

CHAPTER 1

THE START OF THE MAYHEM

The rage in Ranga’s snarl was palpable. As if chiding him, two ogres, one with blue hair and one with black, leaped in response.

A moment later, a shock wave formed a crater in the earth, sending piles of dirt and mud into the sky. The blast from Ranga’s Voice Cannon held enough power to atomize a group of goblins on the spot. But it would only work, of course, if it actually struck the ogres.

The dodge did not unnerve Ranga. He was proud of his abilities, but seeing them avoided was the least of his concerns at the moment. He sprang off the ground, hoping to end any tandem attack from the blue- and black-hairs before they could unleash it.

They were both still in the air, and Ranga took aim at the black ogre, reasoning this was the weaker of the two. Putting one out of the picture would rob them of the teamwork they seemed to be counting on in this battle.

Ranga was halfway toward realizing his goal. What he failed to notice was that he had more than two opponents. The moment he was in the air, a wall of fire suddenly appeared before him. It resembled the spiritual magic conjured by shamans, but it was a different type—a so-called mystic art, part of the family of illusory magic. Mastering such a complex spell indicated exactly how advanced these ogres were—not some rabble living primarily off instinct, but those capable of learning and acting on reason, like the human race.

The Flame Wall blocking Ranga’s path was not particularly harmful, but it did allow the caster to fully block a single enemy attack. Conjuring such a shield in front of an advancing foe could also serve as a smoke screen, earning the caster precious time to formulate a plan.

And that tactic succeeded. Losing his target, Ranga was forced to land back on the ground.

He didn’t enjoy engaging with such foes, who used tricks and feints to avoid a frontal assault at all costs. The illusory spell Confusion, cast at the start of battle, had also knocked his keen sense of smell off-line. At least the effects had not fully incapacitated him yet—though it had taken out most of his companions in battle, unable to resist the magic strike. The only ones who managed to fend it off were Rigur, head of the security team, and Gobta, Rigur’s right-hand man. The rest of the dozen or so hobgoblins that had been summoned here by an emergency call during a hunting run—along with their tempest wolf companions—were now de facto out of the battle.

Ranga resentfully stared down the wall of flame and the pink-haired ogre caster who had taken out his friends. There were six foes in all—six ogres, higher caste among the residents of the Forest of Jura. They were nothing to sniff at in battle—not the black- and blue-haired ogres Ranga attempted to engage, nor the purple-haired ogress Rigur was tangling with, nor the gray-haired ogre elder Gobta was fending off. Certainly not the magic-wielding pink-haired one, so effortlessly giving her companions a magical advantage, nor the red-haired ogre standing next to her, surveying the scene.

Not a one could be left to their own devices for a single moment. They were working as a team to fight Ranga and his friends, a strategy no unintelligent race would employ. Easily B rank or higher, by the looks of things. Rigur and Gobta, as stout as they were, couldn’t hold out for long.

If only my master, Rimuru, were here—

Ranga snickered at himself over the thought. Relying on his master like that would be unthinkable. Then, as if wiping away any weakness in his body, he howled with the full conviction needed for the decision he had to make.

Peace had returned to the village, and the hobgoblins had been acting remarkably calm and composed despite the Ifrit attack that leveled the place.

The biggest surprise, I suppose, was how much of a born leader Rigurd, my newly appointed goblin king, turned out to be. Much more than I would’ve guessed. He had done a splendid job leading the work teams as they rebuilt the village while I watched after Shizu. Among Kaijin, the three dwarf brothers, and the four goblin lords, everyone seemed to be sticking to their duties, working efficiently for the other villagers.

Really, I didn’t need to do much besides offer a couple words of advice. Overseeing our food supply was Rigur, whenever he wasn’t busy handling security. Garm, oldest of the dwarves, was responsible for clothing; Dold, the next oldest, for making tools; and Mildo, the youngest, for home construction. All production was overseen by Kaijin, while Lilina, one of the goblin lords, managed our inventory of completed goods—that’s how I figured we’d split the responsibility.

The remaining goblin lords—Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd—became my ministers of justice, legislation, and administration respectively, all aiding Rigurd with keeping the local government together. Minister of legislation sounds like a highfalutin job, but all it really involved was taking whatever I blurted out and trying to turn it into coherent law. Simple, really.

These were more intelligent monsters than before, but they were still monsters. When someone stronger than them was around, they listened, mostly. So for the time being, everything was going pretty smoothly. No big problems on the road to building a new country.

But I had other things on my mind anyway. I had this human body now, and I wasn’t too hot on draping rough animal pelts over it. So I decided to have someone make me some proper clothes.

Being a slime had proven to be quite useful, here and there, but it had its disadvantages. Apart from certain magical items, I was unable to wear any armor or, you know, grip a weapon. And slimehood itself didn’t suck, but being “naked” (so to speak) could potentially lead to problems. What if I got a paper cut on a leaf or twig or something as I was going through the forest, and then some kind of poison or virus infected me? It pays to be careful, and I figured some actual armor would assuage any anxiety I had about that. I had just about given up on it unless I was able to find just the right magic item, but now that I could turn into a human, the world was my oyster—and the dwarves were making all kinds of stuff from the magical ingredients they seized from monsters after a hunt.

So I paid a visit to Garm, hoping to at least acquire a child’s-size outfit. He was stationed at our little clothing factory, a log cabin that had come into being when I wasn’t paying attention, and he was overseeing a small team of goblinas as they sewed away.

“Yo, Garm! I could use some clothing for myself.”

“Uh, you sure about that, boss? How are you planning to wear it?”

“Heh-heh-heh…heh-heh… Haaaa-ha-ha-ha! That’s what you’ve got to say? If you think I was planning to be a slime forever, you’ve got another think coming, man! Haaaahhhh!! ”

“Wh-wha?! You’re…growing…? …Well, not too much actually, huh? Were you a child all along, or…?”

“Eesh, I was hoping for a little more shock and awe… Ah well. I can be full-size, too, but this is a lot easier. So could you make an outfit that’d fit?”

“Oh, sure, sure. Mind if I take some measurements? Hey, Haruna, let’s get the boss all measured up!”

I was naked, of course, but I didn’t let that bother me as Haruna the goblina came up with a measuring rope. I was just a child, after all, and my body was genderless.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, blushing a little. “You’ve become so cute, my lord!”

Cute? I mean, I personally thought so, yes, but did that still apply when it was a goblin’s worldview? And for that matter, did monsters have aesthetic standards like mine? If you went way down the food chain, they were related to fairies, so perhaps their tastes were closer to mine than I gave them credit for.

So Haruna measured me, Garm told me to come back in a few days, and that was it. Having nothing more pressing to do, I decided to test out the skills I had obtained a bit ago.

If I wanted to play with my new toys in peace, I needed someplace where people wouldn’t show up and bother me. I could only experiment so much inside my own tent, which prevented me from unleashing too much power.

So I told Rigurd I’d be out, ordered him to make sure nobody followed me, and moved off—from the center of the village to the Sealed Cave. It was the place I first met Veldora, inside his vast underground space—pretty sturdily built and completely devoid of other people. Even the cave’s monsters didn’t dare draw near, as they were still so afraid at even the thought of Veldora.

