



SURVIVAL IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY MISTRESS

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NOVEL

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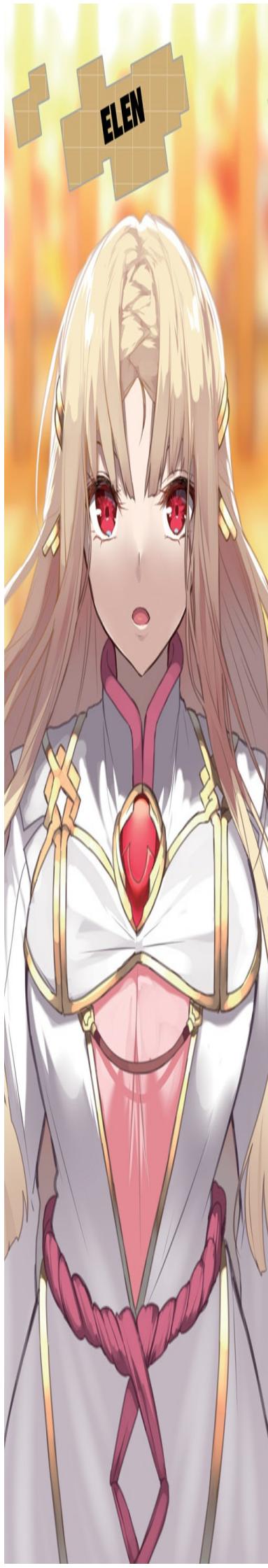
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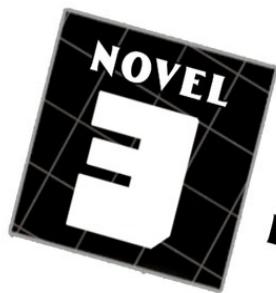
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I SURVIVED IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY MISTRESS



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Seven Seas Entertainment

Goshuzinsama to yuku isekai survival Vol. 3

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MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

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Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-894-5

Printed in Canada

First Printing: October 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Prologue: Surviving in the Kingdom of Merinard

HOWDY! KOUSUKE, parallel world survivalist back again. After making my way through the Great Omitt Badlands, I was in the territory of the Kingdom of Merinard. Additionally, I just helped seize two of the three fortresses on the border.

To sum up these fortress conquests... Well, let's just say that the harpies' airborne bomb strikes proved extremely effective against troops who were packed in like sardines behind their walls. Even the tough gates were pulverized after a few blasts. There was never any chance we'd lose.

In addition to our newfound air superiority, we also had the Holy Kingdom beat in a long-range exchange of fire thanks to those handy-dandy crossbows of mine. Our firepower, range, and accuracy outstripped the enemy's, and combined with Sylphy's spirit magic support and my defensive wall, we were unbeatable.

As far as the Holy Kingdom's military was concerned, once a fortress lost its defensive value, the building was just a giant coffin. Hitting them with a completely novel mode of warfare certainly helped, too. Their commander was blown away long before they could devise an effective response.

And so, we dealt maximum damage to the enemy with minimal casualties on our side, toppling each fortress in a flash.

After a day's rest, we set up defensive forces at the second of the three fortresses, Beta. Gerda from the heavy infantry was left behind to stay and manage things there as we pushed forward with our offensive line.

"If anything happens, I'll be in touch, so come save us."

"Right. I'm sure things'll be fine, but make sure to stay in contact. This place is in your hands."

“Understood.”

Gerda and Sylphy, the leader of our little Liberation Army, exchanged words before we departed.

Beta Fortress had food, arrows, harpy aerial bombs and more, so as long as the Holy Kingdom didn’t muster an army of thousands outside the gates all at once, they’d be able to fight off just about anything. There wasn’t a lot you could do against a hundred fighters with crossbows who had the high ground. Even if you could walk a suitable siege engine up to the gates, there’s nothing so solid that the harpies couldn’t bomb it into splinters and dust.

“Please be careful!” Gerda urged us. “We really don’t have enough people.”

A hundred crossbow users, twenty members of the heavy infantry, and five members of the aerial bomb squad stayed behind as we departed for Alpha Fortress. This left us with a primary attack force of 380 soldiers—maybe a little less, given the last battle’s casualties.

“There’s not much we can do about that. All we can do is hope that time solves that problem.”

Once you took enemy territory, you needed the troops to hold it. Regardless of how much we overpowered the Holy Kingdom with our strength and chased them out of their bases in towns or fortresses, if we didn’t have the warm bodies to maintain those new areas, there wasn’t much point to any of this.

“We’re up to our necks just taking these fortresses.”

“When it comes to finding the manpower to sustain peace in the area, well...”

“We’ve acquired a number of warhorses in our battles up until now. We can use them to build up a mounted patrol force to maintain the peace.”

In other words, not cavalrymen. Training up that kind of fighting force would take time we didn’t have. In our current situation, the most we could hope for was to use the horses for transport, then dismount when the time came to fight. Still, we should be able to prepare food for the horses. We’d have no issues raising crops and the like.

On the way to Alpha we discussed our plans for what to do after we took

down the third fortress. We came up with two broad directions heading forward.

The first was to cement our control of the area and expand our sphere of influence, unifying the citizens of the former Kingdom of Merinard by restoring its territory to them and gaining access to developed fields, roads, and towns. That would be useful, although, the blowback from citizens who moved there after it became a vassal state did pose a significant risk.

“Personally, I want to avoid oppressing the citizens of the New Kingdom of Merinard. Our enemies are the Holy Kingdom and the King of Gods, Adol. Not innocent civilians,” Sylphy said as she rocked back and forth aboard the carriage, her expression troubled.

Sylphy’s complexion was a dash darker than the average elf’s. When I called her a dark elf when we first met, she just about kicked my teeth in. In spite of that, the two of us had a pretty amenable relationship now. It happened pretty quickly too. We’ll just leave it at that.

“I’m sure, but I doubt the citizens of the old kingdom will be happy with that. There must be some sort of punishment,” replied the bull beastman Danan, his expression just as stern as Sylphy’s.

Outside of his massive frame and bull-like horns, he mostly just resembled a mega-ripped middle-aged man. Twenty years ago, he was apparently a young member of the royal guard when the Holy Kingdom attacked the Kingdom of Merinard. Now he served as a commander of the Liberation Army—Sylphy’s right-hand man. My coworker, basically.

“True enough,” I said.

It was fair to say we had an obligation to restore the territory and liberate the citizens of the old Kingdom of Merinard, and to make those who enslaved the local demi-humans pay for their sins. Twenty whole years had passed since the Holy Kingdom defeated the Kingdom of Merinard and turned it into a vassal state. There was no telling how deep the resentment ran in the demi-humans who endured all that time at the absolute bottom of the heap. After what they’d gone through, they’d expect some sort of recompense.

“Twenty years, though. If we punish them for that whole period, I doubt most

citizens of the new kingdom would last.” Melty the beastwoman furrowed her brow.

She was a beautiful woman with sheep-like horns, who tended to wear clothes that hid her figure. She actually had incredible proportions, right up there with Sylphy’s.

Hm? None of this is relevant? Hey, I’m just telling you the way I see it, and the way I see it, that matters plenty.

Melty used to serve as the kingdom’s internal affairs officer. She was a pro at politics and bureaucracy. The fact that she held that position twenty years ago meant that at her youngest, she had to be in her forties, but she didn’t look it at all. If anything, you could convince me she was in her early twenties.

Apparently, sheep beastmen had similar life spans to humans, so maybe she wasn’t one after all. In a fight, she was more than capable of holding her own against Sylphy, whose body was literally optimized for combat.

I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if someone told me that Melty was a straight-up demon. If I ever said that out loud, though, she’d probably bend me into a pretzel, so I’d decided to keep that thought in the vault. Talking about a woman’s age and strength was a mega no-no.

“Most demi-humans are poor, so liberation is only going to get them so far. The humans who’ve had their fortunes and properties seized are in the same boat. We’re just going to end up with a poor country on our hands,” Ira whispered without a shred of concern on her face.

Ira was a cyclops, so she had a small body and one large eye. She was pretty cute. However, twenty years ago she served as Merinard’s court mage. She was a genius who looked younger than me, but was somehow much older. Pretty much a walking fantasy trope. At first glance, she was as expressionless as they came, but in reality, she was deeply emotional and incredibly tolerant of others.

Like Sylphy, we had uh, *that* sort of relationship.

Yeah, I know, I know! She’s small, I get it! Seriously, I do. But cyclopes, like elves, had long lifespans. She might have looked small, but in reality she was a full-grown lady. See? No problem.

"Do you really think we can build a functioning country in that state?" I asked.
"I think it'd be impossible."

"Indeed," agreed Danan. "We'll just have to find the right balance of things."

"In other words, we're getting all the responsibility dumped in our laps. Got it." Melty said, and smirked. Danan's face twitched.

Quite frankly, it was hard to keep cool when caught between Melty's dark smile and a battle-forged royal guardsman.

"I think our other option is most realistic," said Ira. "Although it would put a lot on Kousuke's shoulders."

"I mean, if you tell me to do it, I'll do it." I said.

Turned out, this other option was to put the three fortresses and all the nearby towns and mining mountains under our control and gather the citizens of the former kingdom together to enhance our combat force. Simultaneously, we'd start cultivating the Great Omitt Badlands and make a new settlement for ourselves. A pretty sound plan.

"We don't have enough soldiers to put everything under our control right now, right?" I asked.

"Correct," said Sylphy. "There are former citizens at our home base and the front lines who have likely recovered their strength and want to join the fight, but... They'd give us an increase of three hundred soldiers at best. If we want to be able to manage our territory *and* take on the Holy Kingdom, we simply can't stretch our forces that far."

"Figuring out our end goal is important," Danan said.

"There's no change. Our final objective is to retake all of the Kingdom of Merinard's territories," replied Sylphy, although with a strained expression.

Trying to reclaim land that had been held by the enemy for so long was no easy feat. The Holy Kingdom took over in the first place because of their *huge* population advantage.

We were winning the fight so far, but we were just a small force—around one and a half thousand people.

“Ultimately, we just keep running up against the numbers problem,” I said.

“There’s not much we can do about that,” Melty replied.

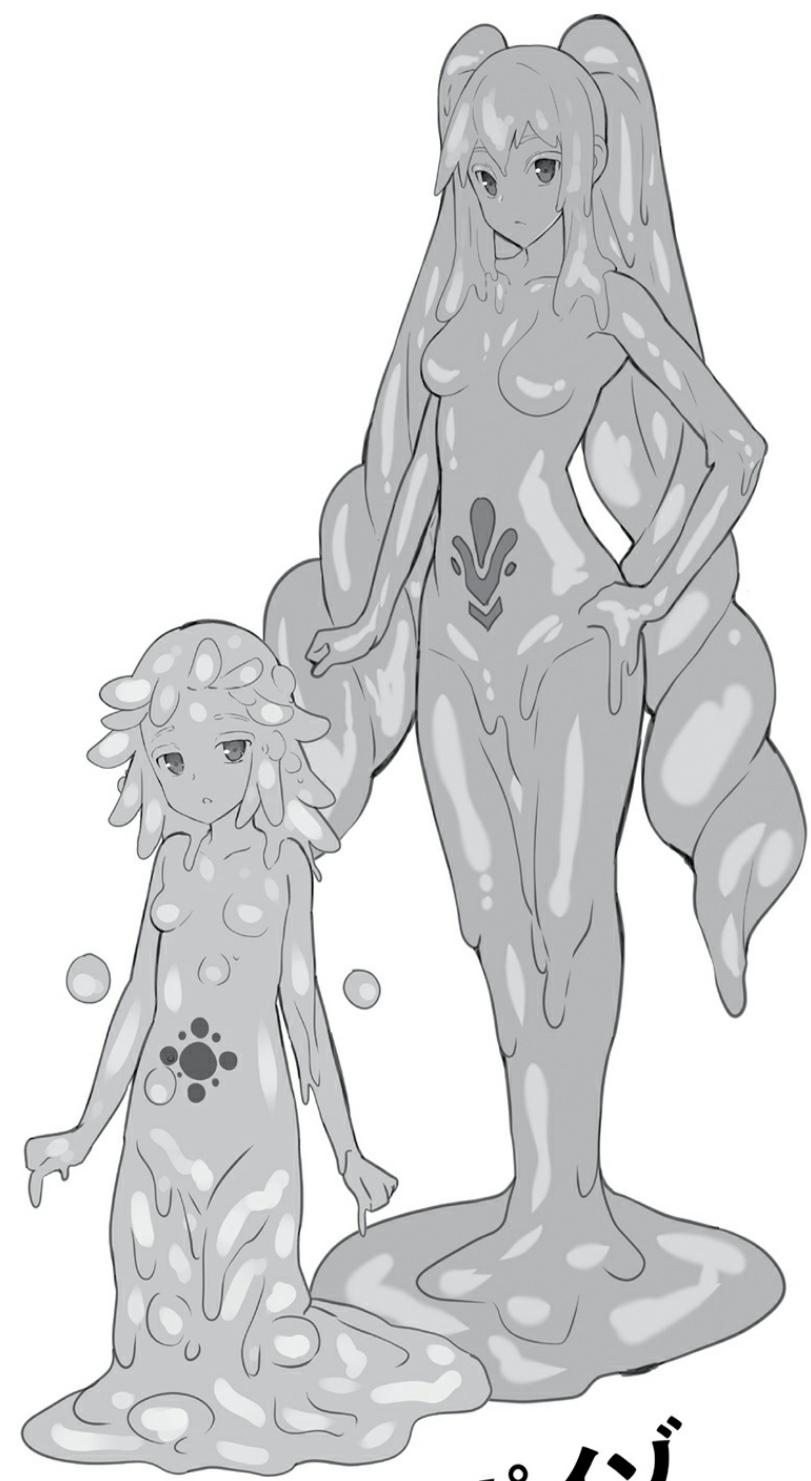
Sylphy was not alone in wearing a strained expression; Danan and Melty both frowned too.

“Our only choice is to use the three forts as operating bases for now, and work to strengthen our numbers.”

Everyone present nodded in response to Sylphy’s declaration. Of course, we’d have to take over the third fortress first. Alpha and Beta were the first two, and Gamma was the final one.

Wonder how this battle’s gonna go...

CHARACTERS



ベス ポイゾ
Bess Poiso

Chapter 1: Building a Bridgehead on the Territorial Border

IT TOOK US three full days to get back to Alpha. We spent a day resting there before heading out to Gamma. We had twenty heavy infantrymen led by Danan, fifty-nine light infantrymen, a hundred crossbow soldiers, ninety-eight irregulars including Shemel, five musketeers including Jagheera, five aerial harpy soldiers, fifteen mages including Ira, and three civil servants including Melty. And of course, we had me, Sylphy, and Madame Zamil.

We were short of light infantry and irregulars because of casualties in our last battle. I was really hoping we could avoid any further deaths.

"I'm worried about our harpy support thinning out," I commented to Sylphy.

We left five harpies each at Alpha and Beta. That left us with only Pirna and the four others. It took harpies about two hours to cover three days' walk, so if Alpha or Beta were attacked and could hold out for at least two hours, we'd be able to send them five reinforcement units.

Ten harpies doing aerial runs would be more than enough to take out most military forces, provided it was anywhere under ten thousand soldiers. There were plenty of aerial bombs at both Alpha and Beta too. It'd be bad if our forces lost a fortress and the bombs were seized—they were just light enough that a beastman would be able to use them as large grenades.

We walked for three days. This time, we ran into no one on our journey, and we arrived at Gamma with little trouble. Most folks avoided the road beyond Gamma on account of the gizma attacks.

"So, what's our plan this time?" I asked.

"Let's start with the usual long-range attack strategy," Sylphy said. "Give 'em a good hammering and drop their numbers."

"No point in taking any risks," agreed Ira.

We'd arrived at Gamma with the sun still high, so we immediately took

positions and began the long-range attack. With Sylphy providing spirit-magic-conjured tailwinds, the battle was decidedly one-sided. Our arrows easily hit their marks, while the opposing side's arrows were blown away and didn't land anywhere near us.

"Kousuke, we're going in this time."

A leopard-woman holding a bolt-action rifle with a 4x scope stood before me with four underlings in tow. Jagheera. In the last two battles, we had Jagheera and her men hold back and save their bullets. I could sense she was gonna make sure they got their chance this time.

"Yeah, you're right, I told her. "Try picking off targets working from the top of their chain of command down."

"Understood."

Our rifle squad immediately dispersed around the fortress, and soon the air was filled with the sound of thunderous gunfire. Simultaneously, explosions of blood burst up from the defensive wall as soldiers fell left and right. They could hit a wider range of targets by spreading out, especially since they could fire from a far greater distance than an archery squad.

The enemy knew what a bow or a crossbow meant the second they saw one. But with bolt-action rifle fire, even if they saw the gun shoot, it'd be difficult to figure out what exactly was happening. Which made sense, considering the bolt-action guns I gave them fire bullets that traveled more than twice the speed of sound. At this distance, the second the muzzle flashed was the second the bullet landed in its target, and you heard the shot itself just after it happened. Since an enemy's head exploded and *then* the rifle made a noise, it'd be rather difficult for them to process what was going on.

I was pretty sure the Holy Kingdom's soldiers were starting to panic. But it'd be impossible to take out all three hundred soldiers with long-range fire. There wasn't not much we could do about the soldiers who locked themselves in the fortress. That was why we would have to infiltrate the building and do the mopping-up at close range by the end of the battle.

"They retreated," remarked a nearby infantryman.

"I figured they would," I said. "They probably looked at our forces and assumed we didn't have any foot soldiers to seize the fortress. If they can't win a long-range fight, then locking down is the common-sense move."

And if they took that road, the path would be decided for us as well. It was time for the bombing runs. Since we only had five bombers with us, they were gonna have to do a bit of heavy lifting. The harpies didn't seem to mind, though.

"This is sooo much fun!"

Um, people? Each bomb you're dropping is obliterating tens of people at a time. Calling that fun is a bit, well... I guess it's fine. It's better to be positive than a negative Nancy like me.

"They're getting revenge after years of torment," Sylphy reminded me. I guess my reaction showed on my face. "Let them be."

"The people of the Holy Kingdom are harder on races the less human-like they get," said Ira. "Harpies, lamia, lizardmen... They get the shortest end of the stick. And that says a lot, since a cyclops like me has it fairly bad too."

"I see."

Revenge, huh? There were a million platitudes I could let speak for me, but I held them in. Revenge wouldn't fill your pockets or fix your life, but there was no doubt that a weight came off you when your abuser died. I couldn't fault someone for chasing that relief.

I did think it was dangerous to take pleasure in the murder of total strangers just because they happened to be fighting on the wrong side, though. Revenge had to end somewhere, and even if there was a specific person or group of people you wanted to get revenge on, you had to stop some time...

I dunno, it was a tough call.

I'd never been treated in a way that made me want to kill someone, but maybe I was just privileged.

"You look troubled," said Sylphy.

"I'm just thinking through a lot of stuff."

"You shouldn't do that right now. It's dangerous."

"Right."

Pitched battle was the wrong place for a moral crisis, after all.

After coming under fire from our squad of bombing harpies, the commander of Gamma Fortress surrendered before we could send in an attack force. That was a first.

"The commanders all died in previous bombing runs," said Sylphy.

"Right. Oh, so that's why..."

If the person capable of surrendering was blown up, then the soldiers had no choice but to fight to the very end. This guy probably lasted long enough to surrender because we only had five harpies with us.

We disarmed the soldiers who handed themselves over to us. Our mage squad had already entered the fortress to heal the seriously wounded. Zero casualties on our side. A few arrows made it through Sylphy's wall of wind, but none of them resulted in anything serious.

"The commanding officer is lucky he wasn't giving orders from up on the walls," Jagheera remarked. If he'd been up there, her rifle squad would've mowed him down for sure.

The squad did a helluva job. In the short time before the enemy retreated into the fortress, they managed to take out about fifty soldiers. *Amazing.*

"We didn't even get to use our second clips... Unsatisfying."

Maybe *they* didn't seem particularly thrilled. But the five of them managed a solid fifty kills with no more than ten shots apiece. You *literally* had to be hitting with one hundred percent accuracy, *minimum*. That was lunacy. If we set them up behind a proper defensive line, they could probably contain an enemy force of a hundred or more with the five of them alone.

"It looks like the enemy's been disarmed," said Sylphy. "Time to go see what this enemy commander looks like."

“I’d prefer not to, quite frankly,” I said.

I imagined they’d have something to say about a human accompanying Sylphy and the others. I thought their whole human superiority spiel was bogus, so whatever, but that didn’t mean I wanted to put up with it.

Inside the fortress, the first thing I noticed was that it was in a lot better condition than the prior two we’d taken. If nothing else, there were no body parts strewn across the floor. There were traces of blood, though.

“Princess, the commander of the fortress is in here,” one of our soldiers told us.

“I see. Let’s have a look...”

Ira stopped me just as I was entering the building. “You probably shouldn’t meet with them, Kousuke. You’re an unknown. They might think that you’re the reason behind us using weapons and tactics we’ve never used up until now.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

“In fact,” she said, “it’d be best if we kept your existence a secret from the Holy Kingdom.”

Ira was completely right, so instead I was given the job of managing the stockpile of supplies in the enemy’s storage. Dumping the fort’s supplies into our inventory did a lot for our cataloging. I could just grab it all, count my stacks, and bam, we got an inventory. Plus, if I placed the stuff back into storage, I could do some consolidation while also checking the contents of the catalog. Two birds with one stone.

Since Melty was participating in the meeting with the enemy commander, the other two civil servants were handling the work with me. We chatted while we worked.

“What a useful skill,” one of them said. “Not that I’d want it, though.”

I shrugged. “It’s because of this skill that Melty dumps these ridiculous jobs on me. But I gotta say, this fortress has a lot of supplies. They might’ve just gotten restocked.”

“Arichburg is near here, so they likely got their stuff from there.”

“Is that a town?” I asked.

“Yep. It’s this area’s primary transportation hub. All the roads leading to nearby towns and villages go through there.”

“Huh. Then it’d make sense to make it our primary objective now.”

“Oh yeah,” they agreed. “If we’re going to move large forces around, we’re going to need to pass through Arichburg no matter what.”

We chatted some more about the area’s geography and its local goods while we made progress with the storage consolidation.

Melty returned after the end of the meeting and flashed the two girls I’d been bonding with a stunned look. No lie, it was kinda funny.

Since we’d taken over the three fortresses and secured a bridgehead into the Kingdom of Merinard, we began to focus on strengthening our foothold. Danan wanted to take Arichburg right away, but we just didn’t have the troops to manage such a large area.

“We should be happy that we even managed to take over these border keeps,” said Melty.

“How unfortunate,” Danan replied.

“Don’t be like that. The fact that we have the three fortresses now means that we’ve taken complete control over the Great Omitt Badlands. Now the rest is up to Kousuke.”

“Me...?”

In other words, I had to use my ability to its fullest potential and make these badlands bloom. Talk about back-breaking work.

“For the time being,” Danan replied, “I think we should focus on fortifying the three fortresses.”

“Huh?” Melty objected. “We really should focus on developing new, livable land.”

“We’ve still got space at our home base, don’t we?”

“Once word gets out in the kingdom that we took the border fortresses, we’re going to draw in a lot of new people,” said Danan. “When that happens, we can’t just say, ‘whoops, no vacancy.’”

Melty shook her head.

“Kousuke’s skills means we can set that up in an instant, even if we wait until the moment people show up. We should strengthen the fortresses so that we can protect the new land we develop. That should come first. It doesn’t matter how much land we prepare—if the enemy breaks through our defensive line, it’ll all be for naught.”

We all agreed on strengthening our current foothold, but we were not united on how to do that. Once Sylphy spoke up, the matter would be decided, but she kept her thoughts to herself for the moment. Ira wasn’t present, since she was healing the wounded soldiers from the Holy Kingdom.

Regardless of who won out, I was going to get used and abused. I’d given up on getting away from that fate. As long as they had time for me to rest afterwards, I was good.

“And anyway,” Danan continued, “Where would we even prepare this new land? We haven’t chosen any spots, have we?”

“We’re currently investigating the area around home base and have selected several potential areas.”

“I’d be interested in hearing about that,” Sylphy interjected.

I was also fairly curious.

“There are several rocky hills a short distance away from home base. It looks likely that we can mine some good stone and ore from there.”

“I see. That’s good to hear. Anything else?”

“As a result of our investigations, we’ve discovered a new ley line node. If we can reproduce anti-magic barriers, we can make new, safe areas just like home base.”

Huh, a new ley line node. If I remembered correctly, they were like power spots that allowed us to draw magic power from the ground to operate magic

tools. Back at home base, it was a nearly bottomless power source. Really quite useful.

“I see,” said Sylphy. She turned to me. “Kousuke, how goes the supply situation?”

“No problems, but we’re running low on clay and wood. Regardless of what direction we go, be it fortress strengthening and preparing new land, we don’t really have enough of what we need.”

We could get clay from the badlands, but wood? Not so much. We couldn’t have it sent in from the Black Forest, so we were gonna have to restock soon.

“Shall we head to whatever forest is nearby and do what needs to be done?”

“Sounds about right. We can just have someone follow the unit assigned to forest recon around the stony areas and gather wood from there.”

There was a forest within sight of Delta, totally detached from the badlands. Lots of healthy greenery over there.

Hm, it was a little late to think of this, but was it really okay for us to spend so much time in the badlands? Plants don’t grow there because the whole place was sucked dry of spirit energy. Were we sure it didn’t have an effect on people?

“We’re following Danan’s advice this time,” said Sylphy. “First, we’ll fortify the fortresses on the border. It’d be bad if the enemy took them back in a counterattack. Just like Danan said, we still have room in our front line... I guess it’s not a frontline base anymore, but I digress. We still have room there for more people. Procuring new livable land isn’t a priority right now.”

“Princess...”

“I understand what you’re saying, Melty,” said Sylphy. “I do. And it is important. But right now we cannot afford to let them reclaim their fortresses. With how few soldiers we have, I want to limit the risks we take.”

“I understand.” Melty was satisfied by Sylphy’s explanation.

“Then we’ll go with that. Melty, get in touch with home base using the golem communicator and gather supplies and manpower at the front line. Danan, you

handle unit placement and develop a plan for strengthening our fortresses. Kousuke, be ready to progress with the work quickly should the need arise."

"Got it."

"Understood."

"You bet."

And so, we got to work. I was going to be working outside, so I figured I should grab Madame Zamil to watch my back.

Madame Zamil and I left the fortress with some Liberation Army soldiers and headed into the nearby woods to spend about an hour and a half grabbing materials and doing recon. But, in the midst of our mission we heard an awful racket of hoots and hollers. We suddenly found ourselves surrounded by a bunch of creepy, green-skinned creatures.

"What the heck?"

"Goblins."

Goblins, huh? Those creatures in fantasy novels that were at the very bottom of the food chain along with slimes.

They had vacant faces, squat green bodies, and aggravating voices like nails on a chalkboard. Even the bare minimum of clothing, it seemed, was optional by goblin standards. *Cover your shame, man, jeez.*

"Madame Zamil, are these things, uh, capable of communication?" I asked.

"It's often said, 'stones and corpses will answer before a goblin.'"

"...Gotcha."

So, it was pointless to expect any kind of conversation with them. Granted, I'd kinda assumed that from the jump.

"Worry not," she told me. "I won't let them lay a finger on you."

"Much obliged."

Madame Zamil rushed into the cluster of goblins with her shooting star cross

spear, and I pulled my goat's foot crossbow from my inventory and loosed a volley. That thing had enough force to break through gizma armor. There was no way a nearly naked goblin stood a chance. They wailed and hooted in alarm.

Madame Zamil swung her cross spear about, taking the heads off of the goblins, cutting their bodies in two, stabbing their heads with her blade. She would even occasionally pierce their throats as they tried to come at her with their own stone blades.

“Does she even need help?” I whispered to myself as I shot some fleeing goblins in the back. This must be what they mean by an irresistible force.

The battle ended in under five minutes. There were about thirty goblins total, and our party was composed of me, Madame Zamil, and three light infantry units, so we'd managed to fight our way through a force six times greater than ours. They'd probably thought they had the advantage.

And, as a result, they were annihilated before they could flee. How sad.

“Weak,” I commented.

Madame Zamil agreed. “They’re nothing compared to gizmas. That said, they still have a sort of low cunning, so you can’t let your guard down.”

“Got it. I guess it would be dangerous if they got in close as a group.”

“It’s fairly common for new adventurers to be murdered by goblins.”

And then—just guessing—they got braised and delicately seasoned. I didn’t know if goblins in this world operated like that, and I didn’t really want to know.

I dumped a goblin corpse into my inventory, just in case we found a use for it later, and continued harvesting wood. Compared to the Black Forest, the trees seemed a bit skinnier. I wondered if this had to do with their life energy being different or something. But eh, wood was all the same once you cut it down.

“No matter how many times I see you use this power, it’s so mysterious...” Madame Zamil whispered as a fallen tree became a log.

“It’s pretty useful. I can just use things as they are without really thinking about it.”

“So it seems.”

We progressed through the forest, taking down tree after tree. Obviously, we couldn't tear the whole place down, so I tried to show some restraint. Since I wasn't exactly a professional woodcutter or arborist or whatever, I could only do so much.

"This place is pretty safe compared to the badlands," I remarked.

"It's just that the badlands in particular are very dangerous," Madame Zamil told me. "The deeper areas of the Black Forest are even worse."

"Seriously? Now that you mention it, I've never really gone very far in."

"It's said that a dragon lurks deep within."

"What the hell?"

I kinda super wanted to see it. A real live dragon! Boys love stuff like kabuto beetles and kuwagata beetles, but a dragon?

I wondered if my current equipment was enough to take on a dragon... If I made an anti-tank cannon, would that work? I doubted that a bolt-action rifle would make much of a dent. I'd wanna prepare a heavy machine gun at the very least. If we pumped the dragon full of .50 caliber rounds, it'd go down, right? I wondered how hard dragon scales were.

"Are you pondering how to take down a dragon?" Madame Zamil asked me.

"You're sharp."

"People who hear about the dragon respond in one of two ways. Either they never think to get close, and promptly forget about it, or they obsess over what they'd do if they could ever confront it. I can tell from the look on your face that you were obsessing. So, did you figure out how to defeat it?"

"It'd be impossible right now. But I did think up several weapons that would probably work on it. Could a mithril weapon hurt a dragon?"

"It's possible."

"Then yeah, I could kill it."

An anti-materiel rifle might do the trick. If I made the rifle and the bullets with mithril and used an overcharged cartridge, then I'd bet I could pierce a dragon's

scales. A dragon was a living thing, so it had to have a weak point. The brain, the medulla oblongata, the heart. If I jammed any of those with enough bullets, it was bound to die. I could even pack the bullets with delay fuses and have the tips explode inside of its body.

“Really? If there ever comes a time to slay a dragon, I’d love to accompany you.”

“I’ll be counting on you,” I told her.

Madame Zamil bared her fangs with a wide smile. I’d been scared of her at first, but after a while I got used to her. There were lots of lizardmen around, after all. Or lizardwomen, in her case.

“There’s a farming village around here, right?” I asked.

“Appears to be. Another squad is headed there. It’d be a little far to walk from here.”

“It’s in a completely different direction, so that makes sense.”

The forest we entered was northeast of Gamma, and the village in question was southwest of the fortress. Yeah, that’d be pretty far away.

“Quite frankly,” I said, “I don’t really know a thing about ruling or whatever. How do you even do it?”

“Generally speaking, you have soldiers patrol the area and take down any monsters or bandits they encounter. And then, when tax time comes around, you collect from the people.”

“Is that seriously it?”

“The nation provides its citizens with safety, and the citizens work within said safety. That’s it. Of course, there are times when the nation provides various services to make sure its citizens can leave peacefully, and times when the citizens make requests of the nation.”

“I see, I see.”

Yeah, this was all beyond me. Though I was sure if I spoke to Sylphy or Melty, they’d lend me their knowledge.

“Sir Kousuke’s abilities would be a great help to the citizens, I’m sure,” she added.

“You think? I guess when it comes to engineering, I have got things on lock.”

“But you can also build waterways and roads, walls to protect the village, storage facilities to house crops, and even bring the land itself back from the brink, can you not?”

“I suppose I’m pretty good at that stuff.”

“It might be your very destiny to build things that help the world and the people who live in it, blood-soaked battlefield be damned.”

“My destiny, huh?”

I didn’t really believe in stuff like that. Looking at my achievement comments, all I could sense was malice. I honestly thought that whatever whisked me away to this world was wearing a shit-eating grin as they watched me muddle on through.

“Even if something like that does exist, I couldn’t care less about it,” I said. “I could never abandon Sylphy and the others at this point.”

“The princess is truly loved,” said Madame Zamil.

“Of course.”

Even if I was told to part ways with her, I wouldn’t. I had relationships with Ira and Pirna now too, so I had to take responsibility for my actions. It didn’t matter what the asshole who summoned me here said. I didn’t plan on listening.

Madame Zamil asked if we had gathered enough wood yet, but I figured we still had a long way to go if we were planning for the long term.

“Then let us continue,” she said. “Hopefully we encounter more appropriate prey next.”

“Such as?”

“In terms of this area... Perhaps a charging boar? They’re too dumb to do anything but charge in, but their meat is delicious.”

“I like the sound of that. Be great if we could catch one.”

“Should we encounter one, I shall take it down in a single strike.”

“Now *that* I’m looking forward to seeing.”

We cut down a whole bunch of trees until the sun began to set. As for charging boars... We didn’t encounter a single one. Dammit.

After returning to Gamma Fortress, Sylphy and the others gathered together for another meeting. Just as I was side-eyeing them and passing by with sympathy in my heart, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Kousuke, I would like to get your opinion on this.”

It was Sylphy, who must’ve seen me trying to sidle past unnoticed.

“Of course.”

My master plan foiled, I found myself dragged along. Madame Zamil followed me without a word, but the Liberation Army soldiers who had accompanied us simply saw me off with a smile.

Don’t think you’ve won the war...

“What’s up?” I asked Sylphy. “You guys don’t seem too pleased.”

She sighed. “A bunch of refugees...no, *volunteer soldiers*...have gathered at Alpha Fortress.”

“We’re not talking Holy Kingdom folks, right?”

“Indeed not,” Danan answered me. “They’re mostly beastfolk, but there are some human soldiers from the old Kingdom. They could not decide whether or not to go to the badlands, so instead sought refuge with us.”

If there were humans mixed in, they must’ve been tracking the Holy Kingdom’s movement. And quite a bit of time had now passed since we started doing battle with them. It wasn’t that strange to think they used the time to prepare and were finally ready to act.

“How many people?”

“A thousand,” Sylphy said.

“Wait, what? I didn’t catch that.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d think she just dropped some ridiculous figure in my lap. (Admittedly, not the first time that happened, *wink wink, nudge nudge*.)

“A thousand people.”

“You big liar.”

Danan ignored our little exchange and went on.

“Only about three hundred of them are trained, usable soldiers. The remaining seven hundred are their family—non-combatants.”

“This ain’t good.”

If I remembered correctly, after we finished construction, we’d have enough space at home base for three thousand people. We should be able to get everyone in there, but it was a long journey... On foot, it’d be at least a week’s march.

Sylphy asked Melty if our food stores would hold up to such a big influx of new mouths to feed.

“To be honest, it’s not looking good,” Melty admitted. “We have a stockpile back at home, but getting any of it here would prove difficult. We needed food production up and running here yesterday, and somewhere close to the front lines at that.”

Our original plan had been to hunker down in the badlands, so I didn’t think it’d be an issue if we produced all our food back at home base. The reality was that we weren’t really in the badlands all that often. We were stretching our supply line by a lot. This was never good.

After some discussion, we decided to delay strengthening the captured fortresses and focus on building a new base near the entrance of the badlands, some distance from the border. The area had been mainly cleared of gizmas, so the danger to us and the refugees was minimal.

Always expect the unexpected. Look at our current situation—a sudden influx of allies proved more of a pain than our actual enemies. Military logistics were the true foe of any army. The Liberation Army was in a decent position, because

at least they had me. Honestly, if the great leaders of the Sengoku Period or the era of the Three Kingdoms knew about my logistical abilities, they'd probably weep blood.

"You know, this is kinda wild timing," I said. "It's almost like someone planned for this to happen..."

"You mean Cuvi," Sylphy said.

"Cuvi?" I said, surprised. "Actually, you know, I haven't seen them around lately."

"That's because we had them infiltrate and get in touch with a former member of the old Merinard military," Ira told me.

Like a spy? A spy fox? Wild.

"Anyway, that's our current situation. I'd like to hear your thoughts," said Sylphy.

"I'm not sure where to start... First, what are the plans you were arguing over?"

"With the addition of the volunteers, I think we should hurry up and take over Arichburg," said Danan.

"I'm against it," said Melty immediately. "We already don't have enough hands. I think we focus on strengthening our position."

"But that gives the Holy Kingdom time to do the same. The enemy has the advantage in numbers. If all three of our fortresses were attacked simultaneously, it'd go extremely badly for us. As soon as we go on the defensive, we could get crushed."

Sylphy wore a conflicted smile as she watched Danan and Melty butt heads. She interrupted Melty's rebuttal.

"They've been like this the whole time, so we haven't yet settled on a plan of action," she said.

"Well, what do you think, Sylphy?" Melty asked.

"...I'm leaning toward Danan's idea, but I also want to hear your thoughts,

Kousuke.”

Danan’s expression showed vindication, while Melty, on the other hand, looked like the kid picked last for the dodgeball team. Sylphy pulled out a map and showed it to me.

“First, I want you to look at this.”

“This is a map of the area, right? This is the fortress, and over here are some towns and villages... Is this line the road?”

“Exactly. There are other, smaller roads, but this is the main one that we can use to transport our soldiers.”

As far as I could tell from looking at the map, if we took Arichburg, then the Holy Kingdom lost its route to the south. We could isolate any Holy Kingdom forces who were still south of us.

“...I see. From this, it looks like Arichburg really is a hub.”

“Right you are,” Danan agreed. “If we take Arichburg, the Holy Kingdom will be unable to overwhelm us with their numbers.”

“And then we’d have to really protect the town,” I added.

“Precisely,” said Danan, with his fists clenched. “Ultimately, we would have to use fewer forces for defensive purposes and be able to instead use those soldiers for peacekeeping.”

“What’s on your mind, Melty?” I asked. She was looking exhausted.

“Even if we were to take Arichburg, I worry about how we govern it after the fact,” Melty explained. “Let’s say we manage to quickly take the town. There are still plenty of Holy Kingdom soldiers to the south. They could cause chaos all over, try to take back the town, or in the worst case scenario, become bandits in the mountains.”

“If we mean to continue fighting, we’ll come up against those issues constantly. But if Holy Kingdom soldiers do any of those things, then public opinion of them will plummet, which means that by taking care of them, opinion of us will rise, won’t it?” I reasoned.

“Do you really think things go that smoothly?” Melty asked. She didn’t seem

to think so.

It was certainly true that this was a problem we had yet to encounter. Up until now, the worst threat we'd really faced was the gizmas who charged at us willy-nilly.

"I honestly don't think there's much to worry about," I said. "We have harpies who can survey the land from high in the sky, and we also have our golem communicators. Hunting down bandits shouldn't prove to be very difficult."

"Mm, I agree." Danan replied.

Even if rogue soldiers were to hide in the mountains or woods, they wouldn't be able to evade the eyes of the harpies. And with the golem communicators allowing our powerful squads to share info, hunting down bandits wouldn't be tough at all.

"Now all of this is so easily solved with brute force..." I started to say.

"Um... So does that mean you agree with Danan, Kousuke?" Melty glared at us like we were a bunch of stupid muscleheads. *Eek, she's scary!*

"Y-yeah... If we can take control of a transportation hub like Arichburg, we'll be making things easier for ourselves in the long run. Even if it means putting domestic affairs aside for the moment."

In sim games, taking control of transport hubs was the most basic of basics. Especially if the enemy had a numerical advantage.

We were way more prepared for defensive battles than we were for field battles. Even if we were to hit Arichburg with a surprise attack, between our harpies' ability to locate enemies over a wide range and our golem communication system, the difference in the speed of info exchange would allow us to wear down the enemy bit by bit.

"What are our new volunteers up to now?" I asked.

"They're currently at Alpha Fortress," said Sylphy. "We're planning on having those who can fight remain there while the non-combatants are sent to the back with protection."

"Do we have enough food?" Melty put in.

"We have the harvest from the fields Kousuke built, so we should be fine. We also plan on sending any extras from Beta Fortress over to Alpha," Sylphy said. I offered to use my inventory to make one of those restocking runs, but she shook her head. "I'd prefer if you constructed a restocking base instead; then we wouldn't have to send the non-combatants all the way back to home base."

"That makes sense. I'll get on it tomorrow."

"Good." Sylphy nodded. "Danan and I will stay here and put together the squad for our assault on Arichburg. Kousuke, you move to Alpha Fortress and get to work on a production base."

"Okay..."

I guess I'm going to be away from Sylphy again, huh?

I knew why it had to happen, but it didn't make me feel any less lonely.

"I'll be sending Ira with you."

"Oh, right. There might be wounded and sickly folks in the new group."

I wondered how long we were going to be apart this time. If it was for the whole Arichburg offensive, then it might be a while. Man, this sucked. I knew Ira and the harpies would be with me, and I did love them, but Sylphy was my number one.

"...Come now, don't make that face. You're going to make me doubt my decision."

My disappointment must have been pretty obvious.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Um, pardon me," Melty cut in, "But could you two save this for when you're alone?"

"Heehee, are you jealous?"

"Sylphy, I'd advise you to get off that high horse of yours. Or else..."

Melty whispered something into Sylphy's ear as she proudly puffed her chest out, and just like that, sweat was streaming down Sylphy's face. What did Melty tell her?!

“Are you okay with that?” Melty asked her.

Sylphy shuddered. “Anything but that!”

“Heehee, I dunno...”



Panicked, Sylphy clung to Melty in protest. What the heck was going on? I was seriously dying to know!

“Ah, ahem!” Sylphy cleared her throat. “That’s all for today’s meeting. Rest well ahead of tomorrow.”

“Aye.”

Danan awkwardly exited the meeting room. He must’ve heard whatever Melty said. Melty was still teasing Sylphy.

“Mm, maybe I should do that? Or what about the other thing?!”

“I’m sorry, okay?!” Sylphy, of all people, was half in tears.

What sort of dirt did Melty have on her...? I really shouldn’t let my guard down around her.

