

## Commonsense Problem Solving

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Frank opened his eyes slowly, blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the bright morning light. He found himself gazing up at an unknown ceiling, the bed he woke up in equally unfamiliar to him. Confused and disoriented, he sat up carefully and looked around. The room was simple and rustic, bare of everything but the necessities. There was no sign of his equipment, and he had no idea what circumstances had brought him to this place. Through a nearby window came the carefree sound of birds singing, and he could see what appeared to be a vast forest. Rising gingerly, he let out a low groan as his nerves came alive with a dull, aching pain. He struggled to remember what had happened to him while he stretched out some of the fire in his muscles.

A knock at the door alerted Frank to the presence of others in the building, and he reflexively reached for the sword he knew wasn't there. The door opened and a young man with a mop of curly brown hair poked his head in.

"Oh hey, you're up," said the youth as he strode into the room. He was taller than Frank, but lean and wiry. A pair of daggers in sheaths hung from his belt, and his clothes were dirty and patched. "How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better," Frank replied with a grimace. "Where am I, anyway?"

"The Ydryll Forest, east of Ludur. The Boss and I found you on the bank of the river and brought you here." The young man wiped a hand on his pants and extended it to Frank. "I'm Roger, by the way."

Frank eyed the youth's grimy hand distastefully, but shook anyway. "Frank."

"Nice to meet you," said Roger pleasantly. "How'd you wind up in the drink, anyway?"

Frank's memories had started to come trickling back, and he finally remembered his harrowing escape from Ludur. "Just a little misunderstanding with the law," he answered evasively.

Roger gave Frank a knowing look and grinned. "Hey, same as us! You should join us – we're rogues!" He glanced around surreptitiously and leaned in close. "The Boss thinks it sounds classier than 'thieves'," he whispered proudly.

"Uh, right," responded Frank. He was beginning to wonder if it was fortunate that these people found him. "So, who's in this band of yours?"

"Just the Boss and me," stated Roger. He opened his mouth to say more, but a growl from Frank's stomach interrupted him. "Hungry?"

"Very," said Frank. "Got anything to eat?"

"Sorry," Roger replied apologetically, "the harvest was bad this year. Everyone's short on food, especially us rogues. I was just about to go out and try to scrounge something up. I should introduce you to the Boss first, though." The young man beckoned Frank, then turned and walked through the door.

"Lead the way," murmured Frank as he followed Roger out of the room and down the stairs. He had a bad feeling about this 'Boss', and his desire to get out of this thieves den was growing by the minute.

When Frank rounded the corner and first got a glimpse at Roger's superior, he immediately confirmed his suspicions. The Boss was a hugely obese, hairy man seated on a lopsided throne of gaudy, piled-up cushions. Even from a distance, the older thief gave off a pungent and unpleasant body odor, and the fighter could see thick beads of sweat running unchecked down his jowls and onto his stained shirt. Gritting his teeth, the youthful warrior approached with some trepidation. "You must be the Boss."

"That's right," bellowed the overweight man, "I'm the Boss!" Frank nearly gagged at the thug's horrid breath and rotten teeth. The middle-aged thief paused for a moment, as if to let that piece of information sink in. "Cuz I'm the boss."

"I heard you the first time," muttered Frank irritably. He definitely wished someone else someone else had rescued him. Drowning might have been preferable to working for this greasy toad, he thought.

"You're just one more mouth to feed," continued the Boss loudly, not bothering to moderate his volume, "and there already isn't enough grub to go around! If you want to stay here, you're going to have to WORK!"

Seeing his gear in the corner, Frank's mood brightened slightly. "I'll need my equipment if I'm going to do that."

The old thief wrapped a meaty hand around Frank's bastard sword and tossed it to the fighter. "Just the sword!" he yelled. "You'll get the rest back after you bring me some chow!"

Frank seethed silently, but didn't feel confident enough to assault the vile man in his weakened state. He strapped the blade on his back, and the familiar weight of it made him feel a tiny bit more at ease.

The Boss flung a hand out and pointed at the door, the movement causing his vast rolls of fat to wobble and shake. The sight almost made Frank lose his appetite, and he quickly looked away

before he became queasy. "Now get out there and find some vittles, and don't come back until you do!"

"Come on, Frank," said Roger as he headed for the door. The warrior followed without a moment's hesitation, glad to be leaving the old thief's unbearable presence.

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The pair scoured the forest for hours, but turned up nothing. All the fruits and berries were out of season, and any game in the area was staying far away from the hunters. "Why do you work for that whale, anyway?" Frank asked the rogue after a long period of quiet.

Roger thought about it for a few minutes before answering. "I guess I don't really have anywhere else to go. He's cared for me for a long time."

Frank didn't bother to comment on the obvious quality of that care. Stumbling upon some mushrooms, he bent over to pick them. "Are these any good?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Roger quickly warned him. "They taste pretty foul."

The fighter stood back up with a sigh. "I'll take your word for it," he grudgingly agreed, his stomach grumbling.

Suddenly, a huge blue blob emerged from the undergrowth and rushed at the young adventurers. The living goo surged towards Roger and tried to envelop him in its pulsating mass. Caught flat-footed, the rogue struggled to free himself with little success. Reacting quickly, Frank drew his bastard sword in a flash and started hacking at the monstrous slime, careful not to hit his companion in the process. The warrior's rapid response turned the tide and gave Roger a chance to slip out of the creature's grasp. Drawing his daggers, the thief helped Frank slice the ooze into small chunks. Eventually the sludge stopped moving, and the weary combatants put their weapons away.