Once I arrived, I got straight to business. Consuming Shizu had earned me the unique skill Deviant and the extra skill Control Flame, both attacks that were already heavily associated with her in my memories. Beyond that, I had Ifrit’s trio of moves: Replication, Flame Transform, and Ranged Barrier. I had already used Replication to check out my human form, so that seemed to work well enough.

So what to try first? Might as well start with Ifrit this time. First off, Flame Transform.

Oops! Turns out that doesn’t work in slime form. That wasn’t the first time a skill was shut away from me due to some sort of incompatibility. I was starting to wonder what the reasoning for that was.

Understood. Ifrit is a spirit, a being who lives off spiritual energy. Its Flame Transform uses its own body as a source of magical energy to unleash its full force. It thus cannot be used while in physical form.

Mmm? So I can’t cast it if I’m still made of flesh or whatever? Would it work if I went into black-mist mode and gave myself a magical body, then? Let’s try it out.

I turned myself into Ifrit and attempted to use it. This time, it worked without problem, although my core—the thing that houses me —didn’t seem to transform at all.

So I needed to be magical, then, to make it work. But that didn’t mean I had to turn into Ifrit himself, necessarily, right? I turned myself into a grown figure and tried Flame Transform once more. This time, flame extended out from the tips of my fingers and toes.

That seemed to prove it. I couldn’t work it very much in regular form, but if I temporarily made myself magical in style, at least, I could manage the Flame Transform well enough. And at temperatures upward of 1,200 degrees Celsius, too, just like Ifrit. What’s more, I could focus the magic on particular areas for extra heat.

As an attack, it seemed pretty powerful. The only issue was that I’d have to use it inside a barrier; otherwise the energy outflow would be so huge I’d immediately drain myself of magic. It was hard to regulate. I’d need some more practice.

Good thing I had Control Flame, too; that ought to help keep me out of trouble. Spiritual creatures like Ifrit couldn’t last long in the physical world thanks to all the magic they ate up, but with my physical form and Control Flame, a little practice should allow me to cap and unleash the flames as needed.

That brought me to Ranged Barrier. This skill locked the heat of flames within a barrier, which I presumed prevented heat energy from leaking out—and, as my theory went, allowed spirits to manifest themselves for longer without wasting magic. Another unique property was that it contained certain physical durability, in case you wanted to keep anyone inside the barrier.

I thought of ways I could use this. The largest barrier I could make with it extended out in a semicircle three hundred feet or so in diameter, although it didn’t affect anything beneath the ground’s surface. I could shrink it down until it was covering nothing but my own body, which didn’t reduce its effect at all and kept magic consumption at a minimum. This free control meant I could wear it like a sort of light protective layer. It could also prevent magic leakage during a Flame Transform—not that it would be much help, given that the flames never went beyond the barrier itself.

So was heat leakage kind of like losing energy? Was that the reason it sapped my magic?

Understood. Flame Transform consumes magicules and generates warmth in order to preserve a certain level of heat. The conversion of magic to heat means that leakage of either one essentially causes the same result.

All right. I think I understand, a little. So if I keep the flames locked inside the seal, I don’t have to waste any energy because it’ll stay active without any further work? I’m pretty sure what I learned in physics class on Earth said something a tad different, but—hey—Newton didn’t have to theorize anything about magic over there. He had it easy compared to me. If I started asking questions like “How does it fully enclose the fire?” or “Won’t it burn out once it consumes all the oxygen in the barrier?” I wouldn’t get anywhere in this world.

Besides, for now, the Flame Transform wasn’t as important as the Ranged Barrier as a form of self-defense. Would that work if I had it cover me alone, a form I decided to just call my Barrier for brevity’s sake? I had the perfect skill to test that with. Yep: Time for another Replication.

I had been a little reticent to test certain aspects of my skill set, just in case I damaged myself in the process, but Replication provided an efficient answer for that. My copies, after all, had the exact same abilities I did, except for the unique skills. Those were exclusive to me, I guess, and while I could have my copies use those while they were close by, once they went out of my sight, that was it for uniques. All except for my consuming skills, which were closely entwined enough with my slime identity that even my copies could use them a little.

As long as I was half a mile or so away from my copies, I had full control over them. Anything beyond that, and they wouldn’t be able to parse anything except for very simple commands. I still had an insight into their line of view, however, and my Thought Communication skill let me give new commands anytime I wanted. The perfect spy tool, in other words, but that was beside the point of this test run.

So I created a clone of myself and cast a Barrier on it. Then I shot one of my Water Blades at it. It was sharp as a knife—I could see that much as it ripped through the air—but it shattered into nothing in front of my copy. A perfect block by the Barrier. Pretty strong, then. Just like I expected.

I then tried practicing to see if I could fire off Water Blades while keeping the Barrier on myself. That turned out to be simpler than I thought. I just had to create a little jet shooter out of my finger and fire away. These shots, in turn, would be enclosed in their own miniature Barrier, a bit like a large soap bubble splitting into two smaller ones. That these tiny force fields expanded the Blades’ strength and range was another unexpected benefit.

The testing continued with Poisonous Breath and Paralyzing Breath, and along the way, I realized that taking damage while under a Barrier consumed my magic. Not with Paralyzing Breath—the Barrier did a fine job absorbing that—but Poison Mist drained it immediately, dismantling the whole Barrier once the magic was gone. Of course, this also meant that as long as I charged up the Barrier with enough magic, it would provide some temporary poison protection.

I applied more magic to the next barrier and placed it on my clone. A few more shots of Poison Mist confirmed it—the more magic I laid on, the longer the Barrier would hold up. It proved to be pretty damn durable, in fact. Even more so if the Barrier was covering the original instead of a clone, I assumed, to the point that Poison Mist–style attacks were likely nothing to worry about. Now that’s armor I could count on.

The final experiment of the day involved using Flame Transform alongside Ranged Barrier. The results were…fascinating.

Damn right it’s A rank. At least.

A Flame Transform inside a Flare Circle barrier would expose anything organic inside the barrier to several thousand degrees of heat, scorching them instantly. Being confined to a restricted space did wonders for the attack’s strength. It cooked the very air itself, robbing it of all oxygen and searing the lungs of its victims before they knew what had happened. Any creature who breathed air would face little chance of survival.

I didn’t have to worry about breathing, of course, and my Resist Temperature tolerance would take care of me anyway. For anyone else, though, it was a death sentence. In a way, it was a relief. Without a body that just happened to be so adaptable to Ifrit’s attacks, my chances of victory would have been pretty slim.

Still, this was another overpowered skill, and I’d need to deliberate over it a bit more. Shizu had a Cancel Flame Attack tolerance, perhaps a side effect of merging with Ifrit. This kept her safe from fire strikes or extremely hot environments—a bit like my Resist Temperature, except without the cold protection, although it offered even more insulation against heat. Cancel must have been a higher level than Resist in this hierarchy, and considering Resist Temperature was already an upgraded tolerance, Cancel Flame Attack must’ve provided a fantastic amount of protection.

