively exuding danger with every fiber of their being.

This was ugly. They still respected my orders enough to stick to them, I supposed, but if anything else happened, they’d be liable to blow their top at any moment. I needed to get this squared away before they went beyond my control.

As I fretted over this, I realized that Kaijin, himself, was deeply disturbed by the king’s greeting. “M-my liege?!” he stammered, eyes ready to pop out of their sockets.

Apparently this wasn’t the Gazel that Kaijin knew—but to me, this was a good sign. It meant the lord of a kingdom had taken the time to come here himself, do away with all the procedural BS, and get down to brass tacks with me. The fact he didn’t immediately sic his knights on us was, in itself, a victory. Regardless of how much it rankled the ogres, I had to take advantage of this chance.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!” the king boomed. “I see your head is unbending as always, Kaijin. Can you not see? I have come here strictly as a private citizen. At least, on paper. Otherwise, I hardly would be allowed out of my own bedchamber.”

Kaijin, still flustered, exchanged looks with his king and me. Realizing that nobody on the scene had any further comment, he took that to mean Gazel was telling the truth. It was hard for him to swallow. He froze.

So. The dwarven king wasn’t paying us a state visit but just doing a little private tourism? So what were all those ominous-looking knights behind him for? Hmm. Thinking about it, they’d never allow a king to just walk around in the forest alone. They had to be guards sent with him to appease the elders and bureaucrats who formed the core of dwarven government.

Well, if we’re doing away with procedure, I don’t see any reason not to address him directly. Trusting in my hunch that Gazel meant no conflict, I decided to take a bullish approach.

“Which means, sir, that I’m free to speak as I wish?”

“By all means. This is no place to allow ourselves to be bound by formal ceremony.”

“Right. Well, lemme introduce myself first. My name is Rimuru. You’re right that I’m a slime, but I’d prefer if you didn’t call me that. I mean, I’m kind of the leader of the Great Forest of Jura Alliance, so you could say things have changed a bit since last time.” I took this moment to turn into my human shape. “This isn’t exactly who I really am, but it’s probably easier for you to talk to.”

I grinned, waiting for his reaction.

“It… It transformed?!”

“A magic-born…and such a high-level one.”

“Hmm. I sense magical force but no casting of magic itself. A skill-based status transformation, I would say. I sense no sudden burst of magicules, so it is likely as it said—simply a change of appearance, not of nature. But this could change its method of battle. At the least, being able to wield equipment like our own could boost its own offensive and defensive powers.”

“Sounds like trouble… I haven’t seen a rare variant like this in quite a while. And the monsters behind it are rather strange in themselves!”

“Hmm,” said an old woman among them. “Those, I can identify. They are ogre mages—a race just as rare as orc lords.”

“They are? That’s the evolved form of an ogre, is it not? Should we not dispatch them before they grow too strong to handle?”

“—You think it’d go that smoothly? Four of them bear horns. We would have to prepare for a bitter fight.”

“I hate to sound timid, but yes… Best not underestimate them.”

The king looked on silently, but his personal companions seemed fairly unnerved. They even guessed what Benimaru and his kin were. That old crone must’ve used some kind of magic to prod us for data. I didn’t like being evaluated like that, but it was largely out of my hands. I needed to show off a little strength, or else they’d stomp all over me. Even if we survived, I sure as hell didn’t want to be subservient to these guys.

“Silence!” the king suddenly bellowed, never taking his eyes off me. “Enough of this racket. This slime and I are speaking right now. Excuse me—Rimuru, I mean. I will evaluate him for myself, and I would appreciate it if all of you held your tongues in the meantime.”

It was a pure show of force, and it stunned them all into silence.

“Yeah, uh, sorry if I scared you all. I just transformed because I thought this’d be more natural for you. Just like that lady said, this is the work of my skill, Universal Shapeshift. A form of mimicry, is all. So you don’t have to freak out about it.”

“I will be the judge of that. I would hardly believe the words of someone unless I was reasonably sure they were a friend…or foe.”