"I've never seen a monster like that before," panted Frank as he caught his breath.

"They're all over the place around here," Roger responded as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "They aren't that tough, but they don't usually get the drop on me like that. Thanks for the help."

Frank waved dismissively. "Don't mention it."

Roger walked over to the remains of the slime as it melted away in the sun. Seeing something on the ground, he knelt down to pick it up. "Hey, fifty gold," he said cheerfully. He rubbed the coins clean on his pants, then dropped them into his money pouch with an pleasing clink. "Now then, where the hell can we find some food?"

Taken aback by the rogue's casual response to finding so much money, Frank's eyes nearly bugged out. "What are you talking about? Our problems are solved!"

Roger tilted his head and gave his companion a quizzical look. "I don't follow."

"With that kind of money," Frank answered excitedly, "we can go down to the village and *buy* some food!"

"But the Boss said we had to *find* some food," stated Roger matter-of-factly.

Frank gestured impatiently at the hamlet to the south. "You mean, like at the store?"

Roger shook his head unhappily. "There aren't any stores in town that sell food."

"Are you kidding me?" replied Frank incredulously. "Come on, let's go. This I gotta see." He motioned for Roger to follow him and stomped down the path to the village. Roger shrugged, deciding it wasn't worth arguing with the man, and headed after him.

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Frank and Roger entered the local item shop, the bell on the door summoning the storeowner. "Welcome to our shop!" the middle-aged woman called cheerfully. She cast a suspicious glance at Roger, but said nothing when he hung back and let Frank take the lead. "What can we get for you?"

"Where's the food?" Frank asked, scanning the store shelves.

The shopkeeper shook her head. "I'm sorry, we don't carry any food."

Roger shot Frank an 'I told you so' look, but Frank ignored him. "Okay, so what do you sell?" probed the warrior.

The woman started to tick off her inventory on her fingers. "Healing herbs, antidotes--"

"Is that a Molotov cocktail?" interrupted Frank, startled by the unexpected sight.

"Yes."

Frank picked up one of the oil-filled bottles and eyed it for a minute. "Why are you selling Molotov cocktails?" he inquired slowly.

"Monsters," the shopkeeper stated simply.

Frank set the highly flammable object down gently. "Let me get this straight," he queried with some annoyance, "you have healing items and *explosives* for sale because of monsters, but not one person in this town sells groceries?" His anger at the nonsensical situation increased as he ranted until he was all but shouting at the storeowner. "Everyone is complaining about the bad

harvest, and yet the monsters around here practically vomit gold! Why are you people still poor?!"

The matronly woman shrank back in fear at Frank's tirade, and he realized he had gone too far. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then cleared his throat before continuing. "I'm sorry about that, ma'am, I got carried away. Let's try this again – what are you having for dinner?"

"Beef stew," replied the shopkeeper warily.

"Sounds great," Frank said with a pleased nod. "How much are you making? Barely enough to live on, or will you have leftovers for tomorrow?" He motioned with his hands to indicate the size of the portions.

The woman hesitated. "Well," she answered after a moment's thought, "there will probably be some left over..."

Frank leaned on the counter and gestured at himself and Roger. "If I give you fifty gold, can my friend and I join your family for dinner?"

The storeowner's eyes went wide with surprise. "Certainly!"

"Fantastic!" exclaimed Frank, slapping the counter. "Roger, pay the woman."

Roger glanced around nervously. "What about the Boss?"

Frank snorted derisively. "That fat slug can stand to miss a meal or two." Frank turned back to the shopkeeper and gestured at the Molotov cocktails. "Oh, and ring up a few of these while you're at it."

"What for?" inquired the curious rogue as he fished out his money pouch.

"What else?" responded Frank with a sly grin. "Monsters!"

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After dinner, Frank and Roger returned to the forest hideout. The Boss glared up at the duo when they walked in, still seated on his pile of cushions. "Where've you been?!" he roared. "And where's the chow?!"

With a full stomach and his aching body mostly recovered, Frank no longer had anything holding him back. "Here's the deal," he told the hirsute man while he pulled out a Molotov cocktail, "you have thirty seconds to vacate the premises before we torch the dump, or you're going up in it. Call it a favor to the nice townsfolk you've been terrorizing."

The Boss stared at the pair in shock as Roger stepped up beside the fighter, an explosive in each hand. Realizing that they weren't afraid of him anymore, the overweight thug bolted without another word and was out the door in the blink of an eye.

Roger whistled in surprise, following the ex-Boss's flight down the path. "Never seen him move that fast before," he commented with a wry smirk, then turned to face Frank. "Say, mind if I tag along? I like your style."

"Sure thing," responded Frank, "welcome aboard." He tossed a Molotov cocktail in the air and caught it deftly. "We'll shake on it later. Get your stuff – I want this place in flames within the hour."

"Right-o, Boss!" cried Roger as he zipped up the stairs.

"Don't call me that!" Frank yelled at the rogue's back, then sighed in exasperation. He hadn't expected to pick up a traveling companion, but who knew? Maybe it would all work out for the best in the end. It was definitely a judgment he would reserve for later.