After a long, cozy night and a fair bit of the morning in bed with Sylphy, I left Gamma Fortress for Alpha with Ira, two mages, ten light infantrymen, Pirna, and two other harpies in tow.

Last night Ira and the others left Sylphy and me alone together, since we were bound to be apart for a while. We were able to spend some quality “us time” for the first time in a while. She really wanted me to dote on her. It’d been a while since I saw her act so needy. She nearly gave me a nosebleed, she was so damn adorable.

When we woke up in the morning and she’d calmed down, she was so bashful about her actions the night before. It was awesome.

“Kousuke?”

“Hm? What’s up, Ira?”

“You were zoning out, so, it’d be dangerous if you fell.”

“Right, right. It would be. I’ll keep my head on straight.”

“Okay.”

We gently rocked back and forth in the carriage—something we picked up at

Gamma Fortress. We were split into three carriages. They weren't that big, and with two horses pulling each, they were quite fast. Though part of that had to do with the fact that I packed the stuff we were bringing with us into my inventory.

"At this pace, we might arrive at Alpha within the day," Ira pointed out.

"Whoa. It takes three days to walk there and we'll make it in one? That's fast."

With the speed we were going, the wind was whipping pretty hard outside the carriage. In my memory, carriages weren't particularly fast, but who knew—maybe horses here were faster than Earth horses.

"But is there anything we can do about this rocking?" I asked.

"Honestly, this is more comfortable than usual thanks to the cushions you made for us."

The only path between Gamma and Alpha was a packed dirt road. If we hadn't had these cushions, our butts would have been majorly aching.

"And it's not like carriages have suspension built into them... Oh well."

"Sus Pension?" Ira asked.

"It's a device that decreases rocking in a carriage using spring force."

"Can you make something like that?"

"I don't know the precise details on how they're made, but... Actually, you know what? I might be able to whip something up." I accessed the carriage and found an upgrade menu.

Primitive Covered Carriage Upgrade: Mechanical Part × 10, Wood × 20, Steel Spring × 8

"Looks doable."

"Do it," she said.

"I really shouldn't while we're moving."

I had a real bad feeling about pulling an upgrade while we were moving. The horses might get freaked out by the flash of light and go wild.

"So, stop the carriage," said Ira.

"I-I suppose that works."

Apparently, Ira really wanted to be done with all this shaking. It was a little early for our midday break, but I supposed we could take it early.

At Ira's signal, all three carriages slowed down, eventually coming to a stop on the side of the road. It looked like everyone else was getting a bit worn down by the shaking, as they stepped out massaging their tailbones.

"Isn't it a little early for lunch?" Pirna asked.

"Kousuke's going to modify the carriages for us," said Ira. "They won't shake anymore."

"Seriously? Kousuke's cushions were a lifesaver, but if he can do even better, I'd welcome it."

"It's early, but let's eat. Kousuke, take out the food."

"Aye aye."

I followed Ira's orders and pulled the food pack from my inventory.

Dried vegetables and meat, baked bread, wheat flour, and salt and spices, all in one box. Just one of these was enough to feed about fifteen people. These were supposed to feed five people for at least three meals, but alas.

These were a prototype designed to make military depots more efficient. I took military provisions that could be saved over a good long while and repackaged them for easy travel.

The packs required stuff like a pot and other tableware, but the plan was to have those included as part of a soldier's equipment going forward. This pack was only meant to supply the food.

Once the pack, a pot, and the tableware were all set out, I started on the upgrades while Ira and the others took care of the cooking. I had the soldier in

charge of the horses unhook them from the carriage, just to be safe.

Even in the middle of the day, the flash of light from the upgrade was blinding. If you looked straight at it, you'd mess up your vision. Once I'd wrapped up that biz, I popped my head under the carriage to check out the results. There were metal plate springs between the axle and the carriage's body now. I wondered how much this was gonna mitigate the shaking. We weren't gonna know till we got in.

Ira came over to check on me.

"Done?"

"One carriage down for now."

"Exciting."

Ira smiled ever so slightly, breaking from her usual stone-faced expression. All the turbulence must've been a real problem for her.

"Don't get your hopes up just yet. I don't know how much good this'll do."

"Mm, it's okay. I'd be happy if you cut down the shaking even just a little, so don't worry."

Actually, now that I thought about it, why didn't the axle break after taking such a beating? After taking another look, I found that the thing was made of wood.

"Ira, the axle on this carriage is made of wood, so why doesn't it break from the shaking?"

"The timber's all been bolstered with vigor and repair enchantments."

"It's strengthened with magic?"

"That's right. The axle is the most valuable part of a carriage."

I see, I see. I'd imagined the axle was the primary failure point, but when magic entered the equation, that went out the window. I guessed that meant axles themselves were costly, but you saved more money because you didn't have to constantly replace them or worry about your carriage being dead weight.

After Ira watched me upgrade the remaining carriages, it was finally time to eat. What was on today's menu? Well, it looked like a congealed mass of boiled...*everything*.

"The bread was hard, so I thought it'd be better to boil it down into gruel," Ira said. "And I boiled the dried vegetables and meat and took the soup stock," she explained. "And then I made dumplings out of the powder and tossed those in as well."

In other words, my first impression was spot on. It was surprisingly edible, so whatever, but uh... I supposed now that I thought about it, when it came to battlefield rations, It was pretty difficult just having the usual stuff. Even on the planet I came from, if you traveled back in time like fifty years, the food wouldn't be much different than this. We had gruel because we could boil stuff, but if we couldn't, we'd be eatinghardtack and cured meat. It was going to be difficult to get a decent meal in any situation without pre-packaged foods, or at least canned goods, and at our current level of engineering and tech, that just wasn't an option yet.

"Lost in thought again?" said Ira.

"I was wondering if I couldn't figure out a way for us to have tasty food wherever we go."

"Sounds tough."

"It is. For the time being we're just gonna have to muddle through."

Eventually I wanted to try my hand at making pre-packaged or canned goods, but that was going to take a while. It might have been faster to figure out a magical approach to the problem. If I made some sort of tool that could transport large amounts of food and keep it fresh, the issue would be solved.

Thanks to the added suspension on the carriages, they did a lot less shaking. The problem hadn't been entirely eliminated, but the difference was pretty huge and everyone seemed grateful. With a cushion, you could barely feel the movement at all

The beastfolk light infantrymen who were driving also seemed pleased, which

made our trip all the more comfortable. I wouldn't be surprised if that was the reason we ended up making it to Alpha Fortress right as the sun began to set.

When we arrived, I saw people milling around everywhere.

"They're even camping outside." Ira pointed out. A thicket of tents and lean-tos and such were set up outside the walls.

It looked like there wasn't enough room in the fort itself. The ones doing the camping outside appeared to be the Liberation Army troops. They must've relinquished their safer boarding to the refugees.

Once we were unloaded, I parted ways with Ira and the mages, who headed off to see to the needs of said refugees. The infantrymen and I headed to the pantries. They were crowded with hungry refugees; it was bedlam in there. Just getting to the storage area was a huge pain, and if the infantrymen weren't with me, I might not have made it all the way.

When we got inside, a sheep beastwoman civil service officer with big round glasses clung to me, half in tears. With the supplies nearly burned through, the clamor of hungry voices must have driven her to her breaking point.

"Aaah! Kousuke! I've been waiting for you! Hurry and save me!"

"R-right! Just hold on!"

I immediately pulled out the supplies from my inventory and dumped them into the empty storage nearby: bags of grains, a box filled with potatoes and other vegetables, and boxes of block cookies that could be eaten as is. I also pulled out some gizma jerky. At least it was *probably* gizma, but no matter how many times I looked at the stuff, it just looked like dried beef or pork. Why did my abilities have to be this way?

All that was left in storage was a ceramic bottle or two of salt in the corner. Kinda sad.

"Please stay in line! We have enough supplies to go around now, so please calm down!"

Looked like the civil servant gal found her second wind now that she had something to hand out. Since the infantrymen were there to help as well, I

thanked them for their good work and let them know that I was heading outside to build some place to sleep.

Just as I finished wading through the crowds, someone called out to me, prompting me to turn and find a super soft fox man.

“Long time no see,” I said to Cuvi. “Weren’t you on an infiltration mission?”

“Yeah, well, I’m good at sneaking around. They picked the right guy for the job, y’feel me?”

He looked as easygoing as ever. And he didn’t look wounded or even ruffled; his mission really must have been a success.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” I told him. “What’s up next for you?”

“I’m cooling my paw pads here a couple days longer; then I’ll be meeting with the princess and old man Danan back at Gamma. After that, it’s back to recon duty.”

“I see... Well, just be careful. Oh, wait.” I pulled something out of my inventory. “Here, drink this.”

“Oh, is this honey I smell? Much obliged.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“I know, I know.”

Cuvi quietly shuffled away with the bottle of honey in his hands and a grin on his face. He’d probably crack it open later today. I watched him slip into the chaos, then carried on out to the exterior fortress grounds. This time, Worg the wolfman approached from the front with his underlings. He flagged me down the second he noticed I was there.

“Been a while,” I said. “Must’ve been rough here.”

“You know how it goes. But thanks to you, things are looking brighter.”

They were almost entirely out of food before we got here. The food supplies in my own inventory were looking pretty low now as well, so we were gonna have to do something about that.

“Tomorrow, I’m planning on setting this place up with enough farmland for us

to come by and restock without cramping your style. We should be okay in about a week. Have you already picked a spot?"

"Unfortunately not. That said, everything between the fortress and the badlands is all flat land."

"Pretty much anywhere will work then, huh?"

Worg nodded. In that case, I figured I could just make it right next to Alpha Fortress. Eventually the front line would leave this place behind, which meant it might be best to build where it was easy to send security back and forth. It also might be good to build it on the side of the Kingdom of Merinard, as opposed to facing the badlands. We had room to spare, and the people working there would likely be the refugees. I figured the workers would rather work somewhere safe.

"All right, got it. I'm gonna think about things and talk it over with Sylphy tonight."

"Thanks a lot."

I parted ways with Worg, headed outside, and put up some temporary sleeping quarters a short distance away from the Liberation Army's campsites. It was a raised-floor type of building, which made it quite safe, and it had a large bath to boot. I'd taken in the criticisms from before and upgraded it a bit.

The harpies and Ira would probably be sleeping there with me, but what about everyone else? Making one of these wasn't particularly difficult...

I could make some lodging for the soldiers camping outside of the fortress, but then what about the cleanup? We couldn't just leave these set up outside of the fortress when we left.

I settled on making one for the light infantrymen and mages who'd accompanied me. I'd use my own quarters as a template and expand it some. That was big enough for about twenty people.

I needed to have food ready to go once Ira, Pirna, and the rest got back. Oh, and I also needed to make sure the beds had cushions 'n' such. Even once the thing was built, there was still stuff that needed to be done, y'know?

In the end, the supply base ended up being about a three hour walk from the Merinard side of Alpha Fortress.

If the Holy Kingdom launched an attack on Alpha, there was a possibility the whole area would become a battlefield, but given their track record, I figured the chances of that happening were negligible.

“In other words,” said Ira, “right now we can do whatever we want in the Kingdom of Merinard’s territories.”

“Well, we can’t let our guard down,” I cautioned.

“Yeah, of course.”

Up in the sky, the harpies were scouting, and we had around thirty soldiers with us. At the center of this supply base was a dorm for the folks doing all the producing, plus a storage area to protect the goods. The soldiers’ barracks was like a mini-fortress with defensive walls, so if things got bad everyone could hole up there. There were golem communicators set up so that they could call for backup, and we could launch harpies from Alpha Fortress to suppress the enemy.

“By the way, it’s pretty rare for you to accompany me like this,” I mentioned to Ira. “Normally, they stick a mega strong person with me as a bodyguard.”

I had about thirty soldiers and three harpies with me, in addition to Ira. I figured the soldiers were supposed to be the substitute for a singular badass.

Ira shrugged. “I’m the strongest person in Alpha Fortress. Makes sense to me.”

“Hold up. For real?”

“For really real,” she said. “I used to belong to Merinard’s Order of Mages.”

Whoa. Her magic was incredible, but was it really that amazing? I supposed, thinking about it now, most of the folks at Alpha Fortress were your standard soldiers. Other than them, you had people like Cushi and Worg. Most of our heavy forces were back at Gamma Fortress.

“If I got serious, I could probably take out fifty Holy Kingdom soldiers by

myself."

"Probably?"

"I'm bad at close combat," she admitted.

I'd bet. As small as she was, I doubted she could hold her own for long in a knock-down, drag-out brawl.

"Kousuke, what's the plan with the farm?"

"Oh, that? I figured I'd make it super big and surround the whole base. Then I'll put some fencing around that. Seem good?"

"Yeah. We don't need the kind of thick stone fortifications that our badlands bases called for here. Wood fencing or walls should be fine."

"In that case, we've got all the materials we need around us."

The forest was nearby. Literally just step off the road and you'd find yourself in the woods. Even the fortress was only a little way off the road.

"Cutting all of this down is going to be a pain," said Ira.

"Heheh, no worries! I figured we'd have a situation like this, so I made a secret weapon." I proceeded to pull an axe out of my inventory. Its blade was made of bright, silver metal.

"Don't tell me..."

"It's mithril!"

By the way, the necessary materials to build this were as follows.

Mithril Cutting Axe: Mithril × 4, Wood × 1

Surprisingly cheap, right? Well, other than the fact that it took mithril and a good long waiting period to make. I'd also made a mithril pickaxe, a mithril shovel, and a mithril hoe. They all had the same material requirements as the axe.

When did I make all this, you ask? Just before I went to bed, I got them

cooking at a crafting bench, and it was all done by the morning. I'm not going wild night after night, okay?

"Kousuke, are you stupid?"

"Um, wow, you're mean."

"Using mithril is a waste," Ira insisted.

"It's totally not! Let me show you the true power of this axe! Oh, and I still have mithril left."

I mined the ever-loving hell out of that valley, after all. It all added up, so I had an overabundance of the stuff—more than enough to make mithril copper alloy or silver alloy.

"Give me some later," she said.

"Ask Sylphy. Apparently, it's pretty pricey, so I don't get to decide on my own."

"Okay."

She agreed, but was still huffing and puffing about the whole thing.

"Hiyah!"

I swung my mithril axe. It smashed and hacked like a charm.

"Kousuke..."

"See? Useful, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

Ira watched with an exasperated look as one swing of my axe proved enough to turn a majestic tree into multiple logs.

Great, right? This is some crazy mod stuff, no? One swing and you're done!

All my other mithril tools were just as awesome, by the by.

"Anyway, we'll be able to cut down tons with this thing."

"What about the stumps?"

"Take that!"

I swung my mithril axe down on the stump and it exploded into dust. The only thing that was left was a cute little seedling.

“Ooh, if we plant this, it’ll grow into a tree again.”

“...Great.”

It had been a while since I’d seen the light disappear from Ira’s eyes.

But Ira just needed to get with the times! With just two actions you could rid yourself of an entire tree, stump and all! Cutting down the forest and building a farm’d be easy as pie!

Or so I’d thought.

“Haaah,” I groaned. “There are so many trees.”

“And monsters, too.”

To build a farm, we had to get rid of the trees, but I’d underestimated how much work it would take to clear that much land. Even though I could take down a single tree with one swing, there were still a heck of a lot of trees. Plus, the resident monsters were pretty put off by us hacking down their forest, so they’d been giving us hell. Goblins, giant wolves, giant bugs, a weird tower of flesh with tentacles, some sort of cross between a slug and a shellfish, and even a turtle-like thing that shot stone cannonballs at us. Wonders never ceased.

“That turtle thing was crazy.”

“Rock Smashers are rare in these parts,” Ira said.

My goat’s-foot crossbow hadn’t stood a chance against its thick armor, but fortunately Ira’s lightning magic did the trick and knocked it out in one hit. Afterward, about thirty of the soldiers surrounded it and pierced its skull with their spears. What an unfortunate end.

“Its meat is delicious, though,” she added.

“Seriously? I guess we’re having turtle for dinner tonight.”

“Mm.”

It was a pretty large creature, so I was pretty sure there’d be enough meat for

everyone. I'd cut it up in my inventory later.

After three hours we'd managed to modify a pretty wide space of land, and then it was time for my mithril shovel to make its debut.

"Now we can start gathering forest soil," Ira said.

"Why? Why not just cultivate the land as is?"

"We can create farm blocks from the soil. It's far faster to harvest from those, no?"

"Yeah, it has been," I said, "but this isn't badlands. This is a healthy forest, so we might harvest more from it anyway."

"...Gotcha. That's one way of thinking about things. Okay, then first, let's turn up half the soil and make farm blocks, then take the other half and just cultivate it as is. This way we can observe how they both naturally work."

"Mm, good idea."

Ira and I began to turn up the soil in the forest.

"What is that?"

"A mithril shovel, of course," I said.

"Weird."

Yeah, yeah. But one scoop dug up a five-meter-by-five-meter space. It was amazing. Ira asked how it worked.

"Beats me."

When I said that with a bit of a proud smile, Ira smacked my butt with her staff. Um, ow? What was the problem? It was useful, no?

"By the way," I said, "that magically enhanced material or whatever... Are you collecting that stuff?"

"You mean the stuff you use for your enchanting workbench? I have a bunch at the central base in the badlands."

"I'm gonna need them to send me some..." I said.

"We just don't have the time to go back there and get it."

“Exactly.”

Given the situation, I needed to stay close to the front lines, which meant I didn’t have the chance to go back. My only choice was to get them to send me some via carriage.

“But can we use the carriages in the badlands?” I wondered.

“We should be able to. Still, it’d be dangerous going over large stones and the like, so it’d have to move slowly.”

“And there are the gizmas to worry about... Ugh, I’m just gonna have to make time to go back, aren’t I?”

“Not necessarily. We could always collect some here. There are workers who collect magic materials among the merchants, so that might be the fastest option.”

We chatted, turning up the dirt and setting farm blocks as we went. After we finished that, it was time for my hoe.

“Hi-hoe, here we go!”

“...”

With one swing of the hoe, I was able to cultivate a ten meter by ten meter area of land. It was like a blast wave was smashing into the ground. It was so strong... I wondered if I could use it as a weapon.

Just as I was considering that, a group of goblins popped up. I tried it out on them, but all that happened was the land at their feet got cultivated. That *really* pissed them off.

“Okay, so hoes can only be used on the ground. Got it.”

“Then what would happen if you swung a mithril sword?”

“Pretty sure it’d just be a regular slash.”

Mithril equipment might have had wild abilities, but when it came to combat, I hadn’t been blessed in the least. I really was just not fit for the violent stuff.

“Mm, no worries. We’ll protect you.”

“I appreciate that.”

It wasn't like I was completely useless on the battlefield. I could shoot a crossbow and a gun, and if things got bad, I could confuse the enemy with some weird movements. But at the end of the day, my power wasn't suited for direct combat. Although if I used some skills and got some combat achievements, that could change. I wouldn't give up on the idea just yet.

Truth be told, I wasn't that interested in becoming more combat capable. I hated pain, and I'd rather avoid doing anything dangerous. Plus, the whole blood and gore thing really put me off. But Sylphy, Ira, Pirna, and the others all got their hands dirty when it was called for. I couldn't keep just hanging back somewhere safe and making weapons for others to kill with. It wasn't right.

Not that I thought getting my hands dirty would somehow grant me absolution or something. It just felt like I was pushing all the hardship and terrifying things onto them while I just hung back, safe and sound. Sylphy would probably say it was thanks to me that everyone had the power to take back their pride and homeland, so hell, who knew. We had completely different views of what I did. Maybe that was the natural outcome, since we came from such different worlds...

We were never going to fix that unless I stood on her side of things, and she stood on mine.

"Kousuke?"

"Hm?"

"You okay?" Ira asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You looked unhappy. Are you tired? Want to rest?"

"Nah, it's not that. I'll talk to you about it later."

It'd be easy to tell her it was nothing, but I knew it wouldn't be good to keep it all closed up in my heart. Before I went to bed, I'd talk to Ira and Pirna and the others about my worries.

My resolution made, I went back to hoeing my row.

My work for the day done and dusted, I headed back to my sleeping quarters. Since I always built it the exact same way, it felt like home no matter where we went. That was kind of nice. I was going to ask folks for some advice, so not only was Ira there, but the harpies who came along as well.

Rei with her black wings, Pessa with her brown wings, and Capri—also brown-fletched; I was beginning to realize that using feather color as a shorthand may not have been the most sensible approach for keeping them all straight in my head.

After bathing and eating dinner, we sat down on the long bench and switched to chill-out mode.

“I heard you wanted to talk with us about something. What’s up?” Capri asked.

“Mm... It’s not *that* big a deal...”

After setting down that bit of preamble, I confessed to my concerns from earlier. Ira and the others went silent in thought for a bit after I put everything out there. I guessed they were looking for the right words.

“I completely understand where you’re coming from.” Ira said, looking me square in the face. I could see myself reflected in her eye. “I have my abilities as a mage, but my alchemy skills give me a purpose away from the battlefield. My body is small; I can’t risk hunting anything but small game, and I could never lead from the front.”

“If you were to go down in battle, we wouldn’t be able to do anything to help when people got injured or sick,” Rei whispered quietly, and Ira nodded in response.

“Exactly. The people around me won’t let me put my life on the line, and even I know that I shouldn’t. Just like you, Kousuke.”

“I guess we are the same in that sense... How’d you move on?”

“I learned to live with it.” A very simple answer. “If I acted up and made things worse, that’d do no good. I thought long and hard. Which was better for everyone—me getting out there and using my power to fight, or me staying behind in the village to help everyone? The answer was immediately clear.

That's why I dealt with it."

"Hm..."

I understood her point, I really did. But that didn't mean I was okay with it. That's why I was struggling so much.

"If you feel like you're obligated to fight, how about talking to the people you feel obligated to?"

Pessa offers up another simple answer. But I really didn't want to go around asking everyone what they thought of me staying back, safe and cozy.

"If nothing else," said Rei, "we harpies have never felt that way about you, ever. We're incredibly grateful for how you gave us something useful to do."

I didn't think I'd ever heard her say that much all at once. From the look in her deep black eyes, I could tell she wasn't just trying to comfort me. She was saying what was in her heart.

"Exactamundo!" said Capri. "I agree. We've been able to do so much and stand out to everyone because of you, Kousuke."

"Yeah..." said Rei. "Since we're not particularly strong, we could never hunt the larger beasts in the Black Forest, and since we're kinda clumsy, we were just extra baggage back in the village. Sometimes we'd do recon for a hunt, but since we didn't have any way to communicate over long distances, even if we spotted a target for the hunters, it'd be long gone by the time we got the word to them. That happened a lot."

"We are good at rabbit hunting," Pessa said. She laughed.

I guessed that tracked; they were all like large birds of prey, talented at swooping down fast from on high.

"If you weren't around," she continued, "we probably would've fought with the gizma in the Black Forest and died. Either that or we'd have been done in by some monster deep in the woods. We get to enjoy warm meals because of you, and we even get to sleep somewhere nice and clean too. There's nobody here who'd force you into battle, knowing that."

"In other words," said Ira, "you're overthinking."

“Makin’ a fuss outta nothin’!” said Capri.

“I think you care too much about pointless stuff!” said Rei.

“You ladies aren’t mincing words!”

I’m overthinking, huh? If everyone was saying so, then I must have been, right? I did think it was true that I’d contributed a lot to everyone’s lives and to the war itself.

“And anyway,” said Pessa, “you’ve got something wrong. The people on the front lines aren’t being forced to fight. They’re doing it because they want to. We’re fighting to take back our pride.”

“Mm...”

“Exactly!” said Capri. “None of us think we’re dirtying our hands or feet or feathers to begin with! We’re fighting for ourselves and for everyone else!”

“Mmm...”

In other words, I’d gone in with the wrong idea about how everyone else thought?

“I’m more than happy with you thinking we’re amazing or cheering us on!” Pessa added. “But I really don’t want you feeling sorry for us.”

“Right,” Rei chimed in.

So, I’d been looking at this the wrong way from the start? This was all so heavy. Thinking about how to justify war and the lives taken during a war... It was all a bit beyond me.

“The more you think about it, the more you’re going to come up against a wall,” Ira said. “Not putting much thought into it is the best course of action.”

“You make me sound like an idiot...”

“...That’s not what I meant. You’re just too kind.”

Was the pause in her sentence a bit concerning, or was I imagining things? When I looked at the harpies, they all turned away and smiled. I decided to just pretend I was imagining things, for the sake of my own mental health.

“No more tough stuff!” Capri declared. “It’s been a while since our last turn,

so let's have some fun!"

"Yeah, you're right."

"Stop thinking about the tough stuff and just leave yourself to us," Pessa said.

She tugged at my hand, leading me into the bedroom while Ira pushed me from behind and Capri followed after her with a big smile on her face. Rei was ahead of us already, by the open bedroom door.

Perfect teamwork.

"...Please be gentle."

The girls didn't reply; they just grinned like jackals. I was doomed.

Thanks to my mithril tools, our land development project progressed super quickly. In just three days, we had ourselves a large stretch of farmland and an aqueduct network set up.

"Those watering holes you can make really do go against all logic," Ira commented.

"Isn't it a bit late for that?"

When it came to operating a massive farm, your water source was going to be the bottleneck. Naturally, you wanted the purest water you could find, and you needed enough to nurture an entire farm. The unlimited water source I could create fulfilled both of those requirements easily.

"The fact that you could make it even more vast than this if you wanted to is amazing. And dangerous."

"How so?" I asked her.

"It makes you a resource any sane politician would kill to claim for themselves," she said. *Whoa, scary.* "Plus, we can harvest from the fields you create in just a week. Obviously, it differs based on the crop, but it's possible to harvest two years' worth of crops in just a month. We can sell our surplus, and we can even use it to grow livestock. From an agricultural standpoint alone, your skills are so amazing that you're practically priceless."

“I get it...”

Taken from that angle, my abilities really were nuts. I was the goose that laid the golden eggs. Which, uh, y’know, when I thought about it, was kind of a gross metaphor.

“If the Holy Kingdom learns of your existence, they might come for you. Your abilities are similar to the miracles of their priests and saints.”

“For real?”

“For real,” Ira insisted. “That’s why it’s important we keep you a secret.”

“Is that even possible?”

The fact that I made this place was going to spread throughout the Liberation Army, and eventually an outsider was gonna visit and see it for themself. It was impossible to keep folks from talking, so it was only a matter of time before the Holy Kingdom became aware of my existence.

“No, it’s not. That’s why we have to pay even greater attention to your surroundings and security,” Ira said as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

“What’s this?” I asked, as she hugged me.

“Security.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

I couldn’t help but feel like there was some intense misunderstanding happening, but on a personal level I welcomed it, so whatever. It was a little hard to walk, and the piercing glares from the soldiers of the Liberation Army stung, but I could deal.

Once we finished setting up the new facilities, we got in touch with Alpha Fortress and told them that the people who would be working here could plan to arrive within the day.

The place could hold a total of five hundred people, so it couldn’t house all the new refugees and recruits from the fortress. About half of them would be sent to home base and central base.

At both bases we already had water-wheel-powered manufacturing machines

and magic-powered metal smelting furnaces up and running, but not enough people to operate them.

Construction had started on the roads connecting home base and central base to our other bases and shelters. We wanted carriages to be able to travel between bases, so we were having folks with earth magic help with the construction. I figured I'd be sent to help eventually, but if they could handle it themselves, that would be perfect. It'd be weird if I handled anything and everything.

"By the way," I asked Ira, "what's going on with the invasion of Arichburg?"

"They've already put together the squads; they'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Oh. I guess I don't have to go this time?"

"They'll be doing it without you. They're bringing together forces from Alpha, Beta, and the central fortress."

"I see... I hope they'll be okay."

The thought of friends and comrades dying on some battlefield without my knowing left me feeling deeply anxious. I couldn't help but think that maybe I could change something if I was there with them.

"They have crossbows, aerial bombs, and grenades," Ira said, sensing my worry. "They'll be fine. Sir Leonard from the central fortress is going to be there, as is Danan and Zamil. They'll protect Sylphy no matter what."

"I hope so..."

"I know this is frustrating for you, but it's important to be ready at the rear. They can fight better knowing you're keeping watch back here."

"Yeah, you're right." That's what I said, and I meant it, but it wasn't going to help me calm down, sadly. I just hoped everyone came through okay in the end.

POV: SYLPHY

AFTER ASSEMBLING OUR INVASION FORCES from the troops at our bases and fortresses in the rear, we began our march toward Arichburg.

We had three hundred volunteer soldiers from the old Kingdom of Merinard who Cuvi brought, five hundred soldiers equipped with crossbows, half of whom had just finished training in the rear and the other half of whom had been accompanying us already. Then we had thirty skilled heavy infantry, fifty light infantry, and a strike squad consisting of 130 former adventurers.

Some of Cuvi's new recruits were adventurers who held above a middle ranking, so we added them into the unit. Additionally, we had ten members of the harpy squad, five mages, and five riflemen. Altogether, ours was an army of approximately a thousand or so.

Since Kousuke wouldn't be deploying with us this time, we had to make sure everything was in order. Fortunately, Kousuke prepared our resupply goods, so all we needed to do was have it carried from the rear, which the baggage train we'd managed to assemble from the various fortresses' pool of carriages would handle.

We had to pass through several towns on our way to Arichburg, so we'd be taking each of them over and further adding to the train. We didn't plan on forcibly taking them; we'd negotiate with the locals and pay them properly for the vehicles. I thought Melty should be able to handle that just fine.

The three hundred volunteer soldiers who joined us had been assigned to the rear as transport soldiers, since they were nowhere close to done with their training.

"Princess, we'll be arriving in Mitterstown shortly."

Mitterstown. In the beginning it was just some defensible little spot where merchants stopped to put up their feet on the way to and from the Black Forest. It was only a matter of time before an inn sprang up, and from there

people settled in and began to cultivate the land to raise crops. It was a proper little village these days.

“Hrm... What of the enemy’s movement?” I asked.

“It doesn’t look like they’ll be retreating,” Danan told me. “They’ve forcibly equipped the townsfolk with weapons as well, and placed them at the front.”

I grimaced at that news. “Untrained civilians...” More sickening behavior on the Holy Kingdom’s part, as expected. It looked like we’d be putting our riflemen to use immediately. “Harm no civilians. Only the Holy Kingdom suffers today.”

“Understood,” he said.

There were fifty Holy Kingdom soldiers on security, and then close to a hundred civilian soldiers. The gates to the town were closed, and they had their forces spread out on their defensive wall. As far as I could tell, they only had ten actual soldiers who were capable of long-range combat.

According to Pirna and her harpies’ recon, they’d gathered bricks and stones at the wall. Those who couldn’t use bows would probably be throwing those instead. It’d be easy to take them down, but I really didn’t want to hurt any of the forcibly conscripted civilian soldiers.

“Encircle the town. Then we will make our request for their surrender.”

“Understood!” Danan went to carry out my orders.

The soldiers surrounded Mitterstown, sealing it off entirely. We didn’t have the time for a siege right now. I called upon the wind spirits and prepared to project my voice throughout the entire town.

“Listen well, citizens of Mitterstown! We are the Kingdom of Merinard Liberation Army, and I am its leader, Sylphyel Danar Merinard! Though you may know me better as the witch of Black Forest.”

Already, a clamor rose behind the walls.

“Our objective is the liberation of all the territories of Merinard and the release of all the tortured demi-humans within its borders. We will show no mercy to the soldiers of the Holy Kingdom, but we have no intention of harming

innocent citizens, burning down your towns, or stealing your wealth and property.”

I could hear the conscripted citizens beginning to stir. The commander of the Holy Kingdom’s army was screaming at them not to be fooled, so loud his face must have been bright red. *How crude.*

“That goes for citizens forced into being soldiers. If you throw down your weapons, we shall neither harm nor imprison you. As far as the officers and soldiers of the Holy Kingdom are concerned, as long as you do not resist, I promise we will take you into custody, and upon disarmament, you will be released safely.”

I could hear the soldiers start to murmur amongst themselves. There were even those who met each other eye to eye and began setting down their weapons.

I turned to Danan and said, in a softer voice, “Snipe their commander,” “Understood.” He passed the order to the riflemen.

The snap of a bolt-action rifle echoed through the air as the commanding officer’s head burst like an overripe tomato in the middle of chewing out his men. The soldiers nearby were covered in gore; screams rose from the wall. I hadn’t thought men could scream like that... Not that I didn’t understand the reaction.

I projected my voice again. “You are outnumbered and outclassed. We will give you one hour to consider your options. If you wish to surrender, raise a white flag in place of the Holy Kingdom’s and open your gates. Should you not respond, we will begin our attack. I hope you come to a wise decision.”

I dispelled the wind magic carrying my voice and folded my arms. Now we played the waiting game.

It didn’t take long for Mitterstown to surrender. Turned out assassinating their commander dropped their morale like a brick, and our promise not to plunder their town was the right call.

Our soldiers entered the town and immediately took over their facilities and collected their supplies.

“Danan, make sure the soldiers don’t cause any problems, got it?”

“No problem,” he said, as a wicked grin took shape on his face. “Should the need arise, I will make an example of a few.”

“I’m telling you to make sure it doesn’t come to that,” I replied, in the iciest tone I could manage; I couldn’t afford for him to miss my point. “Got it?”

“As you wish.”

I put Zamil on bodyguard duty for Melty as she happily went out into town. She was probably on her way to talk to the merchants about supplies and horse carriages. We had the money we took from the fortresses and military installations for her to spend, as well as the gems Kousuke prepared for us ahead of time.

“I’m just glad we were able to take the town without anything awful happening,” said Leonard.

I agreed. “Hopefully, we can keep this up all the way to Arichburg.”

“I doubt things will go that smoothly,” he said.

Leonard would be proven right very quickly.

“They’re prepared to resist.”

“It would appear so.”

Another three days had passed since we began our journey. The Holy Kingdom had gathered a counterattack force at Mazewood, the last town that stood between us and Arichburg.

“They have around two thousand soldiers,” Danan reported.

“And they’ve completely shut themselves in for a siege,” said Leonard.

Mazewood was a logging town, and the surrounding forest produced high-

quality timber and wood. Their walls had never been for show—there were monsters in the deep woods, and they made frequent attacks. The walls would serve just as well against us.

I made my declaration to them just like with Mitterstown, but it didn't look like things would be going the same way. It was clear they didn't plan on surrendering.

"At least there are no civilians conscripted to fight," Melty said.

"Right." It was time we got started. "Let's put pressure on them with long range fire."

"Understood." Danan called out to our troops. "Crossbow units, forward!"

Once I bid the wind spirits to blow at our backs, five hundred crossbow soldiers stepped forward and began to fire upon the town. Our barrage pierced through the bodies of the Holy Kingdom's soldiers on the wall, while my powerful gusts of wind blew their arrows far off target. A few of their projectiles made it through and into our soldiers, but there were no fatal injuries, as far as I could tell.

Within ten minutes, the enemy's counterattack slowed to a crawl as they took cover behind the wall. At least this part of the battle had ended with our overwhelming victory.

"Crossbows really are incredible," I said. "I don't feel like we can ever lose a ranged battle at this point."

"Indeed," Melty said. "However, now they appear to have locked themselves in."

"Then we have no choice than to go with the usual strategy." I turned back to Danan. "Launch the harpies."

"What's our target?" he asked.

"Tell them to focus on fatally wounding the enemy and to keep civilian and facility damage to an absolute minimum." Just before he left my side, I added, "Oh, and none of them are allowed to fall in battle."

Danan nodded. "Understood."

Even though we're far apart, I know you're watching over us...Kousuke.

The harpies ascended high into the air, aerial bombs strapped to both legs. Soon, they'd rain down death on the officers of the Holy Kingdom. When that happened, the tide of battle would be decided.

There was more than enough wood around for us to make a battering ram. Before the battle began, I delivered the orders to have one made, so the transport squad would have already cut down a host of trees and completed it. The harpies would annihilate the wall's defenses. Then we would break down the front gate.

If Kousuke were here, we could just blow up the gate with a bomb, but since he isn't, we couldn't afford to waste the harpies' explosives like that.

Their aerial strike began, signaled by rolling thunder that made the air itself quiver. The soldiers of the Liberation Army cheered.

"Yet again, the harpy squad's achievements in battle are incredible," said Leonard.

"They would argue that those achievements don't belong to them, but instead go to Kousuke," I said, and he agreed. To us, Kousuke was our lifeline. But at the same time, he was also our greatest weak point.

"Will we be keeping Kousuke safe in the rear from now on?" Leonard asked me.

"I intend to do so, yes."

Leonard shook his head. "I doubt he'll be happy about it."

"He won't be. But if I put him on the front lines and something were to happen..."

"Being in the rear doesn't necessarily mean he'll be safe."

"Then what would you have me do, Leonard?" I asked, and he shrugged.

"I think it would be best to always keep him at your side. It's not only the safest place for him, but it's the best way for the two of you to be happy. I consider it a failure of mine that I did not do the same."

Sir Leonard lost his beloved wife in battle with the Holy Kingdom. His territory came under attack from a detached force from the enemy that managed to skirt around Merinard's army. It was said she fought valiantly in battle until her final moments.

Remembering this, I told him, "I'll consider it."

"I think that would be wise. Plus, the quality of the food will go up if Kousuke is around."

Leonard laughed and walked off towards the battering ram that was coming up from the rear. He was probably going to butt heads with Zamil over who got to lead the charge.

Kousuke... Wait for me.

We would take Mazewood shortly. And when we did, Arichburg would be right there in front of us. If we could take control of it, the Liberation Army would finally be able to pause and take a breath. We just had to make it that far. I just had to keep going.

I gripped Pale Moon tightly and looked up at the wall the harpies had ravaged with their bombs. Then I raised my voice on the amplifying wind.

"Begin the assault! Show the Holy Kingdom who they're dealing with!"

The soldiers let out a battle cry and began their assault on the gate. Before Arichburg, we had to take Mazewood. *Focus.*

Chapter 2: Off to Support the Front Lines

“THEN ARICHBURG is just up ahead?”

“Yeah. We had some injuries in this last battle, but no casualties.” Sylphy’s voice came through over the golem communicator. “The potions you and Ira made have done wonders for the wounded, so after a few days of rest, we’ll be starting our assault on Arichburg.”

The Liberation Army left Gamma Fortress about a week ago, and since then had taken over towns and villages while heading north through the old Kingdom of Merinard territories. As of today, they’d taken over the final town just before Arichburg.

“I see... Is everything okay?” I asked her. “Are you sure you don’t need me there? I’m all done making this new base, and there’s nothing I absolutely need to be here for.”

In fact, there was very little for me to do in the rear. The last few days had been spent gathering materials and then making goat’s-foot crossbows, aerial bombs for the harpies, bullets for the bolt-action rifles, and various other bits and pieces. All the things that only I could make.

I’d had quite enough of collecting soil for the bathrooms.

“Mm... Once we take down Arichburg, I want to strengthen its defensive capabilities. Think you can come here to help with that?”

“No problem! If possible, I’ll leave tomorrow! And if not, the day after at the very latest!”

Sylphy giggled at my enthusiasm. “Since you’re all pumped up, I’ll have to make sure we take down Arichburg before you arrive, especially considering there are still a sizable number of Holy Kingdom troops to the south. Be careful on the way over.”

“You too, Sylphy. You better not get yourself hurt.”

“I know, I know. Goodbye until we meet.”

“Yeah, good night.” I set the comms unit on standby.

“Moving on tomorrow?” Ira asked me. She’d been sitting nearby.

“That’s the plan. Ira, will you be...”

“I’m going with you.”

“No, we need you here in case there are more injured and sick folks.”

“They’ll be fine with potions,” she insisted. “And we have former alchemists and pharmacists here too.”

“Hrm, I suppose that’d be fine?”

“I’m more concerned about you going somewhere alone. You need protection.”

There was no way I was ever going to change her mind about coming along, and it wasn’t like I didn’t want her with me. If anything, it’d be a huge relief. Being on my own was just...lonely. I wasn’t going to go solo, though. At bare minimum, I would’ve taken the three harpies with me.

“All right, then. How should we go about this? I could carry you and run?”

Ira made an irritated face and signed a small “X” in front of her mouth. “No way. I’ll barf.”

That bad, huh? Made sense, though. I did hop around at a crazy speed, after all.

“Carriage it is then,” I said. “Do we have any available?”

“We can get one. We can also say we’re delivering supplies to the front lines.”

It wouldn’t even be stretching the truth. While there wasn’t a whole lot we could haul with one carriage, I could carry an absurd quantity of supplies with my inventory. And by absurd quantity, I meant I have no idea just how much I could fit. Was it possible I had infinite space?

I put that thought aside and focused on Ira. “We’ll handle tomorrow’s business tomorrow. Tonight, it’s just you and I.”

"That's right. And the sun's starting to set," she said.

Generally speaking, when the sun set in this world, people stopped working. It wasn't exactly safe or productive to work in the dark, and it was expensive to light things up. So when the sun set, it was time for people to be with their families and lovers, and to deepen their bonds.

Like Ira said, tonight was just me and her. Rei, Pessa, and Capri were sleeping elsewhere. They'd all talked it over and came to a decision without me.

"I'm the big sister today."

"Big sister..."

I repeated her words. She was quite the tiny older sister, if I did say so myself. In terms of height, I had at least a head and a half on her... No, two heads.

"I am technically older than you," she said.

"That is true."

Despite appearances, Ira was thirty-two, or so she said. I was only twenty-four... Although, I supposed if I included the time I'd spent in this world, I was twenty-five now.

As far as I could tell, the way time was measured here wasn't all that different from on Earth. I hadn't asked for specifics, like how many hours were in a day or anything, but I did know that a month was about thirty days, and a year was divided into twelve months. Basically the same.

"So, what does Ira the big sister plan on doing?"

"*Big Sis* Ira."

"...Say what?"

"You're younger than me, so you should call me Big Sis Ira."

"Er, I'm not sure how I feel about using language like that at my age..."

H-hey, stop staring at me like that, Ira. I'm not gonna change my mind!

Ah, don't cry! Please? Agh, I can't handle this! She's not playing fair!

"Big..." I started, then stopped.

“Big?”

“Big...Sis Ira...”

“...Heehee.”

She laughed! She totally just laughed after putting me through all of that!

“Adorable. Come here.” Ira smiled warmly at me as she opened her arms and prepared to embrace me, her gaze kind and welcoming. “Let your big sister dote on you.”

“Um, I’m not sure...”

Ira looked so sad again. “You don’t want me to dote on you?”