True enough. Friend or foe, though, huh? That might be why King Gazel’s here, then—to figure out exactly who the heck we are. If I had to guess, he knew about the orc lord’s defeat, and that compelled him to move. As long as I could gain his trust, there was no need to be hostile.

“Well,” I ventured, “you can doubt me all you want, but we can’t really sustain a conversation that way, can we?”

“No need to worry. Words are not what I need to judge your character. Instead, I will use my sword to divine your true nature. If you insist on such ribald boasting, calling yourself the ‘leader’ of this forest, it may be about time to show you your place. If that sword of yours isn’t mere decoration, I ask you to accept my request.”

With that, he handed the halberd he carried in his hands to an attending knight on his side. My katana-style sword must have set off his battle lust or something.

“Y-Your Majesty, surely…”

“Ha! What faster way to settle this than with a man-to-man duel?” The king laughed, ferocious.

Judging by the shocked looks on the knights and Gazel’s companions, their monarch was seriously looking for a fight. I had no reason to turn him down. We were still evacuating the town, so it’d be a helpful way to buy some time.

“I accept the request. And I’ll make you regret calling me a boaster,” I said, looking King Gazel in the eye.

We both took a step forward, the ogre mages keenly looking on. I’m sure they didn’t think I could lose. The king’s side seemed intent on letting him fight as well; nobody dared to dissuade him from the idea. The crowd had already formed a ring, with us facing each other down in the middle.

“Regarding the rules,” Gazel said, “if you can block a single string of my attacks, you may call yourself the victor. Not that it has to be said, but you are free to attack me at any time, too. But remember: I am Gazel Dwargo, Master of the Sword, and my blade shall not be taken lightly.”

He took his weapon in hand and aimed it in front of his eyes. It held a single edge, with a bit of a curve to it, and pretty patterns were etched up and down its length. It resembled a samurai sword but had its own unique design—certainly, a very well-made weapon for the Master of the Sword to carry.

Just when I was preparing to draw my own blade, a clear voice penetrated the ring.

“Allow me to watch over the match!”

As it did, I felt the presence of three more among us, hearts pure and bereft of evil. One had spoken—Treyni, a dryad I was familiar with. As always, she had a knack for appearing and disappearing whenever it suited her. The other two resembled Treyni, so I assumed they were among the “sisters” she spoke of.

“Dryads?!” exclaimed the elderly woman who scanned us earlier. I couldn’t blame her surprise. Anyone would be alarmed at a monster teleporting in from out of nowhere.

Treyni smiled as she gave both of us a quick glance. “Dwarven King, you are being terribly arrogant to our forest leader. Calling Sir Rimuru a boaster tells me you are willing to make every denizen of this wood your enemy. Is this right? However, if Sir Rimuru has accepted this challenge, it is my role as his subject to allow it. I will close my eyes to it this time. But relent on your promise, and do not expect mercy from us.”

She was willing to accept no back talk against this. My companions nodded at one another—it was like Treyni said what they all were thinking.

The dwarves, on the other hand, didn’t look well at all.

“The loftiest presence in the forest,” one whispered, “siding with a single force?”

“They are as powerful as high-level elementals. And three of them! I hope you are all ready for this, my friends…”

The mood was grim among them.

This was exactly why I wanted to avoid combat…

“Ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! So ‘leader of the forest’ was no boast, after all. I apologize for branding you a liar, Rimuru. And I think I have a vague understanding of the situation here. But I still seek to gauge your true nature. And if we have a referee for this contest, all that remains is to cross swords!” Gazel seemed completely unmoved.

He had been watching me the whole time, without wavering.

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll have a quick match, and then we can talk about what has brought you here.”

“Heh-heh-heh… And if you can beat me, I will do what I can to answer.”

There was no longer a peep from our audience.

Treyni, face tensed, stood between the two of us as we confronted each other. The match was on.

“Begin!” came the dryad’s shrill voice over the still field.

And with that, Gazel and I instantly took action.

