Reincarnated as a Castle - (LitRPG, Kingdom Building, Progression)

Chapter 91: A Fight for Survival

"Damn it!"

The chieftain’s eyes widened in horror.

"MOVE!"

"MOVE, YOU DAMN BODY!"

He poured every last bit of strength into his muscles, desperately trying to break free.

But the wolves wouldn’t let go.

He was too late!

Or so it seemed...

"GET AWAY FROM HER!"

A goblin suddenly charged in from the side, gripping a long spear with both hands.

THRUST!
The spear pierced the wolf’s flank and drove deep into its body.

The creature yelped in pain, its attack interrupted just before its claws could reach the girl.

The goblin who had saved her was a young Hobgoblin. His face was pale with terror, but he held the spear firmly in both hands.

He was clearly frightened out of his mind.

Yet he’d still rushed forward.

"RUN!" he shouted at the girl. "GO!"

The girl didn’t hesitate.

She scrambled away, tears streaming down her face.

Unfortunately, the young Hobgoblin’s heroic moment didn’t last long.

Two more wolves immediately turned toward him.

Their crimson tongues hung from their jaws as they lowered their bodies, preparing to pounce on the foolish goblin who had dared to interfere.

The young Hobgoblin tightened his grip on his spear.

His hands were trembling.

Still, he didn’t retreat.

He had saved the chieftain’s daughter.

That was enough.

If he could buy her even a few more seconds...

Just then...

BOOM! BOOM!
Two explosions erupted almost simultaneously.

Flames burst across the rocky ground, engulfing the two approaching wolves in a violent blast.

The creatures were thrown backward, their fur scorched black as they tumbled across the ground. They rolled and writhed in agony, desperately trying to extinguish the flames burning across their bodies.

The young Hobgoblin stared in shock.

Then he turned toward the source of the explosions.

Several meters away stood the elderly shaman, skull-topped staff raised high. Smoke rose from his palm as faint red embers flickered around his fingers.

"Don’t just stand there!" the shaman shouted. "Keep moving!"

The young Hobgoblin snapped out of his daze and hurried after the others.

Meanwhile, the shaman planted the bottom of his staff firmly against the ground.

THUMP!
Then he raised it.

The staff floated high. more than five meters high.

The skull mounted atop the staff began to glow.

First, its eye sockets lit up with a dim crimson light. Then the glow intensified, turning into two blazing red flames that filled the empty sockets.

The skull’s jaw suddenly dropped open.

And from its mouth...

FWHOOOOOOOSH!
A torrent of fire erupted!

The flames roared across the battlefield like a living dragon, sweeping over the rocky ground and forcing the approaching wolves to scatter.

Several creatures yelped as the heat washed over them. Others leaped backward, their fur singed by the intense flames.

The shaman slowly controlled his floating staff two sweep from side to side, directing the fiery torrent across the battlefield.

For a few precious moments, the wolves were forced to retreat.

The path was finally clear.

"GO!" the shaman roared. "DON’T LOOK BACK!"

The remaining goblins hurried past him, helping the wounded as they fled toward the forest.

The shaman continued holding the wolves at bay.

But then...

His gaze shifted toward the chieftain.

The gigantic goblin was still on the ground, struggling against the three wolves clinging to his body.

For a moment, the old shaman hesitated.

The staff floated down to his hand as the powerful spell finally ended.

His grip tightened around the wood.

Suddenly, the shaman coughed up blood.

Apparently, that powerful spell had not only drawn out an incredible amount of mana, but some of his life force as well.

Still, he wanted to help the chieftain. Perhaps he could risk everything and cast another spell.

But... what would happen to the others if he did?

His eyes flickered toward the fleeing goblins.

Then toward the young girl among them.

The chieftain’s daughter...

His master’s final request....

The old shaman’s expression twisted with anguish. He didn’t want to leave the chieftain behind. Not after everything they’d been through together. Not after serving the tribe for so many years.

But he’d already made his choice.

He had promised to protect the tribe. And he wouldn’t break that promise.

"Chieftain..."

His voice was barely audible beneath the roar of the flames.

At that moment, the chieftain turned his head and met the shaman’s gaze. Despite the pain, despite the three wolves tearing at his body, he understood the old goblin’s hesitation.

And then...

He smiled.

It was a rough, weary smile that seemed strangely out of place amid all the bloodshed.

"GOOOO!"

His roar shook the battlefield.

"PROTECT THE TRIBE!"

The shaman bit his lip so hard that a trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to say something. But in the end, he simply turned away.

He reached for the chieftain’s daughter’s hand and pulled her toward the forest.

"Come on!"

"Father!"

The girl desperately tried to resist, twisting around to look back at the enormous figure still fighting for his life.

"FATHER!"

But the shaman held her tightly and kept running.

He couldn’t let her turn back.

Not now.

Not after the chieftain had sacrificed everything to give them this chance...

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Behind them, the flames gradually faded.

The shaman’s spell finally came to an end, and the remaining wolves began gathering themselves again.

The chieftain watched as the last of his people disappeared among the trees.

His daughter was safe.

The tribe would survive.

That was enough.

He slowly exhaled.

Then, with a sudden surge of fury, pushed himself up, then threw his enormous body sideways.

BOOOOM!

He deliberately slammed himself against a massive boulder protruding from the hillside.

The impact was so violent that the rock shattered.

Chunks of stone exploded outward, and the wolf biting his right arm was caught between the chieftain’s body and the collapsing boulder.

CRACK!
The wolf’s body was crushed beneath the tremendous force.

Its jaws finally released the chieftain’s arm as it slumped lifelessly among the broken stones.

But the chieftain wasn’t finished.

Not yet!

He twisted his battered body and changed his attention to the wolf clinging to his left leg.

With a furious roar, he drove his fist into its head.

BANG!
The impact crushed the wolf’s skull!

Its body went limp almost immediately.

The chieftain then reached down and seized the final wolf by its head.

The creature snarled and struggled, desperately trying to wrench itself free.

But the gigantic goblin’s grip only tightened. His fingers dug into the wolf’s skull.

Then...

SPURT!
Blood sprayed out as his five fingers pierced the wolf’s head!

CRACK!
The bone gave way beneath his monstrous strength.

The wolf’s struggles stopped.

And just like that... three wolves. All dead.

The chieftain slowly rose to his feet, his enormous body trembling beneath the strain.

Blood ran down his arms and legs. His breathing came in ragged gasps, and his remaining hand shook as he tried to steady himself.

Yet he still stood, still facing the enemy.

He turned toward the remaining Horned Gray Wolves and let out a thunderous roar.

"ROOOOOAAAAARRRR!"

"COME AT ME!!!"

"I WILL SLAUGHTER YOU ALL!!!"

For a moment, the entire battlefield fell silent.

The wolves froze. Their ears flattened against their heads, and several instinctively took a step backward.

Even these patient, intelligent predators couldn’t help but feel a flicker of fear as they stared at the monstrous goblin standing among the corpses of their fallen packmates.

This was the creature that had killed so many of them.

This was the beast that had fought through countless injuries and still refused to fall.

For a brief moment, it almost seemed as though the chieftain might actually drive them all away.

But then...

His knees buckled.

Thud!
The enormous goblin dropped back onto one knee.

His massive body trembled violently as the last traces of that overwhelming power faded away.

The red glow in his eyes dimmed.

His swollen muscles began to shrink, and the thick veins bulging beneath his skin gradually receded.

The twenty seconds were over. And the backlash had arrived.

Guh...!

The chieftain coughed violently, feeling as though every ounce of strength had been ripped from his body.

His arms felt unbearably heavy, his legs refused to respond, even drawing a proper breath had become a struggle.

He tried to stand. But his body wouldn’t listen.

"Damn it..."

"Not yet..."

"I can’t fall.... here!"

The remaining wolves watched him carefully.

They had seen his transformation fade.

They had seen him collapse.

And now, they understood.

The monster that had slaughtered their companions was finally reaching his limit.

One of the wolves slowly stepped forward, its lips curled back, revealing a mouthful of bloodstained fangs.

The chieftain tried to raise his head.

He wanted to fight. He wanted to stand back up and swing his sword one more time. But his body had nothing left to give.

The wolf lowered its body, its hind legs tensed.

And then it leaped, straight toward the fallen chieftain’s throat.

...

Ah... is this the end?
The chieftain’s vision grew blurry as he watched the approaching wolf.

He still wanted to fight. He wanted to grab the beast by the neck and smash its skull against the ground. He wanted to stand up, pick his greatsword up again, and keep fighting until every last wolf lay dead at his feet.

