

CHAPTER 4

THE CONQUEROR OF FLAMES

So there we were. Back at the goblin village. It had been only about two weeks, but I was seriously starting to miss it a little. Assuming you wanted to call it a village at all. It was more of an empty space with a fence around it.

While we were gone, a few simple tents had been pitched around the area. There were signs of progress, at least. I spotted a large iron pot situated over the remains of the central campfire. Goblin cuisine used to be all about spit-roasting—but now they’d added simmering to the mix!

This was a truly remarkable development. Where’d they get that thing? Taking a closer look, I realized it was fashioned from the shell of a big turtle. Man, how much did they expand their hunting grounds while I was gone? I was glad they’d kept their home base safe, at least.

The resident hobgoblins spotted our returning party quickly, greeting us with cheers and applause. I had rudely forgotten to bring souvenirs, but given the monster pelts and such I spotted drying here and there—proceeds from their hunting, no doubt—I was sure the dwarves would have everyone kitted up and clothed before long. I’d like the goblins to make that stuff themselves later, but let’s take it one step at a time.

I tried looking around for Rigurd so I could introduce the dwarves to him. I didn’t need to. He ran right up to me. I thought he was just excited to see us, but he had something bothering him instead.

“Welcome back!” he said before I could ask. “I hate to bother you so soon after returning, Sir Rimuru, but we have visitors…”

Visitors? …But I don’t remember having any friends.

I decided to let the dwarves show themselves around. They’d be living here for a while, and I was sure they were curious to see what it was like. I also stowed the tools I’d brought along in an empty tent, figuring the covering would at least offer some protection against the elements.

Leaving our new residents to Rigur, I had the elder guide me to our guests. He took me to one of the larger tents, which had been converted into a sort of meeting room. Who could it be? I guess I’ll find out, I thought as I bounced in.

Once I passed under the flap, I stopped. Inside were a bunch of goblins—the regular kind. Several of them were well dressed, each one accompanied by a handful of servants. Some elders and their guards, maybe? Nobody was armed. Not that I minded that.

Before I could ask what was up, the goblins prostrated themselves on the floor.

“““It is an honor to meet you, O great master!””” they all shouted in unison. “““Please, listen to our most earnest of hopes!”””

Great master? I guess they mean me, but really, that’s going too far. They sure believed it, though. Their eyes couldn’t have been more longing or resolute. There was no telling what they wanted, but I figured I’d hear them out.

“All right. Go ahead.”

“Oh, thank you for your generosity!” one of the elders shouted. “All of us here wish to join your throngs of followers, sir!”

“““Please, grant us your magnanimous kindness!!””” the others said as they remained on the floor, eyes turned to me, before bowing low.

Honestly, I didn’t want to deal with this.

We’re just getting started with the rebuilding process here, guys. I don’t have time to waste on you!

I would’ve loved to simply shoo them off. But we did have a lack of manpower around here. And I could already picture the turf wars these guys would want to spring upon us sooner or later. Maybe it was best to take them in while we still could.

If they stab us in the back after that, we can just kill ’em all.

I wouldn’t take kindly to traitors. Rose-colored glasses would just get in the way when you were leading a pack of monsters. You had to keep a cool head around them. That was part of the reason I was willing to take these goblins in—because I wanted to prove to myself that I meant business.

Once again, I reminded myself, If these guys turn out to be traitors, I will personally kill every one of them. It was amazing how I could think about killing people as if I were wondering where to go for lunch, though. It came as a surprise, but—hell—it beat hemming and hawing over every life decision I made. Kept it simple.

By the way, if these were just the envoys, how many goblins were we talking overall? I sighed. I might have a hell of a lot of names to think up soon.

The guards accompanying the goblin elders had gone back to their respective villages to report the news. So what did they have to say?

To sum up, their story went a bit like this…

It all began with the recent disruptions to the order around the forest. The other villages had de facto abandoned Rigurd’s during the direwolf attack in part because they simply had no combat resources left to assign to the place.

All the intelligent races in this forest—the orcs, the lizardmen, and the ogres, too—were starting to step up and stake their claims on this wood. There had been smaller arguments along those lines before, but there was also a sort of silent agreement that nobody would let it get to armed conflict. With the forest’s one and true overseer out of the picture, however, there were more than a few races out there ready to vent some steam.

Monsters, in general, had a tendency to puff up and engage in regular displays of power. Now every village in the forest was rapidly preparing itself to kick some ass. It was only a matter of time before something got the ball rolling. And goblins, the wimpiest kids on the block, were doomed to let most of these other races lay total waste to them.

This, naturally, alarmed most of the other goblin elders. The moment they got involved in this cross-forest turf war, it’d be over for them. So they held a conference, talked it over for several days, and were all too blockheaded to come up with any decent ideas.

Not that I would have expected them to…

News of the impending direwolf attack came in the midst of this, but their attention was focused elsewhere. Rigurd’s village was left for dead and all but forgotten. Their talks continued, with no miracles in sight.

Just as the villages’ food stocks were starting to run low, they heard word of yet another new forest menace—rumors of massive, dark beasts, piloted by people riding on their backs. They sped through the trees, as if traversing flat plains, and they utterly vanquished the more powerful monsters of the forest. Who were they? The concept made the goblins tremble with fear and surprise.

They were apparently…ex-goblins.

Opinions were split on how to handle this. Some suggested to travel to them immediately and beg for protection. Others found the tale too extraordinary to swallow, concerned that it might be a trap and refusing to believe that the ex-goblins would have no reason to trick them.

Trap or not, though, there was no guarantee this new race would accept them. Especially since they’d abandoned Rigurd’s village. Forgiveness appeared a futile hope for many of the elders. Even goblins were capable of shame, it turned out.

In the end, realizing they had reached the far end of their intellect, the conference ended with a total lack of any concrete conclusion. So the side that sought our protection decided to travel over here.

Now it all made sense. Still, pretty selfish of them, wasn’t it? We’re talking about weak, stupid, helpless goblins, though, so I should have known better. I’d already agreed to take them in, besides.

“Anyone who wants to come over, have at it,” I told the goblin representatives. That was enough to send them back home for now.

That was where my problems began.

As I looked over the teeming crowds of goblins, I thought to myself, This is…kind of too many, isn’t it? Far too many to house within the village’s space.

Why did this have to be my problem, anyway?

Over the past few days, we’d been stuck building axes, using them to chop down trees for wood, and so on. We hadn’t even started on houses yet. There was just too much to work on.

Kaijin was handling wood duties, while the three dwarven brothers worked on processing the animal pelts into hobgoblin clothing. The looks they had been giving the females were less than savory. I figured it was best to set them on that job before anything else.

We were in the midst of this when the goblins showed up. Four tribes, about five hundred of ’em in total. The rest were still in the villages with the elders who opted to stay put.

Well, time for a move. It wouldn’t make much difference work-wise, assuming we did it right now. I checked my mental map of the area. Preferably I’d have liked something with nearby water and some cleared land suitable for farming. As I walked around, I realized that the most ideal location was…the area right nearby the cave I’d popped out of. Hmm.

I decided to ask Rigurd about the state of things over there. “It was regarded as a forbidden zone,” he reported. “Unlike the forest, it was a veritable den of powerful monsters…”

“No problem there, then. I mean, I lived there.”

“Y-you what?!”

“Like, I guess I was born around there, so…it oughta be fine.”

“…You constantly impress me, Sir Rimuru. I am astounded.”

Funny thing for him to say. What’s so astounding about being born in a cave? If he was cool with it, then fine.

I then called for Mildo, youngest of the three brothers, and told him as much as I could about how architecture worked in the world I came from. Surveying and measurement in this world were actually fairly accurate, thanks to magic. That, plus the amateur-hour knowledge I brought to the table, helped us decide to hatch a surveying project for the local area.

The wolves didn’t need it much, but for the goblins and dwarves a waste-management facility would be a necessity. I thought it’d be nice if we could set up a pseudo–septic system that could store waste and turn it into fertilizer. We’d need something to keep infectious diseases at bay, besides. That was another thing I added to Mildo’s list.

Do goblins get sick, though? I wondered. The answer was yes—they were susceptible to disease like anyone else. Pretty wimpy monsters, if you asked me. Though given the kind of filth they lived in before I showed up, no wonder…

They lost a lot of people but made up for it with an abundance of babies. Simple math. Although that wasn’t so much the case with hobgoblins—they gave birth to fewer offspring at a time, which was another reason I assumed their life spans were longer.

Either way, if we lost too many to illness, we wouldn’t be able to keep our numbers up. I had zero knowledge of medicine; anything a potion couldn’t handle was beyond me, and we didn’t have any magic healers.

So while we were in a building frenzy, I decided we might as well go all the way with hygiene. Mildo, for his part, actually had considerable knowledge about waste systems like this. I must not have been the only otherworlder to talk about this with people.