My Magic Sense skill allowed me to read all available information within the local range and replay it in my mind. Using it, I had a full grasp of the ring, as if I were looking down at ourselves from overhead. Speeding up my thought process by a thousandfold, I began to consider my tactics.

It had been a long while since I had given my all in battle. Since my fight with Geld, the Orc Disaster, I hadn’t skipped a day of practice with Hakuro—but the fact that none of it was “for keeps” had prevented me from really treating it seriously, in some corner of my mind. I honed every sense in my body as I sized up my foe.

At the moment, my height was around four and a quarter feet. Consuming the Orc Disaster had expanded my own magicule storage, so I had more all-purpose slime tissue to work with. King Gazel, meanwhile, was around five and a half feet, a bit larger than the dwarven average. Over a head taller than me—and in my mind, he loomed like a mountain. His role as king undoubtedly contributed to that.

Still, I kept my heartbeat calm as I observed him. He had his beautiful sword up to his eyes, taking a full-frontal approach and not moving an inch. He was ready to deflect anything I could dish up for him—and really, I couldn’t find any gap to exploit at all.

I was stricken by a sense that I was facing Hakuro. Master of the Sword was right. Or maybe I should be more amazed at Hakuro, given how he was the first person who sprang to mind when as a comparison to Gazel.

Regardless, this wasn’t training. I couldn’t afford to call time-out. Let’s test him, then. Gazel only talked about “a single string of attacks,” and I was free to try attacking all I wanted in the meantime. Or defeat him, even.

The more masterful the fighter, the better a gauge they had of the space around them. In that case…

Using Strengthen Body to boost my leg muscles, I zoomed forward and slashed at the king. He was free to take the blow; if he tried to respond to it, he was right in my trap.

I was sure I’d given him enough data to work with before I sprang into action, and I was sure he read it all accurately and factored it into his own approach. Which meant that, if I could just stretch my arms out four inches or so more as I slashed, that’d be enough for him to misjudge everything. Not too much—just enough.

Maybe this strategy sounds petty, but it definitely works. One of the most important rules of close-quarters combat is not to let your foe gain a solid sense of distance. I used the same trick to land a blow on Hakuro once. It never worked again, and Hakuro truly lived up to his ogre name as he showed me hell the rest of the day, but there it was. One point for me. And if it deceived a master like him, would it work on this one?

But betraying my total confidence, Gazel executed a precision move to deflect my hand away, as if expecting it the whole time.

Dude! You’ve gotta be kidding me! I thought as I readied my sword again. Gazel showed no interest in countering, still just watching me quietly. I tried a few other attacks, switching out my tactics each time, but he breezily shrugged away each one. I should mention that I wasn’t going easy on him. I had potions on me, so I could heal him as long as he survived.

But my full force wasn’t enough to work on him. Lightly, gently, he was handling me with just the right amount of power, ensuring he didn’t nick his sword in the process. It seemed there was a clear, and overwhelming, difference in skill between us. I was so helpless against him that even I had to admit it.

“What? Are you done? Is that all the power you have, Rimuru?”

Come to think of it, he wasn’t restricting me from using my skills at all. It wouldn’t be breaking the rules, I reasoned. But relying on such skills seemed basically the same as admitting defeat. It peeved me. I had to get a clean blow in, no matter what. This whole match had lit a spark under the competitive streak I’ve had since before.

“Shut up!” I spat. “I haven’t come at you for real yet, so don’t hurry me!” But I still didn’t have any new ideas. I didn’t want to lose, but I had nothing to work with. And as if reading this state of mild panic, King Gazel started to move, confronting me with terrific fighting force. Exposed to this aura, my movements were fully held in check.

Oh, crap. I’m leaving myself wide open to him!

Report. Analysis complete. This force is Heroic Aura, an extra skill that is a higher-level version of Coercion. Its aim is to make the target cower and become unable to move. Targets with low resistance will find themselves submitting to, and even adoring, the wielder.

Just as I feared the worst, my reliable partner gave me a report. Now that’s what the Great Sage is for. So how to counteract?