But...

He couldn’t even move a finger anymore.

His body had finally reached its limit.

Well... at least I did my best.
He’d fought with everything he had. He’d killed as many wolves as he could, buying precious time for his people to escape.

And judging by the fact that he could no longer see any of them nearby, they’d probably managed to get away.

That’s enough.
At least his daughter was safe.

At least the Bright Red Nose Tribe still had a future.

The chieftain slowly closed his eyes, accepting the inevitable.

Dying to these wolves... Heh. I suppose that's still a hundred times better than being eaten alive by those damn giant spiders...
He almost laughed at the thought.

Almost.

The sound of pounding paws drew closer. They barked, they growled.

Well, then. Come on.
Just get it over with.
One wolf lunged.

Its enormous jaws opened wide, rows of razor-sharp fangs aimed straight at his throat!

...

But just before those fangs could reach him...

Something rushed in from the side!

"RRRRAAAAAAAHHHH! SHIELD CHARGEEEEEE!"

BAAAAAAMMMM!
A gigantic shield slammed into the wolf's body with enough force to send the creature flying sideways!

The wolf crashed into the ground, tumbling several times before finally coming to a stop.

Meanwhile, a towering figure stood between it and the fallen chieftain.

A goblin.

A HUGE goblin!

He was nearly three meters tall, with a broad chest, thick arms, and a physique that looked as though someone had taken a mountain and decided to give it muscles.

He was every bit as impressive as the chieftain himself!

And his head...

His head was completely bald, shining brilliantly beneath the sunlight!

The giant goblin planted his enormous shield against the ground.

The chieftain stared at him.

His eyes widened.

"...What in the world?!"

For a moment, he genuinely wondered whether he'd already died and was now hallucinating some bizarre scene in the afterlife.

Because seriously...

What the hell was this?!

Another Hulgagoblin?

Had a neighboring tribe's chieftain come to his rescue? That would at least explain the incredible size and strength.

But...

WHY DOES THIS GUY LOOK SO DAMN HANDSOME?!
The chieftain’s jaw nearly dropped.

Despite his shiny bald head, the giant goblin possessed an unexpectedly handsome face. His features were sharp and well-proportioned, his skin smooth and flawless, and his physique practically screamed power.

Not a single ugly scar marred his face.

Not even a pimple!

What kind of ridiculous evolution is this?!
The chieftain had met countless goblins throughout his life. He’d seen hulking warriors, cunning shamans, strange-looking mutations...

But he’d never seen anything like this. Not even close!

But before he could make sense of the situation...

"HELLOOOOO, MOTHERFUCKERRRR!"

Another voice thundered across the battlefield.

A second goblin came rushing in, gripping an enormous dark iron axe with both hands.

Unlike the first giant, this one was considerably shorter, standing at roughly two meters tall. His build was leaner, but his movements were incredibly powerful and fluid.

He swung his axe in a wide, sweeping arc, putting his entire body behind the strike.

SHWOOOOOSH!
The blade flashed through the sunlight.

The wolf that had just recovered from being knocked aside barely had time to turn its head.

SLAAAAASH!
The axe cleaved straight through its body!

Blood sprayed across the ground as the two halves of the wolf fell in opposite directions.

The second goblin landed lightly on his feet, his enormous axe resting against his shoulder. Then he turned toward the chieftain and smiled.

A dazzling, confident smile that revealed a row of perfectly white teeth.

"Yo! You alright, big guy?"

The chieftain stared at him.

Then he stared at the first goblin.

Then back at the second.

...WHAT THE HELL?!
If the bald giant had already shattered everything he knew about goblin appearances, this second fellow had just taken those shattered pieces, ground them into dust, and scattered them to the four winds!

He was even more handsome!

His hair was smooth and neatly styled, his facial features looked practically sculpted, and his skin was so flawless that the chieftain couldn't spot even the tiniest blemish.

And that smile!

Damn it! Why are his teeth so white?!
The chieftain had spent his entire life surrounded by goblins with crooked teeth, rough skin, scars, warts, and all sorts of other imperfections.

Yet here stood a goblin who looked as though he'd been personally designed by the gods to make every other male in the world feel inferior.

And the most infuriating part?

This handsome bastard was casually holding a massive iron axe as though it weighed no more than a wooden stick!

Where the hell did he even get such a cool weapon?!

Wait... another Hulgagoblin?
The chieftain's mind raced.

No, that can't be right.
The second goblin is much smaller than the first. His aura is different, too. He is clearly powerful, but he doesn't seem to possess the same monstrous physical strength as the bald giant.
Then what is he?
And why does he look like that?!
Unfortunately, the chieftain didn't have much time to ponder the mystery.

Because more figures were emerging from the forest.

One was a smaller male goblin with striking, spiky white hair. He moved with an almost unnatural lightness, his sharp eyes rapidly surveying the battlefield.

Behind him came three female goblins.

And when they came to a stop, surrounding themselves around the chieftain...

The chieftain froze, eyes darting between the new goblins.

All three were beautiful.

No, *beautiful* wasn't even the right word.
They were absolutely gorgeous!

One was a mature-looking woman with a graceful figure and a calm, composed expression. Another carried a massive hammer and had a fierce, intimidating look that suited her weapon perfectly. The third was a petite young woman with a bow, her shy expression somehow making her even more adorable.

And just like the males, all three had smooth, flawless faces. Their features were delicate and well-proportioned, and their skin looked softer than anything the chieftain had ever seen in his entire life.

Even their hair was beautiful!

One had a cute ponytail. Another had short, badass red hair. The smallest looked almost like a little doll, with long, wavy blue hair that shimmered in the light.

And all of them were goblins!

GOBLINS!

NOT ELVES!

The chieftain’s mouth slowly fell open.

He looked at the newcomers.

Then at the dead wolf lying in two neat halves on the ground.

His mind went completely blank.

...
Just...
WHAT THE FUCK ARE THESE WEIRDLY HANDSOME AND PRETTY GOBLINS?!

Chapter 93: Helping the chieftain

Thankfully, my goblins had arrived just in time!

So, this is the chieftain of the Bright Red Nose Tribe, huh?
A Hulgagoblin?
Damn... now that’s an impressive physique!
I took a good look at the giant goblin before shifting my attention to the battlefield around him.

The ground was littered with the corpses of Horned Gray Wolves. Some had been split in half, while others had their skulls smashed in or their bodies crushed beyond recognition.

This guy... He’s really strong!

Even in his current condition, the chieftain had managed to take down so many powerful monsters. And judging by the countless wounds covering his body, he'd been fighting well beyond his limits for quite some time.

Honestly, I couldn't help feeling a little excited.

If I could somehow recruit this guy into my castle...
Just imagine having a monster like him on my side!
A powerful frontline fighter with that kind of physique would be an incredible addition to my forces. If he could fight like this after sustaining so many injuries, I could only imagine how terrifying he'd be at full strength.

But then again...

Hulgagoblin is still an inferior evolution line, isn't it?
Would I have to devolve him back to Level 10 and make him go through the entire evolution process again if I wanted him to evolve into a superior variant?

Ugh... that sounds like a pain.
Still, I could worry about that later. Right now, the guy was practically standing at death's door, and there were still plenty of wolves running around.

First things first. We needed to get him out of this mess.

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And so, while the others continued fighting the Horned Gray Wolves, Gopuran and Gopuberry hurried over to the chieftain.

"Hey! Careful!"

Gopuran quickly grabbed one of his massive arms while Gopuberry moved to support him from the other side, trying to keep his enormous body upright.

However, the moment they took some of his weight... the chieftain suddenly slumped against them.

"Ugh...!"

Both goblin girls staggered under his weight, struggling to keep their balance.

Good grief!
Just how much does this guy weigh?!
Even for two Super Forest Goblins, supporting a creature of his size was no easy task!

Still, his weight wasn’t even the biggest problem.

Looking at the terrible condition he was in, I honestly couldn’t understand how he’d managed to survive this long.

His body was covered in deep wounds, his remaining arm was badly mangled, and blood continued dripping from numerous injuries. Several cuts looked deep enough to expose the muscle beneath his skin, while his legs trembled whenever he tried to remain standing.

Even his breathing sounded painful. Every breath came out as a rough, strained gasp.

Then, without warning...

"Blargh!"

The chieftain suddenly vomited a mouthful of blood.

"Hey! Are you alright?!" Gopuran exclaimed, her voice filled with concern.

The enormous goblin coughed several more times, his broad shoulders shaking with each spasm. He tried to swallow the blood in his mouth, but more trickled down his chin before he finally managed to speak.