This world, for its part, had something called “spirit engineering,” a unique field of study that led to all sorts of weird discoveries. What it didn’t offer, however, was a way to make fertilizer out of people’s dumps. Mildo was amazed to hear the idea from me.

Regardless, though, after some deliberation, I named him head of building operations for our village and left everything up to him.

Another classic tossing-off of responsibility, if I do say so myself.

After having Rigurd assign a few people to Mildo’s detail, I sent them all off to survey our potential new home. Ranga joined them, just in case. I didn’t think monsters would go swarming out of the cave at them, but you never know. Ranga ought to have been able to handle whatever popped up, so better safe than sorry.

That took care of one issue, but I had something bigger on my plate—naming. Just thinking about it depressed me. I had the sinking feeling that by the time I got halfway through the five hundred or so goblins, I’d just be running through the alphabet. “Abcdef” would be a little hard to pronounce, though.

Still, I had to get started. It took around four days to get through them all, with a quick bit of sleep mode in between, and I really had to hand it to myself—I stuck it out to the end. Not quite as exhausting as last time, but not a process I wanted to repeat anytime soon.

I called the tribal elders over. They knelt down in their stately hobgob way. Rigurd was there, and following in his footsteps were three others I had just named: Rugurd, Regurd, and Rogurd.

Put all the leaders together, and yep! You’ve got all five vowels!

Ranga being the a was a coincidence.

So maybe it wasn’t my best, but it was okay! They’d never know. Don’t forget how much work I put into this.

I’ve always been very good at making that excuse.

That left one unnamed elder, and she was a woman. Something feminine sounding was best, I thought, so I picked Lilina. One advantage of everyone being hobgobs was that I could actually tell ’em apart by gender. Magic Sense could help me do that with the regular gobs, but to the naked eye, it was a challenge.

Could I turn “Lilina” into another name series, maybe? I thought about it but decided not to worry about the future too much. No time for it.

So here we were. A few hundred hobgobs. Maybe it was time we built a class system for them? With these numbers, I couldn’t tell them “Let’s all be pals and get along” and expect them to follow that. There needed to be a clear chain of command, especially given how much monsters valued strength.

“All right,” I declared, “I’m giving all of you ranks!”

Rigurd received a nice upgrade to goblin king; the other four elders became goblin lords. The rest of the goblins in the village immediately bowed to them, which was a spine-tingling sight to see.

“““Y-yes, our lord!!””” the elders parroted. The ensuing cheers were deafening. I had just inadvertently penned a new chapter in goblin history.

Kaijin was kind enough to bring along all the carpentry tools he needed. Garm and Dold were proving to be able commanders on the clothing-production front. We were building a miniature tower of wood lumber in an empty space in the village. Preparations were going along smoothly.

By the time I had evolved all the goblins and made sure I hadn’t missed anyone, Mildo came back to the village. The surveying work was done without a hitch. All systems go. I looked over the different blocks in the village he’d planned out. It was really more of a town than a simple village. A new home for all of us.

After making sure everything was in place, we set off. It was our first step toward a new land. Toward a new nation for us!

The man’s name was Fuze, and he was the guild master at the Free Guild branch in the kingdom of Blumund.

His competence at his post was unquestioned, and even before then, his prowess as an adventurer had brought him all the way to the rank of A-minus.

And as he’d promised the Baron of Veryard, he quickly set off to conduct an investigation of his own. What his assorted intelligence contacts told him, however, was that the Empire was currently making no moves at all. It might stay that way, of course—that was Fuze’s hunch—but there was no room for error.

He continued to have his people watch the Empire. It wasn’t his usual line of work, but for now, at least, he was willing to make an exception.

One day, he received word that another investigation team had made its return to his city. He went to his chambers and sat down very slowly and deliberately on the sofa in the reception room he always used for classified meetings. Across from him sat three people—two men and a woman, all B-ranked adventurers.

This group, he already knew well. There was Gido, a thief who excelled at reconnaissance. Kabal, meanwhile, was a master of defense. Being fighter class, he willingly served as a wall for the rest of his party, and he did his job well. He tended to crack jokes a lot, but he was no slouch. Finally, there was Elen, a sorceress whose skill set was geared toward the more unique types of magic. She had a wide variety of spells at her disposal, but her true skill lay in supernaturally enhanced movement. It was also worth noting that her careful planning always did wonders to boost her party’s chance at survival.

That was the team Fuze had sent to examine the cave Veldora had once been sealed in. His first reaction upon seeing them was slight amazement that they were safe. That cave was more suited for people with B-plus ranks or higher, and if you took its master into account, tracking down an A-minus traveler or two was usually your safest bet. Even if Fuze himself ventured in—not that his guild responsibilities would ever let him these days—it would likely be quite a slog if he took it solo.

Regardless of their ranks, these were the people Fuze had sent to find out what was up with Veldora at the moment. He’d made the decision because of their uncanny knack for staying alive. The ability to avoid battle while gathering intelligence, in this case, was worth far more to him than employing a B-plus powerhouse.

If something had happened to them, though, Fuze would have had to take the heat as guild master. Sending people into areas they were unqualified for by rank was a clear violation of guild regulations. A branch head daring to try that would create controversy if the incident became public knowledge.

But this was the group Fuze had wanted, and nobody was happier to see them back now than him.

“Let’s hear the report,” he said, ever careful not to betray his emotions. No matter how appreciative he was inside, he made it a point not to offer them any reassuring words. The trio was used to this.

“It was awful, man!” Kabal blurted.

“I so need to take a bath…,” Elen agreed.

“Yeah, the hardest part was tryin’ to keep this pair from ripping each other apart, I’d say…,” Gido commented.

Their debriefings almost always started like this. Their eyes, however, were deadly serious. It probably was indeed awful, Fuze thought.

The report began with a description of the monsters they’d found in the cave. After bluffing their way past the tempest serpent that served as the area’s guardian, they’d proceeded past the sealing door. It had been clear early on that Veldora was gone, but they’d spent another week or so exploring the cave, just in case. The end result: definitely no guardian, or leader, to speak of inside.

But one thing had caught their attention the most.

“Here’s the thing, though,” Kabal said. “Once we were done with our examination and went out the door…the tempest serpent was gone.”

“Right, yeah!” Elen exclaimed. “I couldn’t activate Escape inside the door, so I spent all that time figuring out how we’d get away from it… I feel like such an idiot!”

“Yeah,” said Gido. “I brought along an illusion and heat-generating trap, and I didn’t even use ’em. At least it saved us some time, though. Gettin’ past it on the way in was one thing, but gettin’ out woulda been another.”

What was the meaning of this? This tempest serpent had a tentative rating of A-minus. It was absolutely the strongest presence in the cave. Not even Fuze liked his chances much against it. It was the whole reason why he had fretted over this trio’s chances of a successful trip.

Something had definitely happened over there. Fuze could tell that much. And he needed to know what.

“All right, guys. I’ll let you rest for three days or so, but after that, I’ll need you back in the forest again. Not inside the cave this time—you’ll be examining the area around it instead. I want you to leave no stone unturned out there, all right? Be thorough. That is all.”

“‘That’s all,’ he says!”

“Three days? That’s it?! Give us a week, at least!”

“Yeah, yeah… You know he’s not gonna listen to us, guys.”

Fuze didn’t let the protests bother him. He had some new information to stew over. What could be going on in that forest…? He lost himself in thought for a moment…then opened his eyes, only to find three pairs of spiteful eyes staring at him. These guys… He sighed, then yelled at them as he always did.

“Why are you still here? Get out! Now!”

The trio hurriedly excused themselves.

Three days later, Kabal, Elen, and Gido were preparing for their forest trip.

“That was barely any time off…,” Elen moaned.

“You said it, girl,” Gido replied.

“Could you stop complaining for a moment, guys?” Kabal, the more-or-less leader, admonished with a lack of conviction that indicated his agreement. “You’re just depressing me now.”

They had few routes into the forest to choose from. The monsters had been growing incredibly active in recent days, to the point that not even the merchants were willing to send wagons into the forest. Hiring bodyguards was out of the question—they’d lose money on this job if they did. If they wanted to visit the forest, it’d have to be on foot for the time being. They would have had to walk at least a little, since the path to the “Sealed Cave” was too treacherous to navigate in a horse cart.

As a result, preparation would be key. Procuring several weeks’ worth of preserved food was a challenge in itself, but without it, they stood every chance of starving to death before they even reached their destination. Elen’s magic, at least, guaranteed them potable water whenever they needed.

When they were largely done and it was time to head off, a person approached them, speaking in a voice that was somewhere between young and old, male and female.

“Excuse me. If you are headed for the forest, would I be able to join you along the way?”

The mask the figure was wearing prevented any guess at the face behind it. It was an ornate, beautiful mask, but it bore no expression at all. There was something vaguely unsettling about the whole package, but…

“Fine by me.”