Understood. As with Coercion, the correct way to resist the skill is via fighting spirit.

Um? Fighting spirit? Come on…

Talk about unreliable. I had the feeling that the Sage was starting to phone it in sometimes.

But no time for that. I need to get out of this. How do I conjure fighting spirit? Shouting could help, maybe. I couldn’t move, but I could speak. If it didn’t work, I’d think of something else.

“Uh… Oraaahhhhh!!”

I screamed as loud as I could. It wound up firing a Voice Cannon, one of Ranga’s specialties, right at Gazel. I also released a bolt of Coercion of my own, hoping it would neutralize Heroic Aura.

The king dissolved the Voice Cannon without bothering to dodge it. But it still distracted his attention enough that his aura disappeared. Now we were back to square one. The two of us glared at each other, swords ready.

If this was how it’d be going, the only way to win was via the conditions he offered. See through his attacks and block them. But I wasn’t expecting such an expert fighter. The depth of his strength was unfathomable. It really was like fighting Hakuro. If he wanted to kill me, he probably would’ve struck a fatal blow long ago. He didn’t because, as he declared earlier, he wanted to see what I had.

But I wasn’t ready to accept defeat that easily. I had proclaimed myself leader of the forest, and I had to go all-out to win this. At the very least, I would never allow myself to fight like a wimp in front of all these people.

Shaking the cobwebs off, I quietly brought my sword up to eye level, facing Gazel—ready to take his instruction, like I did with Hakuro. If I can deflect his moves, I win. Banishing all doubt from my mind, I focused on becoming one with my blade. Turn an ear to its sound, and become one with it—that was Hakuro’s advice to me. I had no idea what he meant, but I meekly tried to follow it.

Watching me, Gazel grinned.

“Yes. That’s it. Now, it is time for me to move!”

You don’t have to telegraph it that much, I thought. But just as I did—he disappeared. Not a single one of my search skills could find him.

What on…?!

It was only luck and coincidence that let me deal with it. Somehow—I had no reason for it—I had a feeling that danger was coming at me from below. I had never trusted my fate to such vague premonitions before, but this time, I decided to follow my gut feeling. Maybe it was the “voice of the sword” I felt—what you hear when you’ve fully mastered your craft.

But it wasn’t the end. Because this… This skill…

Oh, crap!

The moment I thought it, I held my sword aloft.

A loud, sharp tiiiing! echoed. The battle was over. I had successfully stopped King Gazel’s sword strike.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh… Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!! You’ve stopped me!!”

“Y-yeah… So, uh, if you admit it, does that mean I win?”

“It certainly does. You don’t appear to be at all evil to me.”

With another bellowing laugh, Gazel removed his sword.

“This fight is over! The winner is Rimuru Tempest!!”

With Treyni’s official notice, my victory was complete. I sat down on the ground, relieved. The battle had taken more out of me than I had thought.

So this was Gazel Dwargo, the dwarven king. Somehow, I felt like I had been granted a glimpse, just a glimpse of this hero’s full force.

Treyni’s voice was immediately followed by a chorus of cheers from the monsters assembled in the field. The dwarves, meanwhile, were already grumbling about the result.

“He stopped the king’s very sword?!”

“Ridiculous! It’s simply not possible!”

“Did His Majesty relent at the last minute?!”

And so on.

Though, really, King Gazel was trying to test me. Anything else, and I would’ve lost any sword battle against him. Relent, however? I know me winning doesn’t exactly fill you with delight, but isn’t that going a little too far?

“Silence!” shouted one of the knights, clad entirely in white. “Have you no shame, my fellows?! How arrogant for anyone to accuse His Majesty of relenting on any foe! Are you saying you could follow his movements with your eyes, when none of us even could?”

“He’s right,” spoke another, a warrior-type dwarf dressed in jet-black. “Gazel did not relent. The Master of the Sword fully deserves his title. This was no duel to the death; it was focused squarely upon gauging each competitor’s true nature. Do not forget: We are not here to create enemies!”