"Thank you... I'm fine..."

No, you're definitely not fine, buddy!
His voice was hoarse and weak. The chieftain glanced at the two girls supporting him, then looked toward the other goblins still fighting nearby.

"But... who are you? Which tribe... did you come from?"

"Hehe!" Gopushadow happened to be nearby, dodging a Horned Gray Wolf that lunged at him from the side.

The wolf's jaws snapped shut just inches from his body.

But the white-haired goblin was already moving.

He twisted aside, slipped past the wolf's fangs, and flicked his dagger across its throat in one swift motion.

SLASH!
The blade cut straight through the wolf's artery. Blood sprayed from its neck as the creature stumbled, its legs giving way a moment later.

Gopushadow casually wiped some blood from his face, then flashed the chieftain a grin.

"We come from the Castle Tribe!"

"Huh? The Castle Tribe?"

The chieftain stared at him in confusion.

"Is there... such a tribe in this forest?"

"Yep!" Gopushadow replied cheerfully. "Our leader isn't a goblin, though. He's a literal god! He sent us here to find you and help your tribe!"

"...What?!"

The chieftain's eyes widened.

"A... a god?"

He stared at Gopushadow as though the white-haired goblin had suddenly started speaking an entirely different language.

Meanwhile...

Oh, God. Shadow, what the hell are you telling him now?!
Look at the expression on the poor guy's face!
And why the hell have you gone straight into marketing mode?!
The chieftain already looked as though his brain was struggling to keep up with everything happening around him. And now Gopushadow had decided to throw the existence of a god into the mix!

Good grief...
Well, whatever. It's not like I can do much about it.
But then I suddenly realized something.

Perhaps Gopushadow had actually done me a favor.

If the chieftain genuinely believed I was a god, wouldn’t that make recruiting him a little easier later?

After all, who would refuse an offer from a god?

Hehehe...
Nicely done, Shadow!
Keep it up!
"Well, whether he’s actually a god is still a mystery," Gopuberry suddenly chimed in. "But he’s definitely an incredibly powerful being! He’s given us so much power."

"That’s right!" Gopuran added with a firm nod. "In fact, the reason we’ve become this strong is all thanks to him!"

"YEAH! OUR BIG BOSS IS AWESOME!"

Gopuro’s loud voice suddenly rang out from farther away.

The guy had just finished decapitating another Horned Gray Wolf with his fire axe. He raised his weapon triumphantly before turning toward us.

"Big boss gives us power and makes us stronger!!!"

"AND FOOD!" Gopugiga shouted from another part of the battlefield. "THE MOST DELICOUS FOOD IN THE WORLD! UNLIMITED!"

The enormous goblin swung his dark iron axe at one wolf while raising his massive shield with his other hand to block an attack from another.

CRACK!
His axe smashed straight through the wolf’s skull, sending the creature crumpling to the ground.

"YEAH!" Gopuflammy joined in. "AND POWERFUL WEAPONS TOO!"

She hefted her massive iron hammer, grinning as another Horned Gray Wolf lunged at her.

"LIKE THIS!"

BAM!
The hammer came down with a terrifying impact, crushing the wolf's head and sending its body sprawling across the ground.

Gopuflammy's eyes gleamed with pride as she admired her weapon.

"HAHAHA! ISN'T IT AWESOME?!"

Meanwhile, the chieftain stared at them.

Then he looked at Gopuran.

Then at Gopuberry.

Then back at the goblins casually slaughtering wolves while enthusiastically praising their supposed god.

For a few seconds, he didn't say anything.

His expression grew increasingly complicated, as though he were desperately trying to make sense of everything he'd just heard.

Chapter 94: Helping the chieftain (2)

Haha...

Honestly, I couldn’t blame the chieftain for being speechless.

If I were in his position, I’d probably be wondering whether I’d hit my head a little too hard during the battle.

Still, we didn’t have time to stand around chatting.

"Anyway," Gopuran said, bringing the conversation back to the point, "are you the only survivor here? What happened to the rest of your tribe? Are there any others?"

The moment he heard her questions, the chieftain’s eyes suddenly widened.

It was as though he’d just remembered something incredibly important.

"Ah! My tribe!"

He tried to straighten his enormous body, forcing himself upright despite the pain.

"Ugh...!"

His knees trembled, and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, but he stubbornly refused to sit back down.

"They escaped!" he managed to grunt. "The others... they escaped! But they’re still running! Please... I have to... help them!"

"Hey! Calm down!" Gopuran immediately tightened her grip around his arm, trying to stop him from moving. "Look at yourself! You can barely stand! You won’t be able to help anyone in this condition!"

"But...!"

"Leave it to us!" Gopuberry quickly interrupted. "Just tell us which direction they went!"

The chieftain hesitated for only a moment before raising his remaining arm and pointing toward the forest.

"There! They went that way!"

The moment I heard that, I immediately issued an order.

"Shadow. Flammy. Go help them!"

"YES, BIG BOSS!"

Gopushadow and Gopuflammy responded almost simultaneously.

The white-haired goblin immediately dashed in the direction the chieftain had indicated, weaving between the trees with incredible speed.

Gopuflammy followed close behind, her massive hammer resting against her shoulder as she rushed off to help the fleeing tribe.

With those two on their way, the survivors should have a much better chance of making it out alive.

At least, I hoped so.

But as for the battlefield here...

Well, we still had plenty of wolves to deal with.

I shifted my attention back to the remaining Horned Gray Wolves.

After watching so many of their packmates get slaughtered, the survivors were starting to look a lot less confident. They backed away cautiously, keeping their wary eyes on my goblins as though they were trying to figure out whether they still stood a chance.

There were still more than a dozen of them left.

Or, more accurately, *only* a dozen or so!
Heh. Too bad for you guys.
You've picked the wrong opponents today.
"Everyone, finish them off!"

"YES, BIG BOSS!"

My goblins immediately sprang into action.

Gopuro and Gopugiga went on the offensive, unleashing their inner killing machines as they charged toward the remaining wolves.

Meanwhile, Gopuran and Gopuberry stayed beside the chieftain, keeping him supported while watching the battlefield for any threats that might slip past the others.

As for me...

Well, I just settled in to watch the bloody show!

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Less than ten minutes later, the battle was already over.

The remaining Horned Gray Wolves had been thoroughly dealt with. Their corpses lay scattered across the clearing, joining those of their fallen packmates.

"WHOOOO!"

Gopuro thrust his axe into the ground and rolled his shoulders, letting out a satisfied sigh.

"That was awesome!"

"Yeah!" Gopuran agreed, wiping the blood off her sword before sheathing it. "I've wanted revenge on these fucking wolves for so long! Finally, I feel so much better!"

"Mwahahaha!" Gopuro burst into laughter. "I know, right?! Who would've thought that just a few days ago, we were still running away from these bastards with our tails between our legs? And now, their entire pack barely gives us enough exercise!"

The guy was practically beaming with pride.

Well, I couldn't blame him.

Not long ago, these very same Horned Gray Wolves had nearly killed them. Now, after receiving my blessings, getting their hands on better weapons, and growing stronger through evolution, they could take on an entire pack without much trouble.

The difference was honestly ridiculous.

Hehe. Looks like my investment is paying off!

Meanwhile, the chieftain had finally managed to sit down and lean against a nearby boulder. His enormous body slumped against the rough stone, and his remaining arm rested limply across his lap.

Gopuberry stayed beside him, keeping a close eye on his condition.

"Here... have some water."

She carefully took out her waterskin and offered it to him.

"Thank... thank you..."

The chieftain accepted it with trembling fingers and raised it to his mouth. He drank several mouthfuls, swallowing with some difficulty before finally lowering the waterskin.

Even this simple action seemed to leave him exhausted.

Damn...
He really was in terrible shape.

"Big Boss..." Gopuberry suddenly murmured.

Her eyes were filled with worry as she stared at the chieftain’s bloodied body.

"Will he be alright? He’s losing so much blood..."

"Hmm..."

I paused for a moment before replying.

"As long as you guys can bring him back to me alive, he’ll be fine."

"Phew..."

Gopuberry let out a soft sigh of relief, and some of the tension finally left her shoulders.

However...

Well, shit.
The truth was, even I wasn't entirely sure whether the guy would survive.

I certainly hoped he would. After all, I'd already started thinking about recruiting him into my castle, and losing such a powerful potential citizen would be a real shame.

But looking at his injuries...

And the increasingly vacant look in his eyes...

And the way his breathing was becoming slower and weaker...