I can’t deal with this!

“That’s not the case, I just...” I had no defense.

“Come here,” she said again.

“...’Kay.”

And really, how could I resist?

The moment I woke up, I rolled across the sheets, groaning. Ira totally had me dancing in the palm of her hand last night from start to finish. I felt like I’d made a terrible mistake.

“Good morning, Kousuke. Breakfast is ready.”

“G’morning, Ira.”

“Big Sis Ira.”

“Forgive me!”

“Heehee...”

Ira smiled silently and inched close to me, then cast a spell to fix the bed and clean me up. Man, magic sure was useful. If only I could use it too.

“After we finish breakfast, let’s get on the move,” she said. “It’ll take three to four days by carriage to get to Arichburg from here.”

“...Got it.”

Ira made a sort of oatmeal for breakfast. Y’know, ever since I came to this world, I’d had a whole lot of opportunities to eat this stuff. I didn’t even hate it, either. It was more filling than you’d think.

Anyway, with breakfast done, I took apart the temporary housing and got ready to head out on the road.

“Gooood morning!” Pessa descended from the sky just as I was wrapping up. “Er, I’m gonna assume that since you took apart the housing, you’re going somewhere?”

“I’m taking Kousuke to the front lines,” said Ira. “Sylphy’s orders.”

“Ah, gotcha! I’ll go let everyone else know!” Pessa flew off hurriedly before I could even say good morning.

“Let’s go to storage,” Ira said.

“Good idea.”

No one said anything about a food shortage on the front line, but there was no harm in bringing more potatoes and grains, considering they’d last a long time. Worst case scenario, we could sell them off and raise a little more funding for the war effort.

I explained the situation to the former internal affairs officer who was monitoring our storage facilities and tossed all the goods I could fit into my inventory. The base had already completed two full harvests, and the once-empty pantries were practically overflowing with grain. We were going to need to build more storage soon.

“I’m heading to the front lines. When I’m not here, my field will still need to be harvested every two weeks, so be careful.”

“Understood.” The officer shook her head. “That’s still a crazy speed for this kind of thing.”

The field in question was the one I’d personally plowed. In lieu of explaining the ins and outs of survival games, I just told the field hands that I’d enchanted the soil.

My experiment with the plowed forest soil had already borne fruit—it only took a week to harvest everything. I estimated that for anyone else it would take about a month. This was all still just theory, though. The field was sure to produce at a ridiculous pace whether I was around or not.

Ira quietly followed me around as I listened to the officer's directions, collected what needed collecting, and exited. Two carriages were parked outside of the building; Cuví was sitting up front, reins in hand. He called out to us.

"Hey, you headed to the front lines?"

"Yeah, you coming too? I guess you didn't go ahead with them after all."

"My new orders are to survey the reaches surrounding all our captured fortresses. And there are still a few nasties from the Holy Kingdom wandering around this side of Arichburg, so you're gonna need protection, right?" Cuví said as he waved us over to board.

Inside one of the carriages were about eight members of the Liberation Army equipped with crossbows and swords. They were nearly all human men, save for two demi-humans.

"Lotta humans, huh?" I said.

"Did I never tell you?" Cuví asked from the front. "I dealt with a lot of humans in the capital of the old Kingdom. Lots of connections from back then."

"Huh."

He was never a soldier as far as I knew, but just what kind of past did Cuví have? The guy was full of mysteries. I got the feeling his career history was a bit sketchy, but there was no point dredging up his past.

Pessa and the rest of the harpies flew out shortly thereafter, and our hastily resupplied caravan departed from the base, bound for the front.

"Man, these new carriages are great! Even *my* butt isn't complaining, and I'm driving!"

"Same for us in the back," I replied. "These things were awful before the modifications. I thought my rear end was going to split in two."

“I’m pretty sure your ass always looked that way, my human friend.”

I wondered how Cuvi’s worked, considering he’s a demi-human. I’d never really taken a good look at a dude’s butt before, come to think of it. I *had* seen Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies naked, so I knew their butts were just like a human’s.

Our travel plan was to spend the whole day getting from the supply facility to Gamma Fortress, then use the Liberation Army’s route north.

We could’ve just gone north directly from the supply base, but we’d have to pass through multiple towns and villages the Liberation Army hadn’t taken over yet. Ours was a longer route, but safer.

“I hope things go well...” I muttered.

“No worries, everyone’s already been this way. There shouldn’t be any trouble.”

Ira, hasn’t anyone told you what “tempting fate” means?

I checked my inventory as I pondered what she’d said, and prepared for the unexpected.

“What’s wrong, Kousuke?”

“I was just thinking that omens and stuff are just occult silliness.”

A few days later, we left Mazewood and made it to Arichburg with no trouble. Along the way? Seriously, no issues. I’m pretty sure the Liberation Army took care of all the monsters between Gamma and Arichburg because we weren’t attacked once, and we didn’t come into contact with any guerilla units from the Holy Kingdom.

“...You shouldn’t underestimate things like gut feelings,” said Ira. “It’s not uncommon for that sort of thing to be a sign you’ve unconsciously noticed small, significant things in the environment.”

“I see. I guess that does make sense.”

“Mm, yeah,” said Cuvi. “But just remember: sometimes it really is just your

imagination. If you pay *too much* mind to that kind of thing, you're bound to trip yourself up. Like everything, take it in moderation."

"Also a good point."

In the distance, I could hear something like thunder. Probably Sylphy and the others hard at work. Another bombing run, I'd bet.

"That'd be those bombs of yours, right?" said Cushi. "Man, the princess is really going all out."

"Yeah. They apparently held onto them until Mazewood, so they're letting it rip today. I'm honestly surprised the Holy Kingdom doesn't have a card to play now that their back's up against the wall."

"They might have something still up their sleeve, but maybe they're not in the position to play it yet," said Cushi. "You already took care of the knights that would've caused us problems."

"Oh, right. I guess I did take out their mobile forces."

"And even if you didn't," Ira added, "our harpies and crossbows would overpower them. If they don't come up with a way to combat our advantage in the air, the Holy Kingdom doesn't stand a chance against us."

The Liberation Army had an advantage whether they were running a defensive battle or an offensive siege, thanks to all that crossbow training. The natural counter would be to launch an attack while we were out in the open, but then our enemy would have to deal with our harpies spotting them from the air and bombing them into oblivion. The other option was to launch a surprise attack, but they'd still run into the same problem with harpy spotters with golem comms. Surprise attacks were toothless if we knew where they were coming from. They'd just get crushed.

"Although, I think that if a ton of knights attacked," I said, "we'd still be worse for wear."

"I mean, sure, there'd be losses," said Cushi, "but I don't think it'd be that bad. The only outcome that I can imagine is that we'd blow 'em straight to hell with air strikes and hand grenades."

“Mm, the bombs would work against knights,” Ira said. “And the explosions would spook their horses, preventing them from maintaining a focused assault.”

“I see...”

So then were we just mega strong? Was I worrying too much? No, this was a world with magic in it. There was no guarantee we wouldn’t confront some force that rendered crossbows or bombs useless... Like, what about dragons? Or maybe heroes and demon kings? If I knew they were coming, maybe I could deal with them. Although, in this case, when I said “deal with” I really meant “flee from, quickly.”

In that sense, my resistance, or I guess defensive power... No, my ability to survive, that was the phrase—that was basically on par with a dragon’s, give or take, wasn’t it?

I really shouldn’t have been thinking so hard about this.

“You don’t think the Holy Kingdom’ll bring out the heavy artillery?” I asked Ira.

“I don’t know,” she said. “They might’ve already sent in their mage unit.”

“Will our guys be okay if they do?”

“I’m not the only mage in the Liberation Army. If necessary, the others can defend against the enemy’s magic.”

“If they’re defending, then who’s attacking? Oh, of course. Our riflemen.”

“Correct. You can’t aim a spell at a person if you can’t see them.”

“Well, magic barrier or no, they can’t defend against a bolt-action rifle. They’ll make for perfect target practice when they stand around casting magic.”

In the past, both Danan and Sir Leonard suffered at the hands of the Holy Kingdom’s mage squad. There was no way those two didn’t have a plan for how to deal with them. If nothing else, our riflemen would lay them to waste.

In the distance, the thunderous rumbling only grew louder. *Man, they’re really going at it.* Since they knew I was coming, they were probably using up all the explosives they had left. They could destroy as much of the defensive wall

as they liked, knowing that I could fix it immediately.

“Let’s be careful and keep moving,” said Ira. “It’d be real bad if we happen to run into a split unit trying to flank Sylphy.”

“True enough,” Cuvie replied. “But the harpies are up there keeping tabs on things, so we’ll probably be fine.”

Our carriages pressed forward, toward the sounds of concussive blasts.

POV: SYLPHY

“THEY'RE REALLY HANGING IN THERE,” Danan commented.

I nodded in agreement. “If we take this town, their forces in the south will be completely cut off. They’re desperate.”

“Yes, they should be.”

The gusts of wind blowing in from behind us rendered most of the enemy’s arrows moot, but an invisible barrier blocked our crossbow bolts before they hit the soldiers on the defensive wall.

“It’s a shame we couldn’t take them out with the rifles.”

“They reacted faster than we expected.”

The barrier must have been the work of the Holy Kingdom’s treasured mage squad. They knew enough about our tactics to put together an effective defense.

“With that barrier in place, they can cast magic without exposing themselves.”

“How annoying.”

Initially, the mage squad exposed themselves over the defensive wall to return fire with attack spells, but our own mages managed to counter them, allowing our riflemen to pick the enemy mages off one by one.

It was honestly tremendous to see the enemy mage squad that once made the Kingdom of Merinard suffer fall so quickly to our attack. Unfortunately, they soon realized they couldn’t defend against our riflemen, so they hid back behind the wall.

And there they’ve remained. The battlefield was now littered with both sides’ useless arrows.

The golem communicator crackled to life beside me.

“This is Pirna. Objective confirmed.”

“Do it,” I ordered. “Two in a row.”

“Roger that. Initiating bombing run.”

A moment later we saw the harpies drop their bombs on the defensive wall. They did some damage to the enemy, but more importantly took out the magic barrier. The enemy seemed relieved that they’d managed to guard against our attack, but soon the harpies circled around for another bombing run.

The second run completely annihilated the mages and enemy soldiers. This was always the plan; Ira and the other mages workshopped our anti-magic strategy ages ago.

“Even the almighty mage squad is nothing in the face of our bombs,” said Leonard, his lips contorting into a smile.

“Super effective,” said Pirna over the communicator. “Massive casualties and damage at the point of contact, mages included.”

“Excellent. Do another run,” I told her. “First priority goes to any stragglers among the mages.”

“Roger that.”

The enemy had lost their trump card; their morale would plummet.

“What’s the next move?” said Leonard. “Do we break the gate?”

“Come now,” I said. “We still have the bombs Kousuke left us with. Reports say he’s restocked on weapons and munitions, and he’ll be arriving within the day. There’s no reason to risk losing any of our soldiers. We’ll wear the enemy down little by little, tightening a silken noose around their necks.”

“I think this is a little...*explosive* for silk,” said Zamil.

“Maybe an iron cord,” suggested Leonard. “Some sort of iron cord with barbs all over it. Personally, I’d rather break down their gate and charge in.”

I shook my head. “No. I know there’s little chance of you falling in battle, Leonard, but the regular troops aren’t you.”

“Unfortunate,” Leonard replied with disappointment and gently caressed the handles of his twin swords.

Ever since Kousuke made them mithril weapons, both Leonard and Zamil were itching to join the fight. I understood the feeling, but it wasn't worth it if it led to our soldiers dying senselessly.

Regardless, this was the harpies' time in the spotlight. There was simply nothing the rest of us needed to do while their bombs tore the enemy apart. We ran the risk of getting caught in the blasts if we lingered anywhere near the defensive wall. That's why I ordered the creation of a battering ram. If the enemy surrendered, we'd have no need of it, but if they didn't, then we'd eventually need to break down the gate.

The fierce explosions continued for a long time, but finally subsided as our supply of bombs ran out. I couldn't help but think that, if Kousuke were with us, he could probably turn Arichburg into a mountain of scrap.

Pirna took stock of what damage had been done and reported to us over the golem communicator.

"We annihilated the majority of enemy soldiers in the air raids. There do appear to be a number of them who retreated from the wall and into nearby civilian buildings, though. The barracks are destroyed, but we avoided bombing their storage facilities; there could be some soldiers hiding there as well."

"Got it. Return to base and relax those wings of yours," I told her, but she declined.

"We'll stay up in the air and continue monitoring the situation."

"Don't overdo it," I said.

"Roger that."

As I disconnected, I raised my face to find Leonard baring his fangs in a ferocious smile. The man's appetite for battle was a sickness.

"There you have it," I said to him. "You'll be battling in the streets, so watch out for ambushes. I'll be going as well."

"Princess."

"It'd be better if I were a decoy, would it not? I'll just take my soldiers to the lord's manor and call for the enemy's surrender. Fear not."

“I think that’s too dangerous,” he said.

“It’s a necessary risk.”

It wasn’t my style to sit safely in the back giving out orders. House Merinard already made the grave error of losing this nation once. If I didn’t go to battle myself, then neither the soldiers nor the citizens would ever look to me as their leader.

And this was all I could do, anyway.

Soon the construction of the battering ram wrapped up and the gate fell. Leonard and Zamil happily began their assault, and Danan and I made our way down the main street with a small, skilled squad of heavy and light infantry.

There was no sign of anyone at all. Either the citizens were holed up in their homes or they’d long since evacuated the town. Word that we were headed north would’ve spread to Arichburg ages ago, after all.

I squinted at our destination up ahead. “Unsurprisingly, there appears to be a defensive line at the manor.”

“What will you do?” Danan said, his gaze settling on me.

The answer was obvious. “We push through!”

“Danan started to object, but I was already calling on the powers of the spirits to enfold myself in wind. I dashed forward and burst through while the enemy soldiers who were spread out in front of the manor loosed a volley at me.

There were shouts of confusion among our infantrymen.

“It’s magic!” Danan called to them. “Set your spears! Stand firm!”

All the arrows directed at me were blown away by the gale that swirled around me. The enemy commander wasn’t too shabby—quick on the uptake, and just as fast to devise a plan and bring his own men up to speed.



As I sprinted across the battlefield, I delivered an order to the wind spirits to peel away from me and strike the enemy with gust after gust. Huge swaths of them were blown away. Just like that, the wall of spears was no more.

“C’mon!” Danan rallied the troops and set them pelting after me.

I leapt through the hole in their line and pulled Pale Moon from its sheath, swiping mercilessly all around me. The white-blue blade bit clean through the Holy Kingdom’s soldiers’ armor, sending severed limbs arcing through the air and leaving trails of blood in their wake. In the blink of an eye, the battlefield was rendered a sea of gore.

“Those ears, that dark skin... It’s the cursed witch!” said one of the enemy soldiers. The next moment, Pale Moon sent his head flying.

While the enemy scrambled to trade their spears for their swords, I cut through the throng and unsheathed my kukri knife with my free hand. I hurled it straight through to the rear of their formation. It spun through the air and pierced the commanding officer’s face. His body dropped like he’d been sucker-punched.

“Lord Mizel?!” The knight who stood next to the commander turned to me and bellowed. “Damn you!”

He turned bright red and charged at me, so I drew the revolver at my hip and leveled it square at him.

Pow, pow, pow! Thunderous noise filled the air, and the knight hurtled backward. His armor was riddled with holes, and his time among the living was done.

I felt the remaining soldiers’ morale shatter.

I raised my voice and addressed them. “Lay down your weapons and surrender, and you shall live.”

The soldiers surrounding me all glanced at one another. Once they noticed Danan bearing down on them with his aura blaring violence, the men hurriedly tossed their weapons down.

Arichburg fell soon after. Kousuke and the others arrived just in time to see

the Kingdom of Merinard's flag raised high above the gates.

When we arrived in Arichburg, the Liberation Army soldiers guarding the gates stopped us before we could enter.

"Nicely done," I said, pointing to the flag flapping above us.

"We've already been informed of your arrival," one of them said. "Please head straight down the main street. The enemy soldiers have already surrendered, but we have yet to completely take over the town, so be careful."

"Understood."

Cuvi exchanged words with the guards before driving the carriage forward.

"This place is pretty big, huh?" I said.

"Arichburg used to be the seat of the margrave of Merinard's southern reach," Ira said. "That role stayed the same when the Holy Kingdom took over, so the town continued to develop. In other words, it's one of the few actual cities in Merinard."

"I see... Governing this place is going to be tough, then."

I didn't know what the population was, but it was certainly more than two or three thousand people. We were looking at five digits worth of folks, bare minimum.

"Exactly," Ira confirmed. "I doubt Melty'll be getting much sleep."

"Normally that'd be grounds for concern," I said. "But I can see her just smiling and getting the job done without issue."

"Yeah, same." Ira smirked.

The carriage got moving again as we chatted, and we left behind the front gate and its overwhelming stench of blood and gore. Even from the outside, you could tell the upper levels of the wall took a beating during the battle. It was pretty obvious what happened to the soldiers stationed there when it was bombed all to hell. All that remained of them was a foul-smelling haze hanging over the entrance.

Desperate to put that morbid thought behind me, I gazed out the window of the carriage and remarked out loud how empty the place looked.

“Remember,” Ira said, “this was a battlefield just recently.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

If I lived here, I certainly wouldn’t leave my house until things cooled down. Who knew what agitated soldiers might do. Sylphy said she was very strict with our troops, but there was no such thing as perfect. And it wasn’t like the people who lived here knew that she was on the case.

Our carriage ride continued for a while longer, until we eventually arrived in front of a large manor. There must’ve been combat there as well, because I could just barely make out the scent of blood in the air.

A lookout led our carriage through the gates of the manor, and we found ourselves on its broad grounds. There were even some pretty pricey-looking carriages parked there too.

After stopping the carriage in the paved space in front of the green, I disembarked the vehicle and lent a hand to Ira. Due to her height, getting off carriages is a little difficult for her. A voice rang out from a second-story window.

“Kousuke!”

“Sylphy!”

She waved us down as she approached. She looked...uninjured. Thank goodness.

I ran up to her and tried to embrace her, but—

“...Why’d you dodge me?”

“Well, um, I kind of smell like blood,” she said. “I did a quick wash, but I’ve still got the scent on me.”

“Blood?! Are you hurt?! ”

“No, no. None of it is mine.”

“I should’ve known.”

I honestly couldn't even imagine her getting injured in battle. The Sylphy in my head was touchably powerful, at least in terms of fighting prowess. Other than that? Well, I've told you plenty that I shouldn't have already.

"And are you well, Kousuke?" she asked.

"Yup! No injuries, no illnesses."

Ira's found her way to my side. She posed victoriously, her chest puffed out. "I took care of him. I'm Kousuke's big sister."

I couldn't help but make an involuntary noise in response to that proclamation. Sylphy eyed us suspiciously.

"Big sister?" Sylphy asked.

Ira leaned into her ear and began to whisper.

Oh man, please don't talk about this here! Civi can definitely hear you even if you whisper! See?! He's grinning and everything!

"Oh ho, I didn't know Kousuke was into that sort of thing." Sylphy grinned deviously and turned to me.

I stuttered out a weak denial. "No, no, no. Er, uh, you must be tired from your battles, right? I'll dote on you plenty tonight."

"Y-you fool!" Sylphy shushed me. "Keep your voice down!"

"Hey, I'll do whatever I have to do to take control of the situation."

"Have you forgotten that you're outnumbered and outclassed in this arena?"

"Crap, you're right!"

Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies were all in the city. Plus, the harpies were naturally gifted at doting... This was bad! At this rate, nobody was going to respect me anymore! Forget little brother and big sister roleplaying, at this rate, I was gonna get cornered into some straight-up adult baby scenes!

I tried another tactic. "L-let's all just calm down. We can talk about this at night when we're all thinking straight again. Aren't there other things we should prioritize right now?"

"True enough," said Sylphy.

Phew.

Cuvi and our bodyguards asked one of the nearby soldiers for Danan's location and then headed off to meet him and discuss housing for the night. I steered the conversation back to business.

"What's the current situation here?"

"We're pretty much done taking things over," Sylphy said. "There's still a chance that enemy soldiers are hiding within the city, so we're just calling for folks to surrender individually."

Sylphy and the rest had already spread the message citywide that if any soldiers surrendered before noon tomorrow, they'd be set free, provided they lay down arms. If they didn't, it'd be taken as an act of hostility, and they'd be treated as enemy combatants. They also made it known that any civilians hiding soldiers would be handled similarly.

"There's a chance some citizens might be housing enemy soldiers against their will, so we need to handle that on a case by case basis," she said.

"This all sounds like a real pain."

"It is," she admitted. "But if we can make it through this, then we won't have to worry about any wide-scale battles for a little while. We'll be able to pour our efforts into suppressing the south."

Sylphy had left her miscellaneous work to her underlings, so just then she was simply on guard at the lord's manor.

"Both Danan and Melty told me leaders at the top of the hierarchy don't bother themselves with detail work, so here I am, doing nothing much at all."

"Is that really how it works?"

"For the most part," Ira interjected, nodding.

Should she have been thinking about how to handle the Holy Kingdom people, or what to do with the prisoners? I supposed the others were laying the groundwork so that she could eventually make those decisions.

"Well, what should I do?" I asked. "Get to it with repairing the defensive wall?"

"No, that can wait until we've completely secured Arichburg. If the enemy were to take advantage of an opening while you were working and something happened to you, I don't..." Sylphy trailed off. "Yeah. No. The wall's damage isn't so bad that it'd be a deciding factor in a battle."

"I guess you're right. Then I guess I'll go unload the goods I brought with me."

"That sounds like a wise idea."

Sylphy and I decided to head towards the warehouse district. Ira parted ways with us since she wanted to check in on the mage squad.

"They've got a helluva lot in here," I said, once I saw the storage warehouses.

"They likely knew that a siege was on the table."

The warehouses in the district were filled with battle rations, bows and arrows, armor, weapons, and all kinds of pharmaceutical supplies. Sylphy was probably right.

"Does that mean there might be reinforcements coming?" I asked.

Normally, an armed force shut themselves in because they planned to hold out until reinforcements arrived. Stall through the enemy attack, and when your allies came, catch the enemy by surprise with a counterattack. That was how it worked. Otherwise, shutting yourself in simply meant you lost your only escape route and died of starvation. Oh, but since winter was coming soon, maybe they thought they'd let the cold bite at us until we retreated? Or even just planned to wait until our supplies ran short.

"Danan and Melty told me they thought it'd be difficult for the enemy to send reinforcements anytime soon," Sylphy said. "I wonder, though."

Considering the damage that the Liberation Army had done to the Holy Kingdom, the supplies we took from their army and all that, then within the Kingdom of Merinard we were facing an enemy force that had been at least halved.

If they launched a counterattack on the Liberation Army, they'd either need massive reinforcements from the homeland, or they'd need the citizens in Merinard to volunteer in droves. Neither was possible within a short span, and

the latter would cause huge economic damage to the Holy Kingdom. In other words, not likely.

“Doesn’t help that the casualty rate for the enemy is absurdly high,” I pointed out.

The kill ratio between the two forces leaned heavily in our favor at the moment, especially thanks to the harpies and their aerial bombs. I was told we took some losses in this last battle, but it was still just a hundredth or so of the number the Holy Kingdom lost.

Sylphy agreed. “And enemy morale seems extremely low,” she added.

The survivors from the fortress battles had spread word of the Liberation Army’s deeds. The Holy Kingdom’s rank and file feared us quite a bit now. Stories about the harpies and their rain of death had spread far and wide.

“Air raids are pretty terrifying,” said Sylphy.

“...I’ll bet.”

I definitely wouldn’t want to be in the harpies’ crosshairs. Even Sylphy couldn’t survive a bombing run by them... *Or could she?* I pictured her zipping around at incredible speeds, weaving between blasts.

Soldiers who’d been surveying the district area led us to a large, unused warehouse in the corner of the district. It was just about empty—a perfect place for me to unload my inventory.

“Just the food, right?” I asked Sylphy. “What should I do about the bombs and crossbows?”

“For those, it’d probably be best if we prepare a space and have you make a special warehouse. We’ll have to guard it properly to make sure nothing is stolen or sabotaged.”

“Oh, right. The military facilities got bombed to hell and back, didn’t they? Should I destroy what’s left and make it there?”

“That might be a good idea,” she agreed.

It’d be safest to just keep the bombs in my inventory, but then the harpies couldn’t use them without me around. At the end of the day, it was most useful

to put munitions and the like in a set location on military grounds.

“Looks like I’m going to be busy starting tomorrow.”

“Repairing the damage to the wall, rebuilding damaged facilities, and potentially even land rezoning in the city,” Sylphy said.

“For real?”

Sylphy explained that Arichburg was a city with a long history, and it was expanded time after time after time. That meant there were probably illogical road placements, buildings that closed off roads, and all sorts of weird things going on in its design. For me, none of that was an issue. I could just put all the goods in my inventory, destroy the buildings, then rebuild them somewhere else, exactly as they were. No problemo. At worst, it’d take less than thirty minutes per house. If I wasn’t concerned about the design of the house, I’d finish even sooner.

“Just tell Melty not to ask the impossible of me? I don’t want to die from overwork.”

“I’ll try my best,” she said.

The fact that she didn’t say something more definitive spoke to how the power relationship between them worked. Melty was seriously like the puppet master behind the Liberation Army... I didn’t know how physically strong she was, but she had to be one tough cookie regardless.

And yet, Sylphy was technically the most powerful person in this organization, wasn’t she? Was any of this really how an army was supposed to work...?

Sylphy must have noticed what my face was doing while I mulled that over. She offered me a pained smile. “If Melty says it’s necessary, then it’s necessary. I know this is a lot to ask of you Kousuke, but I do appreciate it.”

I smiled back, totally unpained. “Then I’m gonna need you to make it up to me,” I said. “Tonight, in fact.”

“Heehee, I wonder if you’ll get what you need? Either way, first I want a bath.”

“Isn’t there one in the manor?”

“Nope.”

“Then it’s time I build one of my portable living spaces in that ridiculously huge yard.”

“I like the sound of that.”

I handed over the records for the materials I brought with me to the Liberation Army soldiers and headed back to the manor with Sylphy so we could relax.

Chapter 3: Caught by That Fox Bastard

IRA AND THE HARPIES were considerate enough to let Sylphy and me spend the night alone together, and the next morning I began work in earnest. After every day, Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies took care of me during the night, so every morning I woke up nice and energized...

Okay, actually, I woke up feeling like something's been drained from me, but I'm still full of energy!

The residents were already evacuated, so I tore down houses, moved them, rezoned areas, strengthened the defensive wall, and made the already-large moat even larger. I even ground grain with a stone mortar.

But I'm still full of energy!

"You look like a zombie."

After I finally finished my myriad of tasks over the last few days, I'd been given a full day off. My company, more specifically my bodyguard, was Cushi. Normally that'd be Sir Leonard or Madame Zamil's job, but the two of them were leading their own squads to the south of Arichburg to take down enemy stragglers.

"You try working the mill for an entire day. Then let's see how you feel."

"I'll pass."

The work of taking over Arichburg was mostly finished, but there still might be soldiers in hiding, not to mention spies. Hence, I had a bodyguard on my day off in the city.

Honestly, I would rather go around with Sylphy or Ira, but both of them were busy.

"So, where to?" Cushi asked. "I doubt you wanna go shopping."

"Well, let's see..."

What with my skills, I can pretty much make anything I want. Even so, buying rare materials wasn't out of the question. When it came to magically enhanced materials, they were prepared for me in the rear guard. I never had the chance to go and see the process for myself, and while I was making the resupply base, I couldn't get my hands on any. I'd also never come into contact with any merchants who dealt in the stuff either...

"Wanna head to a brothel?" Cuví suggested.

"I'm not uninterested, but there'd be hell to pay if the girls found out."

"Ah, right..."

I didn't have the energy left to get horny at a brothel, considering my night life. And I got the feeling that getting in the habit of visiting that kind of place would have a bad impact on my future days off. My girls weren't exactly normal, you know? They would probably pick up on the faintest whiff of any funny business. And although I was interested in the idea, it was mostly out of curiosity. Sylphy and the others were taking care of me just fine.

"Then what about a pub?"

"My own drinks and snacks are good enough, and I don't want to go to a place with cute girls for the same reason I don't want to go to a brothel, so."

"That checks out." Cuví said. "Well, then how about we put some cash on the line?"

"Gambling? What sort of games are we talking about?"

"Well..."

According to Cuví's explanation, they had something resembling Japanese dice in this world, and people played it in bars at tables and such.

"I see. I guess people play with dice no matter where you go."

"So, you wanna check it out?"

"Nah, I'm good," I said. "I'd just get my newbie ass whooped."

At its core, gambling is designed so that the house can make money, although even in a place like that, there are folks who can consistently make bank playing

the odds. If I went waltzing in, though, I'd be screwed. I'd end up betting the pants right off my ass.

"Smart move."

"Now that I think about it," I said, "there really isn't much for me to do on a day off."

"Well, how do you usually spend time off?" Cuv asked.

"Developing new tools and stuff."

He scoffed. "You call that a day off?"

"It's pretty fun designing and making new things, you know?"

Regardless of whether the Liberation Army ended up using any of it or not, I'd made mega-powerful weapons and all sorts of stuff. Never knew when some new thing I'd tinkered together might come in handy.

"Okay, you've got a rare break on your hands today! If you're not gonna drink, gamble, or go to a brothel, then what the heck are you gonna do?"

"Wander around the city...?"

"Let me repeat myself: you call that a day off?"

And yet, while we chatted away, we ended up doing just that: wandering around the city. Over a week had passed since Sylphy and the army took over Arichburg. Things had generally started to settle down for the residents, and they were going about their new daily lives. For the ones who'd kept demi-humans as slaves, though, this whole thing was probably deeply uncomfortable.

The demi-humans, who were once slaves and treated like liveestock, were at last being treated like people. More than that, they were under the protection of the Liberation Army.

Because they'd lived as slaves for so long, none of them had any wealth to speak of. Without us, it'd be tough out there for them. We couldn't just free them and go, "You're free now! Good luck!" So, for now, we kept them fed and supported them until they were able to stand on their own two feet.

At the same time, we had to deal with the people who'd profited by forcing

the demi-humans into inhumane working conditions. We've seized their profits and funds. I wasn't really sure what the standards were for that kind of thing, but assumed it was going well, considering every day I saw Melty head into town with a massive smile on her face. I figured, well, what goes around comes around.

Or, in this case, they fucked around for twenty years, and now they were finally finding out.

"Melty's really been making some big moves in the city. Is she gonna be okay?" I asked Cushi.

"Oh, well... I think at the end of the day she'll do fine. She's strong, and the humans aren't idiots."

He went on a bit and told me about how there were several former Holy Kingdom merchants who stepped up to cooperate with Melty. Guess those guys read the writing on the wall. And, on the upside, it wasn't like everyone who was a part of the Holy Kingdom oppressed or harmed demi-humans.

"It takes all kinds, right?" He went on. "There are folks who deeply believe in the Holy Kingdom, folks who don't, folks who oppress people like me, and folks who don't."

"Yeah, I get that."

The people who enslaved a lot of demi-humans fell into two extremes, he told me. There were those who brutally exploited them to feed their own greed, and then those who saw them as a valuable labor pool and at least kept their working conditions decent.

The former had to be crushed, whereas the latter got preferential treatment, and the demi-humans they'd kept as slaves had the choice to come back as full employees.

"Isn't there a limit?" I asked him.

Cushi shrugged. "We're basically taking all the rights and power that their former businesses had and using that to placate these guys. We've gotta turn a profit too, so we gotta use the people we have available to us."

“I guess I get it. Then what happens to the folks we crush?”

“After we take all their wealth, they’re typically thrown out north of Arichburg.”

“Rough.”

“Better than getting executed.”

“True enough.”

I often forgot that in this world, the rule of law was far from universal. In fact, I doubted whether any of the people in lands under the Liberation Army even knew what law was. Wouldn’t be surprised if they’d ask if it was something you could eat.

Sylphy and the Liberation Army took Arichburg by force. If they wanted to, they could physically eliminate the bigots and the church of Adol, given their position... And when I considered that, maybe the current alternative wasn’t so bad.

Cuvi and I entered the business district and I spotted some stores actively trying to sell their goods, while others were completely shuttered. I figured the difference between the two was a product of Melty’s work.

“Think things are gonna be okay?” I asked Cuvi.

“How so?”

“You know, going forward?”

I certainly didn’t know jack about governing a country. All I could do was make things to ensure that people didn’t starve, that they had a place to live safely, and provide them with a way to combat outside threats.

Cuvi didn’t seem to know much more than me, though. “You should talk to the princess and Melty about that. I’m the wrong guy.”

“I know.”

The two of us meatheads were maybe the worst people to try and talk this through. I’d ask Sylphy and Ira about it when we saw each other at night.

“Oh, by the way,” Cuvi turned to me. “I’ve been curious. How much do you

have in your inventory, exactly?"

"Hm, quite a bit."

I'd be lying if I said I was keeping perfect track of just how much stuff I was carrying with me. Timber, stone, metals, clay, leather, and tendon as far as natural materials went. I also had alloys, weapons, munitions, tools, clothes, food, feathers from the harpies...

"Since you've got free time on your hands, how about doing a little organizing? I'm curious about what sort of weird stuff you've got in there."

"You know what, that's not a terrible idea. It's something I can only do when I have the time, too. The only problem is that I need space for this stuff to go while I'm sorting it."

"What about that open spot near the western wall? The vacant space that got made the day before yesterday."

"Oh, yeah, that'd work."

The place he was talking about used to be occupied by a battered little shack in a district that had become a slum. I cleared it out so I could install some new facilities there. The folks who lived in the slums were given other places to live, so clearing the land hadn't been much of a struggle.

A short walk from the business district, we came upon the wide open clearing.

"I guess I'll just dump it all out," I said. Cushi backed way off from me.

"I'm gonna give you some space."

"Good plan."

It'd probably be bad if he got crushed under a log or something.

And so, without sound or fanfare, I unloaded my inventory into the open space: timber, stone, clay, metals. That was the better part of it. In particular, I had a whole lot of timber thanks to my recent adventure in the woods.

"That inventory of yours really is ridiculous," Cushi said.

"Yeah, I know." *Seriously, how much is in there?*

After dumping that stuff, next up came the fibers, bent branches, tempered

metals, steel springs, glass, mechanical odds and ends, leathers, powerful tendon, gunpowder... The middle-ground materials.

“This here, this is the stuff I have no clue about.”

I shrugged. “These are all pretty much all materials I’ve modified to some degree or another. With a bit more modification, I can use them to make something. But right now, none of this is particularly useful as is.”

The next batch of things were various blocks for development. I hadn’t actually ever taken this stuff out of my inventory as proper items.

“What the heck?”

“Blocks for building stuff. They’re all one meter across, a meter tall, and a meter deep.”

“Whoa. Like big dice.”

The blocks did sort of tumble like dice when they materialized outside of my inventory. But now that I could eyeball them, I thought they looked a bit like those toy blocks that everyone hates to step on.

“The food and stuff could go bad if I plop them out...”

“Yeah, let’s pass on that.”

In which case, up next came the weapons.

Lots of stuff had just been sitting around since I made it. There were blades of all kinds, bows and arrows, various guns and munitions, different types of bombs, cannons, cannonballs, crossbows, ballistae, and even a stone catapult. Cuví seemed duly impressed.

“You could do all kinds of violence with this stuff. Though there’s a lot I haven’t seen before, so I’m not sure how exactly.”

“Not every weapon I’ve got is particularly useful on the battlefield,” I said.

Especially in terms of cost. Guns that required gunpowder were outrageously expensive. If we had to use powder, it was way more cost-effective to just make bombs.

Hmm... It was a bit weird talking about cost effectiveness for something that

took human lives. But, anyway.

The rest of the stuff in my inventory were household appliances, daily life goods, clothes, and tools.

“Yo, what’s up with the pickaxe, shovel, axe...?”

“All mithril, my friend.”

“Are you serious? That’s blowing my mind.”

And with that, most of what was in my inventory was out. A chunk of the empty lot was just pure chaos. All that was left in the inventory were food and harpy’ feathers.

“Is this everything?” Cuví asked.

“More or less.”

“Gotcha... This is nuts.”

“I used to have a whole lot more,” I admitted.

In fact, I’d already used a ton of materials in Arichburg doing repairs and that sort of thing. And most of the food and munitions for the Liberation Army were stored away in the warehouse.

“So, the basic idea is you can’t do anything without raw materials, huh?”

“Yeah, generally speaking,” I said. “I can’t create something out of nothing.”

Folks in the Liberation Army had gotten the wrong idea about that recently. I couldn’t just magic up whatever they needed.

“I remember you saying something like that before,” Cuví said. He must have come up behind me, because he put a hand on my shoulder.

And then, when I turned around, he punched me.

“Gah?!”

His fist landed square on my jaw, and my vision blurred. Something wrapped around my neck and started to choke me. I scrabbled to claw at the foreign object, but my nails just slipped uselessly through his fur.

“Wh—?!”

"My bad, pal. But relax, I ain't gonna kill you."

My vision began fading. Probably because of the pressure on my carotid artery. I felt my consciousness fading... *Dammit...*

And then everything cut to black.

POV: SYLPHY

“W~~H~~ERE IS HE...?”

I tightened my fist atop the table to the point of pain, until a hand gently settled over my own and squeezed.

“Please, keep calm.”

Ira gazed quietly at me. She was right. I had to stay calm or else we might miss something. I took a deep breath.

Things began just before noon. I received a strange report from HQ.

There's a great deal of...raw material in the vacant space to the west. What would you like us to do with it?

It was this huge, disorganized pile of building materials, weapons, munitions, and all sorts of other strange things. Whoever came across it all immediately thought of Kousuke.

We'd treated his role in our operations like a secret, but ever since the gizma battle, Kousuke had stood out. Pretty much everybody among the original members of the Liberation Army

knew about his abilities. Along with his relationships with me, Ira, and the harpies, his abilities were something of an open secret. It'd be way too late to put out a gag order on the info, so I just let it be.

Anyway, we successfully retrieved the goods before the locals could take it all. Unfortunately, this meant we ended up using warehouses and empty houses we weren't planning on utilizing.

The problem was the origin of these goods. Among the plethora of items were a pickaxe, shovel, and axe, all made from mithril. It was clear to all that these were Kousuke's. There were also a host of weapons that neither Ira nor I had ever seen before. I could only suppose that they were prototypes Kousuke

had made and then stored away for one reason or another.

"I think this is the machine gun Kousuke told us about," Ira said, as she inspected one of the mysterious weapons.

It was true that Kousuke once spoke a little of something called a machine gun—a powerful weapon capable of firing bullets at incredible speed. Since it consumed so much ammunition so quickly, he'd deemed it unsuitable for our present purposes.

There were similar weapons that were much larger, objects shaped like guns without barrels, weapons with inflated ends, and weapons that we had no idea how to use, nor any idea how powerful they were. Honestly, the fact that he'd made and hid all of these weapons without telling anyone hammered home just how tough a personality he had, despite his lackadaisical attitude.

Whatever else had happened, it was clear that Kousuke had emptied out his inventory in the western plot, and then vanished into thin air.

The first thing that leapt to my mind was the possibility that he'd finished his task in this world and returned to his old world. Arichburg was occupied, and thanks to Kousuke, we'd acquired a massive number of gems—the materials for spirit gems. With these things accomplished, the elf village was basically secure.

Kousuke appeared in this world when the elf village of the Black Forest was in peril. Whatever spirit or great being summoned Kousuke here might've decided that the danger had been vanquished and returned him to his home. Perhaps everything he'd been holding onto had been left here upon his departure?

But Ira immediately rejected that line of thinking.

"That wouldn't explain why these things in particular were left behind. Kousuke should've been carrying a large amount of fresh food and pre-made meals in his inventory. It's weird that none of that is anywhere to be found."

She made sense. If everything in his inventory had been spat out, the missing food was a real question mark. The harpy feathers that he treasured so much were nowhere to be found either.

"This all feels intentional. And I haven't seen *that other guy* anywhere."

Indeed—the man assigned to Kousuke as his bodyguard, Cuvi, vanished alongside him.

Arichburg was as good as ours at this point. We were still on alert just to be careful, but it was fair to say that everything within the city walls was perfectly safe. We had our people keeping watch and staying in contact, and the economy had started back up again. Even so, it'd felt like a bad idea to have him walk around alone, so I assigned Cuvi to bodyguard duty.

Truth be told, even if he were alone, it would be difficult to harm Kousuke, but he's an important person regardless. The fact that Cuvi was also missing was rather odd.

"Did someone kidnap Cuvi as well?" I wondered out loud.

After a moment, Danan shook his head sternly. "I doubt it. He's extremely sensitive to danger. Even more so than a talented scout."

"Then is he off somewhere looking for Kousuke?" Ira asked.

"Without contacting anyone?" I didn't think so. "He's too smart to make a mistake like that. He would get in touch immediately."

Then Ira said something absolutely crazy.

"Then Cuvi must be the culprit."

"Cuvi? Kidnapped Kousuke? That's not possible," I said. "What purpose would that serve him?"

"It would mean that Cuvi was an enemy masquerading as our ally," Ira said, folding her arms in thought and closing her eye.

It was all well and good that Ira was practically a genius, but sometimes she jumped to wild conclusions. But the thing was, even when she jumped, she was usually right.

"Cuvi's been with us since we started our rebellion three years ago, yes?" Ira said. Danan answered her.

"...Correct. To be more accurate, he was already with us during our preparations, before the rebellion even began."

“And after that initial rebellion, together we overcame the struggle at the Great Omitt Badlands,” I added. “You’re thinking he did all that, bided his time during the Black Forest, and then betrayed us now... Do you really think that’s possible?”

Three years, and not years spent lightly. Three hard-fought years, he stood together with us and overcame trial after trial.

It was true that he was a hard man to grasp, but he was also loved by the children. He could talk to anyone comfortably, and he was the type to solve a problem before anyone even noticed it was there. There was much I and others didn’t know about him, but the same could be said for many of the others who made it through our struggles at the Omitt Badlands.

That’s why I never even considered him as a potential enemy.

“We couldn’t locate any carriages...”

“Got it... Continue with the search, but don’t go too deep into the north. I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“...Understood.”

Pirna’s voice was cut off from the communication.

“We’ve confirmed that a carriage left through the western gate and headed north...” I traced the route out of the city with my finger.