How nice of them to plead my case for me. It also proved, for good, that the dwarves were here not for war but to judge my character.

The other dwarves scowled at this dressing down. “Forgive our impropriety,” they said to Gazel and me. I’m sure they weren’t trying to throw mud on the match—they simply didn’t want to admit that their beloved king was fallible.

The apologies sounded sincere enough, so I accepted them. Besides, I could understand their thoughts. Not to be blunt, but I blocked that last attack out of sheer luck. I should know, because I was there. I knew the stance that strike of his required, and it seemed like it’d be pointed at me in the same way, so I just followed my instincts and held my sword aloft—and I turned out to be right.

“Well done, though! You saw right through my Haze of Rumbling Heavens move. Impressive!”

“No, no, it was sheer coincidence. I saw my instructor use that skill before.”

Well, not “saw it” so much as “was beaten to the ground by it” in training. Just the other day, I managed to dodge his first slash, only to be smashed right on the crown by his real strike. Talk about a disappointment.

A piercing blow from the ground to the heavens like that is mainly meant to throw one’s foe off guard. It was the strike that followed after this blow that displayed the true worth of Haze of Rumbling Heavens. It was one of Hakuro’s beginner-level moves, but I was juuust about in a position to deal with it by now. I only stopped it because I was familiar with it. Nothing worth praising me for.

“What was that? Could this ‘instructor’ of yours be…?” Gazel asked, looking down at me in excitement.

Hmm. Could it be, indeed? The same skill and everything…

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Well performed, Sir Rimuru. Glad to see you are hearing your sword’s voice!”

Hakuro, who was aiding the town’s evacuation, chose that moment to sidle up next to me.

“The women and children have been directed to safety. I left the rest to Gobta and came here, but what a sight awaited me!”

He gave me a smile, clearly enjoying this. I guess he must’ve thought I needed some help over here.

“If I may…,” Gazel said, suddenly humble. “Are you the Sword Ogre?”

Aha. So they did know each other.

“…Hohh. The child from way back when, is it? I hardly even recognized you. Well, forgive me for being so rude, Your Majesty. I was wondering what kind of stalwart warrior could use such a sword move. How splendid to see you have grown to be a better swordsman than I!” Hakuro gazed upon the king with a smile.

“It is an honor to hear such words, Sword Ogre.”

“Mmm. Three hundred years, is it? Since I found you as a child, lost in the forest, and began teaching you the way of the sword on a whim? A fond memory, nowadays. And now you are the dwarven king!”

So he instructed Gazel at some point? No wonder they had a similar style. Which meant the king was kind of my fellow student. Still, three hundred years? How long has Hakuro been around anyway? Talk about a man of mystery. And talk about never knowing who you’ll run into from your past.

We decided to talk in more detail elsewhere.

Gone were the provisional tents from before. Now, in the center of town, we had a dorm full of rooms for everyone who held central posts related to keeping things running. There was a government building of sorts next to it filled with offices and meeting halls, and we all went inside to hold a little catch-up meeting. The freshly returned town residents could take care of the knight corps—this meeting was just for the top brass, and it began as a rather relaxed affair.

The mission of the dwarves was to investigate the mystery team of monsters that defeated the orc lord—in other words, us. As they put it, they needed to see if we were friend or foe, just like I thought.

Between the dryads and running into the king’s old sword master, any potential hostilities (that duel notwithstanding) were a thing of the past. The dryads were known to be a kind and fair race, and the dwarves believed they would never lend a hand to anyone with evil intentions. If they liked us, then they didn’t even need that duel to know we were okay. I guess that fight was just out of curiosity, then?

Once the dwarves gave their story, I gave ours—from the first rumblings of the orc lord to the Jura alliance we forged. I didn’t mention how the orc lord had evolved into a full-fledged demon lord—it’s all solved now, so I figured I didn’t need to.