Yeah, it was hard to feel optimistic.

The chieftain was doing his best to stay conscious, but his body was clearly reaching its limit. Every now and then, his head would droop slightly before he forced himself to raise it again.

He was fighting to stay awake.

But for how much longer?

Damn it...
If only one of my goblins had some kind of healing skill!
Unfortunately, none of them did.

Sure, my citizens had become much stronger, but their abilities were still primarily focused on combat. We had powerful attackers, a sturdy defender, a swift scout, and several other capable fighters.

But a proper healer?

Yeah, we were sorely lacking one.

And right now, that weakness was becoming painfully obvious.

I could only hope the chieftain's body was tough enough to hold out until we returned to the castle. Once he became my citizen, I might be able to use the System to find some way to help him.

The problem was getting him there alive.

Come on, big guy. Hang in there a little longer!
Just then...

Rustle!
Several figures emerged from the forest.

I immediately turned my attention toward them.

Leading the group were Gopushadow and Gopuflammy!

And behind them...

Oh!
They're here!
The remaining members of the Bright Red Nose Tribe had finally arrived!

Now...

More than twenty goblins emerged from between the trees. Some were supporting wounded companions, while others carried whatever weapons they'd managed to hold on to during their desperate escape.

Among them were three Hulkgoblins, five Hobgoblins, and quite a few ordinary goblins. I also spotted the elderly shaman with his skull-topped staff, his tattoo-covered body adorned with countless bones and trinkets.

Hmm... This old guy seems pretty high-level, too!
Even from a distance, I could tell this old fellow wasn't an ordinary shaman. He was practically radiating some kind of powerful aura.

Unfortunately, I barely had time to examine him before the entire group noticed the enormous figure resting against the boulder.

Their chieftain.

For a moment, everyone froze.

Then...

"CHIEFTAIN!"

"He's alive!"

"CHIEFTAIN!"

The clearing erupted with voices.

The goblins rushed toward him, relief spreading across their faces as they crowded around the boulder. Some were limping, others were also suffering from nasty wounds, but nobody seemed to care about their own injuries anymore.

Among them, one figure moved faster than everyone else.

A young goblin girl.

Despite her injured leg, she stumbled forward as quickly as she could before throwing herself into her father’s remaining arm.

"Father!"

Her voice broke almost immediately.

"Father! You’re still alive! I’m so glad! I’m so glad!"

I see...
So this girl is the chieftain’s daughter!
Well, this is touching.
She clung to his enormous body, sobbing uncontrollably as tears streamed down her face.

"Uwaaaahhh... I thought... I thought I’d never see you again!"

The chieftain stared at his daughter for a moment. Then, slowly, his expression softened.

"Ah... I’m here. It’s alright now..."

He carefully wrapped his remaining arm around her, pulling her close against his chest.

The moment he embraced her, his shoulders began to tremble.

He was crying, too.

The enormous goblin who had faced an entire pack of Horned Gray Wolves without backing down was now holding his daughter and weeping quietly.

He'd fought desperately to protect his tribe. He'd endured terrible injuries, pushed himself far beyond his limits, and come within a hair's breadth of death.

And now, finally, he could see with his own eyes that his daughter was alive.

Apparently, that was enough to break through whatever strength he had left.

Around them, the other goblins struggled to hold back their tears. Some covered their faces with their hands, while others lowered their heads, their shoulders shaking as they remembered just how close they'd come to losing their chieftain.

Even the elderly shaman, who'd remained composed throughout the battle, had tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

For a while, nobody said anything.

They simply gathered around their leader, sharing in the relief of having him back.

...
Well, damn.
Even I couldn't help feeling a little moved by the scene.

After everything they’d been through, they deserved at least this moment of peace.

However, the old shaman soon turned toward Gopushadow, who was standing nearby, pretending to be strong by swallowing his own sobs.

The elderly goblin suddenly reached out and grabbed both of the young goblin’s hands.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

His voice trembled with emotion.

"Thank you for saving our chieftain! If you hadn’t arrived when you did..."

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

He didn’t need to.

Everyone there knew what would have happened.

Gopushadow scratched his cheek, looking slightly embarrassed by the old goblin’s gratitude.

"Hehe... it’s nothing."

The chieftain slowly lifted his head from his daughter’s embrace and turned toward my citizens.

His gaze lingered on each of them before finally settling on Gopushadow and Gopuflammy.

"The Bright Red Nose Tribe..." he began, his voice still weak but carrying a solemn weight. "Will forever be indebted to you, great warriors of the Castle Tribe."

He lowered his head as much as his exhausted body allowed.

"And to your great leader... We will never forget this debt."

"Hehe..." Gopuro scratched his nose, looking a little awkward. "Come on, there’s no need to be so formal!"

"That’s right!" Gopuran added. "We’re all goblins, aren’t we? We’re brothers and sisters! When one tribe is in trouble, the others should help!"

"Yeah!" Gopugiga nodded enthusiastically. "Besides, beating up those wolves was pretty fun!"

And just like that, the tension eased a little.

Several of the Bright Red Nose goblins chuckled, and even the chieftain managed a faint smile.

Watching them, I couldn’t help feeling pleased.

Nice! Looks like my citizens are making a good impression.
This is fantastic.
More importantly, this was exactly the kind of relationship I wanted to build with the other goblin tribes. If we could help them through difficult times and earn their trust, perhaps we could eventually bring more of them under my protection.

Well, one thing at a time.
For now, I decided to let them enjoy their reunion a little longer.

After all, they'd just survived a massacre. They deserved a few moments to catch their breath and make sure their loved ones were safe.

*****

However, we couldn't afford to linger here for too long.

This was still Horned Gray Wolf territory. We'd dealt with the pack we'd encountered, but there was no telling whether more wolves might show up.

And then there was the battlefield itself.

The ground was practically covered in monster corpses.

Which meant... lots of potential Points!

Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly stop here and start processing every corpse while everyone was still injured and exhausted.

Damn it. What a waste of a perfectly good farming opportunity...
Still, getting everyone safely back to the castle had to come first.

I was just about to issue the order when the chieftain spoke up.

"Alright, everyone. Let's get moving... We need to reach the Castle Tribe before sunset."

He slowly released his daughter and began pushing himself away from the boulder.

The old shaman immediately stepped forward to support him. He placed one hand against the chieftain's chest and began channeling green healing energy into his battered body.

A faint glow spread across the chieftain’s wounds.

Some of the bleeding slowed, and a few of his worst injuries began to close, at least slightly.

Oh?
I watched with interest.

So this guy knows healing magic?
That’s awesome!
However, something seemed off. For some reason, the old shaman’s expression remained grim.

Even so, the chieftain stubbornly forced himself to stand.

"Ugh..."

He gritted his teeth, straightened his back, and took one step forward.

Then another.

For a brief moment, it actually looked as though he might manage to walk. And I was starting to feel optimistic again.

But then...

His legs suddenly gave way.

"Ah..."

The chieftain’s eyes rolled back, and his enormous body collapsed toward the ground.

...

"FATHER!"

His daughter screamed.

Fortunately, Gopuran and Gopuberry reacted immediately, catching him before his head struck the rocky ground.

"Hey! Chieftain!"

"Can you hear us?!"

"Hey!!!"

But he didn’t respond.

His head lolled to one side, and his remaining arm hung limply beside him.

He’d lost consciousness.

"NO! FATHER!"

The young goblin girl dropped to her knees beside him, grabbing his arm with both hands.

"Father! Please wake up!"

Her voice shook with panic as she turned toward the elderly shaman.

"Shaman! Please! Help my father!"

The old goblin was already kneeling beside the chieftain, one trembling hand pressed against his chest. Green light flared around his palm as he poured more healing energy into the massive goblin’s body.

For several seconds, he worked in silence.

Then his expression changed.

The color drained from his face.

"Damn it..." His voice was barely more than a whisper. "He’s lost too much blood!"

The shaman clenched his teeth and desperately tried to increase the flow of healing energy.

But the green glow flickered weakly.

"Even with my healing magic... it’s not enough..."

He looked up at the surrounding goblins, despair filling his eyes.

"At this rate, he’s not going to make it!"

Chapter 96: At death’s door

"No!!!"

The young goblin girl burst into tears.

"Shaman! You have to save my father! Please, you can’t let him die!"

"Karrrgh! I’m trying my best here!" the elderly goblin snapped.

He wasn’t angry at the girl, of course. He was just as desperate as she was, and he was running out of options.

The shaman pressed one hand against the chieftain’s chest and continued channeling his healing magic. Green light spread from his palm, washing over the enormous goblin’s battered body.