So all and all, the experiments bore a lot more fruit than expected. Nothing I could’ve learned inside my own tent; I would’ve torched the village immediately.

Happy with the results, I returned to the village. I didn’t need sleep, but replenishing my magicule stores was vital, and rest was the best way to do that. I’d had enough of being forced into sleep mode, and it was never a good idea to overdo things anyway. No need to panic. I had all the time in the world.

The next day, I stopped by Garm’s cabin for a fitting session. They were still stitching up my outfit, but Haruna had some mass-manufactured armor and clothing for me to try on.

“Oh my! It looks quite good indeed, my lord.”

It felt like she was playing dress-up with me somewhat, like a child and her doll, but Haruna and her coworkers seemed to love it, so I let it slide. We found an outfit in their equipment that fit perfectly, so I went with that for the time being. It was basically the same as the rest of the hobgoblins’ wear, but it felt surprisingly comfy. Garm must have been pretty good with his hands, after all.

“Hmm,” I said, “not bad. Easy to move in, and it looks sturdy enough.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Glad to hear it, boss. Just you wait until your own custom outfit’s all wrapped up!”

I was starting to look forward to it. I had given him the skin from the boss direwolf I dispatched a while ago, so in terms of fashion and function, it ought to be first-rate.

I stepped out of Garm’s workshop with great anticipation, still in child form since there was no reason to abandon my new outfit just yet. I was expecting a few arched eyebrows, but everyone passing by immediately smiled and opened the road to me. They must have recognized me all the same, which I was pondering when I ran into Rigurd out surveying the scene.

“Hey, Rigurd. Things going well?”

“Ah, Sir Rimuru!” He beamed back at me, instantly making out who I was. “Things could hardly be going better, and we all have you to thank for it!”

“So you can tell who I am? I’m not in slime form.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Of course, my lord! The elegance you project from every pore of your body is unmistakable!”

So now I was just projecting how awesome I was, whether I intended to or not. Not an aura, but just…sheer class? Perhaps my naming them all had something to do with it, but regardless of the reason, I didn’t care as long as people knew who I was.

With that concern out of the way, I decided to stage another experimental session down at the cave, telling Rigurd not to bother me unless it was an emergency. I was working with some rather potent offense again that day, and I didn’t want to put anyone in danger.

“Yes, my lord! By the way, I imagine you have no need for food today?”

The question made me give Rigurd a thoughtful look. Oh! Of course! Why did I forget about that? I’ve got this lovely new human body, and I haven’t even tried eating anything yet!

“Actually, hold on. I think I’m going to eat with you guys starting today.”

“Y-you will , my lord?!” Another beaming smile—which always looked a bit threatening from hobgoblins, but it wasn’t their fault. “Well, we must hold a feast today to celebrate the occasion! I will instruct Lilina to prepare a sumptuous spread for us all!”

I was just as happy as he was. I didn’t feel hungry, no, but it would technically be the first solid food I’d had in ages. It was exciting.

A distance away from the village, I stumbled upon Rigur and Gobta.

“Hey,” I said. “I guess there’s a party at the village today, so try to hunt down something tasty for Lilina, would you? I’m capable of eating food now, so let’s make this an evening to remember!”

“Ah, Sir Rimuru!” Rigur exclaimed. “Is that so? Well then, I will provide the most succulent cowdeer I can!”

Cowdeer? Cow…deer? The name made it easy to imagine the sort of animal he was talking about. People around here seemed to dig it. I was starting to seriously look forward to this.

“By the way, Sir Rimuru, to what do we owe the occasion of your new appearance?”

“Heh-heh-heh! How kind of you to notice, Gobta! Life as a slime is pretty easy for me, but going around as a human ain’t too shabby, either. It offers a lot more command over the five senses than I enjoyed as a slime, for one. Taste, in particular. That, and this form makes it easier for me to interact with you guys.”

I had already reproduced all my old senses pretty well except for taste in slime form, but being a human still felt more…natural, somehow. Although being a slime was second nature at this point.

“Oh, I see!” Gobta shouted. “I would like to interact with you, too, Sir Rimuru, but I do prefer more curves, sir!”

“That’s not what I meant by ‘interacting,’ you idiot!”

I rewarded his observation with a reverse roundhouse kick. My body moved exactly as I instructed it, which meant my right foot struck home in the pit of his stomach. The pain caused him to pass out, and really, I couldn’t think of any better medicine for such a fool.

“My apologies, Sir Rimuru. I ensure you I will instill some discipline in Gobta later.”

“Sure. I’m not that offended. But thanks in advance for the meat.”

“But of course! We’ve had a number of herds migrating from deeper within the forest, so the pickings are quite good. We won’t let you down!”

“Oh? Something up in the forest?”

“Indeed, we occasionally see large-scale migrations of magical beasts, due to changes in habitat or other factors. I doubt it is anything serious, but we are stepping up our patrols.”

That struck me as odd. He was probably right—it’d be nothing—but you always need to stay a step ahead on these things. So I summoned Ranga and assigned him to sentry duty with Rigurd and his team. Nothing he couldn’t handle, I was sure.

In a moment, Ranga stepped out from my shadow. I was capable of summoning him now—my pride forbade me from being unable to do something Gobta could handle with such ease. I had been practicing on the sly for a while.

“You called, Sir Rimuru?”

“I did. I want you to join Rigurd’s team in the forest. I doubt you’ll see anything, but if you do, keep the team safe.”

“Yes, my lord. I will make it so.” His face was meek and docile, but his tail was wagging like mad, as if nothing pleased him more than being bossed around. He was back to normal size now—which still meant he was six and a half feet tall, or thereabouts—so the wagging didn’t kick up any gale-force winds, at least. I was glad to see he was listening to my training.

“Keep a close eye out, Ranga. And if you see anything, Rigur, let me know.”

“Ha-ha-ha! There is hardly a thing to worry about, Sir Rimuru. I hope you have a hearty appetite worked up!”

He was right. Maybe I was overthinking it. Ranga was at least a B-plus in terms of strength—maybe even an A-minus by now. His class was on the upper end of what you saw in the Forest of Jura. He’d be fine. The thought of all that roasted fantasy-monster meat in my mouth was making my brain catastrophize over nothing.

“I’ll be sure I do. I’ll be in the cave, so let me know if something comes up.”

Then I nodded at Rigur and left.

The excitement was welling within me all the way to the cave. Actual roast meat! There was no way I could expect much from hobgoblin haute cuisine, but if all they were doing was grilling up some meat and plants and such, what could go wrong? They probably wouldn’t season it with much apart from salt, but oh well.

…But hold on. Do they bother adding any seasoning at all? I hadn’t thought about it, since I had no sense of taste. They’ve got to use salt, at least. Maybe I should find some rock salt and build a little supply for myself, just in case.

The Analysis skill provided by the Great Sage let me track down some rocks with salt content in them. Predation let me suck it in and extract the salt, and I just tossed the rest. Couldn’t be easier.