Somewhere along the line, the meeting transformed into a sort of banquet. The tension between us dissipated as we spoke, and by the time night fell, Shuna had offered us all dinner. We had a pretty bountiful food supply in town, so she was capable of some pretty decent eats. Nobody was better at it than Shuna, either, so I guess I should have expected this would devolve into a feast sometime.

It was dangerous for the Pegasus Knights to fly in the dark, so we would be hosting them tonight.

We had them all kick back in our public assembly grounds. Staying in regular contact with their home kingdom was no problem, they told me, so I thought I’d build a little amity and bust out some of the wine we were developing. Then the good times started rolling.

In the midst of this friendly affair, I thought I’d ask about something that bugged me.

“I have to admit, though, you guys work pretty fast. We informed the adventurers’ guild about this three months ago, so it couldn’t have reached you that long ago, could it?”

“Ah, our covert team—our intelligence gatherers—I had them keep tabs on you.”

For a king, Gazel seemed awfully forthcoming about what sounded like top-secret stuff. Maybe it was the wine talking.

“Uh, you sure you want to blow their cover or whatever?”

“Oh, what of it? You spotted them anyway.”

“Ah yes,” Soei coolly replied. “We did find someone sniffing around rather suspiciously. We had orders from you not to kill anyone, Sir Rimuru, so we simply chased him away. We thought it of little importance, but perhaps we should have taken him into custody?”

It barely even registered in Soei’s mind, so he didn’t think to brief me about it. I told him to just tell me next time instead of making judgment calls on his own.

“Well, that’s a rather hard pill to swallow. Yeah, my team isn’t too well suited for direct combat, but…”

This was Henrietta, a beautiful woman but apparently a bit of a mean drunk. One of Gazel’s close associates, she was a knight assassin who ran all the kingdom’s intelligence-gathering operations. I suppose Soei just hurt her feelings, but a serious-looking man in the white armor of a knight stepped in to assuage her. That was Dolph, captain of the Pegasus Knights, as he said—a man who adored Gazel, and one of the dwarves who apologized to us after the duel. Running a covert force as he was, he was more honest and upright than I originally thought.

After intervening between Soei and Henrietta, Dolph quickly fell into a deep conversation with Benimaru about aerial combat. I suppose not even someone as magnanimous as Dolph wanted to hang around those two for long. They had stopped sniping at each other, but the air was now silent and frigid between them. I’m sure anyone would rather talk about their favorite battle strategies instead.

Jaine, the old woman so curious about my own skills, was an arch-wizard and one of the most gifted dwarven clerics in the kingdom. She was now debating this or that finer point about magic with Shuna, and it seemed like Shuna was willing to learn from her, perhaps picking up on Jaine’s investigative magic. The crone also discussed the concept of “legion magic,” a kind of spell that could be cast on an entire military unit to annul the abilities of a rival force. It made me shiver a bit. If Benimaru decided to cast Hellflare on the knights, it probably wouldn’t have damaged them much at all.

This arch-wizard was decent enough in battle against individual foes, but apparently her true expertise was in strengthening entire units with magic. A much more dangerous lady than she looked.

Meanwhile, Kaijin was in friendly conversation with a dwarf clad in heavy black armor. This was Vaughn, arguably the strongest warrior of the entire Armed Nation. An admiral paladin, he said, and second only to Gazel in his field. He used to be Kaijin’s boss, and while his post meant he couldn’t play favorites, Vaughn still dearly regretted losing Kaijin. If we had come to blows today, he was prepared to make sure Kaijin and the other dwarves were escorted to safety. Nice guy. Bit scary-looking, though.

So that’s how we managed to break the ice with them all. And here’s King Gazel himself, reminiscing about the old days with Hakuro.

“Well, you may call me Hakuro the ogre mage now. I have taken on the post of instructor for Sir Rimuru.”

This comment of Hakuro’s made the good king promptly request his tutelage as well. His friends had to talk him out of it. The king of a nation—a superpower of sorts, even—leaving it all to go become an apprentice martial artist in a foreign country was gonna be tough to win approval for. So he glared at me instead, green with envy. Yeesh, could you knock it off? It’s not my fault.