But the longer he maintained the spell, the more exhausted he became.

His breathing grew ragged. His shoulders trembled, and sweat ran down his wrinkled face as he struggled to keep the magic flowing.

"But... my power..." he gasped. "It’s simply not enough to save him..."

The green light flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then it went out.

The shaman’s hand slipped from the chieftain’s chest. He staggered backward before dropping onto his rear, breathing heavily as he tried to recover.

"Shaman..."

The young goblin girl stared at him, her face pale.

The old goblin lowered his head. For a moment, he just sat there, his trembling hands resting uselessly on his knees.

"I’m sorry..." he muttered. "I’ve done everything I can..."

Fuck...
I cursed inwardly.

If only I could make this guy one of my citizens right now!
If I could recruit the chieftain into my territory, I might be able to use my system to evolve him, just as I’d done with Gopuro. That could potentially increase his HP and give his body a better chance of surviving his injuries.

And if that wasn’t enough, I could use my blessings to help him recover, too!

There were so many things I could try if he were one of my citizens.

But, unfortunately...

I couldn’t grant citizenship to someone outside my territory.

Urgh... this is so frustrating!
Seriously, is there really nothing I can do to save this guy?!
I immediately turned my attention toward the system.

"Hey! System! I need your help here!"

"Is there any way I can grant this chieftain citizenship right now?"

"Come on! Please! Can’t you make an exception just this once?!"

...

Silence.

As usual, the system remained completely unresponsive.

Fuck!

I was starting to get seriously annoyed.

Not that getting angry would accomplish anything. I could only watch as the chieftain’s daughter continued clinging to her father, tears falling from her face.

Then, just as I was beginning to run out of ideas, a voice suddenly rang out from the crowd.

"What about that spell, Shaman?!"

Everyone turned toward the speaker, a young goblin standing among the surviving members of the Bright Red Nose Tribe.

"What about your Sacred Blood Transfusion?!"

The girl’s tear-filled eyes widened.

"Right!"

She hurriedly turned toward the shaman and grabbed his arm.

"There’s still the Sacred Blood Transfusion! You can use that spell, can’t you?!"

The elderly goblin flinched as she shook his arm.

"Please!" she begged. "You can save my father with it, right? You have to try!"

The shaman hesitated.

"Well... I certainly can activate it..."

"Then do it!" the girl exclaimed, a flicker of hope returning to her face.

"Yes! Please use it!" another goblin chimed in.

"Save our chieftain!"

"Whatever you need, just tell us!"

But instead of looking relieved, the shaman seemed even more troubled.

"But..."

He glanced at the goblins gathered around him.

"The cost of that spell..."

His voice trailed off.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then one of the goblins stepped forward.

"Shaman, we don’t care!"

Another quickly followed.

"You just need our blood, right? Then take it!"

"That’s right! If our blood can save the chieftain, we’re willing to give it!"

One after another, the surviving goblins began speaking up.

Some were wounded. Others looked utterly exhausted after everything they’d endured. Yet they were still willing to offer what little strength they had left.

Their chieftain had risked his life to protect them. Now that his life was hanging by a thread, they wanted to do whatever they could to save him.

Hmm...
I watched the exchange with growing interest.

Sacred Blood Transfusion, huh?
Judging by the name and their reactions, it sounded like some kind of spell that transferred health or vitality from one person to another.

If so, it might actually work.

After all, the chieftain wasn't necessarily beyond saving. His biggest problem was that he'd lost too much blood, and the shaman's healing magic couldn't compensate for it.

However, there was one thing I couldn't quite figure out.

Even though everyone seemed willing to help, the shaman was still reluctant to use the spell.

What's the problem?
Is there some kind of hidden cost?
I decided to find out.

After issuing a quick instruction, I had Gopuro step forward to relay my question.

"Shaman."

Gopuro approached the elderly goblin, his expression more serious than usual.

"Can you tell us a little more about this Sacred Blood Transfusion spell? What exactly does it require? Perhaps we can help."

The shaman looked up at him.

For a moment, he seemed uncertain whether he should explain.

Then his gaze shifted toward the other members of the Castle Tribe.

Gopuran nodded firmly.

Gopugiga crossed his massive arms and gave an encouraging grunt.

Gopuflammy rested her hammer against her shoulder, while Gopushadow and Gopuberry watched the elderly goblin with equally serious expressions.

They were all willing to help.

After a brief silence, the shaman finally let out a heavy sigh.

"Very well. I'll explain." He slowly pushed himself upright, though his exhausted body still trembled from the effort.

****

Turns out, my suspicions were correct...

[Sacred Blood Transfusion] was basically a spell that transferred HP from one person to another.

The process itself was fairly straightforward. The shaman would draw a magic formation around the injured target, then have the surrounding goblins

participate in the ritual. Once the spell was activated, their HP would be drained and transferred to the person they were trying to save.

Simple enough, right?

Well, there was one pretty nasty catch.

Once activated, the spell couldn’t be stopped.
The transfer would continue until the target’s HP reached a certain threshold, which was apparently 50% of their maximum HP.

Once activated, the spell couldn’t be stopped.

The transfer would continue until the target’s HP reached a certain threshold, which was apparently 50% of their maximum HP.

And that was what made this spell so dangerous.

The chieftain’s HP pool was enormous. According to the shaman, who could inspect the levels and stats of his fellow tribe members through a special skill, the chieftain had around 3,000 maximum HP.

3000!

That’s a ridiculous amount of HP!

To bring him back to the 50% threshold, the ritual needed to restore at least 1,500 HP. But there was a catch. The spell wasn’t particularly efficient.

According to the shaman, [Sacred Blood Transfusion] had an efficiency of roughly 50%. In other words, for every 100 HP drained from the participants, only about 50 HP would actually reach the target.

So, to restore 1,500 HP to the chieftain, everyone involved would need to sacrifice a combined total of around 3,000 HP.

And that was assuming the chieftain didn't lose any more HP during the ritual.

Hmm... I can see how that's going to be a problem.
With so many members of the Bright Red Nose Tribe dead or injured, there was no guarantee the survivors could supply that much HP.

Worse, once the ritual began, they couldn't simply stop if things went south. If they ran out of HP before the chieftain reached the required threshold, the spell would keep draining them until they collapsed or died.

The chieftain might still die.

And everyone participating in the ritual could die with him.

...Yeah. That would be utterly stupid.
The shaman knew it, too. He wasn't willing to gamble the lives of his entire remaining tribe on a ritual that might not even work.

However...

What if my goblins joined the blood transfusion?
I immediately began running the numbers.

Among my citizens, Gopugiga had the highest HP pool by far. Thanks to his [Brute Strength Lv. 1] skill, which doubled his maximum HP, he already had around 1,000 HP at Level 14.

As for my other goblins, their maximum HP ranged from roughly 400 to 600 each.

Adding everything together...

We had around 3,500 maximum HP between us!

That was already more than the estimated 3,000 HP we'd need to sacrifice, assuming the shaman's figure of 50% transfer efficiency was accurate.

And that wasn't even counting the surviving members of the Bright Red Nose Tribe.

There were more than twenty of them, and they were all willing to donate their blood to save their chieftain.

With that many additional participants, we should have more than enough HP to complete the ritual.

Hehe... looks like we might actually be able to pull this off!
For the first time since this whole mess began, I felt like we had a decent shot at saving the guy.

But then I caught myself getting ahead of things.

There was still one rather important problem.

All my calculations depended on the shaman's explanation being accurate.

What if the actual transfer efficiency was lower than 50%? What if the spell had some other limitation he hadn't mentioned?

For all I knew, there might be another nasty surprise waiting for us.

And if I’d miscalculated...

Things could go horribly wrong.

...

Hmm...
This shaman... can we really trust him?
Well, I didn’t have any particular reason to suspect the old goblin of lying. He seemed genuinely concerned about his tribe’s survival, and his reluctance to perform the ritual was understandable.

Still, I wasn’t about to risk my own citizens’ lives based on a rough estimate. Not when the consequences of getting it wrong could be so serious.

I quickly discussed the situation with my goblins, making sure they understood the potential danger before we went any further.

After hearing my concerns, Gopuran stepped forward and addressed the shaman.

"Shaman, how certain are you about the blood transfer efficiency? Is it really 50%?"

"Yes!" the elderly goblin answered without hesitation.

His expression was firm, and there wasn’t the slightest hint of uncertainty in his voice.

And this raised my trust in him a bit.

"In fact, if I have the proper materials, I may even be able to increase the efficiency to 70%!"