Though was it really all right to use my skills for stuff like this? Hmm. It has to be. What’s the harm in using the tools I have?

So with the salt in hand… Oh wait, I was testing out my skills, wasn’t I? I was so distracted by the upcoming feast that I lost track of my original mission. I shook the cobwebs out of my head as I headed for yesterday’s underground cavern.

Today, I wanted to try my hand at some Control Flame maneuvers.

It was, as one would expect, an extra skill to control flame. You could build up your body’s temperature and the ambient heat in the palm of your hand, focus it on a single fingertip, or just whip up a campfire on the ground wherever you liked, no actual wood or kindling required.

That, however, was it. Hence, why it’s an extra skill. Nothing that powerful. I couldn’t, like, set my finger on fire or shoot flames from my palms. I thought I could maybe release the heat from my fingertip like a sci-fi laser rifle, but I was sorely disappointed. And forget about triggering explosions like Shizu did with ease. She was probably fusing this with some of her own magic to do that.

Hang on. Fusing with magic…?

Suddenly, the Flame Transform I had worked on the day before came to mind. Back there, I had changed my “form” into a grown adult and infused my own body with that skill—but as I’d thought about it overnight, I realized I could try working Flame Transform on my internal magic stores instead. For spirit beings, Flame Transform turned their “body” into energy waves, but I figured there was no rule that said I had to use it that way.

For example, what if I released some magic and worked Flame Transform on that? And if I could then take the results over with Control Flame…

Received. It is possible to combine the Mimic aspect of your Predator unique skill, Flame Transform, the extra skill Control Flame, and the unique skill Deviant. Execute?

Yes

No

Hee-hee-heeeee. Just like I thought. “Yes” it is, then.

Pretty surprising to find this unexpected quirk of Deviant, before I even had a chance to fully examine it. I felt like I’d been introduced to some new kink—a bit guiltily, but at the same time, I was just beginning to realize the extent of this new world.

Report. Flame Transform and the extra skills Control Flame and Control Water will disappear following the combination. In its place, you will have earned Dark Flame and the extra skill Control Particles. Resist Temperature will also evolve into Cancel Temperature. This will eliminate the extra skill Cancel Flame Attack.

I gave the order, and the Sage did the rest. The results let me earn a new skill far more easily than I would’ve guessed. Losing Control Water along the way was a regret, but I figured it was because I could do the same thing with Control Particles well enough. Time to try ’em out.

Dark Flame was a skill that let me release flames from my body whenever I focused my internal magic force. I created a field of magic, transformed it into flame, then launched it away—thus, creating fire from thin air. I could also adjust the temperature based on how much magic I used.

If I wanted to grab someone’s head and immediately encase it in flames, it’d be possible (albeit a tad toasty). If I wanted to focus the flames on my palm and shoot them off, no problem. Basically, I pictured it as gathering a bunch of magicules in a single place, setting them on fire, then releasing—somewhat like how my Water Blades worked.

I fired a shot of this at a nearby boulder. It immediately burst into flames—and judging by how the surface was literally melting, it had to be pushing 1,500 degrees again, about the same as with Flame Transform. What a weapon I’ve stumbled upon. I could probably get it even hotter, depending on how much magic I crammed into it, and if I worked it on a larger scale, maybe I could trigger an even larger explosion. Better practice that. Never know when I might need it.

Now I could work these flames however I wanted without thinking too deeply about it, and I suppose I had Control Particles to thank for that. Working the magicules around me allowed me to control the paths of other molecules in the air, creating heat from the resulting friction. Since I was controlling magic to move these particles around, I could boost the temperature simply by using a little more force.

It had come all too easily, but Control Particles was a fearsome tool to add to my arsenal. The Great Sage attempted to explain the ability over the course of several minutes, using all kinds of unfamiliar jargon and logic, but I cut it off. It was indecipherable, a total waste of time. I figured it would handle the details for me anyway.

More interesting was that now I could apparently control the very air molecules around me. My understanding of Dark Flame was that it transformed magicules into flame to create searing temperatures, but if I could make any sort of molecules rub against one another for similar effects, could I use that to create electricity, perhaps? Like, say, what if I linked Dark Lightning up with Control Particles…?

Received. It is possible to link Dark Lightning with the extra skill Control Particles. Execute?

Yes

No

Looks like I was right. Yes , I thought to myself—and with that, the skill Dark Thunder was mine. This, by and large, gave me access to Dark Lightning–type skills without the need to transform my body into a Twilight Starwolf, as well as adjust its strength to some extent. The wolves could use the dual horns on their heads to fine-tune the intensity and range of their attacks, but Dark Thunder eliminated the need for all that.

I tried summoning some electricity between my thumb and pointer. An arc of bluish-white energy danced between them. Just like with Dark Lightning, I could freely control its size and force with the amount of supernatural energy and magicules I used—from a light, paralyzing jolt to a vaporizing thunderclap.

Honestly, this Control Particles stuff was getting a little godlike. It was nothing all that exciting by itself, but when paired with other skills, it turned into a juggernaut.

Although, really, it was my Sage unique skill that was creating all this, alongside the Deviant skill that Shizu left for me. If it weren’t for that, then…

…Hey, what kind of skill is Deviant anyway?

Received. The unique skill Deviant is capable of the following…

To sum up what the Sage told me, Deviant’s effects could be broadly divided into two categories.

Synthesize:

Transform two differing targets into a single object.

Separate:

Release the properties inherent to the target and make it into a separate object. (The original object may disappear if it has no physical form.)

This appeared to be the main engine behind Shizu’s transformation. Human and spiritual forms, two very different things, synthesized into a single creature. It was hard to say whether Ifrit took Shizu over first, or if Shizu invented the Deviant skill to keep Ifrit from staging a complete power grab. There was no way of knowing for sure now, but either way, it was clear I could adapt this skill for a number of things.

I already knew that Synthesize could be applied to skills, leading to all manner of other combinations. Perhaps it could be combined with magic as well? Maybe fusing flame and wind to create hurricanes? Or maybe I could give magical effects to weapons and trigger a special attack with just a little magic force?

To give you my honest opinion, this Deviant skill was a scarily good fit with my own skill set. As a slime, I wasn’t capable of nervous sweating, but I might as well have been. A few quick experiments had already given me Control Particles and Dark Flame, and I now also had full control over electrical attacks. There were tons of monsters left for me to Predate and glean new skills from, and I planned to do that as much as I could.

And for that matter, could I use the Separate function to seize skills from my enemies?

Received. It depends on the specific scenario. However, erasing or separating skills etched into the target’s soul is not possible.

So it couldn’t do everything . But it’d work sometimes? I’d need to figure out exactly what was available to Separate from my target first.

But really, Synthesize was the biggest prize with Deviant. I was planning to take a lot of skills from a lot of monsters going forward, and seeing what kind of things I could create from them was already getting me excited.

I suppose it was all thanks to the Great Sage, but either way, Predator and Deviant made for a potent duo. It didn’t exactly have the most attractive name, but in Deviant, Shizu had given me one hell of a farewell gift.