“Wh-whoa! I’m the leader here, Elen! What’s your problem?!”

“Ahh, you know her. Once she decides on something, there’s no changin’ her mind.”

“Thank you.”

Those words of gratitude were all the masked figure said before silently following behind them. Thus Kabal and his band found themselves with another companion as they ventured into the forest.

The sound of chopping trees and hammering echoed throughout the forest. Slowly, the new town and its houses were beginning to take shape. In our minds, at least. We were still busy laying out the water and septic system, so for now, it was still just a clearing.

This system took the direction of its flow from the river we were adjacent to. We planned to have a water-processing building eventually, although it was still under construction. That’d be where the river water was purified and distributed to people’s houses.

On the septic end of things, we built a large chamber out of wood that we planned to bury in the ground. The wood’s inside surfaces would be treated to improve their resistance to rotting, then reinforced with cement. That was what we were working on now. We’d lucked out and found some quicklime-type material off a nearby hill.

Meanwhile, another building outside of town would be our waste-processing facility, where we planned to make the fertilizer we wanted.

In addition to this, I was having the crew build a large temporary building, a sort of gymnasium they could sleep in during construction. It was rather slipshod since we had no intention of making it permanent, but it would do the job.

Outlining the assorted neighborhood divisions was going along well. The upper-class houses, including the one I’d stay in, would be built near the cave mouth. We’d have a line of homes meant for the tribal elders, with the other residences spread out around them.

We were doing this before anything else, so it was easy to lay out the town plan without getting things cluttered and mixed up. It was basically built in the shape of a cross, with a wide main street, making it easy for townspeople to work as a group if the need arose. We’d have to be careful not to create long lines of identical roads—that’d make it easy to get lost—but it wasn’t too much of a concern.

The only real disadvantage to this setup was that it could be easy for enemies to move around in case of invasion—but if they actually made it to the center of town, it’d mean a dozen other things would have failed by then.

No point dwelling on that scenario. If we got wrecked, we could always just rebuild.

It was absolutely a good idea to name all the goblins and upgrade them into hobgoblins, though. It did wonders for their intelligence levels, and they were all astonishingly quick studies. Their strength was upgraded, too. The dwarves described regular goblins as straight-on F-ranked monsters, while hobgobs hovered between C and D for the most part. They felt more like people than they did before, to be sure. Depending on their weapons and armor, not to mention their classes and magical arts, there was a lot of room for growth.

On that note, I was seeing substantial variation in the hobgobs’ sizes and strengths. The four goblin lords I’d just named, for one, all seemed more talented in life than the rank and file did. Rigurd the Goblin King, meanwhile…

“Oh, is that where you were, Sir Rimuru? I was searching for you!”

Who was this guy? He was practically a muscle-bound freak of nature at this point, huge in frame and almost the size of an ogre. “Hell, larger, even!” as Kaijin put it. That must’ve been the result of giving him a class in addition to a name, I supposed.

I swear, the biology of these monsters was a total mystery to me. I’d have to try assigning a few more titles to see what happened.

“What is it?”

“I’ve come to report to you, sir. We’ve captured a few suspicious individuals.”

“Suspicious? A bunch of monsters, or?”

“No, sir, humans. We did not engage them, as you ordered.”

“Humans? Why here?”

Whoa! Sweet! Better get on their good sides, fast! If it was those three idiots from the dwarven gate, I’d be happy to chop them up and feed them to our work crews, but…

“They were engaged in battle with a group of giant ants, it seems. Rigur and his security detail rescued them and took them here, but…apparently he suspects they are conducting an investigation of the local area. I thought I would come to you for advice…”

Hmm. Some country’s checking out this place? I already knew from the dwarves that the Forest of Jura was considered neutral territory, unclaimed by any nation. It seemed plausible that this was an expeditionary force, trying to find some new territory to take for its own. This could be trouble, but there was no point fretting over it without hearing them out. I could think about what to do after that.

“All right. Take me to them!” I said as I hopped on Rigurd’s shoulder.

Ranga being out on patrol made transport around our new town a bit of a pain. I could walk easily enough, but when I was by myself, my lack of height was an issue. I always resented the feeling of being looked down upon whenever I met anyone. Having people kneel to greet me just got in the way of actual work. I had a reputation to uphold, besides, and I didn’t want to be under people all the time. Perhaps I worried about it too much, but I always thought it was better to avoid trouble before it started.

That was why I tended to travel around on a lot of shoulders these days.

So aboard Rigurd’s shoulders, I made my way to see these adventurers. Who are they? I wondered before a conversation entered my (figurative) ears.

“Wh-whoa! Hey! I wanted that!”

“That’s just mean, isn’t it? I raised this meat myself!”

“Sir, I regret to inform you that I am not giving up this food!”

“Munch, munch.”

Certainly seemed like some excitement.

“…”

Rigurd replied to my silent question. “M-my apologies, Sir Rimuru. It would seem the ants made off with most of their luggage…and even before then, they had not had a decent meal in some time, so I had some brought to them.”

Hmm. That was kind of the goblin king, to be sure. “Oh, that’s no problem,” I replied. “In fact, good job noticing. Helping out someone in need is a nice thing, you know?”

I felt it was appropriate enough to praise him. He was gradually becoming more and more of a leader, no longer asking me about every little thing that cropped up. A good thing, I thought.

“Ha-ha! I will do my best to improve my rule and be less of a burden upon you, Sir Rimuru!”

But I wish he wouldn’t be so formal with me all the time, I thought as we approached a simple tent. The hobgob guarding it opened the flap for us.

The moment we stepped in, I felt all eyes upon me. Four adventurers sat on the ground, their mouths full of assorted meats and vegetables. Their eyes were wide open as they gawked at me. It was a hilarious sight to see, although they probably didn’t realize it.

Hmm? Have I seen them somewhere before? …Oh, right. They were the adventurers I passed by in the cave, although one of them was new to me. I wondered how any kind of food got through the mask this figure had on.

“Munch, munch…”

They sat there for a moment, chewing. They sure were taking their time.

Fresh roasted meat…mmm. If only I had a sense of taste. Argh… Does anyone have some spare taste buds…?

Whoops, got a little distracted there. I turned my focus to the matter at hand.

Rigurd walked up to a tall seat on one side and placed me upon it. “My guests,” he bellowed as he sat next to me, “I do hope you are comfortable here. Allow me to introduce you to our master, Sir Rimuru!”

I could hear them swallowing down their food. Then, in unison:

“““Huh? A slime?!”””

“Munch, munch.”

All of them reacted with shock.

Well, I’m not sure about the last one, actually. Whatever.

“It is good to meet you. I am Rimuru, a slime. Not a bad slime, you know!”

I heard a sputtering sound from under the mask. With all the food that guy was chewing, the results probably weren’t pretty.

Rude jerk.

Must’ve been a surprise to hear a slime speak. The other three looked equally surprised, but at least they didn’t have their mouths full at the time.

So. Who were these visitors? Good guys, hopefully.

“Well, pardon us, I guess. I just didn’t expect we’d be saved by a monster tribe.”

“Oh! We’re human adventurers, by the way, and this meat is really good! We’ve been running for the past three days, I think, so it’s been hard to eat much of anything… Thank you so much!”

“Yeah, thanks. I sure didn’t expect some hobgoblins to be building a village around here.”

“Urrp… Koff! Glug glug.”

“Well,” I said, “please, feel free to enjoy your meal, all of you. We can talk afterward.”

I sort of wished the hobgobs had called me over after the humans were done stuffing themselves, but they were still lacking in politeness here and there. I’m sure they were surprised, but something told me I’d need to hold a workshop on manners shortly anyway.



So I left the tent, not too interested in watching them eat on the floor, wondering about my good luck at obtaining these human guests (or prisoners, depending). On the way out, I told their guard to take them to my personal gate near the cave once mealtime was over.

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured the crestfallen-looking Rigurd as we walked. “We can work on manners later.” They were, after all, growing by leaps and bounds. I wasn’t expecting every diplomatic effort to go perfectly with these hobgobs.

Settling down back in my tent, I began patiently waiting. Rigurd had one of his female assistants prepare some tea for us. It looked more palatable than the last beverage I’d tried from them, but I could only guess at the taste. Neat how evolution even affected areas like that.

Slowly, we were settling down into a truly cultured society. Something about that tea convinced me.

After a few more moments, the four adventurers popped in, immediately giving a hearty “Sorry ’bout that!” as they entered. The tent was a little cramped with all of them inside.

Once their goblin guide was gone, another one brought out some fresh tea for the group. There, see? Real service, out of nowhere. They must’ve picked it up from the dwarves—I knew they had been spending nights drinking with them, learning about their society and culture.

“Ah, good to see you again. My name is Rimuru, and I’m the leader of this little group. What brings you guys over here?”

I figured it was a valid enough question. They nodded at each other—must’ve expected this—and began to speak.