It was funny, though. Gazel claimed to be visiting as a private citizen, and right now, that’s what he was. None of the grandiose atmosphere he presented in his royal chamber. Now he was more subdued, all the pomp and circumstance toned down. Or maybe that’s the real Gazel I’m seeing now? Watching him practically ooze delight as Kurobe praised his sword training, I couldn’t help but wonder.

There was Gazel the Heroic King, and then there was Gazel the fighter. He had seen what I was made of, and I felt like I had done the same with him.

Just as the feast got into full swing, Gazel suddenly turned to me, his expression grave.

“Rimuru…I want to ask you something.”

“Sure! Anything you need.”

“D’you want to forge a covenant with me?”

This body of mine didn’t allow me to feel buzzed, but I still felt like I had just snapped back into stone-cold sobriety.

“I ask you not as a fellow student of Hakuro, but as king. If you are the leader of this forest, that would put us in equal position—and if you’ve been able to hold this entire vast forest under a single government, I am sure you will be rewarded with riches and bounties that not even my kingdom can enjoy. We observed this city from the skies, and let me tell you, it is a beautiful one. That, and you have built great roads through the forest; I could only guess at the logistical and technical skills required to build them. They may yet be incomplete, but I can easily see this town becoming a vital trade center in due time—a vast new market, one that will take on great strategic importance. And when that happens, having another nation to back you would help in various ways, would it not?”

Some of that royal coercion was coming back again. He was pressing the offer at me, eyes dead serious. Ignoring that “fellow student” nonsense for a moment, he was basically recognizing that we were a coherent organization. A group he wanted to support, even. What a coup!

“Are you sure? Because this is the same as admitting that we—this group of monsters—are a full-fledged nation.”

A coup, but not something that King Gazel could decide upon by himself. If he was speaking as a king at the moment, this was his last chance to take it back.

“Of course! And since we may perhaps see this differently, let me say this: A covenant would be of great help to us, as well. This is no charity mission, Rimuru. We could both stand to benefit!” He told me all this with a grin, then offered his terms, dead serious.

These were as follows:

1. A nonaggression treaty with each other.

2. Assistance whenever one nation is endangered.

3. The building of a road to Dwargon, in exchange for their backing.

4. Guaranteed safety for dwarves in the Forest of Jura.

5. Promises of technology sharing between us.

There were a few other details, but those were the five main points.

The nonaggression thing went without saying, and safe passage for dwarves seemed suitable enough. In terms of military assistance, it seemed unlikely that we’d suddenly be tapped for that, just because we were getting along a bit civilization-wise. Dwargon shared a border with the Eastern Empire, but given that the dwarves were strictly neutral, the Empire wouldn’t be dumb enough to pick a fight with the Armed Nation. If they did, it wouldn’t really be our business to intervene.

If we were going to build formal trade links, a road would obviously follow along shortly. Having accessible trade routes is an indispensable part of encouraging trade, after all. But making us foot the bill for the whole thing? That would normally be a bit hard to accept. I suppose that was Gazel being as sharp as ever, but still, this was an extraordinary deal.

Recognition of monsters by humans like this was, in terms of common sense, just something you’d never see too often. I was picturing it happening over a long period of time, gradually. If I could get some real interaction with other nations going within, say, a few decades, that would’ve been fine by me. And here we were being offered the backing of the Armed Nation of Dwargon. Priceless. We couldn’t snag that even if we tried negotiating with one of the smaller kingdoms around us. It was such a stroke of good luck, I couldn’t help but shiver a bit.

“I would be glad to take this offer,” I told him.

Rigurd, Benimaru, Treyni and the others had no objections, willing to let me have the final say on it. As Treyni put it, none of the dryads disagreed with naming me leader of our alliance, and none of the monsters had any innate aversion to interacting with humans or dwarves.

So now we had an alliance.

“Let’s relay this to the kingdom,” the king told Henrietta. The head of Gazel’s undercover team would transmit the message back home by magic. To her, it was as casual an operation as making a phone call.