I decided to wrap up that day’s session with a few Cancel Temperature tests. Temperature covered both fire and ice, I supposed, and considering even Resist Temperature was enough to handle Ifrit’s mega-charged fire, having an upgraded version should handle most attacks tossed my way. Anything short of being launched into the sun like a slingshot, at least.

There was a barbecue waiting, and I wanted to wrap this up quickly. But defensive skills directly contributed to the preservation of my life. I had to figure out what I had.

Just as I had yesterday, I used a sizable amount of magicules to create a Replicated slime body. Something about attacking a cloned, naked human resembling a young girl gave me pause. I could probably summon up some clothing or armor once I was more versed, but that didn’t make this any less in bad taste. (Slimes were pretty cute themselves, but if I wanted to do any real experimentation, I had to beat up something .)

I knew from yesterday that I could apply a Barrier to block my own Water Blades. Now, let’s try attacking it with Dark Flame.

Using the same level of magical energy as before to smash Dark Flame against a Barrier, I found that it succeeded in fully blocking the heat. Not bad. If it could annul Ifrit’s Flare Circle, it could handle well near anything, I supposed, to say nothing of Icicle Lance. So I was good against hot and cold, then?

Received. Cancel Temperature is linked with Ranged Barrier, thus canceling the effects of temperature-related attacks.

Ah, perfect. If Shizu possessed Cancel Flame Attack, Ifrit must as well, since it let them each handle such high-temperature attacks in the first place. It seemed like the perfect tool. Now that it was combined with Resist Temperature, I had nothing to worry about from ice, either.

Removing the link for a moment, I tried Dark Flame once more. This time, it smashed through the Barrier instantly, but my Replicated clone was perfectly safe. Resist Melee Attack must have helped absorb some of the shock wave-based aftereffects.

Between all these resistances and my Barrier, I figured I could rest pretty easy when it came to my own defenses. Better not forget to link all this stuff with the Barrier first, though.

Received. Ranged Barrier is now linked with your resistances. Relaunch as Multilayer Barrier?

Yes

No

As it turned out, I couldn’t create a single Barrier with lots of different effects applied to it, but I was free to create multiple Barriers with one resistance effect each. So “yes” it was, once again, and the moment I thought it, I could feel a thin, colorless, invisible coating come over me. It was a Multilayer Barrier, consisting of several layers but still so thin that my Magic Sense skill could only barely spot it. It didn’t require much magic energy to keep going, either—once it was summoned, it barely consumed any at all, far less than I could naturally recover by myself.

Another great success for today, then. There were still some potential skill combinations I wanted to work my mind around, but for now, I had done more than enough. I had gained more offense and defense, and as I departed the cavern, I felt more than satisfied.

Making my way down the path to the exit I had memorized, I thought about ways to suppress the mystical aura I had a tendency to exude.

It was just the occasional light aura of magicules, and while I could keep it down if I thought about it, for some reason, it’d just appear while I wasn’t paying attention. With all the energy I had absorbed after defeating and consuming Ifrit, it was getting difficult to hide.

I ran into another giant centipede on the way up, but it simply gave me a quick glance before scurrying away. So now did all the other residents of this cave. Glad to see I was finally getting a rep around here, but really, it was probably that aura more than anything.

The Multilayer Barrier did wonders to hide it, but my presence still leaked out a tiny bit—or, to be more exact, the Multilayer Barrier itself was exuding a bit of force. It beat letting my power roll off me without any cover, but it didn’t really help much.

If I could do something permanent about this aura, I could probably pass for a human pretty much anywhere, but…

Suddenly, an idea came to mind. I reached into one pocket and took something out—a beautiful, fetching mask. The Mask of Magic Resistance, the lone physical memento I had to remember Shizu by. I had absorbed the broken pieces with Predator and reassembled them with my body. Maybe this mask could block it?

It was a magic item, one infused with four effects: Magic Resist, Antidote, Breathing Support, and Amplify Senses. Pretty valuable, I imagined. Also, the likely reason why Shizu could breathe normally when summoning fiery explosions within point-blank range of herself. Breathing Support probably kept her lungs full even as the flames consumed the oxygen around her—not that I needed that with my body. I could Synthesize up a respiratory system if I really wanted to, but I didn’t. Maybe this mask could convince people that I was breathing, though. It wasn’t useful now, but it could be depending on the kind of people I ran into.

The other effects—Antidote and Amplify Senses—seemed a lot more useful to your average adventurer, if not to me. The one effect I needed the most was Magic Resist, which could both dull any magic attacks enemies cast and (hopefully) hide my internal magical force.

I put it on. It had an oddly calming effect, and it seemed to fit pretty well. The moment I applied it, the aura pouring out of me immediately dispelled. Nice. Let’s go with this whenever I’m bumping around the outside world.

So that wrapped up another nagging issue. Good. And I had some nice, juicy grilled meat waiting. As I made my way back aboveground, I was filled with glee.

………

……

…

My first decent meal in ages—turned out to be wishful thinking.

The moment I stepped out of the cave, I could instantly feel that someone was fighting. The magicules in the air were stirring, disturbing the surrounding atmosphere.

The meat would have to wait. I gave up on it and made my way in the direction of the particle surge. On the other end…

I found nothing short of a battle to the death.

I could hear screaming as I approached the scene of the battle.

It was Gobta.

He was crossing swords with an elderly white-haired ogre, but he was far out of his league. Whatever physical strength and agility this adversary had lost over the years, his swordsmanship and footwork made it clear he was no amateur. Gobta, meanwhile, was totally an amateur. I had to hand it to him for managing to stay alive up to this point. He seemed to be holding his own for now, wildly flinging his body around to dodge the ogre’s strikes, but his astounding luck could only save him for so long.

A moment later, the elderly ogre closed the distance between them and landed a single slash across Gobta’s whole chest, right before my eyes.

“Gaahhhh!!” he shouted as he rolled on the ground. “Oh, that hurts! I—I may die! I may very well die here!!”

I figured he was fine if he had the energy to plead his case with that much gusto. Besides, to my eye, his opponent didn’t seemed very intent on killing him.

Noticing my presence, the wizened ogre abandoned the fight, confident enough that Gobta was no longer a threat.

“Calm down, you. The wound is a shallow one.”

“Gah, Sir Rimuru! Are you here because you were concerned about me, my lord?!”

“Yes,” I said, “and I’m glad you’re in good shape. Don’t need a recovery potion or anything, I see.”

“Whoa, I, um, please? I—I apologize if I didn’t make that clear enough!”

Yeah, he was fine. His wild instincts must’ve propelled him to the ground, preventing him from being any more seriously injured. So I tossed him a bit of potion, more to shut him up than anything. One flask was plenty. The old ogre didn’t move while I administered treatment; it seemed like he was observing me instead. It was a little unnerving.

The area around us was littered with fallen hobgoblin warriors and tempest wolves. None appeared to be dead, but knocking them all out without dealing any grievous wounds would’ve taken some serious talent. A magical strike, perhaps.