“I am glad to meet you, Rimuru. My name is Kabal, the leader of this band…more or less. This is Elen, and that’s Gido over there. We’re adventurers, all ranked B—you know what that means, I imagine?”

“Hi! Elen here!”

“Gido, sir. A pleasure.”

So they were a party. Being ranked B put them in the upper echelons, to be sure, but they would’ve faced a rough time in the cave, no? Maybe they were masters at hiding from monsters or something. And what about the other one in their ranks? I was sure there were only three of them in the cave.

“This, meanwhile, is Shizu, a temporary addition to our team for this mission.”

“Shizu. Charmed.”

It was hard to tell her gender or age strictly from her voice. But after honing my talents trying to differentiate goblins, I could tell right off—she was a woman. And, if my hunch was correct, maybe even Japanese? That was the impression I had.

The way she carried her teacup and the way she knelt just so, tops of her feet flat against the floor. That position, I thought, had to be rare in this realm, and her three companions certainly didn’t bother—the men just sat cross-legged on the wolf-pelt rug over the ground, and Elen chose to keep her legs to one side instead.

Ah, well. It wouldn’t be strange to have a culture somewhere on this planet that resembled Japan’s. I’d pursue that train of thought later.

Although, it occurred to me—was it me, or were these adventurers being way too cavalier with their own safety right now? So far, they seemed to be enjoying their stay immensely—eating, drinking, and laughing with each other. This was a monster’s den they’d wandered into. They knew that, right? Maybe they just had a screw loose, I dunno.

…Oops. Got sidetracked. Time to continue the conversation.

“You too, thanks. So…”

………

……

…

They were exceedingly forthright with their story, apparently not wary of my motives in the least. Their guild master had sent them to examine the area around the cave and check to see whether anything suspicious had taken place…but this mission was proving to stymie them.

“Yeah, that’s the thing!” Kabal continued. “We’re here looking for ‘suspicious’ things, but what the heck is ‘suspicious’ supposed to mean? We’re clueless here!”

“Totally!” Elen chimed in. “I wish he could’ve said, like, ‘Look for this or that or the other thing’ instead of leaving it so vague!”

“We might be good scouts and all that, but we can’t do everything, y’know?” Gido added.

And so they bad-mouthed their guild master without a care in the world. I almost felt sorry for the guy.

Along the way, this group had run smack into a large, suspicious-looking boulder with a hole in it. This is it! they must’ve thought, because they drew their swords and stabbed it a little bit…only to wake up an entire nest of giant ants. Brother. I didn’t know what to say.

It was a miracle they were alive—they’d spent the next three days constantly on the run, losing all their possessions on the way, before making it here. I had to hand it to them for managing that, really.

“Well,” I reflected, “I wouldn’t say there’s much ‘suspicious’ going on around here, no. The cave, mainly, I guess?”

Elen shook her head. “But we didn’t find anything in there, no. Did you know the story behind that cave? There’s supposed to be this big, evil dragon sealed inside, but we spent two weeks running up and down that cave, and nothing! Two weeks without a bath, and we got practically nothing for it…”

“Whoa, c’mon!” an unnerved Kabal barked back. “We can’t go around revealing that much to them!”

“What do you care?” Gido countered. “She’s the one who did it! It don’t matter to me!”

The men completely panicked at Elen’s unwitting revelation.

I already knew, of course, thanks to my last encounter with them. And these people liked a dip now and then, huh? Maybe I’d have to get a bathhouse built around here.

Moving on.

“So what were you looking for in that cave, exactly?”

It couldn’t have been treasure, after all.

Kabal somberly shook his head in response. “Well, if she’s said that much, no point hiding it. Like she said, rumor’s been going around that the dragon in there’s stopped responding…”

Hmm. Not that I could’ve known, but Veldora’s disappearance must’ve put the humans in a tizzy. That vanishing act, despite his being safely sealed away, was huge news—I guess this was some crazy powerful dragon after all, although to me he’d just seemed like a nice guy who liked to chat sometimes.

Must’ve been a big deal, though, if people were sending out search parties. Was building this town near the cave mouth a mistake?

“We brought along a Reaction Stone, too, because they said the cave was practically bursting at the seams with magicules…but it wasn’t anything near what we thought it’d be. I mean, the concentration’s a little heavier than your typical cave, but nothing outside what’s normal now. And that is pretty unusual, so at least we’ve got that to go back home with, but…”

“It’s still packed with strong monsters, though, so I don’t really wanna go back in again if I have the choice,” Elen said. “No treasure to speak of, either, and no magic ore. All that monster hacking you gotta do, and there’s no payoff for it at all!”

“Yeah,” Gido added, “you might find some bandit gear if you look a bit, but nothin’ worth goin’ out of your way for.”

Oops. No ore, huh? Well, what if I told you that there used to be loads of it…and I swallowed it all up? And what if I told you the magic had declined in there because I swallowed up Veldora, the guy generating all of it? That’s all basically my fault, isn’t it?

Oh well. What they didn’t know couldn’t hurt them.

We continued talking for a while. They had said too much anyway, as Kabal put it, so they might as well go all the way. These guys were a lot more good-natured than I gave them credit for at first.

And if the cave was no longer a location of interest, maybe we wouldn’t be the center of attention after all. I was considering having the town moved as a worst-case scenario, but now I doubted it’d be necessary. No country had any legal right to this land, so it wasn’t as if anyone could force us out.

Just in case, I decided to ask whether the guild would have any problems with us building a town here.

“It…oughta be fine, right?” Kabal said.

“Yeah,” Elen agreed. “It’s not the guild’s problem in the first place. What about the local governments, though?”

“Ooh, that ain’t for me to say,” was Gido’s opinion.

Of course, the guild wouldn’t know what their host nations were thinking. Plus, if any of them took action, they’d have to prove their claim to the other nearby nations. It wouldn’t be worth it.

Then, as I thought over this, I noticed that something was going on with Shizu, who’d been sitting there listening the whole time. Suddenly, she slumped to the floor, unconscious. We all immediately came up to her, trying to hold her up, when…

“Nhh… Nraaaaahhhhhh!!”

Things progressed quickly after that.

Once Shizu’s extended groan ended, the tent was visited by absolute silence.

Cracks were now appearing over her mask, mystical force wafting out from beneath. All of us could tell that something bad was happening.

“Summon magic?!” Elen shouted in surprise.

“Whoa, for real? Where the hell’d that come from? What rank is it?”

“…Umm, judging by the size of the magic circle, I’d have to guess B-plus or higher.”

“Well, we can’t just sit here, boss. We gotta stop it!”

So they were seasoned adventurers after all, when they needed to be. A few words exchanged, and they immediately leaped into action.

“Great Earth, place thy bonds over her! Mud Hand!”

“Urrrrrraaahhh! Knockdown!!”

First, Elen tied her down. Then Kabal landed a full-body blow. Gido played backup, ready to act the moment trouble appeared. Hmm. For B ranks, their teamwork was top-notch. Not a single wasted movement.

But all Shizu had to do was lift the top of her index finger up a bit, and that was enough to trigger a small explosion around her. So much for my tent—which I didn’t mind that much, but what about those three? Were they hurt? There was a bit of a shock wave, but I was unscathed.

Kabal, who had landed a Knockdown on Shizu after Elen bound her, had sadly taken the full brunt of the explosion with his body. It had sent him flying. Gido was fine, however, and he’d sensed danger early enough that he’d pushed Elen aside to safety as well.

“You all right?”

“We’re just fine, yeah!”

“Um, I’m kinda aching all over!” Elen protested. “They better give us some hazard pay for this!”

Kabal, for his part, was already on his feet. “Owww… Guys, could you worry about your leader at least a little?” He must’ve been made of some sturdy stuff.

“I knew Shizu was a magic user, but summoning, too…?”

“What’d she summon, anyway?”

“No, no,” Gido cut in, “that ain’t even the half of it. As far as I know, you can’t launch magic without a chant during a summoning—”

Before he could finish, he stopped, looking at Shizu as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. He had just hit upon an idea.

“Wait… No way… The Conqueror of Flames?”

Shizu was still casting a spell. Her entire body was glowing bright red, hovering in the air a little. Her mask remained prominent on her face as her long black hair spilled out of her robe. What’s she trying to do? She seemed strange to me a moment before all this happened…

“Rigurd, get everyone out of town! Don’t let anyone near here!” I shouted.

“But…”

“That’s an order! Once they’re evacuated, get Ranga here for me!”

“Yes, Sir Rimuru!”

The goblin king sped off.

I could tell neither he nor his race could do much against this. It’d be a waste of countless lives. And I didn’t want Ranga as a fighting companion. I’d called for him simply because I’d considered the possibility that this was all an act on the adventurers’ part to divert our attention. Their oddly loose lips made a lot more sense to me if they’d never intended to let us live from the start. That, or they really could have been that stupid, but…

If this was an act, they might try to stab me in the back while I was struggling with Shizu. That was what Ranga would be for. Maybe I was overthinking things, but you can never be too careful.