"Oh?" Gopuran exclaimed. "And what materials do you need?"

The shaman hesitated briefly before answering.

"Hmm... do you happen to have any powerstones? We could collect some from the wolves, but..." He glanced toward the battlefield. "I'm not sure we have enough time for that."

...

The moment he asked, Gopuro burst out laughing.

"MUWAHAHAHA! POWERSTONES?!"

The guy practically doubled over, slapping his thigh as though he'd just heard the funniest joke in the world.

"WE HAVE PLENTY OF THOSE!"

He immediately reached into his pouch and pulled out a handful of powerstones.

Apparently, although powerstones could be consumed by my citizens to gain experience and level up, there was a limit to how many they could absorb each day. As a result, my goblins, especially Gopuro, had been saving some of their stones for later.

And before we came here, I'd also given everyone some extra powerstones, just in case they needed them for something.

Well, looks like that decision had paid off.

"Here! Take these!"

Gopuro cheerfully handed the stones to the shaman.

The other members of my tribe followed suit, pulling out their own reserves and adding them to the pile.

Before long, the elderly goblin was staring at a rather impressive collection of powerstones.

His eyes widened.

Then, to everyone’s surprise...

The shaman suddenly dropped to his knees.

"This... this is more than enough!"

His voice trembled as he stared at the precious stones.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

He looked as though he might burst into tears at any moment.

"Hehe! Don’t mention it!" Gopuro replied, grinning proudly. "Just make sure you save our big guy!"

"That’s right!" Gopuran urged. "There’s no time to waste. Let’s perform the ritual!"

The shaman nodded firmly.

"Understood!"

****

Without wasting another moment, the shaman began preparing the ritual.

He took out a piece of chalk and started drawing a large magic circle on the ground, carefully tracing its intricate patterns while muttering what sounded like an incantation under his breath.

I immediately instructed Gopuran to watch his movements closely.

Hmm... if possible, I'd like to learn this ritual, too.
A spell capable of transferring HP between individuals could prove incredibly useful in the future. I'm not entirely sure when I'd need something like that, but having another tool at my disposal couldn't hurt.

Meanwhile, the other goblins got to work clearing the area.

They dragged away nearby wolf corpses, chopped down several small trees, and removed anything that might obstruct the magic circle.

Ideally, I would've preferred to conduct the ritual somewhere safer, perhaps inside a cave or another sheltered location.

Unfortunately, there was one rather obvious problem.

The chieftain was absolutely enormous.

Moving that giant around in his current condition would be difficult enough, let alone transporting him somewhere else. Besides, we didn't have the luxury of searching for a better location.

We'd just have to make do with what we had.

Fortunately, the shaman worked incredibly quickly.

In less than three minutes, the preparations were complete.

Damn...
This old guy is legit!
I was genuinely impressed by how efficiently he worked.

The magic circle itself looked relatively simple at first glance. It was a large circle drawn in chalk, with intricate symbols and patterns arranged around its perimeter. The unconscious chieftain lay right in the middle.

As for the powerstones...

The shaman carefully piled them on top of the chieftain’s massive body.

Apparently, they would serve as catalysts for the spell, accelerating the transfer process and improving its efficiency.

Hmm... interesting.
It reminded me a little of how I could spend Castle Points to speed up my construction projects. Different methods, sure, but the basic idea was similar. Invest additional resources to make a process faster and more efficient.

Anyway, once everything was ready, the participants gathered around the magic circle.

My goblins took their positions alongside the surviving members of the Bright Red Nose Tribe. One by one, they sat cross-legged on the ground, forming a ring around the unconscious chieftain.

The young goblin girl remained nearby, watching anxiously as the shaman made his final preparations.

However, I didn’t let all my citizens participate.

Gopuro and Gopuran would serve as guards instead.

After all, once the ritual began, the participants wouldn’t be able to move freely. If something attacked us and interrupted the process...

Yeah, that would be a disaster.

So, Gopuro and Gopuran stood outside the magic circle with their weapons ready, keeping watch over the surrounding forest.

The old goblin looked around at everyone.

"Alright. Is everyone ready?"

"Yeah!" my citizens answered firmly.

"We’re ready!"

"Let’s do it!"

"Save our chieftain!"

The surviving goblins echoed their determination, their voices carrying across the clearing.

The shaman took a deep breath and slowly raised his hands.

The moment of truth had arrived.

Come on, big guy...
You’ve made it this far. Don’t you dare die on us now!

The spell began.

I watched closely as the shaman performed a short, peculiar dance, moving his arms and staff through a series of strange gestures while chanting words I couldn't even begin to understand. Like some kind of ancient arcane language or something.

Gradually, the magic circle beneath the participants began to glow.

A faint red light spread across the ground, illuminating the symbols drawn around its perimeter.

Then, one by one, the goblins sitting around the circle lowered their heads. Their shoulders slumped, and their bodies went completely still, almost as if they'd suddenly fallen asleep.

Whoa. Is that normal?
I tried whispering to Gopushadow to ask, but there was no response.

Huh?
It looked like he'd fallen asleep, too. The other goblins from the Bright Red Nose Tribe were in the same state.

Uh... should I be worried about this?
I was a little concerned, not gonna lie. But judging by the shaman's expression, this was probably a normal part of the ritual. At least, I hoped so.

Before I could wonder about it any further, the shaman released his grip on his staff.

The wooden staff floated into the air, hovering directly above the chieftain's enormous body.

Then the skull mounted on its tip began to glow. Two fiery lights ignited in its empty eye sockets, casting an eerie red glow over the clearing.

Then, the magic happened.

Thin streams of crimson mist began seeping out of the participants' bodies. They rose slowly into the air before flowing toward the floating skull. One after another, the streams flowed into its open mouth, as though the skull were drinking in their life force.

Damn... that's actually pretty cool.
The shaman seemed completely unfazed by the spectacle.

He calmly sat down cross-legged beside the chieftain, placed his hands on his knees, and closed his eyes. Within seconds, he'd settled into a deep meditative state, his mouth still moving as he continued chanting.

Meanwhile, the red mist kept gathering inside the skull.

Then, a thicker stream of crimson smoke poured from the tip of the floating staff. It flowed directly into the chieftain's chest, sinking into his body around the heart.

And with that, the ritual was officially underway.

Naturally, I immediately checked everyone's HP. After all, I needed to make sure they were safe.

Fortunately, my system allowed me to monitor their condition in real time.

The moment I checked, I noticed that their HP was steadily decreasing. Every minute, the numbers dropped a little further.

However, something about the rate of decline caught my attention.

Gopugiga's HP was dropping roughly twice as fast as everyone else's.

Hmm...
So the spell drains HP in proportion to each participant's current HP, huh?
That would explain it.

Since Gopugiga had a much larger HP pool than the other goblins, he was contributing more to the ritual. Meanwhile, those with lower maximum HP were losing less.

In other words, everyone seemed to be sacrificing roughly the same percentage of their total HP.

That's good.
At least the spell wasn't going to drain the weaker participants dry while leaving the stronger ones relatively unharmed. That would've been a pretty nasty design flaw, honestly.

But as I continued monitoring the numbers, I noticed something else.

Gopugiga had [Regeneration Lv. 2], which restored a whopping 10 HP per minute. On top of that, his [Carnivorism] skill gave him another 1 HP per minute, while his natural regeneration recovered 4 HP per minute.

That brought his total regeneration to 15 HP per minute.

That meant his regeneration was offsetting a good portion of the HP he was losing to the ritual.

And, well, the others had their own regeneration abilities, too.

That’s good. That’s really good!
I was actually pretty happy with how things were going.

At this rate, everyone should be fine.

As long as the ritual continued working as expected, there was little risk of any of my citizens running out of HP before the chieftain recovered.

****

Meanwhile, Gopuro and Gopuran remained on guard outside the magic circle.

Since they couldn’t participate in the ritual, their job was to watch the surrounding area. The last thing I wanted was some monster sneaking up on us while everyone else sat around with their eyes closed.

Still, after checking the ritual’s progress, I decided to reassure them. Through our connection, I told them that everything was going smoothly and that the participants were losing HP at a manageable rate.

Both goblins visibly relaxed.

"That’s good!" Gopuro exclaimed, tightening his grip on his axe. "Looks like we’re gonna save that big guy after all!"

Gopuran nodded, looking relieved as well.

According to my calculations, the chieftain should reach the required 50% HP threshold in about thirty minutes.

That’s much faster than I expected.
And the sooner we finished, the better.