Farther off, I spotted a purple-haired ogress fighting with Rigur. This, too, was sadly one-sided. The ogress, wielding an iron mace that was little more than an enormous hunk of metal, was apparently blessed with superhuman strength. Rigur’s sword was starting to bend against it, and his wooden shield was long since battered to splinters. It wouldn’t be long before he was out of the picture, too.

Ranga, noticing me, sprang to my side. “Sir Rimuru,” he said, “my deepest apologies. I was here, and yet, look at this disaster…”

I stopped him mid-sentence. This wasn’t Ranga’s fault; they just had the misfortune of running into the wrong adversary. These were ogres, one of the highest-level races in the Forest of Jura, and no hobgoblin could hope to last too long against them.

“Hold your weapons,” I softly ordered Rigur and the other stragglers. He instantly did so upon hearing my command. The ogress, instead of striking any further blows, gave me a thoughtful look. She was large-framed, muscular, but still in proportion. Her chest was formed enough to make her identifiable as female, and to my surprise, she looked quite a bit more noble than I expected.

I ordered Ranga to take the exhausted Rigur away. The ogres, while still wary of me, made no move to stop him.

“S-Sir Rimuru… I—I cannot express my sorrow…”

Rigur, covered in scratches from head to toe, could barely form a single word or two between breaths. Against the purple-haired ogre, he had little chance of victory. His skills maybe hovered around B rank on a good day.

“Don’t worry,” I said as I gave him a potion. None of his injuries were serious, so his recovery wouldn’t take long. “Just get rested and leave this to me. Ranga, what happened to all these fallen fighters?”

“Ah, that—”

According to him, magic had felled them all. It was some sort of sleeping spell, and none had managed to resist it in time. Good thing it wasn’t a confusion-type, at least. That could’ve been murder.

Magic, though… Talk about drawing the short straw.



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I took a moment to calmly assess the situation.

There were six of them, and they were a rather odd group, one that totally contradicted my conventional wisdom of the ogre race. They were fully clothed, and dressed well, if simply. I was expecting tiger-skin loincloths and little else, but I was wrong. They were big, as I’d pictured, and each one was well-built, but their full wardrobe was a surprise.

If they were this well-dressed (and wielded magic to boot), they had to be highly intelligent. Perhaps more dangerous than an equivalent party of human adventurers, even.

If you took two races of equal physical strength, the presence or lack of intelligence could make a huge difference in danger level. That went double for such a high-level race. These monsters were B rank or higher as it was; if they were further armed and working together, they could’ve even hunted down Ranga.

The ogres’ weapons made me curious, too. That they had weapons wasn’t unusual—if even goblins could buy them from dwarves, pretty much anything with a pulse could. But there was a difference between simple clubs and full-on swords. Eastern-style ones, too, very different from the dwarven Western types that worked more like bludgeons.

The elderly ogre who felled Gobta wielded a sword that could only be described as a Japanese-style katana. And judging by how he handled it, he was a seasoned swordsman. That, combined with his ogre strength and magic, made this group potentially lethal.

That magic was apparently provided by the pink-haired ogress off to the side, dressed in a remarkably elaborate outfit. She had a sweet but extremely resolute face, and the way she carried herself suggested she was a noble among her race, perhaps some sort of demon princess.

The most dangerous of all, though, was undoubtedly the red-haired ogre.

“What sort of evil monster is this?!” the pink-haired one shouted as I gauged them all. “Stay on your guard, everyone!”

Her expression appeared to be honest fear now, and with her eyes fixed on mine, she must have been referring to me…

“Whoa, wait a sec. You think I’m evil?”

“Oh, attempting to play dumb, is it?” the pink-haired ogress countered. “No good-hearted human would ever have control over such a heinous horde of monsters. You appear to be hiding your magical aura from us, but you are fooling no one! Did you think you could deceive us?”

“You cannot pull the wool over our princess’s eyes! Reveal your true self, now!” the black-haired ogre bellowed.

“How nice for the mastermind to appear before us at such an early stage!” continued the elderly one. “With their sparse numbers, we have every hope of victory!”

They didn’t sound too interested in listening to me, then. I did my best to plead my case, claiming this was all a misunderstanding, but to no avail. They insisted I was a sinister presence, and that was that.

And so…

“Enough of this,” the red-haired ogre snarled. “If you insist on making such flimsy excuses, we have ways of making you reveal the truth. We know you are with the evil pigs who dared attack our allies!”

This made no sense. But a battle now seemed unavoidable. I could have easily fled, but there were still sleeping hobgoblins and tempest wolves all around me. I wasn’t heartless enough to leave them vulnerable.

“Sir Rimuru,” Ranga asked, “what will we do?”

Even a freshly healed Rigur and Gobta wouldn’t help us much. Ranga and I were the only really useful fighters. So I decided to point him at the magician.

“I want you to take on the pink-haired ogress over there. I think there’s something else going on here, so I want to get through to them. Meaning: Don’t kill anyone, all right? I don’t want any more magic tossed around, so just run a little interference for me. I can defeat the rest.”

“But, Sir Rimuru, you against five ogres…?”

“Don’t sweat it. Like, I couldn’t possibly lose.”

The ogres within earshot stirred angrily. I didn’t care.

“…Yes, my lord!”

Following my orders, Ranga zoomed into action. The ogres immediately fanned out in formation.

I took a moment to figure out how I was going to handle this. I wasn’t lying before—I really didn’t think I could lose. Based on my experimentation over the past two days, I knew I had gotten more than a fair bit stronger. Ifrit was well past A rank, apparently, and since he was part of me now, I had to be A level.

Rigurd said ogres were around B to B-plus, meanwhile, and considering the stately dress of the ones before me, we might be dealing with A-minuses, even—but stronger than Ifrit? Yeah, right.

It’d be easy to kill them, I thought, but our inability to talk this out was concerning. If they clearly wanted to murder us, that would be one thing, but they had killed none of my allies. And while they weren’t willing to listen to me, I was sure they would if we could all just chill for a second.

So I took action, making a beeline for the dark-haired ogre. My body felt light as it obeyed my thoughts. I had been human for a relatively short while, but already it seemed to fit me like a glove. The difference in height from my slime form didn’t bother me, either, since Magic Sense gave me a 360-degree insight into my surroundings.

Rearing back in surprise at my sudden advance, the dark-hair steadied himself, eyes wide open. He was still too late.

“Take a rest!” I shouted, bringing my left palm toward him. A small vent opened up, and within a moment, it was spitting out a black mist toward the flabbergasted ogre—the Paralyzing Breath I’d taken from the cave centipedes.

I’d figured I could belch it out now that I was in control of this body, and I was right. Mimicking only the monster skills I needed wasn’t exactly a finesse move, but it worked.

Report. Mimicry of the unique skill Predator, combined with the synthesis and separation skills of the unique skill Deviant, has earned you the extra skill Universal Shapeshift.

Not only did it work, it bore unexpected fruit.

I had wondered, with my Deviant skill’s synthesis and separation traits, could I just recreate whatever unique aspect of a monster’s abilities I happened to need at the time and nothing else? Despite testing it out on the field for the first time, it went pretty darn well, I think.