“Yo, Gido! What’s that Conqueror of Flames thing?”

“Wasn’t that a hero or something?” Elen chimed in first. “I think she was active around fifty or so years ago?”

Famous, then? I thought to myself. Then Shizu’s mask fell off her face.

Flames shot upward.

Up in the sky, three flame salamanders appeared. It was a hell of a way for Shizu to reveal her face to us. Her black hair fanned outward with the shock wave, shining brilliantly against the inferno. She had a fleeting, transient beauty to her—but her eyes emitted a wicked shine, and the edges of her lips were twisted upward in what seemed to be an expression of utter joy at the carnage she had seen.

Something about it struck me as completely unnatural, in a way I couldn’t describe very well. Then…

Launching unique skill “Deviant.”

The voice of the world echoed around us. As it did, the beautiful young girl transformed into a giant of pure fire.

“No mistakin’ it,” Gido shouted. “That’s the Conqueror of Flames, the master of Ifrit the titan… The strongest elementalist in the world!”

Ifrit, the fire titan. The lord of fire, capable of burning anything in his path. A level above any royalty, mortal or divine.

“Gahh! Ifrit? Isn’t that spirit, like, above A rank and stuff?!” Kabal yelped.

“Oof… That’s my first time seeing it,” Elen said. “But…how could we ever beat that?!”

“Yeah, we can’t,” retorted Gido. “We’re all gonna die here… Sure was a short life, I guess.”

With his three flame salamanders by his side, the Conqueror of Flames surveyed his domain. No wonder the three of them were in such a panic. Even a single salamander boasted B-plus strength. But… What was the deal with Shizu? To me, it didn’t seem as if she was controlling all this—more like Ifrit was controlling Shizu.

There was a shock wave as Shizu—or Ifrit—unleashed a torrent of magic force.

…That was weird. It wasn’t aimed at anyone, not meant to kill—just a little show of violence, although there was nothing little about it. It didn’t seem like the work of a free mind; the attack looked more as if it was preprogrammed by someone. Now there was no doubting it. This wasn’t Shizu’s will at work. Ifrit was supposed to be hers to handle, but now he was out of control.

Whether that theory was right or not didn’t matter right now. The problem was the force behind those attacks. It was beyond lethal. Pale red shock waves rolled across the landscape, hot enough to instantly burn all the buildings we had under construction.

God dammit! We just got started, too!

The three adventurers tried using a Magic Barrier to block the attack, I guess, but it didn’t even last a single shock wave. They weren’t dead, but they weren’t doing too well, either—conscious, but probably immobile by now.

“Guys, don’t move!” I yelled at them. “You’ll wind up getting targeted!”

They responded by bunching up together, launching both Magic Barrier and Aura Shield. Guess this isn’t an act. They were seriously defending themselves. So much for the “let’s kill all the monsters” theory.

Talk about force, though. The magic power Ifrit was releasing—with no casting time at all—was blowing searing-hot wind a good hundred feet in every direction around us. If I didn’t fight these guys—Ifrit and those three flame salamanders—we were all going down. What a pain.

But it was strange.

Even in this predicament, I wasn’t trembling with fear or anything. Maybe it was because I was a monster now. I mean, Veldora and that black snake kinda freaked me out at first, but both wound up being good experiences in the end.

“Hey. What’re you trying to do?”

“…”

Pop!

An explosion went off behind me. I was guessing trying to talk this out with Ifrit wasn’t going to work. He just answered my question with another white-hot strike in my direction.

This time, unlike that untargeted shock wave from before, he was clearly trying to kill me, and his beams of pure heat were vaporizing anything they touched on the way. The force behind them far outclassed that first release of magic power—but, hey, if they didn’t hit me, no worries. I had already dodged those beams, and with my quick senses, I could see things coming at the speed of sound.

In a way, I was glad we weren’t finished with the town yet. I probably should’ve been more concerned about the flame titan in front of me, but that was the thought that popped up anyway. Our tents and temporary outhouses were gone, but that wasn’t any disaster.

We had already cut down the surrounding trees to expand the clearing; if we’d been in the forest, there probably would have been a massive wildfire by now. There’s a silver lining for you. I was a bit concerned about the wood and other supplies we had piled up, but there wasn’t much I could do for it now.

This giant had a hell of a lot of nerve, though! With that attitude of his, I was sure he saw me as nothing but an annoying little bug in his way. He was dissing me, and that was more than enough to get on my bad side. Ifrit was my enemy, and I decided now was the time for a counterattack. I had my qualms about Shizu, the person Ifrit was probably feeding off of for all this, but if I didn’t strike, this would never end.

Suppressing Ifrit was priority one; I could check up on Shizu later. For all I knew, maybe Shizu wasn’t being controlled at all.

I shot a Water Blade at Ifrit’s stomach. It evaporated right before reaching the flame giant; a spiraling plume of fire cut it off. Hmm. Guess that won’t work. But I didn’t have time to ponder it, because the salamanders had just reacted to my attack.

“Icicle Lance!!”

Elen’s ice magic stabbed its way through one of them. As I took a peek at her, she was already fleeing back into her corner of the Magic Barrier.

It was a clever attempt. It looked as if the barrier was holding up well enough without much concentration on the caster’s part. But it’d take more than an Icicle Lance to shoot down those salamanders.

One of them lunged straight toward the adventuring trio.

“You all right?!”

“I can do this!” Elen said. “Risking our lives is nothing new to us!”

“Oh, come on,” Kabal groaned, “I thought I was the leader! Well, so be it. I’ll take one of ’em down!”

“Yeah?” Gido retorted. “I ain’t heard of a bandit fightin’ an elemental spirit before. Guess we’re all in this together, huh?”

It was hard to tell whether they really counted on each other or not.

If Kabal was that eager to “take one down,” I might as well let him. If he died, though, that was gonna weigh on me.

“All right,” I said. “You take him. But don’t push it! If you get hurt, use these.”

Skipping the explanation, I spat out a few recovery potions and threw them their way. Gido managed to scoop them up.

“Um… Rimuru? What are these?”

“Recovery potions! Pretty good ones, too, so if you’re hurt, use ’em!”

We didn’t have time for details. I went back on the move, and the three of them were too busy dealing with the flame salamander to talk. Even one would be a tough opponent for them. Hope they hang on okay.

The other two salamanders, meanwhile, had started making their way toward me. Ifrit himself was calmly advancing, too.

Now what?

Just as the thought occurred to me, Ranga finally arrived. I’d expected to have him keep watch over the adventurers, but no longer. He’d be serving as my mount instead.

“You called for me, my master!”

I hopped right on his back. At least I had some speed now. The salamanders were pretty quick up there, but not as quick as Ranga.

“I want you to focus on dodging them,” I ordered. “You don’t need to attack at all. I’ll take care of that!”

“Understood!”

We had almost a wordless connection with each other. Ranga instantly understood what I wanted to do. Then we were off.

The two salamanders fired off straight jets of Fire Breath at us, like two flamethrowers in the sky. It was light work for Ranga to avoid them, rearing back and out of range of the heat. The fire looked powerful, and I didn’t want to try my luck. If I’d still been a human, they probably would’ve turned me into a black divot on the ground.

I’d better take care of those two guys first before tackling Ifrit. So I tried out some Water Blades. Unlike the fire giant, the salamanders couldn’t cut off the attack before it hit home. I managed to slice off a limb…but, ridiculously enough, the guy grew it right back again. It must’ve been made of fire like everything else. Just cutting it off wouldn’t accomplish much. The black snake probably exuded more raw strength than these guys, but the salamanders’ special powers would make them a tad trickier to defeat.

“…My master, physical attacks will not work against spiritual foes. Striking their elemental weakness or using magic will,” Ranga explained.

Oh. Right. Hitting an elemental spirit with a sword wouldn’t do much, would it?

What about launching a ton of water at it, then? My “stomach” had about that much in storage from the underground lake. Would that be enough to put the brakes on this guy?

Understood. It is possible to release a large amount of water. This will cause a steam explosion upon contact with the salamander, but is this all right?

Yes

No

Huh? A steam…explosion…? What…?

Understood. A flame salamander is formed from collected heat energy. Being doused in water will cause it to immediately vaporize, creating steam that envelops the salamander’s body. It will also trigger a high-temperature, highly compressed wave of pressure, creating a series of explosions.

—And? Will that beat the salamander?

Understood. Pressure times volume equals water released times vapor constant…

Stoppppp! Give it to me in a way I can understand!

Understood. It will trigger a large explosion, and it is possible that the salamander will be knocked out without a trace. However, the results will likely turn the local area into a vacant plot of land.

Oh, come on! What’s the point, then? I’m not suicidal, man!