We still had plenty of time before sunset, so we should be able to return to the castle before nightfall. Considering what we knew about the Dark Giant Spiders, I had absolutely no intention of spending the night out here.

But then, just as I was thinking about our return trip, Gopuro suddenly let out a long yawn.

"Urrrggghhh..."

He stretched his arms, looking like he was already getting bored. Then, rather unexpectedly, he walked over to one of the nearby wolf corpses and pulled out a butchering knife.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Gopuran immediately called out. "We're supposed to be on guard duty!"

Gopuro glanced over his shoulder.

"Well, I'm just trying to make the most of our time here!"

He crouched beside the wolf's corpse and began examining it.

"Even if we can't bring these wolves back to the castle whole, we can still take their most valuable parts, right?"

...Oh!
Right!
Good thinking, Puro!
I'd been so focused on the ritual that I'd completely forgotten about the pile of valuable monster corpses scattered around us.

Leaving all that loot behind would be a terrible waste. And considering how many wolves we'd killed, we were talking about quite a haul.

"But what about our guard duty?" Gopuran asked, still looking a little reluctant.

"Relax. We can keep watch while working, can’t we?"

"Hmmm... I guess so?"

Haha! You two have a point!
I immediately instructed them to prioritize the wolf hearts and powerstones. Those were the most valuable parts, after all. If they had enough time, they could collect the horns, too.

A single Horned Gray Wolf heart could be worth 100 Points, while each horn was worth another 45. And powerstones were always useful. The more, the better!

Hehe...
I was genuinely pleased to see my citizens thinking ahead like this. Sure, Gopuro had only been trying to kill some time, but he’d stumbled onto a pretty good idea.

As a ruler, I couldn’t ask for much more.

However... let’s not get too careless.
I sent another instruction to the two of them.

Gopuran was to remain on guard duty and keep an eye on their surroundings, while Gopuro could handle the butchering. That way, we could collect our loot without leaving ourselves completely vulnerable.

****

Ten minutes passed...

Everything was still going smoothly.

The ritual continued without interruption, and the participants' HP remained at a comfortable level. Nobody seemed to be in any immediate danger.

Meanwhile, Gopuro had already collected a considerable number of wolf hearts, horns, and powerstones. The pile of loot beside them was growing steadily.

That aside, I wasn't too worried about our surroundings.

According to the goblins, Horned Gray Wolves were already the most powerful monsters in this area. There was always a chance that something unexpected might show up, of course, but the odds of running into an even stronger monster seemed fairly low.

And if another pack of wolves did appear, Gopuro and Gopuran should be able to handle them. Gopuro hadn't even used his new special move yet, and his mana was still completely full.

Yeah, we're probably fine.
As for the Dark Giant Spiders...

Well, it was still daylight.

Those creepy bastards were primarily active at night, so we should have a little breathing room before they became a problem. At this rate, we'd be back at the castle by then.

Alright. Everything's fine.
The ritual is working, our goblins are safe, and we're collecting free loot.
Honestly, this is going better than expected.

I settled in to watch the ritual’s progress.

Another ten minutes passed.

Then fifteen more.

The ritual was finally nearing completion.

The chieftain’s HP seemed to be steadily recovering, as there were some visible changes in his condition. His skin looked greener than before, and his breathing had stabilized. Meanwhile, my goblins remained in excellent shape. Even after all that time, none of them showed any obvious signs of exhaustion or discomfort.

Just a little longer...
Come on, big guy. You’re almost there.
****

But then...

A series of howls suddenly echoed through the forest.

"AWWOOOOOOOOO!"

"AWOOOO!"

"AWOOOOOOOOO!"

The cries came from all directions, spreading across the region!!!

"Huh!?" Gopuro straightened up, his cheerful expression fading as he quickly picked up his axe on the ground. "Horned Gray Wolves? What’s going on?"

Gopuran tightened her grip on her weapon too.

"What the heck? Why are so many of them howling at once?"

I was wondering the same thing.

Did something happen to them?
Somehow, I was starting to have a very bad feeling about this!

Chapter 99: Approaching Darkness

Gopuro and Gopuran both turned toward the direction of the howls, tightening their grips on their weapons. Their expressions grew serious.

Something was happening in the distance. And judging by the sheer number of wolves howling at once, it didn’t sound like anything good.

Then...

A deep, rumbling sound echoed through the forest.

The ground trembled beneath their feet, and birds suddenly burst out of the trees, taking flight in enormous flocks. Within moments, the sky was filled with fleeing birds, their wings beating frantically as they scattered in every direction.

What the hell is going on? I asked myself.
Meanwhile, Gopuro frowned.

Another rumble rolled through the distance, louder than before.

Gopuran’s expression stiffened.

"Hey, Puro... do you feel that?"

"Yeah..." Gopuro replied, then suddenly clutched his chest.

"This suffocating feeling..." he muttered. "I don’t like this..."

Hearing that, I immediately checked both of their statuses.

MP. Physical condition. Negative effects.

I went through everything my system could show me, looking for any indication that they’d been affected by some kind of skill or environmental effect.

But...

Nothing.

Their HP was fine. Their MP was fine. There were no abnormal status effects listed. As far as my system was concerned, the two goblins were perfectly healthy.

Then why are they feeling this way?
Before I could investigate any further, a shadow suddenly burst out from between the trees!

"Look out!" Gopuro shouted.

It was a Horned Gray Wolf! A big one!

And it was charging straight toward them!

For a split second, I thought it was about to attack.

Gopuro immediately raised his axe, while Gopuran shifted her stance, ready to intercept the beast if it came any closer.

But then...

The wolf suddenly stumbled.

Its front legs buckled beneath its body, and it crashed face-first into the ground just a few steps away from the two goblins.

"...HUHH?"

Gopuro stared at the fallen beast in confusion.

The wolf struggled to get back up, but its legs seemed barely capable of supporting its own weight. It staggered for a moment before collapsing again.

Then I noticed the blood.

Several deep gashes ran across its body, as though something had slashed it with an enormous, razor-sharp blade. Black blood oozed from the wounds, accompanied by wisps of dark smoke that hissed faintly as they drifted into the air.

That sight was all too familiar...

Wait.
Those wounds...
Before I could examine them more closely, another wolf appeared.

Then another.

And another!

Within moments, several Horned Gray Wolves came rushing out of the forest, sprinting between the trees with their tails tucked between their legs!

Gopuro and Gopuran immediately raised their weapons again, preparing to intercept, expecting the wolves to attack.

However...

The wolves weren’t even looking at them.

They simply ran past the two goblins without so much as a glance in their direction.

Their eyes were wide with terror, their ears flattened against their heads as they whined and whimpered desperately. One nearly tripped over a tree root while trying to flee, while another kept looking back over its shoulder as though something horrible were chasing it.

It was like... they were running for their lives!

"...What the hell?" Gopuran muttered as one wolf after another rushed past them.

Gopuro’s face had gone pale.

Meanwhile, a cold realization was slowly spreading through my mind.

There was only one thing I could think of that would make these wolves behave this way.

One creature capable of inflicting those horrible wounds...

One monster whose very presence could fill an entire area with overwhelming fear.

Spiders.
...

The word surfaced in my mind almost instinctively.

Dark Giant Spiders!
But why now?!
It's still daylight!
This shouldn't be happening!
According to everything we'd learned, Dark Giant Spiders were primarily active at night. There was no reason for them to be hunting in the middle of the afternoon!

At least, that was what I'd been counting on.

Another deep rumble shook the forest.

This time, it was accompanied by a distant crashing sound, as though countless trees were being crushed beneath something enormous.

More wolves came rushing past.

Then, from somewhere beyond the trees, came another chorus of desperate howls.

"AWWOOOOOOOO!"

Whatever was happening out there, it was getting closer!

"Gopuro!" I immediately sent him an order through our connection. "Get somewhere high! I need you to see what’s happening!"

"Understood, Big Boss!"

Without hesitation, Gopuro rushed toward the nearest tall tree.

He jumped, caught a low branch, and hauled himself upward with surprising agility. Within seconds, he was climbing higher and higher, using the thick branches as footholds until he reached a spot with a clear view of the surrounding forest.

Then he looked toward the distant horizon.

And through his eyes, I could see it, too.

"...Oh, shit."

Gopuro’s stunned reaction pretty much matched my own.

The moment I saw what lay beyond the trees, my mind went completely blank.

Because in the distance, an enormous sea of dark mist was spreading across the land.

A vast, unnatural blackness that swallowed everything in its path.

Trees disappeared into it.

The ground vanished beneath it.