Now I could transform smoothly, without a lot of effort on my part, and I could even select the part of the monster I wanted—for that matter, busting out traits from multiple monsters at once. Using a direwolf or a black snake as a base would make me look like some weirdo chimera, but I was free to use my human form instead, apparently.

The most notable trait of this skill: I could control all my abilities at once without much limit. In other words, I had even more freedom with my attacks than before.

The black-haired ogre shuddered, mist covering his entire body. He fell to the ground, still bolt upright and unable to move. Facing the brunt of my B-plus-level black centipede transformation was enough to stop even him in his tracks.

But the ogres weren’t your run-of-the-mill foes. The moment I felled the black-haired one like a mighty tree, two others lunged at me. In a moment, the purple-haired ogress was upon me, cannonball-like mace swinging in the air. The blue-haired one was lurking behind her shadow, ready to land a surprise attack when I wasn’t paying attention. It was a well-practiced example of teamwork, but with Magic Sense, I could see it coming a mile away. Veldora had told me no one would ever sneak up on me again, and he was right.

The noble-faced ogress sneered, eyes like two long slits. I waited for the moment she raised her mace high, then pointed my left hand at her and unleashed a spinning flurry of Sticky Steel Thread. The flexible strands, strong enough to even keep Ifrit restrained, had been synthesized with Deviant to grow even more durable. They now cocooned the ogress, and she couldn’t escape, no matter how she struggled. All that training really did pay off.

As I sung my own praises in my mind, a sword shot at me from a blind spot below. The blue-haired swordsman had aimed straight for my heart. But I didn’t panic. Magic Sense had told me he was there, so I was just thinking about how I’d handle him.

I decided to use my right arm as a shield to deflect the straight sword. After the dull thunk of steel striking against something solid, the sword broke neatly in two.

The ogre’s eyes widened in surprise as I landed my follow-up, a straight jab from a scaly right arm. I had deployed Body Armor—the scale defense from the lizards in the cave—up and down my hand and forearm, and it made short work of the blue-hair’s chest plate. It shattered, ensuring I had defanged him without hurting myself a single bit along the way. I didn’t really need Body Armor here—Resist Melee Attack linked with Multilayer Barrier was enough to annul any potential damage to my arm—but hey, just in case, you know?

That meant three ogres were out of the picture. That left the pink-haired ogress Ranga was tangling with, the haughty-looking red-haired one, and the elder ogre, still standing there and gauging my every move.

“Do you see how strong I am now? Are you willing to hear me out a little?”

“Silence! Now I am more convinced than ever—you lie at the very root of this calamity. It was your cohorts who led those fetid pigs to destroy our home, was it not? A simple horde of orcs would never be enough to defeat us normally. It was you! The magic-born who doomed us!”

Um? The magic-born who what? This was getting to be one serious misunderstanding. And when that red-haired ogre said pigs , was he talking about orcs? Rigur and his crew had suggested there was some kind of struggle going on over forest territory…

“Wait, you’ve got the wrong—”

I attempted to state my case, only to be stopped by a premonition behind me. I turned around—the elder wasn’t there. Was the other one lecturing me just to divert my attention?!

In a panic, I turned, blocking a strike from behind with my right hand. It was a shock, someone evading Magic Sense to get so close undetected. Thankfully, the unique Great Sage skill sped up my thought processes to a thousand times faster than normal. The elder unsheathed his blade in a flash, and I was just barely in time.

But something about my arm felt unusual. My skill set kept me from experiencing pain, but—oops—he had lopped the thing right off. This old guy’s skills were incredible. Even with Multilayer Barrier and Body Armor in place, it was like he could cut through paper.

“Mmh… I must be growing senile. I was sure I had decapitated you there…”

Senile, my ass. His physical skills were no match for his companions, but his speed was ridiculous. He was lethal.

Retrieving my amputated arm, I stepped back a little ways.

“Sir Rimuru?!”

“Stay back! I’m fine!” I shouted, shooing Ranga away. The elder was too dangerous for him to handle. He looked confused for a moment but turned his attention back to the pink-haired ogress, apparently trusting me.

“I will not miss next time,” the elder said as he resheathed his sword and readied it anew.

No way I would underestimate his advanced age now. I needed to show him everything I had.

Apparently waiting for the moment I was fully focused on him, he leaped up, and with a shout of “Die for my comrades!” slashed at me from my flank.

“Hah!” the red-haired ogre shouted, still targeting me. “Losing an arm should be the end for you. You were strong, I’ll grant you that, but you were arrogant. You thought you could take us on alone, but that was your undoing!”

He had a unique way of moving, too, one that let him stab at my weaker points head-on. He must have seen me as enough of a threat to not bother keeping alive.

Master-level teamwork like this was a huge pain in the ass. I was incredibly strong, so I didn’t pay much attention to it, but I was really just an amateur in a fight. Whatever rubbed off on me during phys ed class was about all I had.

Getting all serious against a total newbie seemed a little immature, but then again, I did tell them I couldn’t lose. I suppose I had it coming. But I still had to make it out of this scrape, by hook or by crook.

I considered the situation as I worked to keep the two at a distance. Taking them on with a single arm sounded like a steep order, so I used my Predator special skill to reabsorb it. Self-Regeneration, the slime-intrinsic skill I started with, was good enough to heal me when paired with Predator in the past. Hopefully, it could handle more delicate surgeries like this…

Report. Combining the mimicry skill of Predator with the slime-intrinsic skills Dissolve, Absorb, and Self-Regeneration has earned you the extra skill Ultraspeed Regeneration. This comes at the cost of the slime-intrinsic skills Dissolve, Absorb, and Self-Regeneration.

Losing all those slime skills at once seemed kind of a hefty price to pay, but I couldn’t complain about the results. I never used those things anyway, given that Predator covered for them all.

Launching Ultraspeed Regeneration, I focused on rebuilding my right arm. The arm I had consumed was taken apart and instantly absorbed into my body—and in the blink of an eye, it was back. It was crazy fast, like none of my recovery skills from before. “Ultraspeed” was right.

…Oops. No time to gape at my own handiwork. Let’s try a quick bluff.

“Heh-heh-heh… Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Did you think cutting a simple arm or two off meant you had won? Well, sorry to disappoint you. I will admit to underestimating you all earlier, though. Time to get a little serious!”

I removed the mask and placed it in a pocket. The ogres, already spooked at how fast I had rebuilt my arm, were positively stunned by what they saw under the mask. Releasing my full magical aura made my hair begin fluttering in the air. They must’ve instinctively sensed the danger.

“You monster!” the red-haired one intoned. “I’ll kill you with everything I have! Ogre Flame!”

I guess fire was his ace in the hole. I was immediately the center of a hellish vortex that might have been two thousand degrees or more.

“That little spark? That won’t work!”

It would have vaporized anyone other than me, but Cancel Temperature meant that it didn’t even singe my hair.

Seeing his finisher fail so spectacularly sent the red-haired ogre, for the first time, into an obvious panic. He kept his head through sheer force of will, resolutely staring at me. He wasn’t broken yet, I had to hand him that, but considering I didn’t want to kill him if I could, I kind of wish he accepted defeat sooner than later.