“This is too strange...” Danan muttered, looking at the map spread out before us. “There’s no way a carriage can outpace a harpy.”

We were continuing our search, running on the assumption that Cuvi had betrayed us. There was no telling how or why Kousuke’s inventory was emptied, but if Cuvi was our enemy, we could assume he meant to weaken Kousuke. Without his inventory, he was just a normal man who could move kind of creepily.

As for why Cuvi would betray us... The human team that Cuvi put together also went missing. They’d used a falsified order to exit Arichburg by carriage, claiming they were meeting up with Leonard’s squad in the southwest.

According to the soldier who checked the carriage, Cuví was on board. Kousuke wasn't there, but they did have a box of "military goods" with them. When it comes to the Liberation Army, Cuví was undoubtedly a standout fighter, but he didn't hold any special position. The soldier who inspected the carriage thought nothing of his presence.

Of course, they wouldn't. Cuví's men were also proper members of the Liberation Army, and there was nothing wrong with the falsified order. The paper itself was official, and it even had a proper seal. He took total advantage of our lack of internal security.

The problem was that neither myself, Danan, nor Melty recalled ever writing the order. Sealing them was my job, but I never approved this one, and I kept the seal on me at all times.

Upon closer inspection, the seal had shown slight differences, but if you weren't looking for them specifically, they were unnoticeable.

Cuví would have also known that the soldiers monitoring the people and carriages coming and going hadn't had proper training as guards. That was just the reality of our current situation. This will certainly prove an instructive lapse for us going forward. But we'd get to that when we got to it.

Pirna's voice came through loud and clear over the comms.

"We've located the carriage! They're in the southwest forest!"

Both Danan and I leaned forward eagerly, but Ira simply narrowed her large eye.

"They're going through the forest?" she asked.

"No," Pirna reported. "They've stopped. The horses are still hitched to the carriage."

"Have the closest squad move in and continue monitoring the situation. Don't get too close," I told her. "The enemy could be equipped with crossbows and rifles."

"Roger that."

And with that, the communication cut out again.

“What do you think?” I asked Ira.

“As to why they’ve stopped? I think it’s unlikely their plan is to abandon the carriage and somehow make their way through the woods undetected until they meet up with forces from the Holy Kingdom.”

“Yeah...”

Even in the forest, evading the eyes of the harpies was no easy task. If Cuví were alone, it might have been doable, but there was no way a squad of ten could manage that. It would have made more sense for them to really push the horses and try to meet up with the Holy Kingdom to the north.

“Teleportation magic, probably.”

I turned to Ira. “Excuse me?”

“I’ll bet the carriage is empty,” she said, nodding to herself. “It’s possible to transport multiple humans over long distances. One mage can transport as many as ten people—and even more than that with the right gems to boost the spell. It’s also possible they used an artifact from the Age of Gods.”

“You really think that’s what happened?” I asked her.

“Considering how important Kousuke is, it’s certainly not out of the question. Think about it,” she said. “Thanks to Kousuke, a mere three hundred demi-humans fought this far. Us standing here in Arichburg is proof of his importance. The Holy Kingdom has been at war with the Empire for quite some time. They want an edge.”

The question of how Cuví found himself with that kind of object remained... Silence overtook us. A call over the golem comms broke the quiet. Prina’s voice crackled through.

“Report! The carriage is empty!”

“...I see.” Ira was right about that much, at least. “Search the area,” I ordered. “Just be careful, you’re near Holy Kingdom territory.”

“Understood.”

The harpies found no sign that Cuví and his men escaped on foot. It was as if they just up and disappeared, which was probably exactly what happened.

“Kousuke...”

“Don’t worry,” Ira said. “They won’t just kill him. They wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of kidnapping him like this otherwise.”

“That may be true, but...” *Even if that’s the case, how can you be so calm?* I almost said it to her out loud, but I fell silent once I caught a glimpse of the baleful light in her eye.

“I’ll find him,” she said. “No matter what. And I’ll make them pay for this.”

“Y-yeah... There should be something I can do too.”

“I’ll need your help. You have the greatest connection to Kousuke.”

“All right. I’ll do anything you need.” Ira immediately turned her head and set her dark gaze on me. It was really intense.

“You said *anything*.”

“Um, uh...yes?”

I immediately regretted not considering my words more carefully. What was she going to have me do?

Hey, everyone. Kousuke again, the Liberation Army’s conscience.

Okay, maybe describing myself like that was a bit of a stretch, considering all the weapons of mass death I created, and the fact that I was probably the reason everything had gone to hell. By the Holy Kingdom’s reckoning, I was a walking natural disaster.

But anyway, I’m sure you’re wondering what sort of position I’d wound up in.

My current position was on the floor of a carriage that could really use a suspension system.

My hands were tied behind my back, I was blindfolded, and I was gagged. I couldn’t tell where we were going or do much of anything from my spot on the floor. It was narrow, too. Was I in a box?

Every time the carriage bounced, it was like the floor was punching me. It seriously hurt like crazy. Was this some new variety of torture? It was really making me appreciate what a decent cushion the human butt was. You know, when you're allowed to sit on it.

And how did I get myself in this situation, again? Well, all I remembered was Cushi clocking me and choking me out. When I came to, I was like this.

I could just barely make out his voice. I really was in a box.

“We’ll be arriving shortly. Just leave him until then.”

That voice was Cushi for sure.

You bastard, just you wait. I’m gonna find a way to kill the hell out of you.

I wasn’t a total idiot. I didn’t know the reasoning behind Cushi’s actions, but I could guess what sort of situation I was in. It looked likely that Cushi had betrayed us all. I didn’t know why he’d pick now to do this, when we’d just taken Arichburg, but I could certainly guess who he was selling me off to: the Holy Kingdom. There were no other options.

I did the only thing I could: yelled through the gag in my mouth and banged around inside my box.

“Grrrmmm!”

One of the voices gave me a bad review: “No clue what he’s saying, but he seems mad. Scary, scary.”

I was trying to describe how I planned to kill them all, but the gag muffled it into nasty, unintelligible sounds.

It was stupid to waste precious energy flailing around, so I shut up and braced myself for the bumps. No need to provoke Cushi. I had to obey my survival instincts and use this time to think of a way out.

As far as my blindfold was concerned, I rendered it moot by stuffing it into my inventory. If I could see something, then I could bring up my menu and put it away. I could probably even do that to the box I was in.

The only problem was that my hands were tied behind my back, so I couldn’t see whatever was restraining me. My legs also seemed to be tied up, but at

least they were visible, so I could stuff that rope into my inventory too.

The carriage stopped for a moment, and then the bumps seemed to change. The ride got a lot smoother—very small bumps that were easy to ignore. Were we running on a stone road?

From then on, the carriage stayed on this new road, occasionally stopping only to start up again soon after. I had a bad feeling about all of this. Were there any cities near Arichburg with sprawling stone roadways?

I couldn't tell how fast we were moving, but it'd been a while since we switched roads. Long enough to have covered the entire distance from one end of Arichburg to the other. And yet there we were, still rolling along.

Somewhere not Arichburg, where the Holy Kingdom was still in charge. There was only one city I knew of that fit those criteria and was large enough: the capital city of the Kingdom of Merinard, Merinisburg.

But there was no way we'd been traveling long enough to get there. It should take about a week from Arichburg to Merinisburg. I didn't know how long I was unconscious for, but I highly doubted it was that long.

Which begged the question: How did this carriage travel all that distance? Although...now that I thought about it, the carriage was already pretty strange. All of the Liberation Army's carriages were modified to have suspension, but this thing was still a super rough ride. Did they knock me out and transport me via civilian carriage? But Sylphy said that civilian carriages were undergoing strict checks on their way in and out of the city. Each and every piece of luggage was inspected. There was no way they'd overlook a whole person stuffed inside of a box.

Checks on military vehicles were much lighter, though. Or did they find a way to get out of the city without using a carriage? No, that couldn't be. The defensive wall was completely fixed, and security around it was super tight. There was no way they could've snuck an unconscious me through unnoticed.

It was more than likely that, after Cushi knocked me out and kidnapped me, they used a military carriage to get me out of the city. Then after that, they used some sort of special technique to get me to Merinisburg. Did they switch me over to a different vehicle at some point? I had no way to be sure, and

thinking about it wasn't getting me anywhere.

Anyway, it was unlikely that Sylphy and the others would be able to rush in and save me right away. No carriage could escape the harpies' tracking abilities, and yet Cuví seemed perfectly calm when he spoke. From the other sounds I'd picked up, it didn't seem like the carriage was in a hurry. Wherever we are, it was somewhere they felt safe.

That meant I was all alone in enemy territory. And to make matters worse, everything in my inventory had been left behind, except for some delicate foods and personal items.

Hold up, let me just say that yes, it was a silly move dumping out my entire inventory like that. But could you blame a guy? I really wanted to see what all the stuff I had looked like lined up like that!

I thought that I was safe within the walls of Arichburg. I had no clue that Cuví was going to turn traitor on me. In fact, up until the very last moment, I believed he was a friend. I figured he had a guilty conscience on account of his past, but I didn't ever think he could be linked to the Holy Kingdom.

I really thought I was an excellent judge of character... Okay, anyway.

Now, why was I still so calm about all this? Because I doubted I'd be offed anytime soon. If the point was just to kill me, then Cuví would've finished the job ages ago. Stabbed me, strangled me, snapped my neck, whatever. But instead there I was, packed into a box, my throat still blessedly un-slit. It was possible that I was being taken somewhere for a public execution, but would someone really crawl their way up the ranks of their enemy's organization to become one of its high-ranking officers just to throw all that effort away on one measly public execution?

I supposed if they killed me and strung up my body for the Liberation Army to see, morale would drop through the floor. But...would it? I felt like Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies would just be filled with a vicious fighting rage. Setting aside the question of the tactic's effectiveness, I could see them using the weapons I left behind to their fullest in order to reduce Cuví and his comrades into bloody mush.

But, then again, if I was kidnapped by folks who knew what I was capable of,

then most likely they intended to use my abilities, even if it meant breaking my spirit.

Well, I wasn't gonna lose to no damn Holy Kingdom!

"And then like this..."

I was in a narrow room, whispering to myself.

When we arrived at our destination, a large man took me out of my box, put me in a bag, carried me here, undid my blindfold, took out my gag, removed my bindings, and then stripped me naked. Yeah, I was shaking in terror at that point.

Fortunately, this didn't end up like one of those 18+ doujinshi; they just forced me into these thin prisoner's clothes. They chained up my hands and legs (they chained me to one of those big iron balls—turned out those are a real thing here), then tossed me into this cell.

All that said, while it was pretty cramped in my cell, it wasn't too bad of a room. I had a wooden bed and there was even a flush toilet in the corner. There was a bottle full of water, or at least I assumed it was water. The stone walls were a little shabby, but you could tell the place had seen some upkeep.

A small, barred window near the ceiling allowed some light into the room. So, I was partially underground then, eh? My hand restraints were in front of me this time, so I could pop myself free of 'em if I wanted to. I could start making moves to escape, but...

I had zero idea what the enemy's goal was, and if this was in fact Merinisburg, then that meant this was where Sylphy's family was from. In other words, there was a chance I might find a clue as to where the royal family was now. Hell, they might have been tossed in the very same dungeon.

And, honestly, I was curious about what exactly the Holy Kingdom had in store for me, considering they went so far out of their way to kidnap me.

The problem was that if I didn't bounce ASAP, I might not get the chance later. I might be executed straight off, or they could brainwash me with some

weird magic. I had no clue if that stuff would be any more effective than Sylphy's slave collar, but I didn't want to find out.

Plus, to be real, I was not prepared to stand up under torture. I was just a normal guy. If a pro tortured me, I'd fold immediately. I wasn't some action hero, and I was not great with pain. I knew my spirit would break eventually.

And before you start to think that made me some kind of wuss, how 'bout you read a little nonfiction for once, really educate yourself on torture techniques. I'd let myself fall down some real rough rabbit holes on the subject, and I knew what I was about, all right?

But that was enough catastrophizing. Torture would suck, end of story.

Which meant it was time to think of a way out. The chains were no big deal. Next up was the cell itself... I could probably handle it. I had a wooden bed, some cloth, and the stone wall was already falling apart. I could probably make a stone axe or something.

Stone axes were incredibly powerful tools—they cut wood, smash stone walls and floors, the works. Since the toilet flushed, that direction had to lead somewhere. I figured I could potentially flee into the sewers. I could even seal up the hole behind me with chunks of the wall and floor, buying me more time to escape. If I fled into the sewer, I could probably manage. At least, I hoped I could.

Now, then, what was I to do? Wait and see, or get the hell out of there pronto...

I pulled the blanket off of the bed and pilfered the wooden planks. Emptied the straw out of the makeshift pillow they gave me, and grabbed stone from the busted bit of wall in the corner of the cell. All that was left was to stuff it all into my inventory and make a stone axe.

The next question was where I should dig. I worked out from the thin shafts of light that filtered into the room that I still had time before sundown. I'd be an idiot if I started making a ruckus now and drew a guard's attention...

Come to think of it, were there even any guards?

Was anyone else in the other cells? One way to find out.

“Heeey! Anyone there? I’m Kousuke, the fresh meat!”

No answer. Looked like I was the only one around.

That was too bad. If there were any other prisoners, we could’ve exchanged info or something. Talk about inefficient, though. They had such nice prison facilities and I’m the only one here? Did that mean the Holy Kingdom didn’t have all that many vicious criminals to deal with or something? Maybe there weren’t many demi-humans left around here with the will to fight back.

Or...they might just get executed on the spot instead. Hrm, I really wanted to know more about what it was like to live under the Holy Kingdom’s rule. I didn’t have nearly enough information to work with. With that in mind, I stuffed the bed into my inventory and started hacking at the floor directly beneath it with my axe.

Konk, konk, konk! It was not quiet work, but there was nobody around to complain about it.

Hold on, was this some kind of S&M dungeon? Oh, or maybe they planned on completely ignoring me down here, weakening my resolve by preying on my loneliness? The water looked fresh, but I doubt it’d last for more than three days. And then once my mind and body were weak, the good folks of the Holy Kingdom would come to save me, treat me well, daub my tears, and wipe my ass. Or something.

It was all wild theories, but I could picture it pretty clearly. Isolation sucked, and going hungry sucked even more. If someone was left all alone without food and water for days, they’d probably reach for the first hand extended to them.

“Unfortunately, that sort of plan won’t work on me,” I muttered to myself while I hacked at the floor.

I had a whole stash of cooked foods and fresh ingredients, plus water, fruits, and vegetables to boot. I had enough food to last literal years. Although, hmm. Could I eat gizma meat raw? I didn’t want to try. There probably wasn’t anything good it could do to my stomach.

Since it didn’t look like I’d be getting visitors any time soon, I continued

digging through the floor, careful not to harm the sewer piping. I needed to find a sewer path large enough for me.

Eventually, I hit dirt, so I built a stone shovel using that and continued my work.

How odd.

I found an underground path, but it wasn't what I'd expected. Wouldn't you build an underground path like this first, then put in the foundation, then build whatever building you're making atop that? Not that I was an expert or anything, but that was the image I'd always had of the process.

But magic existed in this world. After making the castle, they probably just used magic to carve out the underground and turned dirt into stone to make the underground halls and such. Ira did something similar when we were building that wall.

Anyway, I came upon a rather obvious problem.

"I can't see anything... It's too dark..."

I needed a torch. And I'd only have enough wood if I completely took apart the bed. Should I dig into the cell next door and sacrifice the bed in there? No, staying anywhere near the cells didn't strike me as wise. I'd just sacrifice my own bed and make a torch.

I headed back to my cell, completely took apart my bed, and gathered up the wood. Just in case, I also grabbed my pillowcase, blanket, and water bottle. Already had my chains stored in the ol' inventory.

I rigged up a torch out of the wood and a little burning tinder from my inventory.

I happened to still have burning tinder with me because, when I was dumping everything out in Arichburg, I'd figured it would've just burned up pointlessly on the outside, so I kept it back.

I still couldn't believe I actually did that. So stupid. Although Cushi was a fox, wasn't he? And you know what they said about foxes. Maybe the dude was just living up to his nine-tailed namesake. It was a little late to try to sort it all out,

but the more I thought about it, the more mysterious it all seemed. There was a lot of sketchiness surrounding Cuv... But maybe that was just hindsight talking.

But still...! Cuv should've known that none of the restraints they used on me were worth jack. And if he told the Holy Kingdom about my skill set, then they would never have chained me up that way.

He supposedly had me empty out my inventory to keep my powers in check, but then I was put in restraints that rendered that whole exercise pointless.

Everything about it was a mess.

If all of this was going according to Cuv's plan, then it meant that me and the Holy Kingdom were just pawns in his game. Of course, it was also possible that the higher-ups in the Holy Kingdom had just ignored his warnings about me.

Gah, I have no clue!

Well, whatever. Going around in circles about it wasn't getting me anywhere. With my torch at the ready and the leftover kindling gathered, I jumped back down into the hole and covered the entrance with a stone block I'd made.

You might wonder if there was enough air down there in my tunnel. Well, for some reason the torch didn't absorb the oxygen... And actually, it never seemed to burn down, and it wasn't even hot to the touch. No wonder Ira always gave me that vacant, how-are-you-breaking-the-laws-of-nature look.

I placed the torch on the ground to light the area and continued digging at the dirt with my stone shovel until I hit another stone wall. Had I finally arrived at the sewer system? I switched back over to my stone axe and took a swing at the wall.

A few meters deep, I finally arrived at my destination... Or at least what I figured was my destination. It was clearly the sewers, but there wasn't any water anywhere, and the dreadful stench I prepared myself for was nowhere to be found. On closer inspection, it looked like the piping I was following went even further below this path.

Why did something like this exist under the castle? Was it a secret route just for royalty? And if it was, wouldn't it connect to the outside? And if so: hot damn! If this was a sort of royal escape route, I could assume there was nothing

dangerous along the way. It'd be absurd if they set traps and monsters down here just for the royal family to get turned to mincemeat on their way out.

Still, I didn't let my guard down. I was a capable survivor, after all!

Since I didn't have to worry about burning through my breathable air, I was way more relaxed than I'd been during all that digging. It was dark and a little scary, but I nonetheless pressed on, my stone axe in my right hand and my torch in my left. It reminded me a lot of when I first explored the woods in this world. This time, though, I only had a stone axe, which was a bit worrying... Ah, but I still had some wood and stone left, so I could make a stone spear. And maybe a stone knife too, just to be on the safe side. Good idea.

Between those and my stone shovel, my stone equipment set was complete!

Why no stone pickaxe? Beats me. It never showed up in my crafting list and it didn't even show up in item creation. Weird, right? I *did* manage to make a stone warpick, though. But whatever, that wasn't important at the moment.

Suddenly, I spun around and waved my torch. I'd been feeling some sort of presence behind me for a while, even though I didn't hear any footsteps. It was like something was crawling toward me...

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God... No! There's no way there's anything in here with me in the dark! Gyaaah!

Okay, I had to stay calm. I could not afford to panic right now. In horror movies, when people convinced themselves it was nothing, they ended up dead. But if they panicked too much, they also died.

Uh, hold on, so if this was a horror movie, I'd already be totally screwed?!

I had to use my brain! With the weapons I had on me, what could I do against an unknown life-form? Stone knife, axe, spear, shovel, multiple torches, burning tinder, a water bottle, handcuffs, ball and chain, food... A-ha! Got it.

I pulled the gizma meat out of my inventory and set it down on the ground next to a torch, then crouched down and entered stealth mode. I watched the bait I've set from my hiding place. And just a moment later...

I-it's here! Something's come for the fresh meat!

It was all gelatin-like and blobby! The sort of thing you'd expect to hear crying out, "Tekeli-li!" or something!

It was a slime. Yup. But not the cute little mooks you saw in certain long-running role-playing games, but rather the kind you got in old school TTRPGs. The pain in the ass ones.

The slime appeared to carefully observe the gizma meat. Clearly it wasn't your run-of-the-mill mindless jelly. It followed me just out of sight not out of instinct, but out of deliberate caution.

It extended a wobbly tentacle and started poking at the meat, rubbing it all over in search of traps, perhaps. Once the slime judged it safe, the tentacle skillfully grabbed the meat and absorbed it into the main body. Then it started to vibrate. Was the gizma that tasty?

"Delish!"

I'll admit it. I screamed. So much for staying covert.

"Gyaaah! It can speak?!"

Then it screamed too.

"Eeek! A human found me! I messed up!"

The slime seemed just as startled as I was. Its whole body kinda tightened up.

"Er, wait," I said. This was weird.

It had enough smarts to be cautious of traps, yet still showed itself so it could eat the meat, and then promptly aired its opinion out loud. This thing might have been smart enough to speak, but it didn't seem too bright.

"Bully?"

The slime trembled like it was scared.

"No, I won't bully you. Do you get bullied for being a demi-human, or...?"

In terms of size... It was about as big as a sofa. Pretty large, I had to say. It was pink, not the dark, Sanity Roll-inducing iridescence I was worried about.

"No bully demi-humans?" it asked.

“Nope. I live happily with a bunch of demi-humans in the Black Forest beyond the Great Omitt Badlands. I was captured by the Holy Kingdom, but I’m busting out now.”

“Wowee...” The slime approached me at a shockingly high speed, squirming circles around me as it kept a tentacle leveled at me. It felt like I was inspected, which is probably exactly what it was doing.

“Can I touch you?” it asked.

“Sure. Just don’t hurt or eat me please.”

I sat down in place and scratched my cheek. I was glad we could communicate, and that it didn’t seem hostile. Honestly, it kind of reminded me of a small child, which was why it’d be best to let it do as it pleased so that it felt comfortable around me.

“No hurt!” the slime promised. It jiggled a bit and began to touch my hands, arms, ankles, and neck. “Taste and smell elf, cyclops, and harpy! Others too!”

“Taste? Hold on, smell?!”

I took a bath this morning, I’ll have you know. Is this slime sensing something that I can’t just clean off?

“Not a bad human, so I’ll take you home!”

“You will? Um, are there...smarter folks than you at home?”

“Yup!”

“Hm. All right,” I said. “I’ll come with you.”

“Kay, ’kay! Follow me!”

The slime... He...? She? Did slimes have genders? Either way, the slime began to move off, so I followed after it. I always pictured them as being heavy and slow, but this one zoomed off at a good clip. There wasn’t much of a difference between my walking pace and its...slimy slither.

“The name’s Kousuke, by the way. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Kousuke!” it said as we went along. “I’m Lime!”

“Gotcha... Nice to meet you, Lime the slime.”

Exploring these dark caverns on my own was honestly a bit of a downer, so I felt really lucky to have hit it off with a friendly...whatever. Yep, that was me! Lucky!

“Hey, Lime, where exactly are we headed?” I asked the creature as it rolled and sloshed along in front of me.

Y’know, I could understand the whole jumping and rolling bit, but how did it slide like that?

“Our home!” it said.

That wasn’t a very illuminating answer, but I supposed I’d find out soon enough if I followed along.

“When you say ‘our,’ that means others are there too?” I asked.

“Hm? Big Lime, Big Bess, Big Poiso!”

“Big...?”

What exactly did that mean? Was there some kind of main body? Nah, that couldn’t be right. But it was a slime, so... But who were Bess and Poiso?

“Do you, Bess, and Poiso live together?” I asked.

“Yup! When scary humans find us, we move!”

“That happen a lot?”

“Yup! They’re awful. Shoot magic at us, poison us, light us on fire,” said Lime, its tone disarmingly sunny. Were these slimes fine with the whole fire and poison thing?

“That’s terrible. And you’re all okay? Not injured?”

“Don’t die easily. Very good at pretending to get killed!”

Lime proceeded to spread out on the ground, turned see-through and then vanished. Then it swiftly returned to its normal form.

“Good, right?”

“Majorly good.”

Lime giggled and seemed pleased with the compliment. Truth be told, if I didn't know better, I would've thought it'd really just died. Lime literally looked like it'd become a puddle of water.

The two of us talked up a storm all the way down the underground path. I was doing most of the questioning. Lime's command of language was pretty elementary, and its memory and intelligence seemed like a bit of a mess, which meant that I didn't get all the details. I did gather that Lime and its friends had lived in secret under the capital city since the Holy Kingdom took Merinard. Since they couldn't leave, they were never able to flee to the Black Forest.

"And the royal family is in the castle!" Lime said. "Can't leave them behind."

"Wait, they're still here?"

"Yup!"

"Whoa..."

Now that was some big new information. Sylphy heard from Danan and the others that the members of the royal family had been sent all over the Holy Kingdom as slaves... So what was really going on?

Either Danan's info was wrong, or Lime's info was wrong... We'd have to confirm one way or the other.

Lime hopped up and down next to a barred entrance on the floor. These bars were quite large, and the entrance was quite small. Humidity in a sewer was usually pretty bad, and yet these bars weren't rusted at all. Were they not made of iron?

"This is the entrance."

"I see... Um, I don't think I'll be getting through here."

"You can't slippy-slidey?" Lime asked.

"Nope."

"Hm..."

Lime liquified itself a bit and squeezed through the piping effortlessly, something my body was not at all capable of. I hadn't quite given up being

human just yet.

“Is it okay if I destroy the floor next to the grate?” I asked it.

“Hm? Probably.”

“Only probably?”

“Big Lime might get upset, y’know?” Lime said.

“Then I’ll apologize when the time comes. I should be able to fix it, anyway.”

“We can apologize together-gether!!” Lime kindly offered, bouncing up and down.

Well, that was a relief. Also, dang, Lime was adorable. Made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I wondered if I could take it home with me... *No, it’s not a cat or a dog. Stop it, Kousuke.*

I broke the floor with my stone axe so I could drop through. It took a little time, but ultimately I finished with no problem.

“Amazing! Super amazing! You’re amazing, Kousuke!”

The little slime’s delight had me laughing. “I know, right?”

I couldn’t help but get a big head as Lime hopped around praising me. When I did stuff in the Liberation Army, people usually just looked at me coolly like, *What, this again?* Though I supposed you could also describe the look in their eyes as so blown away by my prowess that they’d achieved spiritual enlightenment.

I dug out the floor next to the grate and formed the stones into a set of stairs. When I peered down them, I saw a five-meter drop, give or take. Wasn’t too bad. I’d have been lying if I said I wanted to leap right down, but I could’ve if I’d had to. Like me, Lime just took the stairs.

“Do you always just kinda jelly-up and squish your way through to get down here?”

“Yup! Slish, slosh, swoop! Fun.”

“Are you okay with swooping too?”

“Yuppy-yup!”

Sounded like Lime was okay with sloshing from five meters up. Made sense—slimes didn't have a lot to bruise or contuse.

At the bottom of my stairs we came to what looked to be the real sewer, but it didn't stink at all. Which was weird, since if we were in a sewer, then I should be retching and heaving from the smell.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"A sewer, of course."

"For real?"

"Poiso and pals processed the sewer water! Runs clean here!"

"Huh..."

So Poiso and company are on some water treatment biz? Are they a poison slime or something? Nominative determinism strikes again.

"Is your home far from here?"

"Nope! It's right over there!"

Lime hopped along, and I followed after it again. Soon enough, I spotted a light in the tunnel ahead. I'd seen this particular sort of glow before... It was similar to Ira's light spell.

"I'm home," Lime trilled. "I brought a Kousuke!"

When we got inside, I had to squint into the light. Although, really, it wasn't super bright, so much as the sewers had been mega dark. Even by torchlight, my eyes adjusted to the gloom.

There were three women in the room, or at least things *shaped* like women. One of them greeted us cheerfully. She was light blue in color, like what you'd call cyan.

"Heya! Welcome back!" And as soon as she'd said that, Lime leapt into her chest and disappeared into her. *Er, what? Um, what's going on?*

Another one of them spoke up. This woman-shaped creature was red, and she eyed me up while I stood there looking gobsmacked.

"Hrmph, he certainly is a human," she said.

And then the third one chimed in. She was seafoam green, as lady-looking as the rest.

“He seems surprised,” she said.

Ya think?! I never thought that slime girls actually existed...!

The thought had occurred to me when I met Lime, but the reality was something else. Speaking of which...

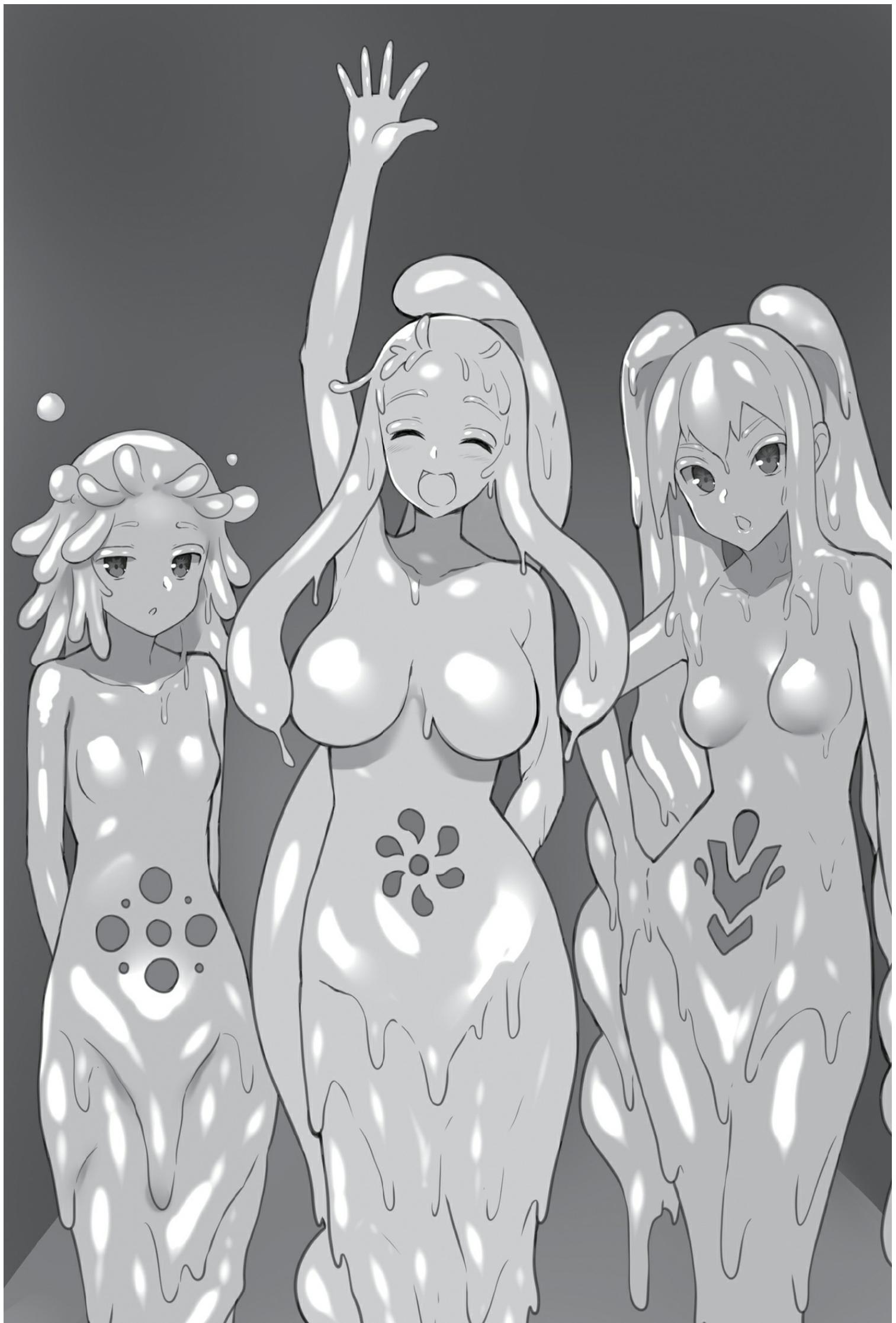
“Um, where’s Lime?” I asked.

“I’m Lime!”

The light blue one smiled brightly at me. She then split off a chunk of herself, recreating the Lime I knew.

The seafoam-green one gestured over at the light-blue one. She said, “The Lime that was with you and the Lime right here are both the same person. And I’m Bess, by the way.”

“We can split off parts of ourselves and create clones of ourselves,” explained the red one. “I’m Poiso, FYI.”



This was a helluva lot to think about, but for the moment, I just focused on making a strong first impression.

“My name is Kousuke, and I’ve been traveling together with Sylphy’s... Er, Princess Sylphyel’s Liberation Army, if that’s at all familiar to you ladies. One thing led to another, and the Holy Kingdom took me prisoner. I was just in the middle of escaping when I bumped into Lime...er, little Lime. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

“You can just call me Lime!”

She gave me another big smile. Yeah, she was the cutest in this form too.

“Princess Sylphyel’s Liberation Army, eh?” said Bess. “I’ve heard rumors. The military and higher-ups in the church have been desperate to keep the situation under wraps, but the capital is swirling with talk of the Liberation Army.”

“We heard they’ve been wiping the floor with the Holy Kingdom,” said Poiso. “Is it true they already took Arichburg?”

“Yup, it’s all true. Arichburg’s been dealt with. Right now we’re clearing out the stragglers from the Holy Kingdom’s army who are still hanging on in the south, and building the city back into a hub...”

The three of them listened raptly while I explained the situation. It must have been hard for them to get fresh info on the outside world when they were stuck down here.

“I see...” Lime’s eyes were practically sparkling as she sidled up to me. “So, what sort of relationship do you have with the princess? Are you close?”

She didn’t look nearly as interested when I was talking about the war effort. And she was getting closer, too... The other two seemed just as interested, both of them watching me starry-eyed.

“Well, Sylphy and I are mega close. We share our nights together.”

“Wowee,” said Lime.

“Yup. Exactly,” I agreed.

“That’s really close...”

Lime got real, real close. And so did the other two, for that matter. *I know you're having fun, ladies, but give me a little bit of space, please! Do you have to feel up my neck and cheeks and such?* Some of my thoughts must have shown on my face.

"Sorry, bad habit!" Lime said.

"We can share information via touch," explained Bess.

"But just between us," clarified Poiso.

"I see... Only works between slimes, huh?"

"Well..." said Lime. "We can do it with others, but we gotta get inside of you and go all squishy-swishy."

"Inside? Wait, how do you get inside? Where do you enter? Okay, that's kinda scary."

"Wanna try it? You'll get addicted." Lime snaked out a pseudopod my way.
Umm!

"Nah, I'm good!"

"But it feels sooo nice." Lime retracted her tentacle with obvious regret.

Jeez, I was starting to think these girls really were working that shoggoth angle!

"You definitely shouldn't do it with Lime," said Poiso. "You won't be back on your feet for a full three days. With me, it'd only take a day."

"Half a day for me," said Bess.

"Yeah, but yours is addictive..." Poiso started to say. They were all getting excited about the idea, so I jumped in to cut things short.

"Hey, can we put a moratorium on horrifying propositions? Okay? Okay." I pivoted the conversation. "I have a ton of questions I'd like to ask you girls. Is that cool?"

The three slime girls shared a moment of eye contact and turned back to me simultaneously.

"And you won't keep anything from us?" they asked.

“If you’ll do the same for me.”

“Then we’ll answer anything we can.”

And then they stared at me.

Yeah, okay, I understood where they were coming from. I did kinda specifically leave out who I am, what I do in the Liberation Army, why I was kidnapped, *etc.*

“Do you not trust us, Kousuke?” Lime asked.

“Just to be clear, if we were going to do something to you, we’d have done it already,” Bess said.

“We’re on your side,” said Poiso. “Even now, we’re protecting the capital and the royal family.”

Ah, she brought up the royal family again. I really wanted to know what was up with that.

“All right, fine, yeah, you got it. I’ll spill the beans if you do.”

“Yippie-yay!” Lime smiled brightly.

“Finally. Now then, let’s hear it.”

“Bess, stop being so impatient. You can take it easy, Kousuke.”

Bess seemed to sit up on her high horse, and Poiso split the difference. I could just about see what sort of relationship these three had with each other.

“All right, let me start from the beginning. This is gonna go some *weird* places, so brace yourselves.”

I began to tell my tale: the story of how I came to this world, and how I first met Sylphy.

Chapter 4:

Living Underground with the Slime Girls

“YOU'RE A FABLED VISITOR!” Lime.

“I thought they only existed in fairy tales and myth.” Bess.

“It doesn't seem like he's lying. He certainly has an incredible power.” Poiso.

“I'm just glad you believe me.” Me again, Kousuke.

I'd made sure to show my abilities off, so it figured that they believed me. Unfortunately, I couldn't show them my crafting skills without materials or a workbench.

“It's so weird how you pull stuff outta nothing!”

“And it's also weird how you can move around in that gross fashion. Not normal at all.”

“That everlasting torch of yours certainly is the real deal.”

Lime, Bess, and Poiso each remarked as they munched on gizma meat fresh from my inventory. Well, okay, by “munched,” I don't so much mean that they put it into their mouths and chewed. In reality, they absorbed the meat into their bodies, somewhere around where a stomach would be on a human. The meat simply dissolved into them.

“Mmm, delish!” Lime was really into it.

“This is my first time eating fresh gizma meat,” Bess said.

“It's not easy to find,” added Poiso.

“Um,” I said, “are you ladies okay with eating it raw?”

I hadn't cooked it at all before they started chowing down. Were their stomachs going to be okay? Maybe it would be fine, since they were slimes. Anyway, Lime insisted that it was tastier uncooked.

“Not that we can't eat gizma meat cooked,” Bess added. “But we prefer it

raw.”

“Actually, how have you ladies been surviving down here?” I asked. “What have you been eating?”

“While we’re hiding down here, we’ve also been managing the sewer water. We get all our nutrients from that,” Poiso said.

“For real?”

It made sense, but it was shocking to hear. Man, they could get nutrients from processing sewer water? Crazy.

Bess saw my face and spoke up. “Are you thinking something rude? Just to be clear, we’re perfectly clean about it.”

“We love being clean!” Lime said.

“We can purify just about any old muck,” said Bess. “Grime, poison, sickness. We can handle it all.”

“Wow, that’s something else.”

It was certainly true that their colorful bodies looked perfectly clean, and they smelled quite nice. The whole room did, actually.

“That’s it? You’re convinced?” asked Poiso.

“Most people would be turned off, even after we explained,” said Bess.

“They’d say we got the cooties!” Lime said.

“Really? That’s terrible. But think of it this way: compared to the weirdness of my crafting abilities or my inventory, your purification ability is pretty cute.”

It also wasn’t that far removed from my mental image of what slimes were like, and it wasn’t difficult to imagine that sewer water contained plenty of usable elements. It didn’t strike me as particularly crazy that slimes could take that water in and successfully metabolize all the poisonous and harmful contaminants.

As I thought this over in silence, Lime slid up to me and grasped my left hand in her own. Her hand was cool and soft as gel; it was truly a strange sensation.

“What’s up?” I said.

“You don’t mind me touching you?”

“Not at all. You’re super soft.”

“Yeah! I really am!” She’d seemed worried a moment ago, but now she smiled brightly.

Suddenly, Bess slid her way up to me and clasped my free hand.

“I-I’m just going to check and see if you really don’t mind being touched,” she said.

She felt distinctly different than Lime. Bess was way more bouncy and smooth to the touch. If Lime was super soft, Bess was extra silky smooth. She felt delightful.

“You two are so easy,” Poiso said from a distance, but even I could tell she was anxious.

Lime giggled. “Heehee, Poiso’s scared!”

“I-I am not!”

“Then c’mon over!” Bess said. “Let’s do this!”

Poisو growled at them. “I’ll make you regret your words!”

Poisо rushed at me super fast, knocked the breath out of me, and should have sent me flying. But I didn’t fly. Even though she smashed into me, she simply enveloped my body. Everything below my neck other than my arms were engulfed in her.

“How’s this feel?” she said, laughing.

She suddenly changed form so that it felt like she was embracing me from behind. *How did she get there?!*

“Bess is all smooth, but Poiso is sticky. You all feel totally different.”

“We can change that a little bit,” Poiso said. “But you’re pretty much on the mark.”

“I can make myself like Lime, for the most part,” said Bess.

“Likewise.”

“And I can become like Bess and Poiso!” Lime chimed in.

“Wow, you’re amazing, Lime.”

Lime giggled at my compliment and latched on to my arm with a smile. I wasn’t sure when it happened, but Bess was doing the same with my other arm. Meanwhile, Poiso was still embracing me from behind. Other than my head, almost my entire body was enveloped in slime girls. *Is this okay? Am I going to be absorbed?*

“So, uh, I can’t move.”

“Kousuke, you’re a little dirty.”

This is crazy!

“Since we’re already here and all, we’ll clean you up.”

Slimes are wild!

“Just relax and leave things to us.”

Suddenly, it felt like I was soaked. At first, I had only felt their textures on my skin, but that barrier vanished.

“Mm, this is quite the flavor,” Lime said.

“A little dusty, though,” Bess added. “Even the dirt’s dirty.”

Poiso tsked at me. “You’re going to get sick if you don’t clean yourself properly.”

“Ah, gah, w-wait, whoa?!”

“Keep still.”

How would I even describe this? It defied description. It was like my entire body was being massaged and licked simultaneously. The slime girls got under my thin clothes and coated me completely. It was like my entire body was being...sucked on.

“Hm? Huh. Oh...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

“My, oh, my, what do we have here? I see...”

“What?! What is it?! Hey, wait, not there!”

My anguished screams echoed out into the underground room lit by magic light.

ARICHBURG SIDE

MEANWHILE IN ARICHBURG, far from Kousuke...

“Hrm?!”

“...?!”

In the main operations room, Sylphy and Ira’s expressions changed as they sensed an ineffable change in the air.

“What’s the matter?” Melty asked.

“I thought I heard Kousuke scream...”

“I’m worried about him...”

Melty was confused. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh...?” Sylphy pointed to the corner table.

Melty looked and saw a vase that held but a single flower. The petals had just fallen and scattered.

“We need to find Kousuke as soon as possible,” Ira said.

“Immediately,” Sylphy agreed.

They further steeled their resolve to rescue him.

“Ugh, no one will ever marry me now...”

Cleansed from head to toe, I hugged my knees close to my chest in the center of the magically lit room.

Lime bounced about looking thoroughly satisfied, like she found my distress delightful. Bess had a dangerous-looking grin on her face while looking down at me like I was pathetic. Poiso voiced her regret, saying maybe they’d gone a bit overboard. She still had a giant smile on her face, though. Me, I was strangely dry all over, even though I’d been totally enveloped in slime. How did that even work? I could not let my guard down around these three.

“All right, I’ve said my piece,” I said, struggling to get us back on track. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I guess so!”