“What do you call this nation anyway?” he asked. It was a natural question, but one that made me freeze. We all gave one another surprised looks.

Our name…?

I mean, yeah, if Gazel was calling us a nation, we’d need a name like any decent one. But wow, a nation, huh…? I was happy enough with a town, so I hadn’t really thought about that. I thought it’d be neat to have a nation of monsters sometime, but I figured that was a while in the future.

“Well… I don’t think we’re really at the ‘nation’ point, yet. I mean, there’s the Alliance, but that’s just a bunch of different races that accepted me as their leader, is all. I don’t know if everyone in the forest is ready to accept that.”

I knew from the start that it sounded weak. Everyone in the room shot me down.

“If anyone refuses to recognize you as their lord,” Shion declared, “I promise I shall slay them where they stand!”

“Well,” Benimaru added, “it’s a monster’s natural instinct to follow the power chain. But I think it’s a little different with you, Sir Rimuru, at the core of it. You know? Nobody’s being forced to follow you, and I don’t think you’ll find anyone against it, either.”

It seemed to be beyond questioning for either of them, at least.

“Hee-hee-hee! Right now, Sir Rimuru, you hold control over approximately three-tenths of the forest. The other advanced races have decided to watch you carefully for the time being. However, the middle levels among them have already expressed interest in aligning with you, and I am sure the lower-level races will come flocking to this town for protection. We are united under a so-called alliance for now, but it is an alliance based on a common will, one that I believe will birth a full nation. One with you, Sir Rimuru, at the center.”

Way to stab me in the heart, Treyni.

Even in these circumstances, the old survival-of-the-fittest rule held true. Now that Veldora, the guardian of the forest, was gone—whatever that dragon thought about it—it meant the local monsters needed to band together before greedy humans or ambitious demon lords came in first. If not, the whole wood would either be exploited or demolished.

I had said it myself: We will form a great alliance among the peoples of the Forest of Jura and build cooperative relationships with one another. It’d be pretty neat if we built a nation composed of multiple races, I think, but…

Treyni and the others had run with it, apparently, and that little quote had been causing a huge stir from one end of the forest to the other. Things had been moving really fast, and growing, while I wasn’t paying attention.

Guess I’d just have to live with it.

“All right. Let’s think up a name, then…”

Gazel gave a distressed laugh in response.

Leaving him behind, we took up a separate room for the debate. The dwarves hadn’t had enough wine yet; they wanted to keep it going all night, so we promised that we’d officially enact the covenant (really, an international treaty at this point) tomorrow and left them to their devices.

Over the previous night, we had hammered out a name, assembling our top officers and staying up late discussing it.

The result we came up with: the Jura-Tempest Federation. Tempest for short. They were almost ready to name it Rimuru at first, but I was too embarrassed to allow that. I can just barely put up with Tempest—it didn’t really sound like a name unique to me, and it had a nice ring to it.

Of course, while I had my guard down, they went and named this town Rimuru on me. Ugh. The Central City of Rimuru, officially, but you know they’re gonna call it Rimuru or the town of Rimuru. Just thinking about it makes me want to crawl into a hole, but their conventions were simply too firm to let me turn it down. I just hope I get used to it quick.

We also talked a bit about what direction our fledgling nation should take. It was nothing we could settle upon in a single night, of course, so we planned a series of conferences to discuss it. I would be the sovereign ruler, more or less, but over time, I’d like to shift toward more of a republican form of government. You know—employ intelligent monsters, whether they had physical strength or not, and get them involved with politics. The right person in the right job, that’s my motto.

It was a long way from what you could even call a framework, but for now, we were good. Besides, this covenant came out because King Gazel and I trusted so much in each other.

This current covenant between the Armed Nation of Dwargon and the Jura-Tempest Federation took the form of a pact between the two nations. It would take effect after representatives from each side applied their signatures. It would then be kept in safe, magical storage and announced to the world.

And so the term Jura-Tempest Federation appeared in the public record for the first time.