Right now would probably be my best chance.

The ogres were by and large stopped, wary of what I might try next. Let’s bust out something huge to break ’em all at once. And if that didn’t work—if they still didn’t want to hear my story—then I’d have no other choice but to finish them off.

Please let this be enough , I prayed as I made my final move.

“You want to see what real fire is like? Look at this!”

I let the Dark Flame whirl around my left arm. I was hamming it up, I knew, but I had to if I wanted to make my foes grovel before me.

“M-my brother!” the pink-haired ogress tangling with Ranga shouted, the fear apparent on her face. “That flame… Your illusory arts are nothing compared to it!”

It shocked her, at least. Her brother’s Ogre Flame was a mystical art, one that turned his very aura into flames. Mine, meanwhile, was an innate skill, which must’ve thrown her a little.

“Heh-heh-heh, you’re right! But I’ve got something even more fun than that!”

Now it was time for some Dark Thunder from my right hand. I needed this to be the clincher, the thing that finally scared them out of their wits. No need to hold back, although I couldn’t waste all my magic on it, either. I adjusted the force to around a third of its usual level, then sent the particles flowing.

“Behold, my true power!” I screamed as I loosed a bolt of Dark Thunder at a handy boulder nearby. It instantly evaporated, and a beat later, a blast echoed. There wasn’t even any soot left behind. Just like when I tested it, maybe even a bit stronger.

Damn, this thing’s crazy! Maybe there was a need to hold back. I knew I had poured fewer magicules into it than last time. It didn’t make sense. It should’ve been a third as strong, enough that I could fire several bolts if I wanted…

Received. Compared to Dark Lightning, Dark Thunder consumes—

I didn’t ask for it, but the Sage swooped in to explain. Basically, it was stronger since it was more focused on delivering a powerful strike on a limited range, which meant it used far less magic. That was why it did more damage with fewer particles.

I was starting to think this Dark Thunder was a bit more unique than I suspected. Just like Dark Flame, it was hard to figure out when it was best to use. It made my heart race, and I was the one wielding it. Good thing I didn’t try it on myself , I thought. It was nothing I could rely on Multilayer Barrier to save me from.

So how will the ogres respond?

“…Tremendous. It pains me to say this, but your powers are in a class far above ours. However, as the next in line to lead my band, I was raised to take pride in my race. How could any leader allow his fallen comrades to suffer in silence? Whether I succeed or not, I must strike a return blow!”

“…Young master, let me join you!”

Great. The exact opposite effect. Now the red- and white-haired ogres were playing the tragic heroes, their faces bewildered. They were ready to sacrifice their lives against me. It wasn’t how I meant to end this, but against that attitude, it’d be hard to suppress them without causing their deaths.

So there’s no other way?

Whether they were mistaken or not, I couldn’t let them run free now—it’d just lead to further trouble later. I hated to say it, but I was starting to understand it was their own damn fault for being so stubborn.

Just then, the fetching ogre princess shouted out.

“Please, wait!”

The pink-haired ogress stood before her red-haired brother, arms open wide to stop him in his tracks.

“My brother, you must think calmly about this. Such an all-powerful magic-born using low-minded tricks to send the pigs to our homeland? It is absurd, for he himself is strong enough to lay waste to all of us single-handedly. He is unique, to be certain, but I am no longer sure he is with the horde that attacked us.”

“What?!” The flustered redhead looked at me. “But…perhaps…”

“Guys, I keep telling you, you’ve got me all wrong! Are you finally ready to listen?”

Steam was billowing from the spot where the vaporized boulder used to be. It was more than enough to back up the ogre princess’s argument. The redhead glanced at her, then me again, finally falling to a knee.

“My apologies. Perhaps I was driven into having the wrong idea about you. I hope you will accept my deepest regrets.”

So he finally admitted he was maybe wrong about this. I appreciated the thought. It came as a relief.

“Well, no point talking here. How about we go back to the village? You guys come along. I’ll be glad to feed you, at least.”

And so the conflict that started for reasons unbeknownst came to a peaceful conclusion.

The hobgoblins began to awaken, perhaps because the princess released the spell on them. It must have been one heck of a charm, considering all the noise from my magic didn’t bother them at all. For my part, I released the Sticky Steel Thread covering the purple-hair and sprinkled a bit of potion on the unconscious blue-hair.

I wasn’t exactly sure what to do with the black-hair, but it turned out Deviant was more than enough to separate the paralysis from his body. Normally, you’d need magic or medicine to handle that. I’d used Paralyzing Breath without thinking of the consequences very much—I’d have to make sure there was an easy way to undo it next time. That, I regretted a little.

Nobody was seriously hurt, so we all headed for the village. And just like they promised before I left, there was some magnificent food waiting. That’s Rigurd for you. The ultimate bureaucrat. His organization skills were nuts.

I still didn’t feel hungry, but I had been looking forward to this since morning. It had been a physically active day, and between that and the test of my taste sense coming up, I was champing at the bit.

And here it came. That first forkful of meat.

It’s so gooooood!!

I thought I might cry.

The flavoring was a worry for me earlier, but they had taken the juice from assorted types of fruit to make a sauce. The promotion to hobgoblin status must’ve upgraded their palates, too, and they were now experimenting with all sorts of new recipes.

This magical beast was cowdeer, right? Well cooked, it was tasty enough even without any extra spices or such, but adding some fruit to the mix provided a very different—and very engaging—sensation to my taste buds. It did wonders to mask the gamy flavor and tie a neat little bow over the whole package.

That was how Lilina, the goblin lord overseeing our food stocks, and Haruna, the proud cook, explained it. I followed their suggestions as I cleaned my plate, taking in the experience I’d missed.

Speaking of which, they were pretty ecstatic when I gave them the salt I had collected. They knew what it was, I guess, but had given up on securing any because it was too expensive.

I suppose, to a goblin race mainly preoccupied with survival up to now, seeking out new flavorings wasn’t too high a priority. They got the requisite salt in their diet from the flesh and blood of their prey, and beyond that, they didn’t think deeply about it.

I advised them not to go overboard with their salt intake, just in case. Not that I was sure monsters could suffer from high blood pressure in the first place.

The pink-haired ogre made a surprising contribution, too. She knew a great deal about herbs and aromatics and the like, and she brought in a few wild grasses we could use to hide the meat’s more unpleasant odors. “I hope this will atone for our rudeness a little,” she said as she helped collect the ingredients. She was a high-level creature, and she worked briskly, putting the freshly evolved hobgoblins to shame.

The other ogress—the one with purple hair—was just eating along with the others, though. Perhaps female ogres weren’t necessarily banished to the kitchen in their society. If it was this delicious, I wasn’t going to care about genders.

It wasn’t long before pink-hair was getting along swimmingly with the rest of the goblinas in the village. They’d try to learn as much as they could from her, I was sure. It was nice to have another positive influence around town.

All’s well that ends well, I suppose. The roast-meat feast I was so looking forward to went off without a hitch, and our new companions were all too happy to join us as we drank through the evening.