“No, Lime’s the wrong person for this,” Bess cut in. “Should I do it?”

“It’s in your hands,” I said, unable to hide the defeat in my voice.

“Then it’s decided,” Bess said.

“I’ll be Kousuke’s chair, then!”

Lime slid next to me and transformed partially into a sort of living recliner, using her conspicuous chest as a headrest. This was all a bit too much for me, but Bess was already starting the tale of the old kingdom’s fall.

“Where should I begin?” she said. “Perhaps it’d be good to start with the fall of Merinisburg some twenty years ago. First, I should explain our position in all of this. We protect the royal family who live here in Merinisburg. We’re almost like royal guards in that respect.”

“The actual royal guards protect them from within the light,” said Poiso. “While we protect them from the shadows.”

“We can’t really come out, but we are invincible down here!” Lime added.

“Precisely,” said Bess. “The three of us can’t venture too far from Merinisburg, but within the city’s walls, we can’t be stopped. We can get into any location, and we can appear as if from thin air. And we won’t die.”

“I see.”

They could probably go anywhere that water ran. Plus, they could create copies of themselves and send them out to do the dirty work without fear of harm to their main bodies. In fact, there was no guarantee that the girls I was talking to were their main bodies. These could also be copies.

“As for where we come from... Does that really matter?”

“I’ll admit I’m curious. Just for my own edification.”

“Then we’ll tell you about it eventually,” said Bess. “For now, let’s focus on the important information.”

“Works for me.”

I motioned for her to continue, so Bess nodded.

“Twenty years ago, the Holy Kingdom invaded the Kingdom of Merinard with the aim of seizing the land, demi-human slaves, and the elves. They probably also resented having a neighbor whose diversity resembled the Empire’s. Merinard’s army fought well, but they were vastly outnumbered. It wasn’t long before the Kingdom of Merinard lost, and the capital fell into the hands of the Holy Kingdom.”

“What happened next?”

“The blood of elves runs through Merinard’s royal family. Do you know why humans desire elven slaves?” Bess asked me.

I grimaced. “I heard about this from Sylphy. It’s goddamn disgusting.”

Children born between elves and humans had tremendous magical power. The noblemen and women of the Holy Kingdom secretly and quietly mixed eleven blood into their own family lines using that “technique” for generations. It was how they maintained their powers.

“Then that saves me some time explaining things. Anyway, the royal family was well aware of this too, so they offered themselves up in the hopes of protecting the people of the kingdom.”

“I see...”

They turned themselves in for the sake of the country, huh? It was a worst-case scenario for anyone in a leadership position to begin with, for sure, but offering yourself up after losing...? I wasn’t really sure what to make of that. I asked Bess to continue.

“The Holy Kingdom could not have cared less about the people here. The pleas of subhumans who had dared to challenge them, and who had lost, fell on deaf ears.”

“That’s one way to go, I guess. But then why is the royal family still in the castle?” I asked.

“I’ll take it from here.” This time, it was Poiso who spoke up. “While the Holy

Kingdom had no intention of listening to the king's request, he never stopped trying to bargain with them. But all the while, the Holy Kingdom subjugated the people and scattered them across their dominion."

I remembered hearing about that part. After Merinard became a vassal state, there was a string of incidents where farming villages were destroyed in jarring, unnatural ways. I'd bet something similar happened in the capital.

"Looking at the truth of the situation," Poiso continued, "the king had no choice but to give up on negotiations. He knew that he and his family had to offer up their blood to the Holy Kingdom."

"Their blood?"

"Yes. The royal family has particularly strong magic running through their veins, even compared to other elves. If the Holy Kingdom were to claim it, those with magical abilities there would likely see a significant upgrade in power."

So, the concern was that the Holy Kingdom would use the royal family's bodies and blood to breed more powerful magic users. According to Sylphy, they were already doing that kind of thing anyway.

"This all stinks," I said. "Then what happened?"

"The Holy Kingdom refused to negotiate. And they threatened to enslave and execute yet more citizens if the king didn't adhere to their requests."

"Disgusting."

Poiso agreed. She continued, "That's when the king made his decision. In exchange for his life and bloodline, he would freeze the rest of the royal family in a corner of the castle."

"Wait, what?" *Did she just say freeze?*

"It's exactly as I've said. If the royal family were able to continue bargaining, odds were that the citizens would only be made to suffer more. So instead, the king froze his family in ice, and locked the struggle in a permanent stalemate."

"...That's heavy."

It was clear as day that the Holy Kingdom would keep taking lives regardless of whether the king did as they asked. If that was the case, then why not

protect yourselves while cutting off negotiations entirely? That way, nobody had to die as a bargaining chip.

Ultimately, this just delayed the inevitable. Still, it was probably the last thing the Holy Kingdom wanted, considering how much they desired the royal family's blood. If they couldn't negotiate with their targets, then there was no point in mercilessly slaughtering the people of Merinard. Enslaving them made way more sense.

For the citizens, becoming slaves was probably a better end result than death, since as long as they were alive, there remained a chance of turning things around. The king made a wise decision in that sense. There was no doubt that the people left behind met terrible fates, but a lot of lives were likely saved as well.

"But it's magic, right?" I asked. "Would its effects wear thin after a certain amount of time? Or does the spell automatically end at some point?"

"That's a distinct possibility." Poiso nodded. "But the king sacrificed his very life to cast this powerful magic. I doubt it'll fade that easily. And they have us watching over them as well."

"If any Holy Kingdom mages come, we chase 'em off!" Lime added. She emphasized her point by patting me on the chest with a tentacle. She might have been demonstrating, very gently, what she did to enemy mages.

"Got it... So, then word that the royal family's been hauled off to the Holy Kingdom is just...?"

"Propaganda," said Bess. "To prevent an uprising by the people of Merinard."

"But there was an uprising," I pointed out. "Three years ago, there was a rebellion."

"That happened without any knowledge of the royal family's presence. It was the end result of the Holy Kingdom's stern governance," Bess said. Lime backed her up.

"That's what the old priest said!"

I honestly thought it was pretty inefficient to treat slaves so cruelly that they

rose up in rebellion. Couldn't they have found a compromise? A way to govern them so it wouldn't come to that? Like a management style that didn't make people want their bosses literally dead? Probably not. This was the Holy Kingdom we were talking about. Adolism was a racist doctrine at heart—in the church's eyes, all of demi-humanity existed to serve human interests. Bigotry was their stock and trade.

"Okay," I said. "But is it really possible that news of the royal family's presence wouldn't leak?" What I wanted to say but didn't: Was it possible that Poiso and the others leaked that info themselves?

"According to our contract, we are not allowed to leave the castle premises," Bess said.

"And ever since the Holy Kingdom took over, demi-humans can't get near this place," added Poiso.

Lime helpfully chimed in too. "We're all alone."

There was a contract, huh? First time I'd heard that word from them.

"What's the deal with this contract?" I asked.

"We're not normal slimes," Bess said, like this was obvious.

"You're...not?"

"Nope." Lime looked deep into my eyes and smiled.

I had no clue what was normal or not normal for a slime. Poiso explained.

"Normal slimes can't talk, imitate the human form, or create copies. We're actually water spirits who formed a contract with the previous king and fused with slimes."

"So, you guys are the product of demon fusion...?"

"We're not demons! Spirits!" Lime jabbed me in the stomach. It hurt like the dickens.

"Ow, ow! I'm sorry. I meant to say that you ladies are more like, I dunno, water elemental slimes, then."

"Correct," said Bess. "We were originally created to serve as part of the

castle's security system."

"And how did you end up down here?"

"We always treated the sewer water here, as sort of a secondary job. Better to make use of our slime abilities, right?" Lime shrugged.

"And now it's safer to keep our real bodies down here," said Poiso. "So we've been operating out of the sewer ever since. When it comes to guarding the royal family, we just have to keep the mages away."

"If we stay in the castle, they light us on fire, try to poison us, and shoot us with magic!"

"That's awful."

In other words, the three of them had been biding their time beneath the castle, keeping vigil over Sylphy's family for twenty years straight. Now came my big question.

"Can Sylphy save her family?"

Poiso answered immediately.

"Most likely. The king always said that one day, Lady Sylphyel might leave the Black Forest with an army of elves and take back the Kingdom of Merinard."

"Hm..."

Sylphy's father had foresight. Whether it was the magic kind or just gut instinct remained to be seen.

"I think I've gotten a handle on things," I said. And then I wondered to myself what my next move should be.

Once I got my equipment together it would be possible to meet back up with Sylphy and the rest. I just had to avoid the streets and take shelter underground when I needed a break. There was no reason I had to leave the city through the front gate, so I could just *dig* my way to freedom.

The sewer had to run out of the city at some point. If I got Lime and the girls to guide me, I could probably find the way out pretty easily.

But considering how deep into enemy territory I was, I felt like it'd be a waste

not to do a teensy bit of sabotage while I was in the neighborhood. If I stole their funds or military goods, it'd be a big help to Sylphy and the cause, no? I could always slip in the odd assassination too... If I could, you know, actually do that, morally speaking.

I'm a manufacturer of death machines, not a death machine myself, okay? Up to this point, nobody'd so much as asked me to point a weapon at another human being. Cut me some slack.

Anyway, if I went too far with my shenanigans, it was possible that the Holy Kingdom might call in reinforcements from back home. Though that was bound to happen eventually anyway. So maybe I would do best to maximize damage while I still could?

Hrm... What to do, what to do.

Side note: Lime's Chair Mode was super comfortable. I was so relaxed that I just about melted into mush. That feeling against the back of my head was just without equal. I wasn't clear on whether or not a slime girl's chest counted as "real" boobs, but I wasn't gonna quibble about it.

"Feel good?" she asked.

"Real good. Amazing, in fact."

"Heehee."

Lime grinned and patted my tummy. Bess and Poiso shot me an odd look. Was it just me, or was I sensing a li'l bit of jealousy? I'd gotten good at recognizing that sort of thing.

"By the way," I said to them, "the two of you trusted me really quickly. Didn't you worry I might be one of the Holy Kingdom's agents?"

"Hrm, that's a good point. Why did we trust you so quickly? How odd," Bess said.

"For some reason, I just get a really comfy vibe from you, Kousuke," said Poiso.

"Actually, now that you mention it..." The dim memory of a conversation came to me. "Sylphy said something about how spirits seem to take to me

pretty quickly.”

That was the night I met Sylphy, in fact, when she healed my busted-up body with spirit magic. Was it some sort of biological thing? Or was it because I was a Fabled Visitor? Sylphy didn’t know why, and if these half-spirits didn’t know either, then I was doomed to stay in the dark about it. Nothing to do but keep planning my next move.

“I need to get in contact with Sylphy and the others and let them know I’m okay. Which means I need my golem communicator...”

It was already registered in my crafting system, so I could make one as long as I had the materials and my work table. It probably wouldn’t have enough output to reach across the distance I needed, so I’d have to figure out a way to supplement that. Could I trade portability for more broadcast power? It was worth giving it a shot.

Which meant I had to make a simple furnace, smelt some iron, and look for a mining spot... Which was a lot of stuff to do. I didn’t know the geography of the tunnels or the sewer, so I needed to get the girls’ help on this. I had a ton of gizma meat to offer them. I wondered if they’d accept that in exchange.

If they didn’t, I had no choice but to negotiate. If I stayed missing for too long, who knew what Sylphy or Ira or the harpies might do.

No, they’ll probably be fine. They’re all older than I am. They probably won’t do anything crazy.

Probably.

“All right,” I said out loud. “I know what I have to do. First thing first is to get my power up and running again.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Bess asked

“Gather materials underground so I can set up a proper workshop. Would you ladies mind helping me?”

“Hrm, well...”

Bess looked deep in thought, and she poked Poiso and Lime with a tendril. Were they sharing thoughts?

"Well, we wouldn't mind working with you," she said eventually. "But of course, it won't be for free."

"Of course! I'll reward you however I can. I still have plenty of gizma meat, if you'd like that."

"I want something tasty!" Lime said. She looked at me and smiled, and maybe I was just imagining things, but for some reason it sent a chill down my spine.

"We're all full of gizma meat," said Poiso. "But we'll request more tasty treats later."

"We also want to hear about the outside world," said Bess. "We have very few pleasures down here."

"I imagine it must get pretty boring for you girls..."

Maybe I should make some games for them? Reversi, chess, shogi, trump, the usual. Oh, board games could be fun too.

"Then you'll help me out?" I asked.

"Sure!"

"It'll be a good way to kill some time."

"It's all about give and take."

Lime bounced enthusiastically, Bess shrugged nonchalantly, and Poiso gave me a measured smile.

Thank goodness. I was starting to see my path forward. Things would work out. First, I had to spend the rest of the day chilling. My brain was working a mile a minute ever since Cuvi kidnapped me, so I was dead tired. It was no use starting out in that state. No point taking stupid risks just to save a little time.

All right, I'm gonna let it rip starting tomorrow!

After dinner (a hamburger and some water from my inventory), I once again offered some gizma meat to the slime girls. Then I took a load off in my makeshift bed for the evening.

"What do you think?"

“Super good,” I said.

The smooth and silky red bed pushed back up against me. Quite frankly, it rivaled even the beds I made myself... No, it was pretty much twice as nice.

“And how’s the pillow?”

“Tremendous,” I said.

The light blue pillow that pressed against the back of my head was a little softer and more jiggly than the bed, but its pleasant elasticity and its snug shape bided well for high-quality sleep.

“How does this feel?”

“...Pretty weird,” I had to admit.

A green gel enveloped my entire body. Strangely enough, it was extremely pleasant to the touch, almost like being submerged in a warm bath. If I was falling asleep in a tub, though, there’d be a legit fear of drowning, so this was definitely better. I got all the benefits of that precarious comfort without any of the risks.

It should be illegal to be this comfortable, especially since I was buck naked surrounded by slime girls. Truth be told, that part made me feel a bit awkward.

“I’m pretty sure it’d be just as good with clothes...” I said, but I was immediately overruled.

“We’d still end up touching your skin directly,” said Poiso, oh-so-reasonably. “So it’s less of a hassle to just be nude from the get-go.”

“I’ll take your clothes and wash them for you,” said Lime.

Honestly, I felt bad about using the girls as a bed. I told them as much, but when they asked me if I really wanted to sleep on the stone floor without a blanket, well, that wasn’t very appealing. I didn’t have the materials in my inventory to make a bed or a blanket. Given my options, which would you choose?

I debated it. For a full three seconds.

So, despite my embarrassment, I stripped off my thin prison outfit, took off

the underwear I had on, and left my body to the girls. They were very obliging.

“Want a massage while you’re asleep?”

“I’ll make your body nice and clean.”

“I can give you an even better sleep experience with some lovely scents!”

A wonderful aroma wafted up from Poiso-the-blanket, causing my mind to wander.

If I ever get used to this, I’d never be able to sleep in a normal bed ever again.

In just a moment, I was out cold.

“Hrm...?”

It felt like I’d just woken from a really weird dream, but I could barely remember what it was about. Maybe something to do with a bunch of puppies and kittens licking me all over...

“Kousuke, you awake?”

Lime’s voice came from overhead, and I practically leapt out of bed. She was looking at my face with a big smile. I knew that slimes didn’t technically have laps, but from this angle, it kinda felt like I was using her lap as a pillow.

Bess and Poiso wished me good morning, both of them with that same smile on their face. As per usual for my mornings, my entire body was still entirely surrounded by the girls, and I felt pretty excellent. I was struck by the desire to nod right off again, but that’d be selfish. Surely the girls had things to do.

“G’morning, ladies. I slept wonderfully.”

“Yay!”

“Of course you did.”

“Mm-hmm.”

With Bess and Poiso’s assistance, I managed to extract myself from the mass of slimes and stood up on the stone floor. Again, butt naked.

“Clothes, please,” I said.

“Here you go!”

Out of Poiso plopped the clothes and underwear she had inside of her. Much to my surprise, it was all dry and felt super comfy.

“I feel so light,” I said once I was dressed. “And my whole body just feels refreshed.”

“Massage and a detox!” Lime grinned.

“You had a lot of built up exhaustion,” Bess pointed out.

“We sucked it all out,” Poiso assured me.

“Y-you sucked...? Um, thanks?”

What exactly did they suck out, and how? I know I slept mega deeply overnight, but what did they do to me while I was out? Clearly, I felt great, but... I decided not to think about it too deeply.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” asked Poiso.

“First, I need to gather materials. I should be able to convert junk into some of what I need, so I’m gonna go dumpster diving for a bit and see if there are any good spots.”

“There are,” Poiso said. “Sometimes there’s stuff that clogs the flow of the sewer water.”

“That’s gotta suck to deal with.”

“It absolutely is. We go through a lot, you know.” said Bess.

“Once enough piles up, we digest it in one go,” Lime said with a smile.

“You can do that?” I asked. She nodded.

“Between the three of us, we can digest just about anything.”

The kind of junk we were talking about was lumber, metals, and ceramics, with the occasional oddity. The fact that these girls could absorb that stuff was honestly amazing. Although, come to think of it, in this world we could probably recycle broken iron goods, although the quality would drop after a while. Something to experiment with later.

“I’ll guide you today.” said Bess.

“Aw, I wanted to!” Lime pouted, but Bess stood firm.

“We mustn’t slack in our duties to the royal family.”

“Grrr, fine.”

I figured Bess’d use a copy, like Lime did yesterday, but no, she was going to tag along with her whole, real body.

“Shall we be on our way? Ah, but you must need breakfast first.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I can eat while we walk,” I said. “What about you girls?”

“We’re okay!” Lime said in a sing-song voice. Bess and Poiso both said they were already full.

“For real?”

I decided not to think too hard about why they didn’t need any breakfast.

Nope, not thinking. There’s no point thinking about pointless things! Because I do not want to sleep on the cold, stone floor.

Bess led the way as we traversed the sewer. It certainly doesn’t smell like a sewer, though. I asked her why that was, and she informed me that further upstream, they used copies of themselves to treat the sewer water.

“So, you’re saying that downstream it still smells?”

“Yes, but this whole place is designed so that water shouldn’t flow back.”

In other words, there was a sewage tank for the castle wastewater so that the girls could treat it once it pooled up. The sewer water for the city came in beyond that, so its scent didn’t carry to where we were.

“So basically, the sewer water from the castle is constantly treated, so it’s always clean.”

“Correct. We do good work, right?”

“Yeah. By the way, what’s the deal with the sewer management in the city?”

“Regular slimes handle that work,” she said. “They’re almost as good as us. Rats and bugs and other small monsters tend to pop up over there, so it’s fairly

dangerous.”

“Sounds scary. You don’t get stuff like that here?”

“Sometimes, but we just eliminate any threats when we come upon them. Why do you ask?”

“I was hoping for some skins,” I said. “They’re good for furnaces ‘n’ such.”

“Well, if I find anything and hunt it down, I’ll make sure to grab their skin for you.”

“Appreciate it.”

Bess was kinda domineering, but she was a sweet and kind girl at heart. Honestly, all the slime girls were. But Poiso was the only one that seemed like she had hidden depths, or possibly like she was plotting something. I don’t sense any hostility from her, though, so I figured I’d just let her do her thing.

“So, Bess, all three of you are different colors and you feel different, but do you have any other unique qualities?”

“Hrm, well I’m the best at magic among us. We can all use water magic, but I’ve got light and fire spells too. I’m built for it, so it’s a bit silly to brag, but I also have a high resistance to magical attacks.”

Bess looked proud and puffed out her chest. Her prodigious breasts jiggled slightly.

Look, I wasn’t obsessed with boobs or anything, but I couldn’t help but be drawn in. Such was the curse of the red-blooded heterosexual dude.

“I see... Now that I think about it, I’ve seen you sling around light magic all the time. What about the other two?”

“Lime specializes in slime techniques,” Bess said. “She can alter her viscosity and hardness freely, and she’s the strongest of us, physically. She can also use water magic about as well as I can.”

“Is that so. And Poiso?”

“She’s very skilled at healing magic and at handling poisons. She also has the strongest digestive ability. She can pull out elements of anything she’s digested

in the past and fuse them together to make medicines and poisons. She can even produce a poisonous gas.”

“Wow, that’s incredible. Magic, raw power, and medicinal talents...” I was really impressed. “I bet physical attacks are pretty much useless against you girls too, huh? The Holy Kingdom must have it up to their necks with y’all.”

“It’s been twenty years and they’ve never broken through our defenses. We’re pretty confident, to be honest. The first three years, we were constantly fighting, but eventually the losses on the other side grew so large that by the tenth year they’d just given up.”

“Damn, that’s crazy.”

I doubt the Holy Kingdom wanted to shed royal elven blood needlessly, so they probably put a lot into those attempts. That meant the slime girls must have tremendous combat capabilities.

After something like twenty minutes of walking, Bess announced that we’d reached our destination. I looked up at the pile of stacked stuff I’d been led to and couldn’t help but express my awe.

“Incredible...”

Busted wooden boxes and barrels, rusting metal scrap, dirty sheets, a clump of coins rusted together into a single shapeless lump, discolored leather bags—the list went on and on.

“Can I have all of this?”

“Sure,” Bess shrugged. “But it’s all just trash.”

“As good as gold as far as I’m concerned.”

I stuffed it all into my inventory and broke it down into materials. Lumber and scrap iron from the busted boxes and barrels, more scrap iron from the rusted metal, fabric from the dirty sheets, unrefined copper and silver from the stack of fused coins, and leather from the bags. And so, the junk I put into my inventory transformed into the building blocks of everything I needed.

“Incredible. That huge pile of trash is just...gone.”

“You had quite the mountain of treasures. Since there was so much leather,

all I need to do is find some clay and then I can make iron goods. Ah, wait, I don't have any fuel either."

I could maybe pick up some clay by busting a hole in a wall somewhere and digging into the dirt, but I didn't even know where to start looking. The fuel issue was even worse. There was simply no way I was going to find a sizable amount of fuel underground. And without that, I couldn't do any steelmaking.

"Fuel, huh?" Bess said. She shrugged. "I have a lot of oil in my body. You can burn that."

"In your...? Er, are you really okay with that?"

"Well, there are limits. But I've collected all of this over the course of about three hundred years. I don't think there should be a problem with you using some."

"Wow... But the thing is, I can't just burn it. I have to at least get things as hot as charcoal."

"That's no big deal, especially if I infuse it with some fire magic."

"S-seriously?"

Magic is nuts! But more importantly, the whole burning Bess's body thing sounds iffy, but if she doesn't mind, then I guess it's fine? I'll just leave it at that, I suppose.

"That'd be a huge help," I said. "Then all that's left is the clay problem. Any ideas?"

"Hrm, nothing around here. But since Lime patrols the tunnels and not just the sewers, she might know something. Her range is a lot wider than mine or Poiso's."

"Really? Then let's head back for now."

"All right," Bess said. "And if I ever encounter a mountain of trash like that, I'll bring it over to you, okay?"

Whatever junk they found, it'd end up as useful materials in the long run. I had been worried about whether I could gather anything of value down in the sewers, but it looked like I'd be okay.

I still didn't know if it was safe to use a furnace or smithing station down there, though. I was terrified of dying from carbon monoxide poisoning. I wasn't going to know either way until I gave it a shot, though. Poiso was good with poisons, so she should be able to keep things safe enough. She could neutralize the CO₂ or absorb it or something. When the time came, I would talk to her about it.

But first, clay. I felt like I'd been searching for clay nonstop since I came to this world...

Clay was human civilization's best friend, that was for sure.

I asked Lime to accompany me on my next excursion in the hope that she'd lead me to a good spot to pick over for clay. She was so positively thrilled when I asked for her help that she hopped up and down in front of me. And then, as we walked along, she sang.

"Going on a walk! Going on a walk! Going on a walk with Kousuke!"

Bess had slid across the ground with only her upper body in a human form on our walk, but Lime seemed to prefer zipping around in the shape of a steamed bun. It showed a pretty stark difference in their personalities.

"So, Lime," I said. "I really need to find some clay. Do you think that's doable?"

"Probably?" She drew out her words, still half-singing. "There's a place where the floor has fallen out and you can see some poking through?"

"Awesome. Is it far away?"

"Mm, if we keep walking at this pace, about thirty minutes?"

"That's pretty far," I said.

We were talking about three kilometers, give or take. Back in the Black Forest when we were setting up base, for some reason clay was always strangely far away... Although thirty minutes is doable. If I memorized the route, I could probably shorten the amount of time it took. Depending on how things panned out, I could even build a tunnel straight there.

“Any good mining spots?”

“Mmm, such as?” Lime just could not stop singing her words.

“Places with bare rocks and the like.”

“Mm, not that...I know of?”

“Seriously? Well, I guess that makes sense.”

You wouldn’t want to build tunnels in a place like that. The rocks would get in the way. It was even possible they chose the castle’s location for that reason. Mm, but even if there were rocks like that nearby, this world did have magic... They might have used earth magic to get rid of that stuff.

“Poiso?” Lime said, like the name was a question. “Can use a little earth magic? If you ask, she might help you?”

“I’ll give it a shot. If you don’t know any good spots, it’d be pointless to dig around aimlessly.”

I might hit bedrock if I picked a direction and dug, but doing that kind of work underground seemed terrifying, between the lack of light and the whole “suffocating because I’ve trespassed in an environment where man was never meant to tread” thing.

The light issue was easily solved with my torches, which didn’t appear to suck up oxygen or pump out CO₂, but that didn’t make the whole endeavor any less dangerous. I didn’t have the resources to reinforce an excavation pit, and I really didn’t want to be buried alive.

“Hey, hey, Kousuke!” Lime said. “Why aren’t you scared of us slimes?”

“Hm?” The question was so sudden that I was a little puzzled. “Because I don’t have a reason to be,” I said. I wasn’t really sure why, honestly. They weren’t scary, so I wasn’t scared.

“But the people from the Holy Kingdom are super scared of us.”

“That’s because they see you girls as just monsters. Honestly, if I’d run into regular slimes before I met you, then I might’ve been scared of you at first.”

“You think so?”

“Who knows.”

We chatted and made our way down the dim tunnels. This time around I left my usual torch in my inventory. Bess had wasted no time when I asked for her help: she set me up with a length of wood enchanted with light magic. It had about six hours of mojo in it. Ira did something similar for me when I was doing reinforcement work on the wall ages ago. Hooray for experience!

We came to a wall in the tunnel, and Lime helped me up. I smashed through the ground next to another metal grate and crawled down onto another path.

Oh, so back in their room I mentioned the whole ground-breaking thing I did on my way to them, and the slime girls said it wasn’t a big deal. The Holy Kingdom already knew they were down there, and they gave the area a wide berth. There were few people eager to take their lives into their own hands by venturing near, and even if some unwary adventurer came close, the advantage was so much on the slime girls’ side, there wouldn’t be anything to fear.

Which sounded pretty overconfident to me, and I said so.

“It isn’t confidence,” is what Poiso replied. “It’s what comes with being strong.”

Dang.

Lime popped a human form from the waist up out of the top of her steamed bun-shaped body and grinned proudly with her arms folded, only further emphasizing her massive chest.

Don’t be fooled, Kousuke. She’s a slime. Those aren’t real breasts. They’re fake breasts; they can look however she wants.

The girls didn’t actually have breasts, butts, or thighs. Regardless of the shape they took on at any given moment, it was all just another part of their whole. I really shouldn’t stare.

I did stare a little, though. I was bad at rebelling against those instincts. I know that Lime was too innocent to be doing this on purpose, and that made me feel even worse.

“What’s wrong?” Lime asked. “Ah, you wanna touch?” She smiled and

bounced a little, making her chest jiggle.



“Not happening.”

Judging by her reaction, she might have been innocent, but she was definitely messing with me. Or was she? I couldn’t be sure! I had no idea!

Help me, Sylphy!

Far away, Sylphy jerked up in her chair.

“What’s wrong?” Said Ira.

“I thought I could feel Kousuke cry out for help...”

Ira grimaced. “We have to hurry.”

“If we can just figure out where he is, then we can get to him. Please, Ira.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

After I fought off Lime’s innocent advances, we finally arrived at the vein of clay and I got to digging. Unfortunately, since I still didn’t have any iron tools, I had to make do with my partner in crime: my stone shovel. Lime was very encouraging.

“Yay, digging!”

I jammed my shovel into the breach in the stone wall, revealing the clay beneath. Next to me, Lime transformed a part of her body and dug at the wall as well.

Er, wait a second.

“Um, Lime?”

“Hm? Yes?” she sing-songed.

“What are you doing?” I asked, and she just looked at me quizzically.

“I mean, you’re having no trouble at all digging without a shovel, with just... you.”

“It’s not hard. I can even dig right through Holy Kingdom armor.”

“O-oh.” That was impressive. “Well, uh, I’m counting on you.”

“Kay!”

Lime extruded multiple shovel-shaped bits of herself and dug away at the clay wall with a speed on par with my own iron shovel. I should’ve expected no less from the resident physical powerhouse. This was wild.

Together we dug for a bit, but Lime had me beat for speed. If I had my old mithril shovel, I’d be doing way better. I’d even settle for my iron shovel!

We’d been digging for an hour, and she’d dug out multiple times more than I had, when we ran out of clay to dig.

“I win!”

“Don’t think this is over...” I grumbled.

“But it is!”

Yeah, it totally was.

But hey, I’d also spent time collecting the clay she dug up. And I was using a stone shovel. Of course I was gonna lose. I wasn’t even using ten percent of my true power!

“I’m winning next time,” I promised out loud.

“Then I’ll get even more serious next time!” she said.

Was she saying that her unnatural speed was just a casual effort? Well, hell, okay.

“Are we done?”

“I think this is enough for now,” I said. “It’s not like I’m going to be making a defensive wall or anything.”

“Okie dokie. Then are we going home?”

“Sure. Let’s go for a little walk and head home.”

“Kay! Little walk! Little home!” Lime wrapped her body around mine so quickly that I couldn’t even protest. “I know you’re tired, so I’ll carry you!”

She shaped herself like a throne fit for a king. Once again, the back of my

head was pressed up against, well, yeah. I tried very hard not to focus on it. It was just a part of her slime body.

“Let’s a-go-go!”

Lime slid off along the tunnel with me atop her. It was a really comfy ride, and pretty unique as far as experiences go. It was like...a wheelchair with no shaking or bumping whatsoever.

“How is it?”

“Super comfy. Can you go faster?”

She was moving about as fast as a brisk walk.

“Yup, yup! Whoosh!”

“Whooooa!”

Lime sped off ahead. It was at least bicycle speed, and since the tunnels weren’t that big, it felt especially fast to me.

“Amazing! This is awesome!”

“Heehee, I can go faster!”

“Oh, no, maybe we shouldn’t...” I started to say, but then I stopped to scream.

Lime zoomed onward at a wild speed. I still had Bess’s magic torch, but its range was small, and it couldn’t light the way ahead of us. We were speeding through a tight tunnel in near-total darkness.

So, you know, I was terrified.

We came straight up to a wall before turning sharply. Lime absorbed the inertia with her soft body, but that didn’t make this any less scary.

“Too fast, too fast! This is freaking me out!”

“But it was just getting good!” Lime sounded confused by my terror.

Lime might very well be a speed demon. I might not have heard of a slime like that, but the silver slimes from that one famous RPG kinda fit the bill. Which made me think of how I still didn’t get why metal slimes in that world were so weak... Well, maybe they technically weren’t weak, but they did have weirdly

mediocre combat capabilities. With their speed and their tough bodies, they should have been able to kill someone with one body blow.

If Lime and the other girls were in a game, they'd probably be super powerful hidden bosses. Either that, or they'd be gimmick enemies that you had to run from because you couldn't actually beat them. Or like, you beat them, but they regenerate endlessly or something.

The fact that they were so friendly really was fortunate. Being with them meant I was as safe as could be.

“Are we nearly there?” I asked.

“Yep!”

At one point, Lime attempted to pass through a metal grate while I was still sitting on top of her, but other than that, we made it back to the girls' room with little trouble. Bess and Poiso welcomed us back. Lime was still pretty hyped up from the trip home.

“I’m home!” she sang. “We went on a fun walk!”

“It was...pretty thrilling.”

“I put Kousuke on top of me and went zoom!”

The two slime girls looked at me with something like pity. They must've already put together what happened. I really wish they'd have warned me earlier. That was legit terrifying.

“Did you gather what you needed?” Bess asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I have more than enough clay now, so I’m going to get right to building a simple furnace.”

“I see. Then I’ll prepare the fuel.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

I opened the crafting menu, selected “simple furnace,” and got to crafting.

Simple Furnace: Animal Hide × 3, Stone × 20, Clay × 5, Wood × 5

Great, I have more than enough materials. I quickly crafted the furnace and placed it in a corner of the room while the slime girls oohed and ahed over my work. The only thing I'd really done in front of them until then was pull food out of my inventory. Although I did show Bess and Lime how I stored stuff, if that counted.

"This is a furnace," I explained. "I can do basic ironworks with this."

"I...see?" Lime said. Poiso was more direct.

"I don't really understand what's so great about it."

"I figured." From their perspective, it really was just a tiny furnace.

Bess handed me a red, luminescent charcoal briquette.

"Try using this."

"Th-thanks... Is this part of your body?

"Correct."

It was surprisingly heavy, and if it burned as well as charcoal, then it would be a great source of heat.

"I'd be honored to use it," I said.

"There shouldn't be any toxic gas if you burn it, but be careful nonetheless," Poiso told me.

"Got it!"

Poiso nodded, and after taking a moment, I opened the furnace's menu and put Bess's magic fuel into the fuel slot. It displayed as "Bess's Magic Fuel" in my inventory. Clearly not normal then. The girls asked how it was going.

"Looking good! Just the one of these will keep things burning for three hours. I've used lots of types of fuel up until now, but yours is by far the most effective."

"Heehee, obviously." Bess was giggling and in a great mood, undoubtedly because I was complimenting something she made.

Pressing on, I took the assorted metals I'd retrieved from the sewer and stuffed them into the materials slot, melting them down into iron. Since the fire was so hot, it went especially fast. Once I had enough of the stuff melted down, I crafted an anvil and a hammer and got to making some iron tools. The slime girls seemed entranced by the way the anvil, hammer, steel pickaxe, shovel, and axe materialized out of nowhere.

"You can really make things this easily? Incredible."

"All shiny and pretty!"

"I thought you were exaggerating when you said you were supporting the Liberation Army's soldiers on your own, but I can see now that you're probably right."

When the tools were made, I started crafting small tools so I could move on to the work table.

Basic Tool Box—Materials: Sturdy Wooden Box × 1, Metal Tools × 8, Mechanical Part × 2

Vise—Materials: Iron × 20, Mechanical Part × 10

Basic Workbench—Materials: Wood × 10, Nail × 40, Vise × 1, Basic Toolbox × 1

I combined everything together to make a basic workbench. I'd have liked to upgrade all of this, but...

Workbench Upgrade: Mechanical Part × 10, Steel Spring × 5, Leather Strap × 2

Simple Furnace Upgrade: Animal Hide × 5, Brick × 50, Whetstone × 3, Machine Component × 10

"I don't have enough," I said.

“For what?” Poiso asked.

“I want to up the speed of my workbench, but in order to do that I need to upgrade my furnace, and to do *that* I need whetstones. Plus, I just don’t have enough iron or skins.”

I had tons of clay to make bricks out of, but I didn’t get enough skins or leather cord from the pile of junk. I had lots of metals, but I’d used just about all of them to make the basic tools and the simple furnace.

“I know where you can find iron,” Bess said. “But whetstone...”

“I have an idea,” said Poiso. “I’ll get some for you tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to get the skins from the big rats that wander around nearby,” Lime said apologetically.

“I’m really sorry for leaning on you three so much... I’ll grab something good from my inventory for you to eat today.”

The three of them looked at each other and smiled brightly.

“In that case...” Lime sang.

“I suppose we’ll oblige,” said Bess.

“The world runs on give and take,” Poiso chimed in. “We’ll have our fill tonight.”

“Awesome. Just leave it to me!”

I still had lots of fresh food in my inventory. I was more than prepared.

Was it just me, or were they looking me up and down in an even weirder way than before?

You can’t eat me, ladies. Okay, you probably can, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t.

“Ah...”

“Morning, Kousuke!”

“Good morning.”

“G’morning!”

All three slime girls greeted me when I woke. It felt again like I'd had another weird dream during the night. The three slime girls were gigantic, and they'd picked me up and chewed on me. They took turns, of course.

I wondered if it was because of the hungry looks they gave me... Some folks theorize that sleep is designed to give your brain time to sort through information. Working from that model, it was easy to see how my fear of being eaten and the events of the last few days might have tangled up in each other as I dreamed.

"Y'know," I said, "Having you girls take care of me while I'm naked is a little embarrassing..."

"Well, from our point of view, we're always naked," Poiso pointed out.

"We can't wear clothes," said Bess.

"Equal!" Lime chirped.

"Being equal isn't really the problem here, though..."

Bess had cleaned my clothes for me, and when I grabbed them from her, they were still a bit warm. They felt great to the touch. They lacked that refreshing scent from when Poiso washed them, but they were still pretty great. Once again, I could really see their personalities come through when it came to stuff like this.

"What's the plan for today?" Bess asked me.

"After breakfast, I want to look into that place Poiso mentioned, the one where I might find iron."

"Understood." Poiso nodded. "I'll take you there."

"I'll find some whetstones," said Bess. "And if I turn up anything else of use, I'll bring that home as well."

"I'm gonna be hard at work!"

What sort of work was Lime talking about? When I asked, she mentioned treating the sewer water, patrolling the underground, and guarding the area where the royal family slept. She was going to stay here with her main body and focus on controlling her copies. It sounded super exhausting.

“Lots of work!” she enthused.

“Lime is a hard worker,” Bess said.

“The hardest out of the three of us,” agreed Poiso.

“Seriously?” I’d figured she played around the most, but it seemed I was wrong.

After breakfast, Poiso and I began our journey through the sewer tunnels. As for Lime and Bess, they didn’t need breakfast that morning. I asked them why, and they told me they’d already had plenty of nourishment. Which sounded a little suspect to me. But they got nutrients from processing the sewer water, and they ate gizma meat once a day, so maybe that was enough?

Bess’s behavior left me a bit concerned, as did Poiso’s grin. As for Lime, well, she was always happy-go-lucky, which made her the hardest to read. Poiso noticed me mulling it over while we traveled the tunnels.

“What’s wrong? Something on your mind?”

“Nothing big,” I said. “More importantly, how far is our destination?”

“Not very. It should take less than thirty minutes on foot.”

“Gotcha. Then I suppose this’ll count toward my morning exercise.”

“Precisely. I’d also love to hear about the outside world,” she said.

“Sure. Hm, where should I start...”

I decided to start with everything I’d seen and heard since joining Sylphy’s group. Poiso came off as calm, but she had a strong sense of curiosity. Especially when I was talking about Earth, the planet I came from.

“Your stories are so fascinating...” she said. “When you first saw us, you didn’t seem remotely surprised. But there are no spirits or monsters in your old world, right? So why?”

“Well, slimes and monsters and the like are all ideas we’ve had over there, and there are also lots of different works that have characters who are slimes that take on human form.”

“Characters? Works? What are those?”

“Gaah, how can I explain this...”

This world had fairy tales and myths and that sort of thing. Did they have the concept of a “story” too? When I asked Poiso, it turned out that they did. In which case, an explanation shouldn’t take long.

I gave it my all to try to explain the gist of it.

“In other words...” Poiso said, once I was done. “You’ve seen and heard about beings like us, but only as fictitious beings in a story, which is why you weren’t surprised when you met us. I understand now.”

“Exactly.”

Ugh, I would’ve been able to explain better if I worked in sales back when I was alive. My storytelling skills were pretty dire. Poiso was shaking her head.

“But at the end of the day, something that resembles us is just that: a resemblance,” she said. “The real thing is always completely different.”

“You’re right about that. Ultimately, you can lump everything under ‘slime girls,’ but there are all kinds. On the flip side, because there are all kinds of slime girls, I looked at you ladies and went ‘Oh, they must be this kind,’ instead of freaking out. Mostly.”

“That does make sense.”

There really were lots of different kinds of slime girls. Ones without cores, ones that could or couldn’t produce copies, some that couldn’t talk, some that could only recreate patterns, and some that could reproduce actual clothes perfectly. And anyway, slime girls were just one part of the greater slime taxonomy. They were typically super strong characters with an array of abilities, so in that sense, I was always in a position to accept the girls for whoever or whatever they were.

“But even then, normal humans tend to fear the unfamiliar,” Poiso said.

“Well, yeah, the first time I saw Lime, I totally freaked out,” I admitted. “There are weak and strong types of slimes, right? And if the slime I encountered was violent, I’d end up fleeing through these dark tunnels. But in this case, the first

thing she happened to say was, ‘Delish,’ so.” I shrugged.

“...Good job, Lime.”

If I’d run into Bess or Poiso first, I doubted they’d have carelessly chomped on the gizma meat and proclaimed how delicious it was. First impressions really were everything. If the first time I encountered the slime girls was as they were turning Holy Kingdom soldiers into mincemeat, I probably wouldn’t have been this chill around them either. Lime’s “delish” moment did a lot to lower my guard.

“We’ve arrived,” Poiso said.

“Oh, for real?”

Just ahead of us was a wide open space, and I could hear the sound of running water. What was this place? It just barely had the smell of sewer water.

“This is the castle’s underground sewer,” she said. “One of the septic tanks.”

“But the water looks pretty clean to me, even if it smells a little bit off.”

“Courtesy of yours truly.”

“Nice.”

As we talked, Poiso lowered part of her body into the tank. My light didn’t reach down there, so I couldn’t see what her body was doing underwater, but by the look on her face and the way she was tilting her head, she seemed to be searching for something.

“What’s up?”

“Lots of things are washed down here from the castle,” she explained. “And there’s a fair bit of metal in there.”

“Oooh.”

“If we wanted to, we could melt it down, but it’s a pain in the butt. That’s why we try to catch as much of it as we can in these tanks so that it doesn’t affect the flow. Once enough of it has built up, we absorb it all in one go.”

“Like the junk pile Bess showed me.”

“Precisely. Ever since the Holy Kingdom took over, their waste management

has been awful. I can't tell you how many times I've looked at their trash and thought, 'why would you throw this away?'"

"Such as?"

"Tax forms, suspicious delivery records, even human and demi-human corpses."

"Whoa. That's awful."

They were throwing away some awful stuff... And none of it should get dumped into a sewer, dammit!

Just then, Poiso pulled something up from the water. It was a hard-to-describe brown clump of...something. Poiso must have compressed it into a block shape while she was fishing it out.