But if not that, then what? Water Blades do nothing practical against it…

“Icicle Lance!!”



I spotted the trio once more, doing their best to survive, with Elen casting magic in the center.

Wait a sec. Water Blades don’t work, because they aren’t magic, I suppose. So is magic all I need?

“Elen! Hit me with an Icicle Lance! Just one’s fine!”

“Hahh?! Umm, that’s kind of…”

“Just do it!”

The request gave her some pause, but after a second, she began chanting. After another moment, the freeze-magic Icicle Lance was launched.

“Don’t complain about this to me later! Icicle Lance!!”

As she shouted out the spell, a pillar of ice shot my way. I could probably capture that magic with my Predator skill.

And if I could—

Report. Launching unique skill “Predator.” Icicle Lance Predation and Analysis successful.

Great! Just as I thought.

Really, I half doubted it while it was being explained to me, but this Predator had to be some kind of rule-breaking skill. That magic probably packed a punch, but Predator absorbed it all, leaving me undamaged, and I even learned it to boot.

“Hehh?! What happened to my magic?!”

Sorry, Elen. Can’t explain.

The Analysis wrapped up in an instant, and now I could cast the spell just by thinking about it. No chanting required—that was another nice side effect of Predator.

“Icicle Lance!”

Omitting the casting time, I fired some magic off toward the salamander. Then, at that moment, I understood—the theory behind magic, and how it all worked. My Water Blades didn’t damage a salamander at all, even if they managed to slice right through the guy, but Elen’s magic did the trick.

The reason was surprisingly simple. Casting magic wasn’t about acting upon your surroundings with a phenomenon—it was more like picturing something, then creating it in real life.

I was, in a way, launching a bolt of energy that had the effect of robbing the target of its heat. That bolt happened to take the form of an energy-sapping ice pillar, but it wasn’t the ice that made it work. It was the energy inside. Thus, it applied damage to a salamander, whose own energy took the form of heat and flame.

And the multiple ice pillars I’d just launched—too big, really, to be called “lances”—had just skewered the two flame salamanders. That, apparently, was all it took to rid them of all their magical force. They instantly vaporized, like a puff of smoke, and were no more.

“Yes! All done here. Let me help you guys—”

I figured I would help them out, since I’d had Elen waste a magic bolt on me—but I was too late.

“Ah, crap,” Kabal said, “it’s gonna blow itself up!” As the first line of defense, he launched an Aura Shield, but the salamander’s self-sacrificing explosion was more than enough to blow it away. The three of them were all exposed to the intense heat as they soared backward into the air.

Flustered, I had Ranga run up to them. They were more badly burned than I’d thought. Conscious, yes, but no longer capable of moving—and Kabal, up in front, had taken the worst of it. If it hadn’t been for his shield, the relatively defenseless Elen and Gido easily could’ve died.

“Dammit… Ranga, protect these guys. Get them somewhere safe!”

“But…”

The order gave him pause for a moment, but he fell silent, perhaps sensing the mystical force I was letting off. His wild instincts told him that no back talk would be permitted, no doubt.

“This is an order! Do it! They’ve got recovery potions on them, so get them to a safe place and heal them.”

“As you say. May you fight well!”

“Don’t worry. Ifrit’s all mine!”

That must have convinced Ranga well enough. He nodded, gathered all three of them up in his mouth, and—giving me one more look of respect—sped off. He might have had the wrong idea about my intentions, but either way, all I had left was Ifrit. Now I could fight without reservation. Forget about getting anyone else involved in this.

Let’s get this farce over with, I thought as I stared the fire giant down.

The flames whirled violently in the air. Ifrit, before my eyes, had split himself up. Now I had multiple giants blocking my escape routes. He had some tricky talents, but I wasn’t too concerned.

My detection skills could accurately tell where the fire was going. Even if the multiple Ifrits all launched attacks at the same time, I could easily determine their fire’s danger level from the temperature and take suitable action. I already knew that they weren’t all at the same level.

I sincerely doubted that Ifrit could hit me with any kind of effective attack. But at the same time, nothing I had was successful against Ifrit. Those flames were rough. The ground was turning into magma amid the ridiculously high temperatures. No way I could just walk across that, not unless I wanted a class change to “burnt slime.”

Now what…?

Paralyzing Breath and Poisonous Breath were effective only up to thirty feet away. My breath attacks needed to be launched within that distance of Ifrit himself, which wasn’t gonna happen. I needed an attack that kept me at a safe distance while dealing a decisive blow to him. The only thing that came to mind was my new toy, Icicle Lance.

“Take this! Icicle Lance!!”

I launched several icicles’ worth at the Ifrit clones and successfully vaporized a few of them. Vaporizing with ice sounds a bit odd, but with the clouds of water vapor after the attacks struck home, that was the best way to describe it. I started getting into this little target-shooting game, knocking down the clones one by one with my lances.

But—

By the time I thought Oh, crap! it was already too late. The moment I felt it, I was already surrounded. A wide-range barrier to trap me? One of Ifrit’s intrinsics?

In an instant, there was a magic circle painted on the ground, no chanting required to cast it. I forgot I wasn’t the only one who could do that. He had transformed his own body into gas and turned a hundred-yard radius into a searing-hot ocean of flame. Probably one of Ifrit’s high-level ranged attacks, and even worse, the area was brimming with energy from the Ifrit clones I had defeated.

“Flare Circle!”

I heard a voice that I couldn’t quite decipher. Man, woman, young, old? Hard to tell.

There was…no escape. I was at the mercy of my enemy’s spell. Ifrit made me attack those clones on purpose. They were both a distraction and a way to charge up his energy.

I mentally prepared myself for death.

Dahh… I didn’t think I had let my guard down, but I could’ve handled that better. And I played right into the enemy’s hands, too! Totally awful.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been so self-centered. We should’ve all taken him on at once. Or maybe I could’ve taken my black wolf form, confused him with my speed, and then lunged at him, taking whatever burns I got. Or maybe a round of Dark Lightning would’ve done the trick. Sitting tight and seeing how things turned out? Not good.

Certain other regrets also entered my mind…

Still, I knew my senses were ultrafast, but it sure was taking a while for the damage to arrive. Not that I minded a painless death, if it had to be that way…

Seriously, wasn’t this going kind of slowly?

Was he just screwing with me?

Weird… I should’ve been swallowed up by the flames a while ago.

Hmmm…?

…Understood. The effects of “Resist Temperature” have successfully canceled flame-based attacks automatically.

I detected at least a bit of “You forgot all about Resist Temperature, didn’t you?” sarcasm to the voice.

Who asked you to speak up right now, you pile of junk?!

Yeah. I thought I got a “…” in response to that little outburst.

Hopefully that was just my imagination. The Sage had been completely faithful to me before now. It wasn’t even self-aware. It’d be stupid to think otherwise.

Ha-ha-ha. I’m just being silly. I’m sure of it!

Now, then.

Wait. It cancels flame-based attacks? So…

Dude, I have this in the bag, don’t I? Like, this is all part of the plan. I pretend that I’m on the ropes, then I turn the tables. Let’s go with that.

Right. Time to finish up, then.

“What was that?” I shouted as I silently unraveled my Sticky Thread across Ifrit’s body. He was done for. My Analysis already showed that he was using Shizu for his body’s core. I couldn’t have tied up a pure spirit beast like the salamanders with this string, but one with a physical core was a different story.

Next, I’d combine the Sticky Thread with some Steel Thread to get the benefits of both. Another product of my experimentation—and as a bonus, it adopted the same immunities I had, so it wouldn’t get burned up.

Checkmate. I know I sneered at you earlier, but you were probably sneering at me, too. Let’s call it even. You’re free to hate me for this if you like.

“I’m up next, right?”

Ifrit, in a panic, struggled to free himself. I expected that. But my “Sticky Steel Thread” was never going to let him. I took my sweet time, casually approaching.

It was time to land the final strike. On Ifrit, the monster that had probably taken Shizu’s body over.

No need for too much haste. I walked up to this flailing creature, who was trying to throw every attack he could to stop me. Sadly for him, flames didn’t work on me.

Then…

Use unique skill “Predator”?

Yes

No

That’ll be a big ol’ yes, please.

A flash of bright light covered the area, then suddenly vanished.

All that was left was a lone old woman and me.

Was this a dream?

My mother’s hand, cold.

Her cold eyes, gazing at me.

A warm smile and a pile of pure white ash.

All these memories did was torment me. I didn’t want to remember them—

But that was the path I walked.

If I hadn’t run into the hero, I doubt my soul could ever have been saved… But I was too awkward, too unskilled, to wind up like her. With so many people relying on me, too…

It was just that—

It had been several years since I’d retired from the adventurer life. I was a full-fledged teacher, leading the next generation of our trade as I helped out the society with its work.