Even the sunlight seemed to grow weaker wherever the darkness advanced, as though the mist itself were devouring the light.

And its boundary was moving.

Straight toward us.

Oh no....
I knew that darkness. There was absolutely no mistaking it.

It was the dark mist that marked the Cursed Land!

******

As Gopuro jumped down from the tree, I was still in full-blown panic mode.

But panicking wasn’t going to solve anything. I needed to figure out what we should do next, and fast.

The ritual wasn’t finished yet, and all the goblins participating in it were still unconscious. I couldn’t exactly tell them to wake up and run away.

Forcing them awake wasn’t a good idea, either. Who knew what would happen if we interrupted the spell halfway through? For all I knew, we might end up making things even worse.

Besides, the ritual was almost complete.

We’d come this far. I really didn’t want to screw things up now.

So... there was only one thing left to do.

"Puro! Puran! Get ready for battle!!!"

"YES, BIG BOSS!"

The two goblins tightened their grips on their weapons, their eyes fixed on the approaching darkness.

Soon, the last of the fleeing wolves rushed past us.

Then, suddenly, there were no more.

The forest fell strangely quiet, at least for a moment.

Then, instead of howls, I began hearing something else from the direction of the expanding Cursed Land.

Krrrk... krrrk... krrrk...
It was a dry, clicking noise, like countless hard objects tapping against one another.

Then came another sound.

Tik-tik-tik-tik-tik!
Rapid, skittering footsteps echoed through the distance, growing louder with every passing second.

My heart sank.

...They're coming.

Chapter 100: Facing The Spiders (1)

Both goblins fixed their eyes on the forest ahead.

The skittering sounds grew louder and louder, mixed with the occasional crack of branches and a low rumble that seemed to come from the ground itself.

Meanwhile, the sky kept darkening, almost like someone was turning down the lights.

Then, suddenly...

A gigantic shadow burst out of the darkness.

A piercing screech tore through the clearing.

I didn’t even wait for a proper look. I just activated the skill.

"Blessing of Protection! Activate!"

A golden glow wrapped around both Gopuro and Gopuran.

[Blessing of Protection]: Prevents new negative effects from being applied. Reduces the effectiveness and damage of existing negative effects by 50%!

With both of them protected, I could at least stop panicking quite so hard about that terrifying aura.

And sure enough...

The monster that stepped into view was exactly what I’d been dreading.

A Dark Giant Spider.

Its body was pitch-black and enormous, front legs ending in sharp, blade-like points. It reared up as it came closer, lifting those deadly limbs high like it was trying to intimidate the two goblins standing in its way. Crimson eyes glowed, and another shrill screech ripped out of its mouth.

Haha...

Unfortunately for you...

Your little intimidation trick isn’t going to work on my citizens!

Gopuro didn’t waste a second. He charged straight at the spider, his massive two-handed axe already raised above his shoulder.

He was fast. The spider wasn’t exactly slow either.

The creature lunged, bladed legs slicing through the air. Gopuro barely managed to dodge the first strike. The sharp limb swept past his shoulder, close enough that I felt my nonexistent heart nearly stop.

But he didn’t back off.

He planted his feet, twisted, and swung the axe with everything he had.

VZZZZT!

SLAAASH!

The blade slammed into the spider’s head with a heavy, meaty impact, cutting deep into the black carapace!

Black blood sprayed across the ground. The monster staggered back with a piercing shriek.

KIEEEEEEEEK!

"Come on, what the hell?!"

For a second I thought he’d actually split its head open.

But the spider was still very much alive.

Its body lurched sideways, and one of its front legs shot toward Gopuro’s axe. The bladed limb slammed against the weapon, blocking the next swing.

CLANG!

The impact nearly tore the axe out of his hands. He staggered backward, arms trembling. Before he could steady himself, the spider thrust another leg straight at his chest.

"PURO! WATCH OUT!"

"Gah!"

He twisted aside just in time, but the attack still clipped his shoulder and sent him stumbling.

Shit.

This thing was tougher than I’d expected. Even with a massive wound in its head, it could still fight back hard.

Fortunately, Gopuran was already moving.

She darted in from the spider’s flank, staying low as she slipped past its thrashing limbs.

SHING!

Her sword flashed toward one of the front legs. The blade bit into the joint... but didn’t sever it completely.

Seriously? How tough is this thing?

Gopuran gritted her teeth and yanked her sword free before the spider could turn on her. One of its rear legs swept toward her, forcing her to leap backward to avoid getting impaled. She landed awkwardly, almost losing her footing, but managed to recover just in time.

Now the spider was caught between the two of them, its wounded head dripping black blood.

Gopuro tightened his grip on his axe.

Gopuran steadied herself, adjusting her stance.

Neither of them looked particularly relaxed anymore.

Well... I'd known they were saving their skills in case something even scarier showed up. Or, considering what this forest seemed to be like, in case more spiders appeared.

But looking at the monster in front of them...

Yeah, I don't think we can afford to hold back anymore.

"We need more damage output! Use your skills!" I ordered right away.

Both goblins understood.

"And Puro, I've got an idea!"

I quickly explained the plan. He didn't hesitate.

Instead of charging in for another direct attack, he ran straight at the spider with his axe held firmly in both hands. The creature reacted immediately, raising one of its wounded front legs to block him.

But Gopuro wasn’t trying to attack just yet.

At the last moment he ducked under the sweeping blade, rolled across the ground, and sprang back to his feet a short distance away.

The spider let out a shrill screech and lunged after him, its huge body surging forward as it tried to close the gap.

Nice.

That was exactly what we’d wanted.

Gopuro wasn’t aiming for a hit. He was just drawing the spider’s attention, forcing it to focus on him instead of his sister.

And apparently the creature had taken the bait. Its crimson eyes stayed locked on Gopuro as it raised the wounded front leg again, preparing to strike.

"PURAN! NOW!"

His sister didn’t hesitate.

She darted in from the side, moving quickly beneath the spider’s other limbs. For a moment the monster seemed too focused on Gopuro to notice her.

Then Gopuran raised her sword.

"WIND BLADE!"

Mana surged around the blade as she slashed at the joint of the raised front leg with everything she had.

SHRAAAAK!

This time the attack landed exactly where it needed to.

The enhanced blade tore through the joint, severing the leg in a spray of black blood.

KIEEEEEEEEK!

The monster shrieked and lurched violently. With one front leg suddenly gone, it couldn’t keep its balance. Its enormous body tilted sideways and crashed heavily onto the ground.

The impact shook the clearing.

"NOW! FINISH IT!"

Gopuro seized the chance.

He stepped forward, raised his axe high above his head, and poured mana into the weapon. Energy gathered around the blade.

"RAAAAAARRRGGGG!!! BIG SLASHHHH!!!!"

He brought the axe down with a tremendous roar.

KRAAAAAASH!

The blow struck the spider’s already-damaged head, tearing through the carapace and splitting it apart. Black blood splattered everywhere as the monster’s body jerked violently.

KIEEEEEEE...!

The screech cut off halfway through.

The remaining legs twitched and scraped against the dirt for a few seconds before finally going still.

And just like that, the Dark Giant Spider was dead.

...

NICE!!!

I practically wanted to cheer.

That was amazing.

Well... the fight had been a lot messier than I'd hoped. For a moment there I genuinely thought Gopuro might get skewered, and Gopuran had nearly been caught too.

Still, they'd managed to work together and bring the thing down.

That was what mattered.

And now that I'd seen them fight one of these things firsthand, I had a slightly better idea of what we were dealing with.

The spiders were dangerous, no question. Their bladed legs were fast, and their bodies were tough enough to tank attacks that would've killed plenty of other monsters.

But if we could protect ourselves from that fear-inducing aura, fighting them might actually be manageable.

Assuming we don't get surrounded by more than three of them, of course.

I wasn’t about to get too confident just yet, though.

Because while we’d gotten a kill, something else was bothering me.

During the fight, the spider’s black blood had splattered all over both Gopuro and Gopuran. And given how the blood hissed when sunlight touched it earlier... it could be poisonous.

I immediately checked their conditions again.

Their HP was stable. Neither seemed to have taken any damage from the blood. [Blessing of Protection] was still active too, so even if the blood had some unpleasant effect, the skill should help keep them safe.

Still, better keep an eye on them.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have much time to worry about it.

Because before I could even finish checking their statuses...

CRACK! CRACK!

Branches snapped in the forest ahead.

Two more enormous shadows burst into the clearing.

This time it wasn’t one.

It was TWO!!!

A pair of Dark Giant Spiders.