"What is that?"

"Something metal that sank to the bottom of the tank."

"Huh." I considered it. "Can I even use this...?"

"Give it a try."

"Might as well, right? Can't know unless I give it a shot."

When I put it into my inventory, it was labeled Bog Iron Ore. Bog? Er, this wasn't a bog. It was a septic tank. But since it displayed as ore, Bog Iron must be a type. I'd be the first to admit my ignorance when it comes to all that stuff... Come to think of it, I'd heard of metals forming at the bottom of lakes, ponds, and swamps. Although that stuff was definitely formed through a different process than this, it had to be kinda the same thing. And one of the slime girls was involved, so it made no sense for me to try and use my old world common sense.

"What's the matter?" Poiso asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. I think I can use this, so could you grab more?"

"All right. Just leave the lifting to me."

Poisos whistled as she fished up brown clump after brown clump, like it was the catch of the day, and I loaded each unidentifiable clump of so-called ore

into my inventory. Was this stuff gonna smell when I melted it down? That was a little worrying.

The actual process of procuring the stuff was done in about thirty minutes. I had quite a lot, but it was impossible to say how much iron I was going to get from it all. I asked Poiso if she'd gotten absolutely everything out of the water.

"Yes," she said. "But if you'd like, there are three other tanks. They're much farther away, though."

"I see... If this isn't enough, I'll have to look into going out there."

"All right, are we going home then?"

"Yeah. I want to hurry and give this stuff a try," I said.

"What are you making next?"

"Let's see... Parts to upgrade my workbench and smithing station first. After that, I want to make some weapons. Not like I'm gonna be able to make the bowstring I'd need for a crossbow, so a gun might be the best option here."

"What is...a gun?" Poiso asked.

"Oh, it's a weapon from my old world."

On our way back to the slime girls' room, I told her about the world I came from. I had mentioned making weapons and such when I told the girls about the Liberation Army, but hadn't gone into much detail. Since Poiso was so interested, I figured that I might as well give her a full rundown.

Poiso was a tremendously good listener, so it just felt good talking to her.

It turned out that the bog iron ore was an incredibly useful material. The thing was that it was pretty low-quality, or at least after melting it down, it wasn't just iron, but also copper, silver, gold, lead, and zinc. That kind of thing would usually lead to a few problems. For normal people. In my case, though, I had no issue using low-quality ore. I used my furnace to exchange it all for various resources, which allowed me to use each metal individually. Meaning my pool of options had just *exploded*. Perfect.

"I should be all set for iron," I announced after I finished processing the materials.

"I'm glad to hear it." Poiso smiled. She'd been concerned about whether the ore would be usable or not.

Just then, Bess came home lugging an overstuffed bag.

"I'm home! I've brought you whetstones!"

Bess placed the bag on the stone floor and began pulling out whetstones, leather horse saddles from who knew where, looped leather straps, clean cloth, and a whole lot of other stuff.

"This stuff is incredible," I said, looking over it all. "Where did you get this from?"

"The Holy Kingdom's barracks, stables, and smithing workshop."

"You stole it all?"

"I'd prefer if you called it taking back what's ours," said Bess. "They're the ones who stole the castle and all its things in the first place."

It had been twenty years, so I thought the whetstones and saddles were probably things the Holy Kingdom brought in, but whatever. No point sweating the details.

"I should be able to make an even better workbench now. Thanks, Bess."

"I can't do this sort of thing often, so please keep that in mind."

"You got it."

If Bess did this sort of thing all the time, the Holy Kingdom would eventually wise up. Although we could cause a pretty nasty disturbance in the process...

Ah, but Covi would probably notice any large-scale sort of theft. He probably already knew I'd escaped.

"Did anyone see you?" I asked Bess.

"Not that I'm aware of," she said. "Normally when we're spotted, things get crazy."

I hope Cushi hadn't noticed... He was never one to let his guard down, that guy. I decided to plan my next moves under the assumption that he knew what's up. Anyway, Bess did an incredible job. I couldn't use the saddles as saddles, but I could break them down for materials.

There was one other thing I couldn't use as is.

"So, hm." I took the gold I'd extracted from the ore, turned it into an ingot, and played with it in my hand. "Gold's pretty worthless right now..." It was heavy and soft, so it might work pretty well as ammunition, but that was getting into hobby territory. Piercing gold rounds would be kinda cool, though.

"So shiny!" Lime enthused as she watched me toss the ingot around.

"I heard that in the Empire, gold and silver bars are used as currency," I said.

"Yeah, near the borders of the Empire," said Poiso. "They even show up in the Holy Kingdom."

"Wow... Well, even if I molded this stuff into bars, I'd still have no means of using it."

"Hello, untrue!" Lime said. "You could go to town and go shopping!"

"No, he couldn't..." Bess started to say, but then stopped herself. "Wait, that's not a bad idea."

"Huh?"

Bess agreeing with Lime's ideas sounded like dangerous territory to me.

"I'm against the idea," said Poiso. "It's true that Kousuke shouldn't be found easily if he's properly disguised. But if he is caught, that's it. It's over."

"I suppose you're right," Bess sighed. "But, if it's done after he's cooled, it should be fine. About a week... No, ten days would be enough for them to think he's dead."

"Er." I waved to get their attention. "I'm not following this at all, FYI."

"The Holy Kingdom fears us, right?" Lime sang.

"They think we're unintelligent slimes, and that you fled into our domain, right?" Bess said.

"They know full well that we live down here, so what do you think they assume will happen to an escaped prisoner in our territory?" Poiso asked.

"They'd...think I was dead."

"Exactly." Poiso nodded. Bess was saying that if we waited an additional ten days, they'd be totally sure I'd been killed. Then I'd be able to go out in disguise without raising suspicion.

"But the risk is still higher than zero," Bess admitted.

"Exactly," said Poiso. "It's not something Kousuke should do unless there's something he absolutely needs."

"Yeah," I said. There was no point taking needless risks. "But at least we have it as an option, so I'll make preparations just in case."

"Sounds good," Lime said, clearly excited at the prospect.

After giving it some thought, I decided I was safest passing myself off as a mercenary or an adventurer back from the eastern front.

"I'm a human male, after all. If I'm going to pretend to be a lone traveler, the easiest way to avoid suspicion is to stick with that."

"You should think of a proper cover story," Poiso said. Bess nodded thoughtfully.

"What if you're going around looking for a position as a military officer, since you've raised enough money on your own?"

"That works," said Poiso. "And with your traveling expenses just about used up, you're exchanging the Imperial currency you saved to celebrate."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed.

Lime kept quiet while we hashed out my cover story. She was a bit busy being a chair... Or more precisely, she was holding me while she napped. I thought that it must be incredible, being able to change your form freely. And man, it felt like I was enveloped in overwhelming maternal energy or something.

Lime was considerably larger than me just then, and it really felt like she was being careful not to hurt me... Like she was protecting me or something.

“...”

I got the feeling that Poiso and Bess were giving me suspicious glares. But surely I must have been imagining things.

“What’s your plan for today?” Bess asked.

“Good question,” I said. “Lemme see...”

Workbench Upgrade: Machine Part × 10, Steel × 5, Leather Strap × 2

Simple Furnace Upgrade: Animal Hide × 5, Brick × 50, Whetstone × 3, Machine Part × 10

I had clay, so I could make bricks. And since Bess got me leather and whetstones, I could upgrade my simple furnace as well. Once that furnace became a smithing station, I’d be able to make iron plate screws, so then I could mod my workbench too. The problem was that it’d take time to make all the parts.

“I think I’m going to stay here for today and just work. I have everything I need, so I’m going to focus on upgrading my workbench and furnace.”

“All right,” Bess said. “Then we’ll focus on monitoring our copies from here.”

“Yup!” Poiso said. “We’ll do recon!”

Once they’d said their piece, they both closed their eyes like Lime had. It looked like they were sleeping, but it must have meant they were focused on their copies.

To avoid disturbing them, I broke free from Lime’s warm embrace and opened my furnace and workbench craft menu. First thing’s first: mass producing bricks and machine parts.

Although, I do have some free time on my hands...

Generally speaking, crafting didn’t take much effort from me. I just reserved the number of things I needed and then waited. Once the process was started, I had nothing to do.

I gazed at my status screen, but since I hadn't been in any direct combat recently, my level hadn't gone up. No new achievements either. I thought I'd maybe have picked up some achievements related to my relationships with women, but sadly not. No new ones related to building, and I also didn't have my brand new workbench... Urgh, being in a holding pattern without being able to make an enchantment workbench sucked.

But finally, my parts were finished, so I quickly moved on to upgrading my furnace.

And then the light nearly blinded me.

"Whoa, wh-what the?!"

"It was so bright!"

"What's going on?"

The slime girls all startled out of their peaceful-looking reveries. *Sorry, ladies.*

"When I upgrade the furnace or workbench, it shines super brightly. I totally forgot."

"How obnoxious..." Bess said. "Are your eyes okay?"

"If I just let them rest, they'll be fine."

I stared at the light straight-on before my eyes recovered without any issues. Already, I could feel them going back to normal, so I was sure it'd be fine.

"This is the real deal," said Poiso as she looked the station over curiously. She'd get along well with Ira, I'd bet.

Lime hummed sleepily and slid over to wrap herself around me again before nodding off. I looked over at Bess and Poiso, helpless.

"I can't get out."

"She's concerned because you were doing something dangerous," said Poiso. "Just let her hold you."

"It wasn't actually dangerous..."

It just flashed for a second... But whatever. I was just close enough that I could

still control the smithing station and workbench, so it was fine. Next, I'd make some screws and work on my disguise. A medium-length, tough-ish sword and a round shield made of wood and metal should be fine. As for armor... A chainmail and light armor set would do the trick.

Keeping it real, I'd love to make everyone's beloved bastard sword or a two-handed sword, but I didn't have the muscles to heft something like that. It was already a struggle for me to use the standard infantryman's short sword. Plus, this was just a disguise. I wasn't going to fight with it, so it made sense to keep it light.

I already decided to make a gun for any actual emergencies. Making bullets was gonna be an issue, though. I would need to make gunpowder, which meant I'd need a mixing table and a huge amount of glass. And to make glass, I'd need sand. Hopefully I could break apart dirt to get as much of that as I needed. I had a fair bit of dirt in my inventory already.

Putting that issue aside, the next problem was manure... But since the sewer was right outside the door, I should be able to gather some. I'd ask Poiso and Bess about it later.

Now that I had my facilities in order, the next step for me was sussing out how to get in touch with the others and devising a proper escape plan. The former was definitely the priority for the immediate future, which meant I needed a golem communicator... But I didn't have any mithril. I wondered if I could swap in pure gold or silver for mithril copper alloy...

I should talk this over with the girls. I don't know jack about magic.

POV: SLIME GIRLS

“DAMN IT! Curse them all!”

The man swore up and down in his radiant, gorgeous office... Actually, it'd be better described as his tacky, nouveau riche office. The man's name was Bullington Sail Ortlinde, and he was a clergyman, bedecked in a glittering priest's robe of white silk and gold thread. A man in his position was expected to be incorruptible, a beacon of integrity. The truth was that he was a simple, common-born man who came up from nothing—not in itself damning, but his endless social climb left him with one true god. In spite of his fierce preaching in Adol's name, money was his only master. And everybody knew it.

Bullington Sail Ortlinde was in a foul mood. It was all too clear why. The Liberation Army that appeared out of nowhere from the Black Forest beyond the Omitt Badlands had given him nothing but grief for the last few months.

It all started with attacks and escapes throughout the villages and rock salt mines near the southern border. Some unknown force struck Holy Kingdom soldiers during the night and wiped them out. Villages went silent, and the demi-humans that worked

there were all whisked away. At first the prevailing belief was that it had to be the work of some large-scale mercenary squad or bandit group. I personally found it odd to treat mercenaries and bandits equally, but apparently the clergymen of the Holy Kingdom didn't see much of a difference.

As the situation became clearer to him, he made a piggish face. Actually, that was insulting to pigs. But for brevity's sake, I decided to call him Father Swine. Had a good ring to it.

Back to the topic at hand. The situation was so bad that it was enough to exasperate him. As it turned out, the demi-humans weren't taken away—they left under their own power. The towns had not been taken over—the demi-humans that lived there took everything with them when they left.

In other words, it was a rebellion. That was Father Swine's conclusion. Nothing he and his hadn't already dealt with—they'd put down the revolt three years prior. Regardless, that victory came at a cost.

"Again?! Those damned demi-humans! I'll make sure they never think of staging a rebellion ever again!"

Father Swine sent out a squad of hunters immediately. The rebels had killed dozens of soldiers, but at the end of the day they were just slaves without proper weapons. They'd stand no chance against properly trained and equipped soldiers. Or so he'd reasoned.

But his underling, who was also the general of his armies, made a frustrated face. Of course he did. The report he received from the scene suggested that there must have been someone or many someones with training who were involved in the escapes.

"It would be dangerous to assume that this is just a slave rebellion," said the general.

Father Swine smirked. What gibberish was this man spouting?

The slaves might have scavenged up a few weapons from the soldiers they'd killed, but they were still just slaves, broken on the wheel of hard labor. They were likely too exhausted to fight well, and their morale and energy would not last long. So said the head of the Holy Knights, who did not get along with the general. Father Swine concurred, forcing his man to back down.

That was the beginning of everything.

Nobody doubted that the escaped slaves would be eliminated by the hunter squad, but an unbelievable report came in from one of the border fortresses between the Kingdom of Merinard and the Omitt Badlands.

The squad had been eliminated, damages and casualties were high, and few soldiers remained. They were asking for further orders.

Father Swine was befuddled. Even if the escaped demi-humans numbered about a thousand at that point, it should've been impossible for a near-equally sized group of armed soldiers to lose to them, especially in such a dramatic fashion. It was true that demi-humans typically had greater physical and

magical strength than humans, but a human with magic skills could match or even greatly surpass them. And they were *still* just slaves.

And yet the Holy Kingdom...lost? Was eliminated? What manner of joke was this?

But since this was an official report, it had to be the truth. Hard to believe without seeing with one's own eyes, but there was no way that Father Swine could go out there himself. Instead, he ordered his general and the head of the Holy Knights to assemble an army and eliminate the escapees.

It took time to muster the troops and gather supplies, but eventually the five-thousand-strong military force began to move. Apparently, they spent an exorbitant sum just getting the operation off the ground. Father Swine was in a terrible mood, but there was little doubt that five thousand troops would get the job done, so he whispered to himself. I agreed.

The results spoke for themselves. Most of the soldiers sent out did not return. The few soldiers who did manage to arrive at the border fortress were deeply scarred both physically and mentally, incapable of properly explaining what had happened. The few bits gleaned from interrogations were that an amazing fortress had been built in the dead center of the badlands, and a force called the Liberation Army resided there. This fortress created a massive explosion that had taken out the Holy Kingdom's army.

What happened after that? When the survivors were asked this very question, they entered a state of confusion and couldn't speak properly.

When the news reached Father Swine, he collapsed. It would have been nice if he'd just died then and there, but unfortunately the world was not so kind.

And so, the Liberation Army's march began. They took each border fortress with impossible speed, setting off rumors of the demi-human slaves' escape that spread throughout the south. To spread further, even, deeper within the Kingdom.

Losses on the Holy Kingdom's side were great, and it wouldn't be long before Father Swine was made to step down as ruler of the Kingdom of Merinard. Father Swine had struggled in vain to crush any outgoing information so that the Holy Kingdom wouldn't learn of the current situation. But nothing could

stop people from talking.

One day, when Father Swine was suffering from stomach pains from the stress, a single carriage appeared from the south and entered the castle. The carriage bore the Holy Kingdom's spies—not Father Swine's men, but the underlings of the cardinal back home.

In the group were a single fox man, twelve humans, and one restrained man.

According to the fox man, the prisoner was a person of great import in the Liberation Army. He didn't reveal any further details, but since the cardinal's own Saint would be coming herself to retrieve the prisoner, the fox man wanted Father Swine to make absolutely sure he didn't flee or get recovered by the Liberation Army.

Greasy sweat trailed down Father Swine's face as he nodded. The Saint who would be coming was known as the "Saint of Truth," as she had been given a blessing from God that allowed her to see through lies. Her boss was the cardinal himself, Father Swine's political enemy.

Father Swine had his back against the wall.

On a personal level, I found myself curious about this supposed person of great import, so I sent one of my copies to his jail cell. The fox man had said that if Father Swine were to imprison the man, he must absolutely keep him blindfolded and with hands and feet tied, both out of his direct line of sight. He must always have someone watching him, as well. If Father Swine couldn't manage it, the fox man even volunteered to assign his own people to the task.

But Father Swine not only did not listen, he turned down the offer for help as well. The fox man attempted to protest, but Father Swine used his status to quiet him and treated his prize like any other normal prisoner. He refused to listen to the fox man's warnings. He was far more focused on how to make it through the Holy Saint's upcoming visit.

For a time, the prisoner surveyed the inside of his room and what he could see beyond it. I didn't know how he did it, but he made the cuffs around his wrists and ankles disappear instantly. There was no magic at work here, I didn't think. So how did he do it?

Next, the man took the wood from the bed, pulled the straw from his pillow, and started gathering stones from the stone wall of the cell. Suddenly, he had a crude stone axe in his hands. I didn't understand. *How did he do that? When did he make it?* My head was filled with questions.

"Heeeeeyo! Anyone there? I'm Kousuke, fresh meat!"

Apparently, his name was Kousuke. He seemed to be checking to see if there were other prisoners, but unfortunately he and I were the only ones here. The jailer who tossed him in here probably wouldn't be coming back any time soon.

Satisfied with the lack of response, the man began slamming his stone axe against the stone floor, making quite the racket. With the jailer absent, there was no one to hear the man's work.

What was he doing?

"Unfortunately, that sort of plan won't work on me," the man whispered to himself. What was he talking about? I just didn't understand.

The prisoner continued to slam away at the floor as my head filled with doubt and confusion, and eventually he began to destroy it. I didn't get it. How could such a crude axe break through a stone floor?

The man proceeded to dig his way through the floor, completely broke apart the bed, erased everything in the cell, and somehow managed to light a torch before he entered the hole he'd made. *Where did he even get that thing?*

After digging for a while longer, I don't know how, but he managed to seal the hole in the floor behind him. I'd been left behind. It was more than likely that he'd arrive at the sewers below, so I followed him. Eventually I managed to catch up and make contact.

A week had passed since then.

We were getting along well. It turned out that he had a mysterious power that allowed him to make all kinds of things, and he was using it to prepare for his escape.

"Ngggh, this is bad! Terrible! What should I do...?"

Greasy sweat continued to roll down Father Swine's pallid face. Honestly, I'd rather not have to look at him, but since he was a top-ranking individual, I couldn't not monitor him. Granted, he probably wouldn't hold onto that position for very long.

Thanks to the Liberation Army's expansion, the Holy Kingdom completely lost the southern region of Merinard. Demi-humans were trickling out of the Kingdom's holdings, fleeing south. On occasion, citizens of the Holy Kingdom have fled to the capital as refugees, though not many. When he learned of Kousuke's escape, the fox man and his troops immediately left for the north. Either they were meeting up with the Saint, heading to the cardinal to turn in a report, or fleeing in fear of retaliation from Kousuke or the princess. I wasn't sure which.

It was also confirmed that Kousuke fled into the sewers. Duh. Given that only a single spot in his prison cell was brand new, of course that looked suspicious. As for how he did it, nobody seemed to have a clue, but upon destroying the new floor, they found a path running into the sewer system. They think we murdered him ages ago.

The castle administration already brought in an earth mage to properly seal up the hole in his cell.

"At this rate... At this rate, I..."

The southern region of the Kingdom of Merinard was in the hands of the Liberation Army, half the soldiers he'd received from the Holy Kingdom were dead, and the important prisoner that the cardinal's spies brought him was gone. Father Swine was still desperately trying to figure out a way to make it through this, but realistically: he's screwed. The Saint was coming on orders from the Holy King passed down to her cardinal, and every lie and misdirection Father Swine had ever told would go up in smoke in her presence. It was a full-blown inquisition.

If that panned out, Father Swine could say goodbye to his pearls, and most likely he'd go to the chopping block, just like any other pig. The man was as corrupt as they came, and we even had the paperwork that showed as much. It would be kinda fun to leave some of those files in easy-to-spot places in the

castle.

Anyway, I had no idea how the Holy Kingdom reacted after Kousuke's breakout, but I doubted they'd sit still. They were bound to make a move. Until that happened, we had to get our new friend back to where he came from, as quickly as possible.

It honestly pained me to think about. I didn't know why, but the three of us were strongly drawn to him. It must have had something to do with him being a Fabled Visitor. I'll confess we've done a little bit of teasing while he slept. I thought he noticed, but he didn't say anything. Since he had relationships with the princess, the court mage, and the harpies, he was probably not too bothered about adding three more to the mix, and we've responded in kind.

There was a knock at the door. Father Swine trembled in surprise. Apparently, the time had come for him to go to the butcher's block.

I had to make sure to see things through to the end and let Kousuke know everything. And then at the end of the day, I would be the only bed he needed. Since he seemed to like my pillow, I was sure he'd be satisfied.

"Lime's the smartest one of us all," Bess told me.

"She's controlling an enormous number of copies at any given time," said Poiso. "Far more than either of us."

"She's multitasking so much that it causes slowdown, huh."

"Slowdown?" Lime said, tilting her head at me. How adorable.

They were explaining that Lime knew she wasn't too great with words, so her copy relayed the information she'd gathered to Bess and Poiso, who then relayed the info to me. It took a little while, but we got through it all in the end.

"And so, the leader was stripped of his title and removed from his position as ruler of the Kingdom of Merinard."

"And the Saint has taken his place?" I asked.

"Provisionally!"

“I see, I see.” I nodded. “Well, Lime is definitely today’s MVP.”

“Reward!” Lime beamed with happiness.

“Hm, okay, I’ll do anything within my power,” I said.

“I’ll be your only bed for tonight!”

“Huh?” *That’s* what she wanted? “Okay, I’m fine with that.”

Bess and Poiso sighed and accepted the nighttime arrangement too.

“Yay!”

Lime bounced happily around the room, which led to...well, if this were a PC game, my machine would start making noises like a steam engine from the sudden burst of jiggle physics involved.

Urgh, I wouldn’t give in! I couldn’t! ...Okay, I gave in. I couldn’t help but stare, okay? Too weak.

That night, I went to sleep engulfed in Lime’s embrace. Or at least I tried to.

“Um, Lime? That’s a kinda delicate spot, so... H-hey, wait. No, you can’t!”

“I do it every night.”

“Every night?!”

“You fall asleep so quickly, Kousuke,” she said, like that explained anything.

“I could never sleep while this was happening to me... Uh, Poiso?”

“Whew, it’s getting hot in here!”

Poiso attempted to whistle nonchalantly. A poor attempt, I might add, and coming from her direction, I smelled the usual refreshing scent I always did before nodding off. There was something so cozy about it that always put me to sleep... Wait, was that why...?!

“Kousuke.”

Bess approached me with a resigned look. That was the face she usually made when she helped me out!

“B-Bess?”

“One must know when to give up,” she said.

I was surrounded by three slime girls. I had no hope of holding out against them, and I’d already been absorbed. In the nude. There was nothing I could do.

It had been about a week since that profound evening. I thought the slime girls took that night as a cue to stop playing around, since they stopped with the tricks, as far as I knew. That was to say, I wasn’t being protected by them... Give and take was important, right? Or at least that was how I organized things in my mind since that night.

But it wasn’t like I just messed around that whole time. I made all sorts of things I needed, discussed stuff with the girls, and worked with them to get ready to escape.

“Are you all set?” Poiso asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Pretty much.”

The ore from the septic tanks ended up being super useful. Even though there was no mithril in the mix. If there had been even just a little bit, I could have used it to make a golem core for communications purposes.

“Man, is there really no mithril anywhere? Even just a little?”

“Mm, that was never going to be easy to find,” said Poiso. “Mithril is a super rare material.”

“There’s none in the vaults here?”

“It was taken and shipped back to the Holy Kingdom ages ago,” said Bess.

“I’ll have my vengeance, Holy Kingdom!” I shook my fist at the ceiling.

“Vengeance!” Lime cried.

A blight on my life, even now. I asked the girls if I could maybe substitute for the mithril with some other metals, but apparently it was required for making high-spec magic tools. Bess told me that when it came to the type of magic tools I spoke of, it just wasn’t gonna happen. I had to go into town and get my hands on some kind of mithril product so I could get in touch with Sylphy and

the others. I didn't need much, so even a ring made of mithril, just a normal, non-magical one like a wedding ring or something, would work fine. Even if it'd be pretty pricey.

Mithril rings were very easy to process, so there were a decent number of them floating around. Noblemen and women frequently used them for engagement rings.

My other option was an Adolist talisman: the symbol of their faith, the light cross. To be clear, it wasn't a T shape, but an X shape. As the name implied, it symbolized Adol's light.

The cheapest kind was made of iron, then there was the standard silver, the high class gold, and then the mithril tier. That last one was stored at church facilities.

"I'd rather not go anywhere near the church," I admitted.

"But they're sure to have them," said Bess.

"It's going to be super pricey," Poiso cautioned.

"Necessary expenditure!" Lime sang.

"I suppose I do have plenty of fake Imperial currency to throw around."

A few days prior, Bess got me some real Imperial cash, so I used the gold and silver I had to make decent replicas. Imperial currency took the form of simple rod-shaped metal money. At first glance, they looked like large mahjong chips. But because they were made of gold and silver, they were quite weighty. There were multiple types based on weight for both gold and silver. The hole in the middle visually expressed each rod's weight.

Basically, five gold rods with one hole and one silver rod with five holes were about equal in weight. That meant that any changes in weight were visibly recognizable, so you knew when the value decreased.

I believed this was called currency by weight. Actually, since this was based on quality consistency, the number of holes represented quantity, so this was more like currency by table? Ergh, but ultimately the weight was measured over the counter, so maybe it *was* currency by weight? I had no clue! Whatever, it

didn't really matter. As long as I could use the stuff.

"All that's left is equipment?"

"Yeah..."

My cover story was basically unchanged: I was back from the battlefields between the Holy Kingdom and the Empire, on the hunt for employment in the Kingdom of Merinard. Fortunately, there was an actual rebellion happening in Merinard, so there was nothing strange about a mercenary ranging out this far following the rumors.

Here was the thing. If I was going to be a mercenary, I needed to have the look and equipment to pass as one.

First up was the classic: a sword.

A somewhat wide short sword. A two-handed sword? A great sword? Man, those were all super cool. But I liked to stick with something light. Including the handle, the sword was slightly shorter than my arm. Long swords were too difficult to swing around. Since I made it with my own smithing station, it was extremely high quality. Probably.



“Next up is a shield,” I said.

“Very normal,” commented Bess.

“Normal and simple,” said Poiso. “And simple is best.”

It was a round shield made from wood and leather that had been reinforced with metal, the type of shield you could find anywhere. On the underside were slots to store up to two throwing daggers, but other than that, it was totally unremarkable. Oh, and it had a belt so that I could wear it on my back while I walked around.

“Now I need a spear.”

“Main weapon?” asked Poiso.

“Bingo.”

At the end of the day, spears were extremely useful weapons. You could attack enemies from a distance, and you could throw them. They ruled, to be honest. No killing tool was more consistently trustworthy in all of human history. I’d never seen one used on the battlefield, but I’d heard they were more common than swords.

Trying it out for myself, I was impressed by how it felt. Maybe pears were my thing.

“Your posture still needs work,” said Poiso.

“You girls are a tough audience.”

“I’m the toughest!” Lime proclaimed.

Someone who called themselves a mercenary but couldn’t wield a sword or a spear was just gonna look like a fool, so over the last few days, the slime girls taught me some basics.

I was initially hesitant to point a blade at them, but they were slimes, after all. I could cut or stab them and it’d be no big deal. They were actually the perfect sparring partners in that sense. Also, they were mega strong. Attacks came flying at me from impossible angles, and they tossed me around over and over again. *Ow...*

“Healing magic!” Lime chirped.

“We can all use it,” said Bess, “so you’re golden.”

“I can easily make medicines for you,” Poiso added.

“How about you all take it a little easier on me instead?” I asked.

“We are taking it easy!”

“Someone save me!” I cried, but there was nobody around to pity me.

If nothing else, I needed to get good enough to dispel any doubt that I was a mercenary. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to protect myself, and the girls wouldn’t let me leave the sewer then because it’d be too dangerous.

They were strict, but incredibly kind, and I could literally feel that in my bones.

Using command actions, I feinted moving forward and then slid back before surging forward with a thrust to perform a double jump attack and input a dash attack.

“You move so strangely...” Poiso said, perplexed.

“Buahaha! I ain’t gonna get beat down forever!”

That tactic worked the first time, but after that they had no problems dealing with it.

“We know your tricks now, though,” Bess said before tossing me over again.

“Kerblagh?!”

“That charge of yours is great for a kill against first-time enemies,” said Bess.

“If you can use it in pieces, it’s not bad for attacking and dodging,” added Poiso. “It messes with your opponent’s grasp on range just enough.”

“But it won’t work on us!” Lime sang.

“I think it’s unfair the way you girls just blanket the field with attacks.”

If my sliding movement messed with their range, then they could just shower a wider range with attacks, launching a wave of spearing tentacles and stabbing my poor defenseless hide to bits. It was enough to knock me clean off my feet

and send me tumbling. I was one giant bruise.

Another week went by in which I was tossed all over, and little by little my hand-to-hand combat skill rose.

...Actually, there was no notification like that on my status or skill menu. No change to my achievements, either. I put all that effort into combat training, but because I hadn't killed anything yet, my level didn't go up. You'd think I'd get something for living underground for so many days, but nope, nada. It'd be great if I could pick up some night vision or something else useful, but the world wasn't so kind.

"All that's left is my trump card," I concluded.

"You mean that thing that makes the crazy noise, right?" asked Lime.

"Yup."

I pulled out a long gun equipped with a long, curved magazine from my inventory. It was likely the most famous assault rifle in the world, and it used 7.62 x 39 mm iron bullets. This was the modded version, because why not?

It was very easy to mass produce, it was tough, and it hit like a truck. I picked this particular gun just in case I ran up on a seriously well-armored target. A handgun might not be able to pierce iron armor.

And yes, an automatic rifle was difficult to justify because of the high cost. My ability to produce bullets wouldn't be enough to keep tens, hundreds, or thousands of people equipped. But for one person? That was a different story. I could manage enough bullets for myself. Which meant it made perfect sense to prioritize over abilities, firepower, toughness, and ease of use.

This particular gun fulfilled all my needs: lots of bullets, automatic, used magazines so it was easy to reload, and it had enough kick to punch through damn near anything. It wasn't the most common military weapon in the world in the Guinness Book of World Records for nothing. It got picked because it was a strong, dependable choice.

I wasn't able to make gunpowder from unprocessed sewer water, but thanks to some trial and error with Poiso, I did make a ton from partially processed junk. Needless to say, I also made some hand grenades. Why not have multiple

aces up my sleeve?

“That thing’s absurd,” said Bess.

“I should hope so!” I answered.

“It won’t work on us!”

“Nothing does,” I told Lime. She grinned in response as she jiggled around.

Magic and fire were just about the only things that did have an effect on them. A large explosion might be able to wipe them off the face of the planet, but as a human who can only attack them physically, I could never win.

“It’s been two weeks since you ladies brought me here, and I’m finally ready...”

“Then you’re going tomorrow?” asked Bess.

“Yeah. I’m gonna check out the city,” I replied, nodding.

“Be careful,” she said. “It’s over if you get yourself caught.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t need to get us any gifts!” said Lime.

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to buy you all something.”

“We just want you to come back safely!”

Bess and Poiso nodded in agreement with her.

“That’d be the best gift of all,” Poiso said.

“Don’t worry, I will.”

I had to be careful now. Tomorrow, I’d be heading into the capital city at last. I’d get my hands on what mithril I could find and come home safe. If possible, I’d also like to get a handle on the current situation out in the world, but I wasn’t gonna push my luck. Not the time for that.

Everything depended on tomorrow.

“Equipment check!”

Lime raised her hand with a big smile on her face and made her proclamation. “Armor, good! Helmet, good! Bag, good! Sword, spear, and shield, good!”

I was wearing leather armor with iron plating in the important spots. At first glance, my helmet seemed perfectly ordinary, but it was actually a rather nice piece of work with a red tassel that drew the eye. Hmm... Should I stand out like that? Well, I was supposed to be a mercenary. If I didn't stand out in some respect, it'd be even more unnatural. Plus, y'know, I looked fresh to death.

“Wallet?” Lime asked.

“The main one is under the armor, secondary one is in my bag.”

Most of the money was in my main wallet, while my secondary one held small coinage and silver. Those were all found in the sewers, and Poiso and Bess stored them before they rusted. If I only had Imperial currency in my wallet, people would question how I'd survived out and about, so I asked them for some randoms.

How did I pay for it? Use your imagination.

“Recite your backstory,” Bess ordered me.

“I'm a mercenary from the east,” I rattled off. “I'm looking for work or a battlefield.”

The story remained unchanged from our first discussions. If anyone asked me for more details, I was ready to provide them.

“Black hair's rare,” Lime sang, pretending to poke holes in my story.

“It is, but it's not like it's nonexistent.”

In their world, there weren't many black-haired folks around, but they did exist. At least one in every thousand or ten thousand, probably. It was to the level that a big city might have a few.

“You don't look very strong,” Poiso pointed out.

“I'm more of a cardio guy,” I said.

I was a decent fighter thanks to the slime girls' help, but I was still no pro. If we were talking about my basic physical strength compared to the average

person, I was either right in the middle or below average.

But thanks to my skills, I was fast, and I could maintain a pretty solid run over long distances. The running style I employed using command actions looked incredibly unnatural, but if I explained that it was a special style or a secret, it turned out that'd pass for most people. According to Bess, there was lots of magic and magic tools in the world, and nobody knew everything about all of it.

"You should be good to go," Bess declared. "All that's left is to make sure you enter from outside the city."

"Right," said Poiso. "If you don't have a travel pass on you, there'll be trouble."

"You can get outside through the tunnels!" Lime said.

"Got it."

Among the passages beneath the castle was one that extended east, past the city walls. I was going to use that path, then enter the capital from the eastern side.

"Depending on what happens, I might spend several days above ground. Even if I get captured, as long as they don't kill me immediately, they'll probably stuff me under the castle again. If that happens, I'll cause a fuss. So please come save me."

"We have to do everything for you, huh?" Poiso teased me.

"No," I said. "I'm just not foolish enough to think that I can do everything myself."

Plus, Bess and the others were way stronger than I was. If I could count on them, I would. I'd use anything at my disposal to reunite with Sylphy.

"Then I suppose this is it?" asked Poiso.

"Time to go," said Bess.

"This way!" Lime led us out their door.

We began moving as a group of four. It seemed they wanted to see me off.

"Y'know, this is actually our first time all traveling together."

“Huh, you’re right, Bess.”

“We usually don’t need to move,” she added.

“The little copies are good enough,” said Poiso.

“I’ll bet.”

During our practice battles, I went one-on-one against the same Lime copy that I first met a few weeks ago. She did a number on me. Even the small versions of the girls were incredibly tough. In the name of practicing for multi-person battles, all three girls each created two copies of themselves. Again, I got my butt thoroughly kicked.

After we’d chatted and walked along for a bit, the three slime girls stopped. We’d reached the end of the tunnel, or close enough.

“This is it,” said Bess.

“Since the royal family can use this path, it’s considered a part of the castle even if it’s not directly underneath it, but this is the absolute limit,” said Poiso.

“We can’t go any further!” Sang Lime.

“Oh...”

I could just barely feel the flow of air that came from the other end. The outside was near.

“We make sure to clean the entrance,” Poiso said. “So there shouldn’t be anyone or anything there, but be careful just in case.”

“Clean the entrance as in...?”

“We make the little ones charge in and go wild!” Lime said with obvious relish.

“That’s a terrifying image.”

“They break down after a set amount of time, so it isn’t dangerous,” said Poiso. “If we didn’t clean up the entrance regularly, goblins and the like would start to settle there.”

“That’d be annoying for sure... All right. Time to go.”

I once again checked my equipment, then turned to the girls. Lime could barely hide the loneliness written on her face. Bess looked concerned. Poiso seemed calm enough.

“I’m not saying goodbye,” I said to them. “I’ll be back.”

They replied all at once.

“You’d better!”

“Go, but don’t do anything crazy.”

“Please be careful.”

“I will,” I promised. “Take care!”

I began my walk toward the surface. It really had been a while since I’d been above ground.

CHARACTERS



ライム

Lime

Chapter 5: Infiltrating the Capital City

“HOLY CRAP, it’s bright...”

When was the last time I’d seen the sun? Wait, what was the name of the sun god in this world again? Whatever, I’d just roll with calling it the sun. The bright light of the sun burned into my eyes, and after more than two weeks living underground, it truly hurt. I decided to rest for a bit till I got used to it.

Man, the air out here is delicious.

Poiso’s scent filled the slime girls’ room, so it never really bothered me, but down there I could still occasionally detect traces of a typical sewer’s foul scent. But there was none of that up in the sunlight.

When my eyes were adjusted, I started taking in my surroundings. Yep. Sure was a cave entrance. It was hidden by a massive rock, so you wouldn’t normally find it unless you were looking for it. I was kinda worried I wouldn’t be able to find the place once I left... But eh, worst-case scenario, I could enter the sewer from somewhere in the city.

It’d smell like hell and probably suck. I’d seen the sewer rats that the slime girls hunted, and they were all as big as dogs and had mega sharp fangs. Plus, there were slimes in the sewer.

They weren’t as dangerous as the girls, but physical attacks didn’t work on them, so I needed a plan to get around them. I had weapons that would probably be effective just in case, but like my assault rifle, they were my last resort.

“I guess I’ll be on my way.”

Fortunately for me, I soon found my objective. The forest was clearly not too far from the capital. I could see the massive spire of the castle in the center of the city through a gap in the trees. I was close, but that didn’t mean I knew what kind of monsters lived in the woods. I couldn’t afford to let my guard

down.

But if I was too careful about it, I'd waste too much time passing through the woods.

After thinking on it a bit, I decided to just run straight through and get out of there as quickly as possible. My running speed was much faster than a normal human's. Combined with command actions, I was probably at least twice as fast as the average person. If I threw strafe jumping into the mix, I was about as fast as a horse. There shouldn't be many monsters who could keep up with me.

I raced through the woods. They weren't that deep. Certainly not comparable to the Black Forest. It didn't take long for me to make my way out of them.

After about ten minutes of running, I exited the forest entirely.

"Whoa."

On my way through, I blazed past goblins, animals I'd never seen before, and monsters, but I ignored them all. Some of them tried to follow me, but they couldn't keep up.

Heck, maybe I could drop the golem communicator plan and just run all the way home? As I thought it over, I began to circle around the city wall. I came across a proper road and diverted onto it, then made my way to the city gates.

There were a fair number of fellow travelers along the road, since it was so close to the city. A few people gave me cautious looks when I emerged from the roadside, but I paid them no mind and made my way to the gate, shouldering my spear. That seemed to dispel folks' anxieties.

They probably thought I was a bandit but, when they saw me all nonchalant, changed their minds and filed me under adventurer. Just as I'd planned.

"Hrm..."

I watched the different people and groups I came across while walking, and the presence of a large, guarded carriage stood out. There weren't many of those around, but I'd also noticed some folks fleeing to the east from the city—nobility, clergymen, some wealthy merchant types and their families. Probably the folks who were well off noticed the danger on its way and started to flee.

But there were even more people entering the city. It was possible that the Holy Kingdom had begun gathering military strength and supplies in the city, starting with adventurers and mercenaries. Up until Arichburg, the soldiers the Holy Kingdom typically employed were proper members of their military forces. When it came to holding out behind city walls, they used every possible fighter they had, but I was pretty sure there were no squads made up of adventurers, mercenaries, or farmers.

They might have started recruiting those types, but that was just me speculating.

“Yo. You a merc?”

Someone called out to me while I was engrossed in walking and people-watching: a well-built, armed man who looked about my age. He had a spear in his hand that had definitely seen a few battlefields.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I replied to him. “And you?”

“Same. You alone? That’s rare.”

“My squad got annihilated on the eastern front. The survivors scattered to the winds, and I ended up here,” I said. “I’m looking for work. And you?”

“I’m part of the Black Feathers. This might surprise you, but I’m an officer and everything.” The man grinned and flashed me a dog tag with a black feather insignia on it. Unfortunately, this meant nothing to me.

“Sorry, but I’ve never heard of you guys. I’ve been so up to my neck with my own crap that I haven’t had time to keep track of the rest of the world.”

“Seriously?” The man looked disappointed, but thankfully not offended. “We’re pretty famous, I’ll have you know. At least I thought we were.”

“My bad. So why is an officer like you talking to a guy like me? And, hell, why are you here all alone?” I asked.

“I ain’t alone. See those guys with weapons over there? They’re all part of my squad. They’re guarding this area around the gate. The captain charged me with scouting out folks like you.”

“Ah...”

He definitely wasn't lying. There were folks spread out along the road who definitely looked the part. As soon as I realized this, I immediately raised my level of caution.

The man's story sounded legit, but he was clearly targeting lone travelers like myself. Lone travelers were among the weakest sorts of folks around, at least in terms of position. After all, they had nowhere to call home. If someone like that were to disappear all of a sudden, nobody would care as long as the body wasn't found.

"Hey now, you don't gotta be so on guard." The man chuckled. "We're not gonna eat you."

"Asking me not to keep my guard up isn't gonna get it down."

I could picture it now: I'd join their little squad, we'd all get drunk celebrating, and then before I even had time to figure out what happened, I'd be stripped of everything I owned. Hell, I'd be lucky if they stopped there.

"I guess I can't fault you for that," he said. "Well, having your defenses up ain't a bad thing. We're staying at a place called the Stone Ledge, so if you change your mind, drop by. Tell 'em Raman sent you."

"Got it. My name's Ko."

Raman smiled and left me to myself. Probably going back to his security and scouting duties. After I'd gotten a little distance between the two of us, I unconsciously whispered to myself.

"Takes all kinds..."

One of these days, that guy was gonna be right there in the thick of it when the Liberation Army and the Holy Kingdom clashed, and it was kind of a given which side he'd be fighting for. If that happened, he'd become Sylphy's enemy. My enemy. And, if that happened, I could show no mercy. Unless he was tremendously lucky, he was going to die.