The Society of Adventurers, a group that crossed borders and had grown beyond the control of any single government, had built its headquarters in the kingdom of Englesia. I was no longer an adventurer, but if there was anything I could do for them, I wanted to help them with it. It had been the society, after all, that had given me a home of sorts when I had nowhere else to go.

There, I had a chance to teach a number of talented students. A young man with eyes that beamed with complete purity. A girl, her gaze tinged with hopelessness. More otherworlders, I assumed, just like me.

The two of them were exact opposites in so many ways. Yuuki was a bright, optimistic boy, while Hinata was insular and reserved, as if she carried all the darkness in the world with her.

Bandits had attacked her when she came here. At the time, I had thought that she would warm up and come around as the days passed. The bandits met their fates at the hands of some other assailant, which saved Hinata’s life, but I’m sure the incident must have scarred her.

I saw a bit of myself in the girl, after all. I had an affinity for her. It was apparently one-sided.

“Thank you for everything you’ve taught me,” she said. “There is nothing else I can learn from you. I doubt we will meet again.” Then she turned around and left.

I thought it might have been best to chase after her, but I couldn’t will myself to leave town. The society was building a new shared-assistance program with Englesia, a new organizational structure originally proposed by Yuuki. As a former hero, I was put in the position of representing the society in the requisite negotiations. It was something I wanted to see succeed, considering how it would define the society’s future direction.

So in the end, all I could do was see her off. “If you ever get lost,” I called to her, “I want you to rely on me.”

After agonizing over it, I decided to support Yuuki over Hinata. The girl had walked a similar path to mine, but she was always far more strong willed than I was. I figured that I should believe in her. That her iron will could clear the darkness in her soul and transform her into a great woman.

It was no great surprise when I learned, a mere few years later, that she had risen to an important position in the Church. I felt a little proud, a little lonely…and just a tad anxious.

Hinata isn’t feeling lonesome, is she? Is she doing all right with her life?

The questions overwhelmed me, but I figured I had no right to ask them. I once had the chance to grasp her hand, and I had refused it.

All I could do was pray for Hinata’s continued safety.

Yuuki, on the other hand, was far more dynamic.

It was Yuuki who built the current system for the Society of Adventurers, now renamed the Free Guild. Thanks to him, the guild was able to build a successful cooperative relationship with nations across the world. He had forged new treaties with governments, earning the guild positions in their topmost of councils. His efforts had made the organization more powerful than ever.

I should have expected nothing less. Until then, every nation had been focused solely on protecting its own borders. When the Free Guild began taking on monster-dispatch duties, it lightened the loads of every other government in the world. And that wasn’t all. Adventurers—people who traveled the world, never beholden to any single country—were obligated to file reports on their journeys. The Free Guild then collated these reports to gain a grasp of how monsters were distributed worldwide. Danger levels were assigned to every region, allowing people to travel in relative peace.

The system had one other major effect. Knowing where and when to expect monsters made it possible to quickly detect anomalies—letting people discover and report on monsters not seen before or eliminate hordes in short order if they grew too numerous.

Whenever a monster that normally didn’t appear in a certain region suddenly menaced a nearby town, the guild was also obliged to send an expeditionary force to figure out the cause. Getting to the root of it early on let the guild and local governments assemble a dispatch corps far more efficiently than before.

Having this kind of organization made people’s lives both safer and more comfortable. Mankind found itself expanding its cities, and the overall population has grown rapidly in recent years. The institution of rankings assigned to monsters did much to reduce the number of deaths as well.

For someone charged with training new recruits, nothing could have made me happier. Thanks to Yuuki, the Free Guild was now an organization that neither the nations of the world nor its people could do without.

Yuuki, for his part, just laughed it off. “I was just imitating what I saw in this video game I played,” he said. “Though, of course, you can do anything you want in a game. You can have monsters that say, ‘I’m not a bad slime, you know’…or even have them join your party!”

He was always a joker like that. Monsters becoming your friends? That sort of thing could happen only in your dreams.

The world I was born in had almost been razed to the ground by war. Had it recovered to the point where it could create people like him—people who never seemed to have a care in the world?

He explained to me that these “video games” were children’s toys that let you experience a full story yourself…so if Japan had recovered enough to give children dreams to play with, it must have become a wonderful place.

So I listened to Yuuki’s stories, thinking to myself about a home I could never go back to.

I continued to serve as a support for Yuuki after that—advising him from the rear, never appearing in the forefront. The Free Guild continued to grow and became an outfit used by nearly everyone. It embraced a philosophy of rescuing the weak, accessible to everyone equally.

Then Yuuki, my very own student, became the guild’s grand master, its highest position, the one who organized and oversaw the guild masters of each branch. Given everything he had done for them, I should have expected it. His efforts were the catalyst that allowed people to live at peace for a change. He had done everything he needed to. I felt the satisfaction of a job well done.

So I decided, then, to go on a journey. A journey to take care of some regrets.

I kept having dreams of the past, back when I was still a magic-born. It was getting hard to contain Ifrit’s will. Perhaps I was approaching the end of my natural life. I knew my Mask of Magic Resistance was still working as well as ever, so the reason seemed obvious.

Once I realized that, I concluded that I had best leave town as soon as possible. I couldn’t know when Ifrit would finally fall out of control, and I had no idea how my death would affect Ifrit himself.

Plus, I wanted to retaliate against my demon lord. Just once, I wanted to have my say with him.

So I decided to set off on my journey.

When I told Yuuki about my plans, he silently nodded, saying nothing about them. Hopefully he was willing to forgive this one final act of selfishness. Maybe, I thought to myself, this is how the hero felt, too.

I made my way to Blumund. Heinz was retired by now, since his son Fuze had taken over the guild master’s role in his place. We got to meet up and chat a little about old times. He had a lot to say, which I was glad for.

Remarkably, he reported that Veldora had disappeared. The guild was conducting a frantic investigation to find the cause. “I don’t know too many details,” Heinz told me with a snicker. “They don’t tell an old pensioner like me too much. I can tell it’s troubling my son, though.”

He must have trusted Fuze well to speak of him like that, I thought. I had gone on several monster-hunting operations together with the boy, and I remembered him doing a fine job supporting me. Now he was out of the front lines and following in his father’s managerial footsteps. He must have inherited all of Heinz’s natural talent.

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve been very kind to me.”

I shouldn’t get in their way. After my polite response, I stood up.

Was Veldora’s disappearance meant to be some divine message to us? Either way, I was headed for the forest.

“You stay safe, too, Shizu! I think there’s an expedition leaving here tomorrow, actually,” he muttered, almost to himself. “If you’re hitting the forest, you might as well join them for a while.”

He didn’t try to stop me. He was always an awkward fellow, and this was how he preferred to show kindness.

“Ah, Heinz, I should have expected nothing less. I suppose I’ll owe you to the very end, then.”

“You owe me nothing, Shizu. And no talking about the ‘very end’ yet! I’d like another look at you sometime.”

I could feel the warmth behind his words. “True. I’ll be back.”

I bowed low and left.

The next day, I managed to run into the expedition Heinz mentioned to me. It consisted of three adventurers, and as he’d told me, they were a bright, inviting group. I genuinely appreciated joining such kind people for my last journey, though their excessive carelessness did baffle me.

There was, to say the least, a lot of trouble along our way through the Forest of Jura. I was impressed, in a way, that they had attained a ranking of B at all. They had the battle technique such a rank implied, but if I had to sum up everything about their team in a word, it would be “nonsensical.”

Our journey continued on nonetheless, right up until they jammed a sword into a giant ant nest. I was horrified. This happened not a moment after I told them it was a bad idea, too. Never in my life did I imagine they would try something like that.

My flames could’ve torched those giant ants instantly, I imagine. But by the time I realized how hard it was to control my power, I had already started to feel my body deteriorate. It remained physically young thanks to Ifrit’s presence, but as my power over him dwindled, it rapidly began aging. Or, I suppose I should say it went back to the age it should always have been.

Would Ifrit be released once my body gave in? Or would he crumble and fall apart with me? I would have no idea what would happen until it did. That was why I had set off.

And why I hesitated to pull out my fire.

We were lucky enough to be rescued by a passing patrol, saving us from any further trouble. But this patrol was one of the fishiest things I had ever seen.

Being saved by monsters? Nothing like that had ever happened to me before.

These were hobgoblins riding upon magical wolves. It would have been one thing if they understood a few broken words of human speech, but these were intelligent creatures, and they had tamed what was clearly a high-level monster species. This was absolutely the kind of “suspicious event” this adventuring trio had been sent out to investigate, I thought.

My destination, meanwhile, was the castle of the demon lord Leon. His domain occupied the lands just beyond the forest. I should have chosen that moment to take my leave of their party. But…I don’t know. I suppose I just wanted to see, along with these adventurers, what kind of home these monsters had made for themselves.