The harpies might catch him in a bombing run, in which case he wouldn't even get to swing his sword. He might get sniped by one of our crossbows... If he was lucky, he might get the chance to cross swords with one of our aces. But there was no way he could ever win against Sir Leonard or Madame Zamil.

“This sucks,” I muttered.

He’d be put under the command of the enemy forces and would do their bidding. He was probably a good guy. He might find happiness in life, and love. But eventually, they’d all be enemies. Him, probably whoever he loved. They’d be trampled under the might of the side they belonged to.

“This really, really sucks.”

I let out a sigh from deep within my heart as I whispered to myself.

The gate drew near.

The farmer in front of me with a cart full of vegetables finished their inspection, and I was called up.

“Next.”

I silently advanced and presented the guard with my spear and sword. They were making everyone in line for the gates offer up their arms for inspection. Or at least that was what I gathered from watching everyone else.

“New face? Haven’t seen you around. Take off your helmet.”

“Got it.” I did as he asked.

“...Black hair, eh?”

The guard stared at my face up close. I hadn’t made any alterations on that front... Were there wanted posters for me floating around? No, that couldn’t be. The slime girls didn’t mention anything like that, and nobody saw my face long enough to draw one up anyway. Plus, they thought I was dead, so nobody should be looking for me.

“Is that rare?” I ventured.

“Kind of. Are you a mercenary? What’s your name?”

“Yeah. I’m Ko.”

“Hrm, Ko the mercenary. Nice red charm... What’s the purpose of your visit?” he asked.

Behind the guard interrogating me was an officer of some sort who quietly jotted down notes onto a pad. They were probably keeping tabs on folks' comings and goings.

"I'm looking for work," I said. "I hear these parts are in a bit of an uproar these days."

The guard grunted in agreement. "I doubt you'll struggle to find work. How long are you planning to stay?"

"I'll be looking for work around here for at least a week."

"I see. Well, it'll be one silver for entrance tax."

"Whoa, that's kinda pricey," I said, feigning surprise as I pulled a single silver from my bag and placed it in the guard's hand.

If I remembered correctly, a single silver was enough to cover two days' stay at an inn. The guard paid my whining no mind and handed me a piece of iron with some characters engraved into it.

"Starting today and for the next seven days, if you present this pass upon entering or leaving the city, you won't be charged. It's like paying your accumulated travel taxes ahead of time."

"Oh," I said. "That makes sense."

"But just because you have a pass doesn't mean you won't be inspected. That pass is for any non-merchants who'll be staying temporarily. If you try to bring large goods in or out with that pass, you're gonna face additional taxes."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Not a bad system at all. But what if, after entering the city, I were to buy a carriage for ease of travel and then a bunch of food and supplies for a long journey? I figured they dealt with that kind of thing on a case-by-case basis.

"And make sure not to swing your weapons around within the city walls," the guard admonished me. "You'll get tied up and thrown into jail."

"Got it, got it. Can I go now?"

"Yeah. Next!"

I got my sword and spear back and finally set foot within the walls of Meriniburg. The security there was full of holes... But I supposed their primary enemy, the Liberation Army, was largely made of demi-humans. We did have a few human agents, but there weren't many. No matter how you slice it, I was still a human, so they weren't going to pay me much mind.

There wouldn't be much point making a black-haired person a spy, either, what with how much attention they drew. I was just glad I wasn't catching people's eye, whether out of pure luck or circumstances working in my favor.

There were two things that travelers did upon reaching a big city: searched for an inn or tracked down some food. Since most inns had pubs and eateries built in, I decided to start with that. Also, because that's what Bess told me to do.

"Um, let's see..."

From an out of the way spot near the gate, my eyes wandered about for a bit.

Ah, here we go.

I spotted a few ragged-looking boys nearby and approached them. A few of them saw me coming, and my weapons spooked 'em, but one of them bravely turned to me and met me halfway.

"Ello, sir," he said. "Do you need a guide?"

"Yeah. I'm looking for an inn. Somewhere with a nice, clean bed. No lice. Ideally with good food." I tossed the boy a single copper. "If you find me a really good joint, you'll get another two."

"Heheh, leave it to me!" The prospect of extra pay made the boy smile widely. "Right this way, sir!"

The boy set off as the other boys looked on with jealousy. Three coppers was enough for a meal in these parts.

The lowest form of currency circulating in the city was copper pieces. Ten of those was one large copper, and ten of those was a silver. Ten silvers was a small gold, and ten small golds was a single gold. Ten golds was one large gold, and ten large golds was one white gold.

Most commoners only used up to small golds, while golds and higher belonged to the world of merchants and nobility. The value system of the world was completely different from Japan's, so it was really difficult to explain things in terms of yen. I had no clue how much my imperial currency or silver bars were worth, and neither did Lime or the others. I got the feeling it'd be a whole lot, so depending on how things rolled out, I might not do an exchange. It'd be scary if I was robbed or something.

While I concerned myself over such matters, the boy led me to the front of an inn. A sign hung out front that read *Laffin Lodge*. Hrm. At least from the outside, the place seemed good. There were spaces for carriages and horses in the back, so it seemed like it was for merchants more than for ruffians like adventurers or mercenaries.

“Is this the place?”

“Yup!” Said my guide. “The beds are clean, and the food’s supposed to be great. Not that I’ve ever stayed here.”

“I figured.”

There was no point just standing there, so I followed the boy into the inn, where I was soon met with a small counter and an old lady in an apron behind it. She smiled at the sight of me.

“Welcome to Laffin Lodge. Will you be staying?”

“Yes. Do you have any rooms available? The boy here said your beds are clean and your food is delicious.”

“But of course.” The older woman nodded with pride. “We wash the sheets every day, and we are quite proud of our cooking.”

“How much?” I asked.

“A single night is seven large coppers,” she said. “Our breakfast and dinner package is eight large coppers. Both packages have bath fees included.”

Eight coins was a lot, even with food. But the service there seemed good, so I could deal with it.

“I’ll be staying for three nights, then.”

I handed the older woman two silvers and four large coppers. I turned to the boy and handed him two additional coppers. He smiled warmly at me.

“Thank you very much,” said the innkeeper. “Can you please write your name here?”

“Sure.”

Since I was supposed to write down my occupation and name, I jotted down “mercenary” and “Ko.”

Hrm. Obviously, none of this was in Japanese, but I could read and write it. I hadn’t had the chance to write anything down since coming to this world; it felt bizarre. Like my hand wasn’t my own, not completely.

“Thank you very much,” said the innkeeper. Then she shouted to the back of the inn. “Razaela!”

“Coming!”

A girl came trotting out. My immediate impression was that she was adorable. She was wearing the same kind of apron as the older woman, only with a different color scheme and a knee-high one piece. She definitely felt like an old-fashioned village girl.

“Please bring our guest to his room,” the innkeeper told her. “Number 202.”

“O-of course!”

She looked a little scared of me. I was very visibly armed, so I couldn’t blame her. I was clearly some adventurer or mercenary, and those sorts were usually ruffians.

The girl took the key from the older woman and guided me on nervously. Maybe this was the girl’s first day or something, and I was her practice run.

“Th-this way...” she said in a hushed voice. I turned for a moment and found the older woman handing the boy some bread. She noticed my gaze and smiled apologetically while bowing her head.

Hm, this all made sense. The boys got paid for leading travelers to inns, and then they got food for providing a steady stream of customers. Not a bad system.

I followed behind the girl, passing through a hallway from which I could make out the dining room, and up some stairs.

FYI, I could not see up the nervous girl's skirt, and even if I could, I wouldn't look. That wouldn't be gentlemanly.

"Th-this is your room, sir."

"Do you mind if I check inside first?"

"O-of course!"

The girl suddenly straightened up like a soldier. It got a little laugh out of me as I stepped inside.

The room wasn't particularly large. Not even eight tatami mats' worth of space. There was a bed, a space to put some stuff down, and a small chair and table. I checked the bed, and it certainly looked clean enough. I took my helmet and placed it on the table, then stood my spear against the wall.

"Ah...black hair." the girl whispered behind me, probably thinking I couldn't hear.

"Uncommon, right?"

"Oh, um, ah, I'm sorry!"

"I'm not angry," I said. "This is a good room. Nice and clean. I'll sleep soundly here."

"I-I'm happy to hear it!"

"Can I have the key?"

"Yes."

She mechanically presented me with the key. I couldn't help but smile.

"You don't have to be so nervous," I said. "I promise I won't go all crazy or anything."

"Y-yes, of course. I'm sorry..."

"When's the next meal?"

"Oh, um, dinner is from when the sun sets to when the evening bell rings, and

breakfast is from sunrise until the morning bell rings.”

“Hrm, so I should come back when it gets dark. Is anyone gonna wake me up in the morning?”

“We make sure to come to the rooms of guests who haven’t had breakfast yet,” she said.

“All right, got it. And where do I wash up? Can I get a bowl of water for the room?”

“Yes. We’ll bring it to your room, then retrieve it the next morning.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome.” The girl nodded gently. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She left looking a little less nervous than she’d started out. It was all well and good that she warmed up to me, but I felt like it was dangerous for her to think all guests would be like me. But the old lady up front probably had a good head on her shoulders, so things should work out okay.

“Now then, what’s next?”

I wanted to get my hands on my objective immediately, but I needed to get a feel for what was happening in the city first. It’d be really dumb if I ended up buying a fake or something. If I did, though, I’d know what it was once I tossed it into my inventory.

First off, currency exchange and lunch. The mistress up front should know where to get both of those done. I’d leave my helmet, spear, and shield in my room. I had extras in my inventory, after all. Oh, and I’d leave my bag behind as well. All I had in it was a change of clothes and travel goods so that nobody got suspicious. In any case, I was locking my door, so it wasn’t like anyone was gonna see this stuff, but eh. Just in case, right?

With my suit of armor on and my sword at my waist, I locked the door behind me and made my way down the stairs into the lobby.

“Heading out?”

The same woman was still at the counter, writing something into a journal. I nodded to her.

"I want to grab lunch and exchange some currency. Do you have any recommendations for good places to trade in imperial currency?"

"Imperial currency, you say?" she said with some surprise.

"Yeah. I was fighting on the battlefields to the east before coming here. The money's my victory spoils."

"I see, I see," said the older woman as she ogled me from head to toe. It was a chaste ogling, I should clarify—purely out of surprise. I hope.

"I don't look tough, is that what you're thinking?"

"I'm so sorry," she said, laughing.

"No, you're not wrong. I'm not tough at all. I just have a whole lotta faith in these legs of mine." I patted my thighs.

"Are you a scout?"

"That, and other things," I said, keeping it vague. "Anyway, that's my story. If you know any trustworthy currency exchange places, I'd love your advice."

"In that case..."

The old woman went on to inform me of a money changer not too far from the inn. She even gave me their address and marked it down on a calendar for me. In her words, it was all to help build up the new girl's confidence.

She gave me a big smile. I really was blessed.

I left my key with her and took off, only to find the boy from earlier holding a big wooden cup in one hand and a hard piece of bread in the other, right outside the door. As soon as he noticed me, he stuffed the bread into his mouth and downed his drink in one go. I waited for him to finish chewing and drinking, then waved the map the woman gave me at him.

"Two coppers if you guide me to the place on this map."

"You got it, sir!"

He placed his cup in the bag at his waist, took the map from my hands, and gazed down at it.

"Can you read?" I asked him.

“A little bit,” he said. “I can figure out addresses and maps.”

“I’m counting on you, lad.”

“No problem! Follow me!”

The boy set off energetically, and I followed along after him.

Now then, should I eat first, or handle my money first? That’s the real problem.

We left the Laffin Lodge behind and crossed the main street to enter the road at the opposite end. A short walk later, we came upon the money changer.

“Ain’t that it?” the boy pointed it out.

“Let’s see.”

It was nothing too fancy-looking from the outside, but its front sign was clean and well designed, and the surrounding area was clean as well. The place had good vibes.

“This definitely looks like the right place,” I said. “Here, your payment.”

“Heheh, much obliged!”

With a big smile on his face, the boy took the two coppers. He looked ready to leave, so I called out to him before he could.

“If you wait for me to finish my business here, there’s one more place I’d like you to take me.”

“Wait, really? I’ll totally wait! For sure! Where do you want me to take you?”

“The best restaurant you know. I’ll even treat you to a meal.”

“For real?! I’ll wait for as long as you need, sir!”

“Awesome. Make sure to wait somewhere where you won’t cause trouble for the store.”

“I know, I know.”

He smiled happily again and went to find a spot a little ways away from the storefront. This was fine, right? The boy had shown his courage by coming to

speak to me, and it paid off for him. I could try to get some info out of him while we ate. I was sure he'd be more than happy to talk at that point.

I stepped inside the money changer's shop, only to find the atmosphere within surprisingly heavy. There were two large men—likely bodyguards—and a single, sharp-eyed, middle-aged man behind one of the counters. He was probably an attendant. There was also a young woman further behind him. There were a few others back there as well, but that was it as far as I could see.

It felt more like an office than a shop.

"Welcome." The sharp-eyed man smiled at me as he spoke. "Will you be borrowing funds? Conversion? Currency exchange?"

Apparently, the place also dealt in financial operations. I nodded my head and moved to the man's counter.

"I'd like to exchange imperial currency. Is that possible?"

"But of course. Please, I'd be glad to help."

"Thank you."

I sat down and pulled the leather bag full of fake currency out from under my armor. I wasn't sure at first, but I ultimately decided to exchange it all. It wasn't like I'd be able to use any of it. Plus, if I was going to get any information from this place about what I was after, I needed to show that I had the money to pay for it.

The man's eyes widened as he saw the bars drop from my bag.

"Well now," he said, "this is going to be quite the sum."

The man flashed a look at the young woman behind him, who quickly stood and retreated to the back. *Er, what?* The man gave me a pained smile when he noticed my anxious look.

"I'm sorry if I've put you on guard. I'm just having her prepare some tea."

"I'm not sure I want to drink any," I said, giving my honest opinion.

I didn't exactly feel like drinking whatever they presented me with after I'd flashed so much money. It wouldn't strike me as odd for this world if they

slipped something in there. The man behind the counter chuckled at the look on my face.

“Please, fear not. Trust is paramount to us here. So, you want to exchange this all for Holy Kingdom currency?”

“That’s the idea,” I said. “By the way, the mistress of the Laffin Lodge recommended this place to me. Just figured I’d let you know.”

“She did...? Hm... May I begin inspecting your currency?”

“Of course.”

As soon as I nodded, the man donned white gloves and began inspecting each bar, one by one, measuring their weight and testing them with a small mallet.

They’d be at a huge loss if they dealt in counterfeit currency. Authentic or not, the silver and gold content of my bars and their weight had been perfectly replicated, so they shouldn’t come up as counterfeit. If they had a magical detection system, then I’d be screwed, but fortunately I didn’t see anything like that.

And so, I was perfectly calm, safe in the knowledge that there was no way they were gonna twig to me. Meanwhile, the man sharpened his gaze even more as he examined each bar. I gently bowed my head in appreciation of the young woman when she came by with the tea, even though I didn’t actually take a sip. It was probably fine, but it was still more risk than I wanted to take on.

After a bit, the man sighed and closed his eyes. Was he finished?

“My apologies,” he said. “It’s quite rare for someone to bring in so much imperial currency. We’re quite far from the battlefield, as I’m sure you know.”

“True enough. It took me a while to get here.”

“You mean from the eastern battlefield?”

“Yeah. I got this all from there. That’s not particularly uncommon, is it?”

“No, not at all. I’m going to write up a breakdown of all of this.”

The man began to jot stuff down. It looked like he was carefully inventorying

the whole load. I mostly brought gold bars, but I also had a small number of silver bars mixed in. I had no idea how much this would all add up to.

“This is the breakdown.”

“Let’s have a look...”

When I glanced over the money changer’s notes, I couldn’t help but be surprised. I’d figured that all together the bars would equal a single large gold, but this was a helluva lot more. Two large golds, three golds, five small golds, seven silvers, and five large coppers. That was, well, it was frankly a ludicrous amount of money.

“I thought this’d be a lot, but it’s way more than I was expecting,” I admitted.
“Is this after processing fees?”

“Correct,” he said. “We take seven percent.”

That was pretty high as far as processing fees went, but we were a ways away from the Empire. There was probably no other way to use this money. In which light, seven percent didn’t seem too bad.

Regardless, I didn’t know the market value of the bars I’d brought, so there was nothing else I could’ve done with them. I was fine with taking their word for it.

“I’m not exactly knowledgeable on these matters, so I’ll take your offer.”

“Excellent. Please sign here.”

“No problem.”

I signed my name and the deal was complete.

And honestly, whatever. I literally made a bunch of fake money from some ore I found underground. Even if this had been a rip-off, it’d be no big deal. After checking my signature, the man handed the paperwork over to the female attendant and instructed her to bring my money from the vault. He sighed and finally took a sip of his tea, which had long been cooling in front of him.

That lull was my chance. I spoke up.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” he said. “Hopefully I can give you an agreeable answer.”

“Well, you see... Agh, this is kind of a personal thing but... I’m looking for a mithril ring or ornament of some kind.”

“Mithril, you say?”

The man widened his sharp eyes. Which was fair. It’d make sense if the person asking was some noblewoman, but there I was instead. I was clearly a mercenary or an adventurer. It was bizarre that a man like me would be looking for a mithril ornament. I didn’t disagree.

But the slime girls and I came up with the perfect cover story.

“It’s just, well, you get it, right? That’s what’s expected of me. Please don’t make me elaborate.”

The man relaxed his gaze and nodded. His misunderstanding was just as we planned it: he thought I was going to use the trinket to propose to a girl back home.

“Ah, I see, I see.”

It was apparently a common story. A youngster leaves his home, and when he succeeds in the wider world, returns home with an expensive ornament, and proposes to his true love. The most expensive tier of ornaments one can get for that occasion are made of mithril. Usually a ring, necklace, or a hair ornament.

“Mithril... That’s going to be rather difficult.”

The money changer’s expression darkened a bit as he mulled it over.

“Is it?”

“Yes,” he said. “Those are quite rare, you see. They used to acquire mithril ornaments from the elves in the Black Forest, but twenty years ago that relationship ended. There are no mines within the Kingdom of Merinard that produce mithril.”

“For real? Is there really no way to buy some around here?”

“In terms of market value, a single large silver should get you one, which shouldn’t be a problem given your current financial status, but if there’s none

to buy, well... Ah."

"Hm?"

The man raised his voice, seeming to realize something. "By the way, sir, would you happen to be a passionate Adolist?"

"Do I look like I am?" I asked.

"Not at all," he admitted.

"Exactly."

"Nevertheless, are you capable of expressing faith?"

He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, the universal sign for cash money.

"If you offer the church two large golds, they'll present you with a mithril rosary as proof of your faith," he explained. "The church here happens to be the heart of Adolism in Merinard. They should have mithril rosaries in stock."

"I'm sure they do, but..." I thought it over for a moment. "What should I even say? 'Hey, folks, could you sell me a rosary for two large golds?' There's no way that'll work."

"It all depends on how you word it. How about this? 'I wish to receive the blessings of Adol so that I might spread the light to my homeland and take my beloved's hand in marriage.'"

"You're one helluva businessman. You know how to talk."

"I'm honored by your kind words."

The sharp-eyed exchanger smiled and politely bowed his head. While we were talking, the young female attendant returned with a nervous expression on her face. She was holding a wooden tray loaded with money.

"Here's the exchanged amount. Feel free to confirm the value," she said.

"Thanks. Will do."

Here we go... Two large golds, three golds, five small golds, seven silvers, five large coppers. Just like what was on the breakdown. I checked each piece and inserted them one by one into my wallet. I then inserted them into my

inventory to make sure there was no counterfeit cash mixed in. No problems were detected.

"I really appreciate the help," I told the money changer.

"No, no, the pleasure is mine. The next time you find yourself with imperial currency, or gold and silver, we'd love to take care of you again."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I slipped my wallet back under my armor and stood up from my chair, then exited the shop. Outside, the guide boy lit up when he saw me come out intact and rushed up to me. If he were a demi-human, he would totally be wagging his tail at the sight of me.

The boy guided me to an eatery where we had lunch, and afterwards I headed back to the inn.

Hm? How was the food? What info did I get out of the boy? Oh, well, uh, the meal was meat, bread, and soup. It wasn't bad and there was lots of it, but nothing really stood out about it. Yeah.

Disappointingly, it turned out folks in the city thought that if you dumped lots of salt and pepper on something, it was considered fine dining. In contrast, the Dark Forest elves knew a thing or two about seasoning a meal. Compared to the rest of the world, they were pretty advanced. And the stuff I could make with my crafting skill was even better. So, yeah. I learned not to expect too much from eateries.

As for the info I got from the boy... Just small talk, mostly. He wasn't an informant or someone with his ear to the ground or anything. What I did get from him was confirmation that mercenary and adventurer types had been gathering in the city. And a little while ago, a group of Holy Kingdom knights in beautiful armor arrived too. They must be that saint's security detail.

When I asked the boy if they were tough fighters, he didn't know. He said he'd heard that the knights of the Holy Kingdom were invincible, but he also thought, if that was the case, then they would've beaten the Empire ages ago. The general opinion said that they were definitely elites, but the boy wasn't

convinced.

I could believe either answer, quite frankly. I made a mental note to ask Bess or Poiso about the knights when I went back underground.

After eating, I went back to the inn. And at the inn, I didn't have much to do.

I glanced out the window to check where the sun was at. Hrm, just past noon. Around 2 p.m., I'd guess. I still had time before sunset, so I could just go to the church and get the mithril rosary.

I certainly had the time to do it, but haste made waste. I was pretty nervous all day, and I was exhausted mentally. I could just chill at the inn a while.

On the other hand, my room was too narrow to do any crafting, so I had no way to pass the time. How did mercenaries or adventurers usually kill time? I could've asked the mistress or the girl, but that wouldn't seem very natural. A veteran merc or adventurer with enough cash to stay there, asking about how people usually spent their time... Yeah, there was nothing natural about that.

Although... I'm bored and looking for something to do. Know any good spots? Maybe that was a good idea. Plus, it was my first time in the city, so of course I wouldn't know much! Nothing unnatural about that.

When I left my room I chanced upon the girl again—what was her name, Razaela? I tried out my line of questioning on her.

“You need...somewhere to kill time?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Where I can have a bit of fun. This is my first time in the city.”

Since she seemed scared of mercenary and adventurer types, I put on my most civil act, but...

“U-um...”

For some reason, she turned away from me, flustered. What was the deal?

“Any ideas?” I prompted her.

“I-I, um, know some places, but, um... Is that really something you should be asking me?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

I got the feeling we were talking past each other in some critical way.

“Look,” I said. “I’m just trying to find out any tourist spots, or maybe stores that sell cool stuff, or even bookstores would be good, too. You know anything like that?”

When I said that, the girl turned beet red. Why would she...? *Ah. Ahh, I get it now.* She’d gotten the wrong idea.

“This little misunderstanding might be my fault, but I’d never ask a girl your age about, you know. Something like that...”

“I-I’m so sorry!” she apologized, still completely flushed.

Yeah, I supposed mercs and adventurers would do that sort of thing for fun. Ugh.

But even if I really were a merc or an adventurer, I’d never ask a girl her age about where to find a brothel. Never. I wasn’t some crusty old dude creeping on girls.

“How about we pretend this never happened?” I offered. “It’d be better for both of us that way. So... Any cool spots you recommend?”

“U-um, let me see... If you walk along the main street toward the center of the city, you’ll come out in the main plaza. Bards and acrobats perform there all the time.”

“Oooh... What about bookstores and other interesting shops?”

“Um, I don’t know specific places, but I do know that there are a bunch of ornament shops and that sort of thing up in the northwest corner of the city, where the nobles and merchants live.”

“Got it. What else, what else... Ah, what about weapon shops?”

“You’ll find craftsmen who deal in that sort of thing near the south gate,” she said.

“Right. Thanks a lot.”

I gave the girl a handful of coppers as a tip. She seemed a bit confused at first,

but in the end, she accepted the money. Was there no tipping culture there? She still took it in the end, so who knew.

"After hitting the main plaza, I think I'll check out where the craftsmen are. I should be back by dinner," I told her.

"Oh, okay! Take care."

I waved to the girl as she saw me off, left my key with the mistress, and ditched the inn to head toward the plaza.

And was the plaza any fun? Mm, it was hard to say. Extremely hard to say. There was one musician I saw who played his guitar—or maybe a lute—and sang tales of the region's heroes... But I wasn't familiar with the original stories, so I had no clue when to laugh or get excited. I honestly enjoyed the acrobats more. There was a juggler and even a magician.

As for the weapon shops... Completely empty. The shelves had nothing on them. Apparently, the Holy Kingdom army had been collecting all the weapons they could get their hands on, so all that was left in the stores was the unorthodox stuff. If there was something you wanted, you had to have it made to order.

There was a marketplace near the crafts district, but some older women, probably housewives, were complaining loudly about how the prices had gone up. The guy running the stall replied that the Holy Kingdom was taking all their stock, and there wasn't much left. *I knew it.* They were buying up supplies, gearing up to take back Arichburg.

I had to get back before the army mobilized. That wacky idea to run all the way back was looking pretty good all of a sudden. Nothing too dire could happen, right? Although, if something dire *did* happen, I'd be completely screwed.

I needed to focus on the things in front of me one by one. First, I had to get my hands on a mithril rosary, head back underground, rig up a large golem communicator, and get in touch with the Liberation Army. That's what I had to focus on.

Running through everything on my to-do list made me realize that asshole

Cuvi knew all about our weapons, tactics, and golem communicators too. Not much I could do about that now. We'd just have to make use of that stuff while knowing the enemy knew our capabilities.

They shouldn't be able to copy us, fortunately. It wasn't impossible to replicate our crossbows, but the Holy Kingdom wasn't particularly fond of projectile weapons, so they probably wouldn't use them on a wide scale for a while yet. As far as bombs and guns went, they didn't have the technical engineering for that stuff, so they couldn't make them. And the golem communicator required mass-produced golem cores, which was way outside their abilities. And the writing formula was super complicated, making copying it almost impossible.

And yet, I could make it all work with my crafting ability. I really was a bit OP in that regard, huh?

The next day came.

It had been a while since I slept alone, and frankly I found it a bit lonely. Ever since I came to this world, I'd never gone to bed alone... It was more than worth it coming to this world just for that. I'd been in danger and terrified plenty of times, but the negatives just didn't compare to the positives.

I got myself ready, strapped on my leather armor, and headed down to the cafeteria. I had dinner there last night, and it was quite a lot more delicious than lunch had been. Maybe it was just that particular eatery that wasn't all that great? Maybe they prioritized quantity over quality.

The mistress saw me off with a smile, and I headed out into the early morning. Looked like I had become an early riser since coming to this world.

"Now then, let's see, where to go..."

I'd already looked into the location of the church. I asked the guide boy about it yesterday. Unsurprisingly, as the religious facility that supports the nation itself, it was built in a very conspicuous place: right next door to the castle. And when I got there...

"Whoa..."

I inadvertently took a step back to look up at its grandeur. It had a majesty about it that really overwhelmed all who stood before it. This church...or I supposed I oughta call it a cathedral? This cathedral was truly something else.

But what was the deal with the vibes around the place?

The majestic cathedral had a heavy atmosphere hanging over it. There were armored knights clustered around both sides of the entrance, and guards on both sides of the road leading up to the building. Everyone was very clearly on high alert.

I made the honestly terrifying choice to call out to one of the nearby knights.

“Excuse me, but did something happen?”

I could feel the guy shoot me a sharp glare from within his helmet. He did answer, though.

“The saint will be leading the worship and giving a sermon this holy day. We’re the security...” he trailed off into a suspicious pause. “Are you some sort of mercenary? Or adventurer?”

“Yes,” I said. “In which case, I probably shouldn’t have my weapon on me, huh? I’d like to leave it with someone before I enter the cathedral...”

“Yeah. You do that at the main entrance.”

“Thank you.”

“May the holy light bless you,” he said.

The knight waved me off out of his sight, so I bowed and made my way toward the entrance.

Talk about bad timing. I just had to get there when the Saint of Truth happened to be around... But since she was only there for worship and a sermon, as long as she didn’t end up questioning me personally, it wouldn’t be an issue.

Of course I was curious about her, but if I ran off, the knights would probably suspect something was up. As long as I didn’t stand out, I’d be fine. No need to worry, nothing was going to happen. And even if something did happen, with so many knights around I could just hunker down in a corner and keep out of the

way. No biggie.

I did get the feeling I was raising all sorts of flags, but surely everything would work out.

The knight guarding the entrance insisted that I hand over not only my sword belt, but also the bag they said I could potentially hide weapons in and my leather armor. I brought only my wallet into the cathedral with me.

There was a massive fresco on the ceiling, gorgeous stained glass windows, and a golden cross that shone magnificently. It was all so overwhelming that even a non-believer like me couldn't help but feel wowed. The place really was incredible.

"Whoa..."

If someone like me, with my limited understanding of Adolism, was moved, then I could only imagine what this cathedral felt like to the faithful. But then I remembered that, in order to build this beautiful structure, tons of demi-humans were sold into slavery and sent all over the country, were abused, and stripped of their belongings. Then it wasn't such a good feeling anymore.

Even so, the cathedral had undeniable artistic value. When the Liberation Army took the city, I could only hope that it would be spared.

I found a seat and plopped myself down. The person next to me was mumbling repeated, vigorous prayers to God.

"Oh, great Lord! Please forgive me for my sins! Oh, great Lord! Please watch over me! Oh, great Lord..."

Concerned that other people might be doing the same, and might expect me to be praying too, I scanned the room, but thankfully it looked like the person next to me wasn't the norm. They were honestly kind of terrifying.

What should I do?

Just as I considered switching seats, a bell from on high began to ring and the doors of the cathedral closed. Silence washed over everything, and a calm atmosphere settled over the room.

It'd be extremely awkward to stand up and change seats with that vibe in the

air.

Since the nut next to me had finally gone quiet, I figured I could deal.

Once the bell finished ringing, several priestly figures emerged from the back of the cathedral, reciting some prayer or another. I didn't know if they were using ancient words or what, but I didn't understand a lick of it. It might have not even been words.

Once the chanting ended, a young woman in pure white robes emerged from the back of the cathedral. With her eyes closed, she gracefully made her way to the altar. Once there, her eyelids lifted, revealing crimson eyes that looked out upon all the believers in the room. And also me.

She was beautiful. She had pure white skin, long sparkling blonde hair that fell to her hips, those unnatural red eyes, and a bountiful chest that stood out even beneath the thick robes she wore, which were embroidered with golden thread. I totally got why she was called a saint. The young woman had a truly heavenly aura about her.

Her eyes locked on to me, and for some reason it seemed like a concerned expression crossed her face, but it only lasted a moment. I might've imagined it.



I wasn't suddenly surrounded and apprehended by the knights, and it looked like the service was beginning without issue. I was sorta looking forward to what I might get to learn.

"God created mothers so that they would love their children, and created children so that they would feel safe in their mothers' embrace..."

The saint's calm and soothing voice echoed throughout the cathedral. The building was absurdly massive. She wasn't yelling or anything, and yet her voice carried like it was no big deal. Was she using some kind of magic tool, or was this a function built into the cathedral? Or maybe her voice just carried really well.

If you wanted to know what she was talking about, sorry. I honestly wasn't all that interested. A whole bunch of quotes from their holy text. Since I didn't know their origins, it was hard to get invested or to care. From what little I did get, I found more ammunition for my theory that this all had some sort of scientific basis and that Adol, whatever they were, was getting up to some genetic engineering nonsense.

Like, the Adolist story of the creation of demi-humans and monsters felt like exactly the sort of thing this culture would come up with to explain some genetic tinkering in their prehistory.

The way they told it, demi-humans were just human sinners who Adol hadn't forgiven yet. Adol bestowed the beast stigma upon them and ordered them to serve humanity. Those who served out their sentence and atoned for their sins had the stigma erased and were returned to their former human state. According to Adolism, the more sinful the demi-human, the more beastly their form.

The first thing that came to mind when I heard that was genetic experimentation and mutation. I didn't know if Adol ever really returned anyone to being human if they atoned for their so-called sins, and I had no idea if they really had the technology to erase the beast stigma. But from an outsider's point of view, this Adol guy seemed like one helluva scam artist.

I refused to believe that the demi-humans were born as sinners. The only difference between them and us were our looks. Sure, they might have had different natural abilities as a result of their forms, but humans did too. There were humans born with strength or speed, those who had great eyesight or sense of smell, people who were smarter than others... There was no end to human variation.

While I was deep in thought, the saint was wrapping up her sermon.

“We must always remember that demi-humans are creatures of the flesh, just as we are. As Lord Adol says, we must love our neighbors. Whether they are human, demi-human, sinner, or animal, love is all, and hate begets hate. Only through coexistence can we unlock the path forward that is otherwise closed to us. That is my sincere belief. Thank you for listening.”

There were Adolists who believed in coexistence? Interesting.

I figured that was the time to get going, but everybody else in the cathedral was now forming a line down the main aisle. The saint was probably going to perform some sort of blessing. I didn’t want to get anywhere near her, but if everyone else was doing it, then it’d look suspicious for me to duck out. Even inside the cathedral, the knights were keeping a close watch. I needed to stay inconspicuous.

“Please forgive me... Please forgive me...”

The person next to me—behind me once we were in line—was muttering to themselves again and seriously creeped me out.

What sort of sin did you commit, my friend? Well, your great saint is going to bless you soon, so get your repenting in while you still can!

The line slowly moved forward, and eventually, the front of the vast room came into view. The saint appeared to be saying something to the believers, and they bowed their heads and accepted it before dropping a few coppers into a box.

It cost money to get blessed? Seriously? Man, it was expensive living in this city...

With these worthless thoughts in my head, I checked the weight of the wallet

by my chest. I could spare a couple coppers. After all, I got to hear the saint's blessing up close and personal. A few coppers in exchange for that was no big deal.

The saint was like the top idol of Adolism, probably. If I thought of it like paying to attend a solo concert and getting a personal handshake meeting, then the price of one meal was easier to swallow.

"Next in line..."

And just like that, it was my turn.

What's that? Stop letting my mind wander and focus on what's happening right in front of me? Look, pal. I had no way to know how things were going to go down. All I could do was stay loose and be ready to react. I was pretty confident in my ad-libbing skills, got it?

"Sir..."

The saint was talking to me. She set her beautiful face and unwavering crimson eyes upon me. I ad-libbed.

"Um..."

Look, cut me a break, how was I supposed to react to this? I turned to one of the priests in confusion, but she seemed as disconcerted as I was. Looked like I was on my own.

"Um, my Lady? My...Saint?"

"You're..."

But she never got to finish that thought.

"WRRREEE!!!"

A horrific scream erupted directly behind me. I spun around and found the muttering weirdo about to push me aside.

I didn't actually think about what I was going to do. It was pretty much instinct. And I fully admit that he'd been annoying me ever since I sat down.

The weirdo tried to shove me aside, but I reversed it on him. Thanks to my recent training with Lime and the others, I ended up delivering a few rough

elbow blows to the guy. Pure instinct, of course.

Those elbows just happened to land square in the guy's face, just below his nose. This was all just incidental. I also landed one critical hit that looked deeply painful for him. That single hit wasn't enough to knock him out, though, and he began recklessly flailing in pain and confusion, brandishing something in his hands.

Just as I'd somehow landed a crit on him, he landed a crit on me.

"Gwargh?!"

A tremendous impact ran through my side, and when I looked down, I saw a knife jabbed into my flank. Turned out that's what he'd been waving around.

"You gotta...be kidding me..." I wheezed.

Just then, someone grabbed me and pinned me down.

No, no! You got it all wrong! I'm the victim here! Ow, ow, ow. I said ow!

Being pinned down was more painful than the stab wound. Maybe it wasn't that serious? But no, not possible. Even at first glance I could tell it was lodged pretty deep. He might have gotten me in my liver. And if that was the case, then I was a goner. The fact I couldn't feel the pain from the wound probably meant it was really bad. Was the knife poisoned or something? That kind of thin blade shouldn't have been able to deal fatal wounds unless the user was really good with it, so it must've been dipped in poison.

Assassination via poison knife. He must've been aiming for the saint. Which would mean that this asshole probably worked for the pig...

Crap, I was getting sleepy...

Man, you gotta be kidding me. This is where I die? Alone, a complete stranger to everyone around me?

This was bad. My consciousness was fading. I tried to hype myself up.

C'mon, abilities! Skills! C'mon, iron skin! Do your job! I just got stabbed! Argh... this isn't working. Survival skills suck...

My adventure really ends here?

And that was it. That was my final thought.

CHARACTERS



エレオノーラ
Eleonora

Chapter 6:

Kousuke Meets the Holy Maiden

A WHITE CEILING.

There was a complex, fancy carving on it. It was pretty uncommon to be able to tell from just the ceiling that the place you were in was high class.

“An unfamiliar ceiling...” I muttered.

Apparently, I was still alive, so I figured why not sneak in one last pop culture reference? I always wanted to say it at least once.

Now then, what exactly happened to me?

I got stabbed during my little brawl with that mumbling weirdo, then I blacked out. And now there was this room with a high-class ceiling. The bed I was on was high quality, and so was the pillow, and the room itself smelled like the same medicinal herbs I’d smelled when Ira and I made potions together.

It was clear that someone had spared no expense taking care of me. Judging by the current scenario, I was either being held in some church facility, or I was somewhere in the castle.

Ah. Although it wasn’t intentional, I saved the saint from some berserk asshole with a knife. At the end of the day, I protected the saint, so there was no way the church could ever just leave me to bleed out. Regardless of whether or not I was a suspicious wandering mercenary.

How was I gonna handle this?

I stirred a bit in bed as I pondered the question. My fingers brushed the spot where I’d been stabbed. Oddly enough, I felt no pain. No anything, really. I was wrapped in bandages, but it seemed to me like the wound had already healed.

I sat up and started to survey my surroundings, and I suddenly found myself staring into crimson eyes.

“WHOA?!”

“...”

The saint was right there.

Shining blonde hair like golden thread, skin so white you might think she was sick, and eyes like rubies. Even with her thick white robes, I could make out the form of her slender body.

She was the complete opposite of Sylphy in many ways.

“Um...?”

“...”

The saint stared at me like some sort of still, lifeless doll. She was really just... staring.

“Um, you’re gonna stare holes into me at this rate—”

“You.”

Her bell-like voice cut me off.

“Are you God?” she asked. “Or perhaps a Disciple?”

She’d asked me in all seriousness, so I had no choice but to respond in kind.

“What the heck are you talking about?” I said. She growled at me.

“I’m the saint, I’ll have you know. You’d do well to remember that when choosing your words.”

“Er, okay? I don’t care if you’re a saint or nobility. If you go around asking people questions like that to their face, it’s your own fault if they think you’re a weirdo.”

“H-how disrespectful...” she sputtered.

The saint seemed utterly befuddled. She was probably not used to people treating her like this.

“And anyway, what exactly is going on?” I asked.

I finally took a good look around the room and noticed a person near the entrance. And beside the bed, directly across from the saint, was another person—from the black robes, I guessed some kind of nun. They were probably

surprised by my rudeness. They seem flabbergasted as well.

The saint attempted to recover from her shock, composing her expressionless face before questioning me again.

“How much do you remember?” she asked.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure.

“I was about to get your blessing in the cathedral when the guy behind me screamed,” I said. “I was all ‘well, this guy ain’t normal’ and then ended up getting into a scrap with him. And then he stabbed me.”

“You didn’t ball up in fear in the face of danger. I suppose I should expect as much from a self-proclaimed mercenary,” she said.

“Er, self-proclaimed?”

“Are you not?”

The saint gazed at me with her crimson eyes as if trying to suss out my intentions. She had super long eyelashes... She was beautiful... The young girl might even rival Sylphy... Young girl? Young woman? Girl?

“It’s not as though I have identification on me, so I guess I’m fine with self-proclaimed,” I finally said. “Now let me ask you again. Why am I in this nice room getting treated all fancy by you, the saint, of all people? And was that knife laced with poison? I’m pretty sure I took that knife somewhere lethal.”

“You’re lucky I was there to detoxify the poison and perform a healing miracle. But even then, the fact that you survived a knife wound and basilisk poison is incredible. You have astounding life energy. What are you, some sort of oil bug?”

“Do you mean a roach?! Is that really the sort of thing to say to the person who saved your life?”

How rude! I came by all this irrepressible vigor honestly!

“One does not show respect to those who do not return it in kind,” she said. Then it was my turn to growl a little.

“You’re not wrong... Well, either way, I am very grateful that you saved my

life."

"You're quite welcome. You have my gratitude as well. Thank you very much."

"I guess we're even," I said.

"No," she disagreed immediately, and with a face like she thought I was stupid for suggesting we were equals. "It's only natural that I would be protected. But you have put a guiding saint to much trouble, and now owe me a debt. The price of my miracles is high."

"Well, that sounds pretty unfair... Didn't you say that all lives are equal before Adol?"

"They are." She started to smile. "I was merely joking."

"Huh. You're pretty funny, you know that?"

"I'm honored."

The two of us looked each other over, reconsidering our initial assessments, but were interrupted by the sister at my bedside coughing loudly and pointedly. The saint took the hint.

"Let's get back to the topic at hand," she said. "Are you God, or are you a Disciple?"

"What the heck are you talking about?" I sighed.

"Making the same joke twice is against the rules."

"Damn, you're strict... Fine. Why are you asking me what I am?"

"It's quite obvious to my eyes. An incredibly powerful divine light radiates from you. Unlike the ones that cover that putrefying pope or the hog in cardinal's clothing."

"Lady Saint, mind your words."

I glanced at the sisters in the room, but they turned away. Regardless of how she behaved in public, this saint had quite the scandalous tongue behind the scenes.

"Ah, my apologies," she said. "I let the truth slip out."

“You sure you’re not making a mistake?” I asked.

“I can see the light now. In fact, it’s almost blinding.”

“I think you’re imagining things. I mean, I did get stabbed saving you, so I’m sure you’re just having a moment.” I smiled. “I mean, I am pretty popular with the—

“*Psh.*”

“Did you just *psh* me?!”

A crack formed in my glass heart. I’d gotten carried away. Sure, Sylphy, Ira, the harpies, and the slime girls all liked me, but that didn’t mean I could start acting like some entitled Casanova.

I’m so sorry! I’m a piece of garbage. Flaming garbage.