It was a strange place indeed, this town our rescuers lived in. It was no dank lair or stinking, filthy den. A “town” was the only way to describe it.

The shock I felt was beyond comprehension. This wasn’t some rude shelter, some glorified hole in a mountain. It was a proper town, one they had built for themselves from scratch.

It was under construction, I should probably add. It had been surveyed and laid out, and building materials had been placed in each section, ready to be converted into houses. There were no buildings yet; the monsters were still living out of neat rows of tents. But they had even started their work by focusing on the underground infrastructure. I had never heard of anything like it on this planet.

It was a bizarre settlement.

But it was bursting with energy. The residents, despite being monsters, truly seemed to enjoy working on it. Most of them were hobgoblins, but they seemed to share their lands with the black direwolves. A tad different from the ones I was familiar with, and I didn’t think it was my imagination.

The leader of the hobgoblins spoke very fluently to me. I imagine he was the most intelligent among them. He even prepared food for us. Remarkably, though, he turned out not to be the leader at all. Instead, he was joined by a slime—one who lay back in his lofty throne, acting as if he were king of the world. It might be odd to say a slime could “lie back” on anything, perhaps, but that really was the sense he exuded.

This slime was the strangest thing of all—for he, in fact, was the leader of all these monsters.

It was hilarious.

I couldn’t help but do a spit take as he spoke. “I’m not a bad slime” was how he chose to describe himself! Just like Yuuki’s “video game.” I began to wonder whether it was a coincidence.

Still, there was something inviting about the space this slime created. The strange creature somehow made me recall memories of my own hometown. My heart felt full. Now I was glad I’d decided to step away from my intended path. This meeting, I thought, was fate at work. And yet—

The hours we spent enjoying ourselves came to a sudden halt. My life was about to expire. I had yet to reach my destination—to fulfill my goal—but here it was.

Ifrit had been waiting for this moment. I could feel his will taking over mine. It’s happening… I’m going to ruin all of this, too…

If only, one last time, I could just—

The titan manifested himself, all but laughing at my folly.

My consciousness faded away.

I went to see how she was. She didn’t have long. In fact, she might never regain consciousness. Still, I wanted to take care of her to the end, this fellow otherworlder human.

The wounded adventurers all pulled through, thankfully, whining incessantly about how it’d take more than hazard pay to atone for getting burned half to death.

“Hey, what’s the deal with this?” Elen asked. “I don’t see any burn scars or anything… Like, my skin’s as soft and shiny as a baby!”

“Dang,” Kabal added. “I didn’t think I’d be able to move for another week or so, too.”

“Yeah, count me surprised. That’s some potion he had there!”

They were right. That potion had made all of them good as new.

“You know, though… This probably means they’ll turn down our request for hazard pay, doesn’t it?” Elen moaned.

“Yep. Nobody’s gonna believe us…,” Kabal replied.

“Yeah, I s’pose so. Beats bein’ laid up for good, though!” Gido commented.

It never took long for this trio to start bickering with one another over their own self-interested quibbles. I wondered if they ever really had a thought about anybody besides themselves. They didn’t have anything against monsters, at least.

“You know,” I suggested, “once things calm down a little, maybe I could go visit your town.”

“Oh, if that’s the case, I could give the guild master a message for you!”

Just what I wanted to hear. Kabal had made my day. I looked up to adventurers, kind of. I didn’t have any sort of ID papers, though, and I didn’t even know whether they’d let monsters join the registry, but…it could be fun.

So Kabal promised me that I could just say the name “Rimuru” and the guild master would hear about it soon enough. Nice guy. I was in such high spirits that I decided to give them a farewell gift—a few pieces of equipment, freshly made by the dwarven brothers. They were all test models, made with materials they had procured themselves, but the quality was respectable.

Spider robe:

A robe of pure white, woven with spider silk.

Scale mail:

Heavy armor made from the shell of a lizard. Far lighter than appearances indicate.

Hard-leather armor:

Made from the skins of local monsters. Magical resistance included.

I also tossed in some food and ten recovery potions for good measure.

“Ooh! Look at this robe! It’s so light, and I can’t believe how sturdy it is! And pretty, too!”

“Whoa! I’ve always wanted some real scale mail! This… Waaaait a second, did Master Garm make this?! This’ll be like a family treasure to me!”

“Yeah, are you sure we can have these? This is almost too nice for the likes of me. I mean, real direwolf fur?”

It was a miniature celebration for a little while. But—I mean, the fire had torched all their equipment, and I doubted their salary would let them replace it all that easily. It wasn’t exactly my fault, but I had to feel a little sympathy for them. The equipment was all prototypes, crafted before the dwarves could move on to mass production, but it was decent enough.

Besides, look how happy they are. I was confident they’d remember to pass my name on. They were calling me “boss” with the rest of them, too.

The three of them had their qualms about what happened to Shizu, but not enough to keep them from setting off again after three days of rest. They had a report to file and a looming deadline. If anything, three days was a generous amount of time to worry over a woman who’d essentially shoehorned herself into their traveling party uninvited.

Still, I promised them all that I’d take care of her, and that was enough to put their minds at ease.

A week passed before Shizu woke up again.

“Is this…? Oh. I…apologize.”

Despite the transformation, she still retained all her memories.

“I was dreaming,” she told me. “Dreaming about the past. The city I lived in… A place I can never return to.”

Japan?

“Tell me, slime. What is your name?”

Hmm. Maybe her suddenly elderliness was affecting her memory after all. I knew I had introduced myself in her presence. “Rimuru, ma’am,” I replied.

Shizu closed her eyes, as if thinking over something. “Could you maybe tell me your real name?” she said.

She must’ve known all along. I hesitated for a moment.

“Hmph,” I offered. “You aren’t long for this world anyway. I’ll tell you. It’s Satoru Mikami.”

My real name. A name I figured I wouldn’t be using again.

“Ah. From my land, are you…? I had thought you might be. I sensed it from you.” She fell silent for a moment. “I had heard from my students, as well. The city’s much better now? Prettier? The last time I was there, there was nothing but fire all around me.”

“Yeah. I could show you, if you’d like.”

I used Thought Communication to do exactly that. Fairly useful thing to have at a time like this. I liked it.

“Ahh…” The sight made Shizu shed a tear. “Listen, slime…or I should say Satoru, I suppose. I have a request for you. Would you mind listening to it?”

“What kind of request?”

Nothing particularly doable, I was sure. But I did promise to take care of her to the end. She deserved to be heard out.

“I want you to eat me…”

Um? What did this old lady just say?

“You consumed the curse…that was placed on me, did you not…? I’m so glad to be rid of it…” Her voice grew quiet. “I wish I had the chance—I doubt I could’ve ever done it, but I wish I could’ve had the chance to confront the person who placed it on me, one more time… So I have just one request for you—would you let me sleep inside you?”

Something about her eyes, the resolve that she just couldn’t relinquish, grabbed at me. It seemed so absurd, so cruel…

“I have to tell you—I have nothing but spite for this world. But I couldn’t bring myself to hate it, still. It’s the same as how I feel toward that man… Perhaps I can’t help but think of him when I look around me. That’s why I… I don’t want to be taken into the earth here. So please… I was hoping you could eat me instead…”

Hmm. Well, that’s easy enough.

Fulfilling her request would bind me, no doubt, and give me a curse of my own. I would be charged with taking on her despair and hatred.

Was there any need to waver on that, though? If I wanted her to see the afterlife with her mind at peace—the answer was obvious.

“All right. I’ll be happy to take on your feelings. And what was the name of this man…the one who hurt you?”

At the question, Shizu opened her eyes, scrunched up her burn-scarred face, and shed a few more tears. “Leon Cromwell,” she said. “One of the strongest demon lords.”

She looked at me with pleading eyes.

“I promise!” I declared. “By my name as Satoru Mikami, or Rimuru Tempest, or whatever works best for you, I promise I’ll make Leon Cromwell know everything you feel about him. I’ll make him regret every moment!”

“Thank you,” she whispered, and then she closed her eyes, her breath turning shallow as she slept.

Use unique skill “Predator”?

Yes

No

—Here’s hoping you’ll find some peace inside me, then.

Yes, I thought to myself, in a sort of prayer to her—a hope that her dreams inside would remain happy forever. With no more rude awakenings.

Tap, tap, tap, tap…

She looked up, her face bearing the innocence of youth. Relief spread across it as a smile emerged on her face.

Well, there you are! Don’t leave me alone like that again, all right?

But the figure shook its head before pointing at something far away. The girl turned toward it, her expression suddenly clouded with doubtful sadness.

There she found—

Mom!!

A burst of happiness rushed through her entire body as she rushed toward her mother. The figure watched her trot off for a moment—then disappeared, as if nothing had ever occupied the space at all. Perhaps it was just an illusion crafted by the girl’s memories.

Thus, the girl was reunited with her mother.

It marked the end of what had been a long, long journey.