“Now, listen well,” she told me. “I am the Saint of Truth. I am a guiding presence. I have to deal with young nobility who have much more attractive faces than you do. I mostly just have tea with them, but when they seek more than that, I make sure they pay for it.”

“Sounds tough.”

“It is. As soon as they open their mouths, senseless flirtations pour forth, and they don’t even try to hide the vile way they undress me with their eyes. The second I leave them an opening, they try to touch me. You have no idea how much of a pain it is to deal with absolute trash. They’re worse than oil bugs. And because my eyes can...see certain things, it really is tough to deal with.”

The radiance in her eyes dimmed, and soon they resembled dull red marbles rather than rubies. This was bad. She was way the hell stressed out.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Sincerely.”

“It’s all right. I appreciate the concern...” she said. “So. You’re God... No, you’re a Disciple, are you not?”

“What happened to making the same joke twice being off limits?”

“It’s fine the first two times. And since I’m certain of the answer, it doesn’t even count this time.”

“What are you... Hah?!”

She leaned toward me, still stone-faced. She just did not give up.

“Evasion won’t work anymore. Answer me.”

“Well, I certainly don’t identify as a Disciple. And anyway, you still haven’t answered my question. Why am I here, and being taken care of so well?”

“You fought off the foul man who aimed to take my life and were stabbed by a poisoned knife. I pleaded for a miracle, and for some reason, Adol granted my wish and allowed you to live.”

I focused on the important part.

“For some reason?!”

“The wound you had was so deep that no human could hope to survive. For some reason, God let you survive, so I couldn’t simply leave you where you lay. Regardless of who you are, you saved me, the guiding saint, in front of a massive group of people.”

“You really like calling yourself that, huh?” I commented.

“I became quite fond of the term just three days ago,” she said. “Anyway, I moved you to this room in the cathedral, where we changed your clothes, cleansed your body, took care of your nethers, and watched over you for three days. When I’d finished my work today, I came to see you and found you awake. That brings us to now.”

“I feel like I heard something I shouldn’t have in there,” I said. She shrugged.

“You’d get ill if we didn’t cleanse you properly, so we cleaned every single crevice and hole. Due to the effects of the poison, nearly every orifice of your body was expelling things for the first day.”

“Okay, please stop.”

Having her explain this to me in detail with no expression was killing me. Remember, heart of glass.

“How does it feel knowing that us pure maidens have seen your anus? Are you ashamed? Embarrassed? Excited? You pervert.”

She'd been totally expressionless, but *this* put a big smile on her face.

"Sisters! Hey, sisters!" I looked to the sisters for salvation, but they turned away from me. "Do something about this girl! Help me, *por favor*!"

They were children of Adol, but in the face of authority, they were just normal people. Looked like nobody was willing to step out of line to help little old me. God was dead to me.

Okay, but the most important thing was that three whole days had gone by. *Crap.* I told the slime girls I was going to spend five days in the city, so at least I didn't have to worry about them just yet. But since I was conscious, it was about time I retreated.

"Anyway...! I'm grateful to you for saving my life," I said, trying to get up. "I'd feel bad staying any longer, so I'll be on my way..."

"Not happening."

The saint pushed me down with a hand on my chest.

"Wh-what's your—"

"You had basilisk poison in your body," she said. "In your liver, no less. Your internal organs were basically dead. It's miraculous that you're still alive. If you get reckless now, you'll die. I went to the trouble of keeping you alive, so it'd be a waste of my effort if you died on me now."

The saint said all of this through the blank mask of her expressionless face. She was staring right at me. It was super unnerving to deal with her.

Anyhow, I opened up my menu and checked on my status. My health and stamina gauges were hovering near zero. They dropped and rose, up and down. It was like I was recovering little by little, while losing health at the same time. My natural healing abilities and current level of damage were just about equally matched, it seemed. As for my current status, it was [Fatally Poisoned (Chronic)].

"You're right," I admitted to the saint. "I'm definitely weak. And I guess if I'm weak enough that the saint's spindly little arms can push me down, then moving around would be dangerous."

“Exactly,” she said. “You’re alive because of the effects of my miracle and because of the blessings of this cathedral. It’s holy ground in here. If you were to set one foot outside of this building, your internal organs would rot, you’d vomit blood, and you’d die.”

“Holy shit, what the hell?!”

“Which is why I want you to stay here for now. Understood?”

“I truly appreciate the offer, but what about getting back to my regular life?”

“You’ll die,” she reiterated.

Her assessment carried a lot of weight, especially considering what my own status said. If I was really being kept alive through the saint’s miracle or whatever, and by this cathedral’s effects or some crap, then I really might vomit blood and die if I left. I groaned.

“...Thanks for your hospitality.”

“Oh, how virtuous!” The saint nodded. “I strive to be virtuous on a daily basis as well.”

She resumed staring at me, expressionless again. No lie, it was hard to relax when a cutie was staring at me all nonplussed.

“Um, why are you staring at me like that?”

“You’ve yet to answer my question,” she said.

“Pardon?”

“If you don’t stop fooling around, I’m going to pray.”

“Pray...for what?!” I asked, which she ignored completely.

“You’re a Disciple, are you not?”

And hell, what was I supposed to do? It was like she could see something that Ira couldn’t, because Ira was absolutely certain I was a Fabled Visitor.

“Um, well, you see...” I started to say.

“Yes?” she urged me on, staring at my face intently.

“O-oh, no, I’m fading due to the poison...” I fell backward onto the bed.

“Looks like it was too soon for me to be getting up. Good night!”

I closed my eyes and did my best to pretend I’d fallen asleep. I just needed time to think!

I peeked out of one of my eyes to check on the saint’s status, and she was looking deeply annoyed. Turned out, the muscles in her cheeks weren’t dead after all. Maybe she just had that resting blank face because of all the rotten experiences she’d gone through. Her position sounded like a real pain.

And the fact that she wasn’t forcing me to continue her questioning meant that she might be a kind young woman at heart. Even if she was hiding a few more sadistic tendencies.

The sister over by the door piped up.

“Lady Saint, it’s almost time...”

“Fine,” she growled and then addressed me, “I’ll be back, and you’ll talk then.”

“I’ll do my best to consider it,” I said.

“Good.”

I heard the sound of fabric ruffling and her quiet footsteps growing distant from the bed. Eventually, the door creaked, groaned, then clicked shut.

I stealthily opened a single eye to scope out the situation, and it looked like the saint took the sister who was by the door with her. The sister on the other side of the bed was still present and accounted for.

“I’m really sorry about all this,” I told her.

“Please don’t apologize. This, too, is the will of Adol. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Despite abandoning me earlier, this sister seemed quite kind. Anyway, I needed to focus on resting my body. If I just had a potion, this wouldn’t be a big deal, but I had none in stock. I couldn’t get my hands on the materials for them. But what about the antidote Poiso made for me? Could that work?

When no one's looking, I'll give it a try.

Yo, Kousuke! My man, you're healthy enough to get up from bed and do your business!

So, um, kind sister? I know you need to keep an eye on me just in case, but could you please not watch me in this sensitive moment?

“This is my duty,” she insisted. “Please, don’t mind me.”

It was all well and good that she could flash such a kind smile as she said that, but it was whittling away at my sanity! And yet, no matter how hard I stressed that, the sister acted like she was one with the wind. She’d never abandon her duty. She was a tough one.

As for meals, it was sort of grated fruit and light salted rice gruel. I was hungry, dammit.

“Your stomach is also weakened and on the verge of death, so...” said the sister.

“No, I’m not complaining. Thanks for everything.”

I was grateful that they were giving me anything at all, and that they were doing all this to take care of me. It was unfortunate that I was hungry, but there was no need to complain about it.

And it looked like my organs really were on the verge of conking out, since all that came out the other end of me was a thin, watery mess. They must’ve provided me with fluids while I was unconscious so that I didn’t die from dehydration. Man, I owed these people a lot.

That was basically the long and short of how things went after the saint left.

But...

“Now, answer my question.”

Not even two hours had gone by, and the saint was back.

“You sure aren’t wasting any time.”

Just like before, she was sitting off to the side of the bed, staring straight into

my face. I didn't even have time to think about an answer!

"Um, so let me get this straight," I said. "You think I'm God or a Disciple because I'm sparkly or something, yeah?"

"Sparkly...?" Looked like she wasn't into me referring to the so-called divine radiant light as "sparkly." Eventually, though, she nodded her head. "Fine, let's go with that."

"Are you sure this sparkly-ness isn't just normal but uncommon?"

"Impossible. Listen well." The saint raised her index finger to lecture me. "If I were to compare this to currency, then the radiance surrounding a normal person is equal to one large copper or a normal silver. People who shine with the radiance of gold are extremely rare."

"I'm not sure how I feel about comparing radiance to money."

"It's easy to understand, is it not? Anyway, the radiance surrounding you is the same as white gold. On a different level from everyone else. It's on the same level as me, the guiding saint."

"I'm not sure whether I should be happy for being compared to white gold, or just kind of turned off by how readily you referred to yourself as white gold..."

"I am loved and chosen by Adol. Of course I'm white gold."

Somehow it still seemed like she was smirking, even though her expression was completely blank. How mysterious!

"So, this shiny radiance or whatever. Only you can see it?"

"Correct."

"Then it's gotta be a mistake," I said. "An illusion. You are exhausted, Lady Saint."

"I thought you'd say that, which is why I brought this with me."

The saint pulled out an old crown of some kind, but not the sort that a king might wear. It was closer to what you might see on a video game hero. A circlet, I thought.

It was made of faded gold, nearly the color of brass, and along the front were

finger-sized, muddy-white stones. If they were red, they really would be like one of those video game circlets!

“L-Lady Saint, that’s...” one of the sisters stammered.

“Yes, the Crown of Radiance. Father Swine had it stashed away, so I snagged it.”

“Lady Saint!?”

Both sisters shrieked at that reveal. Judging by their reactions, that was not the kind of object that should be snuck out of its place without permission.

“This holy artifact makes the wearer’s radiance visible to all,” said the saint. “Like this.”

She placed it on her head and the stones on the front shone with incredible force. The light nearly seared my eyes.

“I can’t see!”

“Incredibly bright, right? When I wear it, it whites out everything around me. Not very useful.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Anyway, let’s put it on Amalie.”

The sister in question shrieked and pleaded with the saint.

“P-please, forgive me!”

“Fear not. Your radiance is between silver and gold,” said the saint, before mercilessly putting the crown on the sister’s shaking head. “It’s a little bright, but perfectly normal. Excellent for lighting a room.”

“Oh, my Lord...”

Amalie had her eyes shut, so she couldn’t see her own radiance. She kept on praying and shaking in fear.

“Lady Saint, why is she so scared?” I asked.

“To those who can’t see radiance, having one’s faith made visible is a terrifying thing, or so I’ve observed.”

“Come on, cut her some slack...” I said.

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Amalie.”

“N-no.” The sister’s eyes were shut tight in fear. “This too is Adol’s will.”

When the crown was lifted from her head, Amalie looked around and let out a deep sigh.

“As I have shown, once you put this crown on, I can prove to you that you are surrounded by an incredible radiance,” said the saint.

“Y’know, I really do think it’s just a coincidence.”

“I have many years of experience, and I have faith. I know full well that coincidences are not possible, so worry not.” The saint turned to issue orders to the sisters. “Bertha, Amalie, please hold him down.”

The sister by the door and Amalie closed in on my bed and grabbed me by both arms. *Oooh, soft... Wait, no! That’s not important!*

“Um, can we please not do this?” I pleaded with them. “Let me go, pretty please?”

“I’m sorry,” Amalie said.

“I don’t want to wear it either...” admitted the other.

“Give in,” was what the saint commanded.

“Ma’am?! Please, have mercy?! Please?!“

I tried to wiggle my way out of it, but my body was still too weak to break free from the thin arms of the sisters. As soon as the saint placed the crown upon my head, the entire room was flooded in blinding white light. Seriously, these were white-out conditions. Insanely bright. I couldn’t see a damn thing.

After just a moment, the saint took the crown off my head.

“This is more incredible than I thought.”

She whispered to herself and rubbed her eyes. There were tears in them, probably the result of seeing that light so up close and personal.

“So, as you can see, I am not mistaken,” she said. “So vomit up the details for

me, now.”

“Lady Saint, mind your words,” admonished Bertha, the second sister. For once, the saint listened to her.

“Bare the truth before the radiant light,” she said.

Okay, so what were my options? I had to think calmly. Would it be bad if I told the truth?

Of course it would.

Who knew how I’d be treated if I admitted to being a Disciple of God, a Fabled Visitor. I mean, they probably wouldn’t treat me poorly, but I’d definitely get taken into custody and sent to the Holy Kingdom. I could probably slip through their grasp by using my powers, but there was little doubt it’d take even longer for me to get back to Sylphy and the others. Even if I got caught, I doubted they’d kill me, but fleeing would just become more difficult.

At the same time, this was a hard situation to bluff myself out of. I had no idea how the holy artifact worked, but the problem was that the saint and everyone else strongly believed in the power of the crown. There was no more room for making excuses.

“I have a few questions,” I said.

“Please, be my guest.”

“Let’s just say, for conversation’s sake, that I am what you say I am. What would happen to me?”

“Well... It doesn’t seem like you’re much of a believer, so first you would have to be brought into the faith. You’d spend every waking hour memorizing and copying scriptures, and praying.”

“For reals?”

“For reals.”

“Whoa.”

The saint seriously just said “for reals.”

“You’d start as my servant and bodyguard,” she went on. “Then eventually,

you and I would be wed, and I would have your child.”

“...For...real?”

“Absolutely.”

“For *real*?”

“Absolutely.”

“For? Real?”

“Absolutely?”

“For?”

“Real.”

“Please converse normally,” Amalie cut in.

The two of us went quiet for a moment, but only for a moment. I spoke up first.

“There’s someone I have feelings for already,” I said.

“I don’t mind, as long as I can have your child,” said the saint, with a completely straight face. *Now hold on just a second!*

“This is not good! Not good at all! Why does it have to be that way?!”

“There was a divine revelation.”

“Excuse me?”

“It arrived the night before I left the Holy Kingdom. At my destination, I would confront death itself. But when I overcame death, I would become close with my destiny, and I would become bound to my destiny. Then, God told me to live.”

And just as that divine revelation said, she found shiny ol’ me, had her life threatened, and I saved her. She brought me back from the brink. In other words, she came face-to-face with death. It was hard not to think that I was the destiny from her revelation. If I were her, that’s what I’d think.

Wasn’t this all a little too convenient? It was God doing this, so whatever, I guess, but how was I supposed to take all this?

I was taken by God, or whatever higher being there was, and spat out into the demi-humans' Black Forest. There, I met Sylphy, met Ira, and met the harpies. Together, alongside the rest of the demi-humans, I fought the Holy Kingdom, was betrayed by Cuvi, and then met the saint.

She said that this meeting of ours was destiny. That's what God told her.

If I was the saint's destined partner, then why had I been thrown into the Black Forest? Wouldn't it have made more sense to send me directly to her? She said I was sparkly or whatever, so if God simply arranged it so she met me before anyone else, everything would've gone all happily-ever-after from the get-go.

And then I'd never have met Sylphy or the others.

I felt a chill run down my spine. If I'd been sent straight to the Holy Kingdom, what would've happened to me? I might've joined up with the Holy Kingdom and killed everyone I now cared about. Just thinking about it made me want to puke.

"What's wrong? You look ill."

"No, it's nothing..."

"I'm sorry," she said, bowing her head deeply. "This isn't something I should be discussing with you when you're not a hundred percent recovered."

"No, no," I said. I couldn't help but panic a little seeing her all apologetic. "If I were in your position, I'd probably be way more forceful. It's just... I need time to think. Do you mind coming back later, so we can talk again?"

"...Is that okay?"

"That's my line. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," she said.

"Thanks a lot. I'm a little curious about this Adol fellow now... I'd love a willing ear for my questions."

The saint actually formed a natural, warm smile. She was stunning. I was stunned. Woof.

“In that case,” she said, “I think I’m perfect for the role. I’ll come to see you again tomorrow. Please collect your thoughts. Until then, if you need anything, please speak to Amalie.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, Lady Saint. Really.”

“Eleonora,” she said.

“What?”

“That’s my name. You may also call me Elen.”

“Elen...” I tried it out. “All right. Thanks, Elen.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

The saint—Elen—smiled at me and left with Bertha. I watched her go, then let my body drop back into bed.

“I’m gonna get some shut-eye,” I said to Amalie.

“Of course. Good night. Our Lord and I will be watching over you, so rest easy.”

Our Lord, huh? What was our Lord even thinking? What did They want from me? Yeesh.

“Thanks...”

Dammit, if I’d known this was gonna happen, I would’ve just braved the danger and ran all the way home. Would I be able to fight against people from the Holy Kingdom ever again? Would I be able to make weapons designed to kill them? As soon as I started thinking about this stuff, I felt ready to puke all over again, even as sleep clawed at the back of my brain. I couldn’t do this. It was to rest. No thinking allowed. The more I brooded over it all, the more I screwed myself over.

I let go, and my awareness slipped away.

The next day, Elen dropped by my room.

“Say ‘aaah.’”

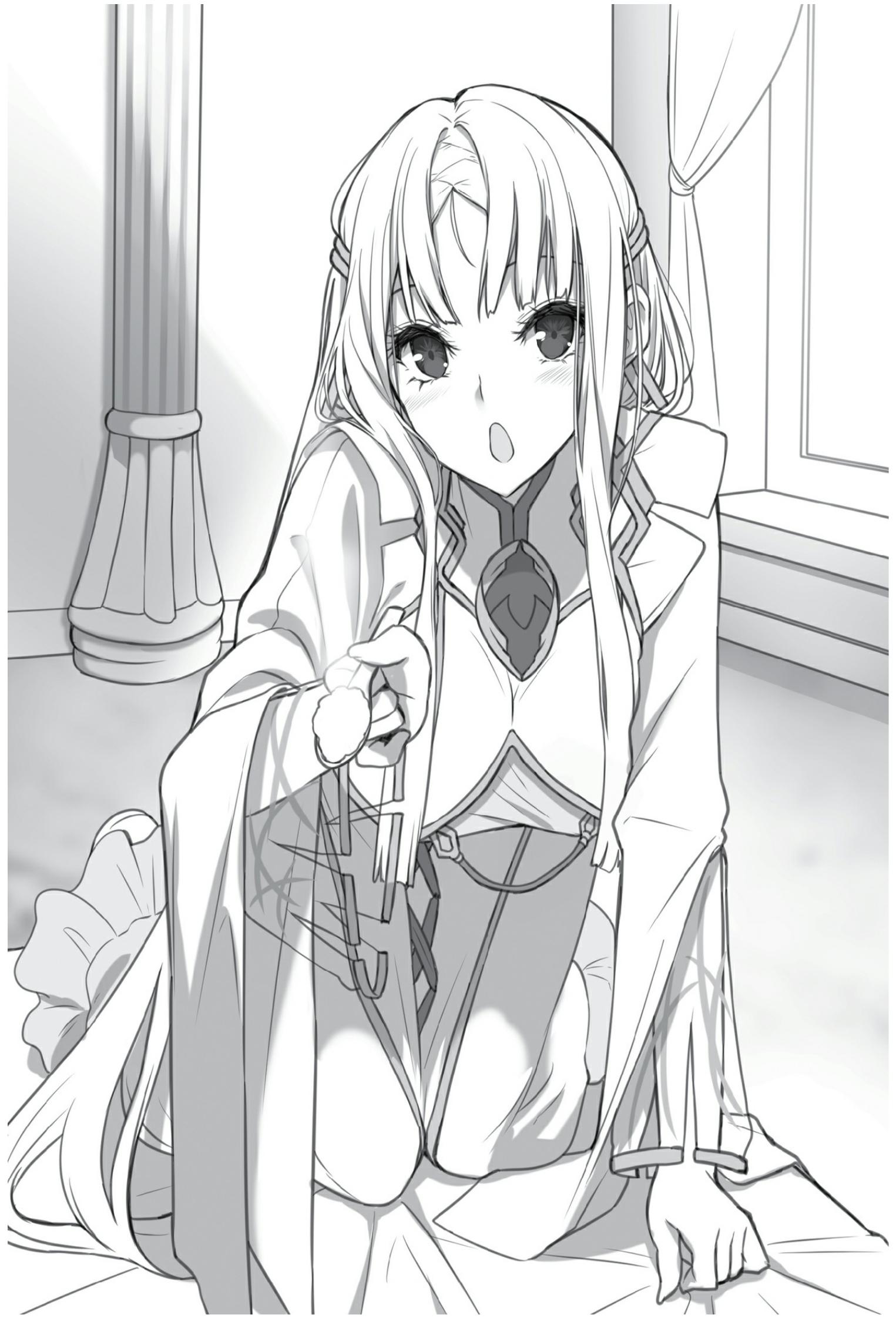
“Um.”

“You heard me.”

“No, like, uh.”

“Eh.”

Elen stared at me, a spoonful of rice porridge raised and waiting in front of my face.



Looked like I had to take the L on this one.

“...Aaah.”

She moved the spoonful of porridge into my mouth and the lightly salted, milk-flavored mush dissipated on my tongue. Okay, yeah, it was good. It was good, but...

“Elen?” I tried. “I can eat by myself.”

“Say ‘aaah,’” she replied, unfortunately.

It seemed the saint had taken a liking to this activity. I shot a glance towards Amalie and Bertha, but they simply smiled and looked away. I was on my own.

In the end, she fed me all of the porridge by hand. The crack in this fragile heart of mine was widening into a fissure. And Elen seemed to have awoken to something. Her cheeks were bright red. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but I wished she’d quit while she was ahead.

Seemingly satisfied with feeding me, Elen left without so much as a goodbye.

“What the heck was that?”

My eyes met with Amalie’s while she cleaned up after the meal, but she simply smiled and said nothing. It seemed she wanted me to figure this out for myself.

Considering Elen’s position, I had to think she hadn’t lived an easy life. I was sure plenty of gloomy things happened to and around her. That wasn’t hard to imagine in the least. All I could really do was try to imagine how she was discovered as the saint, what kind of life she’d lived. She must’ve had the weight of the world thrust on her, what with the way she went all dead-eyed at the drop of the hat. It was entirely possible that she was on the verge of losing her faith. But then she was given a divine revelation, and when she followed it, she met me. Her destiny, or whatever. After that, her faith would skyrocket.

And so then, with the help of her newly recovered faith, my presence was kind of emotionally load-bearing for her. All this would have a huge effect on her judgment... But I got the feeling she realized that. That could be why she was trying to put some distance between us.

“Hmm...”

The problem was on me. Elen was a good girl. She was as beautiful as Sylphy, and I had fun talking to her.

But when it came down to it, we were enemies. I was a key member of the Liberation Army, whose primary objective was to take back the Kingdom of Merinard. She was the Holy Kingdom’s saint, the very same nation that took over Merinard. We were two people who would never, ever have interacted under normal circumstances. And, despite how much Elen might care for me, I already had Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies. My home was with them.

Amalie broke in on my ruminating.

“You seem conflicted,” she said.

It was weird for her to talk to me directly. Having to stick with me all the time was probably a real pain for her. But she’d never once complained, and had stayed by my side, nursing me. Now there was a gold-tier clergymwoman.

“I am,” I told her.

“Do you not wish to be Eleonora’s partner?” she asked.

“It’s not that... It’s not really that sort of a problem... There’s someone I’ve already exchanged vows to be with waiting for me. It’s just that there are certain circumstances at the moment that are keeping me away from her.”

I was talking about Sylphy, of course.

“I see...” said Amalie. “But it’s not as though only one person can stand by your side.”

“That’s... Well... Is that allowed in Adolism?”

“Lord Adol forbids stealing your neighbor’s possessions, illicit sexual relations, and stealing wives.”

“And, so...?”

“He says nothing about one man having multiple wives. Lord Adol Himself took many wives and had children with all of them. We are his descendants.”

This guy’s gotta be one of those aliens with wildly advanced technology. He

made wives like an otaku might make his 2D wife in Custom 3D, had kids, and then used 'em to populate the planet. From there he took "sinners"—whatever that category originally meant—as they arose in the growing population, and then he modified their genes to make demi-humans. Or at least, that's what I figured might have happened.

"Well, even if there's no problem on that front, there are other issues..."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

In any case, it was pointless trying to figure out a god's intent. This was the same guy who dumped me in this world out of nowhere. Whether that was Adol or someone else, I didn't know, but clearly they were kind of an asshole. This wasn't someone capable of sympathy, as far as I could tell.

The issue was, what did I want? What was best for me? What was best for Sylphy and the others? And what was best for Elen and her people? Obviously, I couldn't hold Elen and the others on the same level as Sylphy and everyone back home. I only just met them. Elen, the sisters, the boy who'd led me around the town, the matron at the inn, the girl there, and even that mercenary I met at the gate.

They were all citizens of the Holy Kingdom, but they weren't evil. In fact, I thought it safe to say they were good people.

But to Sylphy and the others, they were invaders who'd mercilessly stolen their country, their home. And to the members of the Holy Kingdom, Sylphie and the rest were inferior demi-humans who threatened their very way of life.

Was it possible for these two groups to coexist? It'd be difficult. The gulf between them was twenty years deep. The hatred between them had built and built, so that when they came face to face, they had no choice but to kill each other.

But just because something was difficult didn't make it impossible.

Humans and demi-humans were both capable of communication and reason. They were capable of exchanging ideas. No matter how much bad blood stood between them, they should be able to talk and find common ground... And,

look, I wasn't so empty-headed that I thought they would up and sit down at a negotiating table that very day, but I did think that there should be somewhere the two groups could meet.

To begin with, humans and demi-humans lived side by side in the old Kingdom of Merinard. That might've been twenty years ago, but those memories still remained in the hearts of the Liberation Army's rank and file. Heck, the soldiers of the former kingdom and their families—even the citizens of the former kingdom—had met up with the Liberation Army, and continued to do so.

In other words, the groundwork was laid for the Liberation Army to accept humans.

The real issue was the Holy Kingdom's huge anti-demi-human prejudice problem. People wouldn't change their minds in a day. It could take tens, no, hundreds of years.

Even back on Earth, bigotry and racism still existed. It'd be incredibly difficult to break down the wall between humans and demi-humans when there was such a difference in appearances, physical skills, and even age. The only thing that might be able to bring everyone together was some new enemy that threatened them both with destruction and forced them to fight together. Even if something like that appeared, it would still be difficult.

But I was getting off track. All I could do... What I had to do... *Hrm*. According to Elen, I had a white gold tier radiant aura surrounding me. On top of that, I was a human Fabled Visitor, and accepted as one by the Liberation Army.

And, if I said I was a Disciple of God, that'd give me a pass as far as any Adolists were concerned.

Was there something I could do with this unique position of mine? For example, what if I started a new sect of Adolism that rejected prejudice against demi-humans? No, wrong word—Adolism had churches and cathedrals, so a new denomination?

If I could convince Elen to help me, then we could get something like that started. With a Disciple of God and a saint as the main symbols of the denomination, it might be possible. Elen had seemed unhappy with the upper

echelons of Adolism. Considering Father Swine in the castle, it was safe to assume that the mainstream church figureheads were rotten to the core.

If I did this right, it might have an actual chance. Maybe this was the reason I was brought to this world? Or maybe not. But it did all seem a little too serendipitous.

The problem was, if we started a new denomination and declared the Kingdom of Merinard's independence, the Holy Kingdom itself would most certainly come to crush us... But if they came for us, we'd just have to resist with everything we had. If things went that far, even I wouldn't hold back. Lots of people would die, but that was nothing new. I'd long since made peace with spilling blood.

No. No, that wasn't true. At the end of the day, I still didn't want to hurt anyone. I didn't want to go back to the Liberation Army and then end up killing Elen, the sisters, the inn matron and her girl, or the boy from the street. Hell no. That's why this was such a struggle for me. This wad of meat in my skull just couldn't come up with a solution that saved everyone.

There wasn't much I could do on my own. I just wasn't smart enough for that. Which was why I relied on others. Starting with Elen.

Elen dropped by my room again at nightfall. I didn't know if she'd been busy or what, but she was MIA ever since the morning. Had something happened?

"Are you okay?" I asked her. "Everything all right?"

"Not quite..."

I could feel an exhausted, concerned aura circulating around her, in spite of the familiar blank expression on her face.

"How so?" I asked, then remembered I'd learned something earlier in the day that might be relevant. "Actually...I heard things weren't going great down south."

"That's exactly it," she said.

She didn't seem to want to discuss the details, but what I heard was that the

Liberation Army had been making moves. Over half a month had gone by since my disappearance. I doubted whether they had wrapped up everything we'd planned to do in the south, but if the demi-human slaves in the area were freed already, then the Liberation Army's forces would have grown significantly.

I wasn't sure if they had enough equipment for all those people, but they had the stuff we took from the Holy Kingdom's army. The goat's-foot crossbows should be in mass production at the manufacturing facility in the rear. They were also probably making use of the materials and prototype weapons I took out of my inventory. I knew the research team made weapons based off of mine too.

But even if they'd increased their forces, a strike directly at Meriniburg was still impossible, or should have been. They may have won battles, but taking control of everything? Doubtful. After all, we just barely had enough people to maintain control over the southern regions.

Plus, all of the former demi-human slaves who'd met up with the Liberation Army had suffered years of hardship, so were unlikely to be at maximum strength. A week of rest wouldn't be enough to get them combat-ready. Hell, training was probably not gonna happen either.

In sum, it was too early for the Liberation Army to make their next move. If they were trying to save me, they'd send a small squad, not the whole army.

Elen broke in on my pondering.

"Are you lost in thought?"

"I have a lot going on right now," I said.

"Do you?"

"I do."

I tilted my head and Elen tilted hers. I'd heard that she could see through lies, so instead of lying, I figured I'd just not talk about it. I changed the subject.

"Elen, you asked me if I'm a Disciple of God, yeah?"

"Correct. Are you finally willing to talk?"

"Well..."

Was it right to tell her everything? I was her enemy. There was no way around that. I'd killed countless soldiers indirectly, and made tons of supplies and weapons for the Liberation Army. Of course we were enemies. If I told her the unvarnished truth, then a fierce, impassable rift would form between us. I wanted to spill the beans so much, but I needed to hold myself back.

"I want to talk to you alone," I told her.

"Alone? Are you planning to jump me, you beast?" She was teasing me, but Amalie and Bertha looked none too pleased at the suggestion.

"Look, I'm being serious. The Saint of Truth can't be saying stuff like that. It could lead to some bad stuff."

Sister, I swear that's not why I want to be alone with her! I don't even have the energy for that! You should know that better than anyone, Amalie!

"You seem pretty desperate," said Elen.

"Can I retaliate for this? Like, physically?"

"Threatening a weak young woman with violence now, are we?"

"Said the woman teasing and messing with a weakened patient."

"I suppose that's a good point," she said. "I'm not stopping though."

"Pretty please?" I begged.

Finally, my desperation got through to her. Either that, or she was satisfied with the amount of teasing she'd done. She signaled for Amalie and Bertha to leave the room.

"Is that good enough?" she asked me.

"Totally. Nobody else who could be listening in?"

"Doubtful. These walls are thick, and there's only one door. The door itself is rather thick as well, so unless I really scream, nobody on the outside will be able to hear."

"Got it..."

"So, if you did choose to jump me like some ravenous heathen, unless I scream very loudly, you should be fine."

“Well, I’m not going to. First... Let’s see...” I took a deep breath. “Let’s start with whether or not I’m a Disciple of God.”

“All right.”

Elen straightened up, ready to listen. Her expression remained as flat as ever, but I would bet she was nervous in her own way. I could feel it in the aura around her.

“Truth be told, I don’t know if that’s what I am. I’ve never met God, so it’s not like anyone’s told me ‘Hey, you’re a Disciple of me, God’. What I can tell you is that I’m not from this world.”

“You’re...not?”

“I’m not. The sky of the world I lived in wasn’t filled with another massive planet. There was no magic, no monsters, no demi-humans. Just a world of humans.”

“You’re from another world.”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

Elen looked me straight in the eyes with those crimson jewels of hers.

“I see. You’re a Fabled Visitor, then.”

“You know about them, Raiden?” I blurted out.

“My name’s Elen. And of course I do. Legends of Fabled Visitors exist throughout many lands, although I’ve never seen one in person.”

“I see...”

Sylphy said that legends and stories about Fabled Visitors existed all over too.

“I have kind of a special ability,” I said, picking up where I left off. “According to a magic tool’s examination, the things my ability can do aren’t strictly magical. They’re closer to the miracles of holy magic.”

“You can call upon miracles too?” She asked.

“No, but I can do this.”

From my inventory, I pulled out a plate stacked with pancakes. I made this

using wheat, eggs, and milk, then topped it with flower honey. As for where the eggs and milk came from, I'd just keep that an industry secret.

"What is this...? It smells so sweet."

"It's called a pancake. They're sweet and fluffy and delicious. Here, say 'aaah.'"

I pulled a fork from my inventory, cut a piece of the pancake with it, then brought it toward Elen's lips. She didn't seem to know how to respond at first, but then she opened her mouth wide. I gently put the fork in her mouth.

"It's...sweet and delicious," she said, once she'd chewed and swallowed.

"Right? Told you so. Here, say 'aaah.'"

"...Aaah."

Elen opened her mouth like a baby bird, and I fed her again. *Uh, this is kinda fun?*

"I also have some milk," I offered.

"I'd love some."

I handed Elen a wooden cup filled with milk, and she took it with both hands and downed it.

"This milk is delightful. It doesn't taste like sheep's milk... What is it?"

"Cow, I think."

"You're lying."

"Mostly cow," I insisted. "Mostly."

About half, anyhow. It started to hurt if they didn't get milked periodically, and they could even get sick from going unmilked too long. The milk kept flowing, even though they didn't have babies to feed. It was a real bother.

"...Well, whatever. So, what's this again?"

"Say 'aaah.'"

Munch, munch.

That was enough fooling around. I needed to do what needed to be done.

There was no turning back.

"I'm not just creating things from nothing," I told her. "I'm taking things out that I already had. It's like an invisible storehouse, or bag."

"Hm, like spatial magic?"

"I don't know what spatial magic is like, but probably? I can store anything, anytime, anywhere, and I can take it right back out. No drawbacks."

"A rather plain ability," she said.

"Compared to being able to see the truth? Sure."

I tried to hand the plate to Elen, but she didn't take it, and instead just opened her mouth. Since I had no choice, I continued to feed her more pancakes.

"I've never eaten sweets like this before."

"Really? I thought you'd have something similar in this world."

Wheat, eggs, milk, and sugar mixed together and fried. Simple as that. Well, maybe not, technically speaking. You might need baking powder? Galette was basically a type of pancake, right? Eh, I wouldn't sweat the deets.

"Anyway, I'm a Fabled Visitor. But I don't know if I'm a Disciple of God."

"According to some tales, Fabled Visitors appear in this world because they are brought here by God. It was Adol Himself who told me you were my destiny, so I think it's safe to presume that you are a Disciple of God."

"I see... I'm pretty agnostic, but, y'know, clearly the situation calls for a little flexibility."

"We can change that starting now," she said, and opened her mouth again. "Aaah."

"All right, hold your horses."

I considered my next move as I shoveled more pancakes into Elen's mouth. She'd concluded that I was a Disciple. So then it came down to how I went from there.

"Name," she said.

“Hm?”

“I just realized that I never got your name.”

“Right, right...”

If I gave her my name, the jig was up. It might be up already, though.

It was extremely likely that Elen had heard about my ability from Cushi. If that was the case, then she knew who I was based on seeing my ability in action. Cushi also knew that I was a Fabled Visitor.

Which meant it was possible that Elen knew the truth from the start. It wouldn’t be shocking if he’d given her my description.

“Kousuke,” I said, finally.

“I see... Mm.”

Since her mouth was open, I plopped in the last bit of pancake. Elen quietly chewed and swallowed.

“So, you really are Kousuke.”

“I am.”

“You are.”

Our conversation stopped in its tracks. Elen looked away from me and stared into her cup.

“God told me. Told me to stay close to my destiny, and live.”

“God’s trials are pretty tough, huh?”

“They are. They really are.”

Silence settled upon the room once again. *Well, what’s next?*

“I gave some thought as to what God’s intentions might be,” I said to Elen.

“Did you, now?”

“I did. I know that from your point of view as a saint, a regular person like me trying to figure out God’s plan must come off as laughably conceited, but

please, just listen.”

“I’m listening.”

With her cup of milk in hand, Elen settled her crimson red eyes on me.

“When I first came to this world... I was tossed out at the boundary between the Black Forest and the Omitt Badlands.”

“Quite the remote area. You did well to stay alive.”

“If I’d happened to wander off into the badlands and not the woods, I would’ve died. But instead, I went into the Black Forest seeking water and food, and I ended up coming under the protection of a certain elf.”

“Protection?”

“Well, yeah, I was made into her slave, to be precise. I mean, not really; it was really an in-name-only sort of arrangement.”

Our relationship started off pretty calculated. When I looked back on things, I felt sort of nostalgic about it.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Elen.

“It wasn’t bad, to be honest. At the time, the refugees from the Kingdom of Merinard who’d fled into the woods were...not particularly fond of humans. If I wasn’t under her protection, I likely would’ve been killed that first night.”

“...I see.”

Elen closed her eyes. It was clear as day that Adolism was the driving force behind the conflict between humans and demi-humans. As its saint, she must have had some thoughts about this.

“At the time,” I went on, “I didn’t really understand my own abilities. Working together with my master, the two of us discovered all kinds of things about them. But, let me get back on track. A lot of things happened during that time in the woods, and I got the chance to talk to the elder there.”

“What about?” she asked.

“About how when the elves face danger, a Fabled Visitor from the spirit world would appear in the woods to save them. Specifically, the Fabled Visitor would

appear at the border of the woods.”

“That sounds exactly like your situation.”

I nodded, then continued.

“That’s exactly what I thought at the time, but hey, it’s not like God told me what to do, and I didn’t even believe in God in my own world.”

“A lack of faith is unbecoming.” Elen narrowed her brows and shot me a gentle glare. “God is always watching over us.” She was trying to scold me, but she was so cute that it lacked any sting.

“That might be literally true in this world, since I got tossed here.”

“...What do you mean?”

“After meeting you and hearing from you, I got the chance to think,” I said. “If our meeting was destiny—if God planned it from the jump—then what’s the point behind it? I’m a member of the Liberation Army. I’m not gonna join the Holy Kingdom.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely not.”

When she heard my declaration, Elen’s expression darkened, and she hung her head. I basically just declared myself her enemy.

“That being said...” I went on. “God told you to stay close to me, and to live. In other words, God is telling you to betray the current Holy Kingdom. To betray Adolism in its current form. Isn’t that the case?”

“What are you...” I saw the blood rush to the surface of Elen’s pale skin. To a devout believer, my words were total heresy. “God would never demand that of me.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

Elen blinked, and a confused expression formed on her face. Looked like that blank mask of hers was gone.

“So then I tried looking at things in reverse,” I said. “Isn’t it the current Holy Kingdom and its prevailing form of Adolism that are the real traitors? Hey, Elen.

From your perspective, do the people calling the shots for the Holy Kingdom and the church pass the test? Do their actions reflect God's will?"

"I... Well..." She stumbled over an answer.

"Aren't they just drowning in their wealth and power, twisting the word of God for their own ends? Wouldn't you say they're rotten to the core? Just like the priest who ran this city."

"..."

Elen once again hung her head and went silent. She'd badmouthed the pope and the cardinal herself, so I knew I wasn't far off the mark.

"I'm going to help the Liberation Army take back the Kingdom of Merinard and take down the Holy Kingdom. A lot of people, citizens of the Holy Kingdom, are going to get killed. I came to terms with that. My hands are already covered in blood." I presented my hands to her and looked straight at them. These were the hands that, by my own efforts, vaporized thousands of Holy Kingdom soldiers. It didn't feel real, but it was reality. I looked up at Elen again. "But if you work with me, we might be able to minimize the bloodshed."

"What do you mean?"

"Elen... No, Saint Eleonora. Come with me, the Disciple of God, back to the Liberation Army. And then, together, we'll create a new kind of Adolism."

"What..."

Elen's eyes went wide, and she seemed lost for words. She dropped the wooden cup of milk, and I heard it fall to the floor.

"As far as our new doctrine goes, well..." I shrugged and rattled off the basics. "Always help one another, get along with each other, that kind of thing? No discrimination. All members of the clergy must pray with sincerity. They must help the people, but they cannot be involved with politics. You know, the good stuff? I'm sure we can all talk it over and figure out something that works."

"Wait," she said. "Please hold on. Do you really think that's—"

"Possible?" I asked, then shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We're going to do it no matter what. Me, you, and everyone else. If we keep going down this path, all-

out war between the Liberation Army and the Holy Kingdom is unavoidable. But if we work together and manage to cut away at Adolism, we can limit the bloodshed.”

Elen looked shaken, but I kept my gaze locked with hers. I didn’t know if that affected her or not, but her crimson red eyes trembled with tears.

“I mean, I can do some pretty Disciple of God types of things,” I went on. “You’d be surprised. But you can trust me. So, let’s do it—you and me.”

I could pull food and drink out of nowhere. With a bog-standard bandage and a splint, I could heal broken bones and sprains. I could build a super-tough defensive wall in a single night. In just three days I could raise crops. I had enough abilities that the general public might as well treat me like a Disciple of God, or a savior.

“...Will you really go through with this?” Elen asked.

“I will.”

“And you need me to do it?”

“I can’t do this without you,” I told her. “I can’t.”

“If I said I won’t go with you, what would you do?”

“I’d be in big trouble.”

“Would you, now...”

“Yes, extremely,” I said. Elen looked straight at me.

“Because you’d have to kill me?”

I looked straight back at her before nodding.

“Yeah. I’d be in big trouble because that might happen,” I said. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Isn’t that just because you don’t want to get hurt?”

“Guess so. I’m a selfish person, you see.”

“And you’re going to make a whole new denomination just so you don’t hurt yourself?” Elen asked.

“Yup. I get to save some lives and protect my heart. Perfect, right?”

“You’re really okay with that?” she pressed.

“It’s pointless trying to lie to you. Plus, ever since coming to this world, I’ve made it my motto to live true to my desires.”

“You’re quite the Disciple of God.”

“I know, right?”

Silence settled in again. Our breathing echoed in the room around us. Finally, she spoke.

“Let me...think it over.”

“Please do. But I can’t wait for long.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll give you my answer tomorrow.”

“I appreciate that.”

I nodded, and Elen rose to her feet and left the room.

I wished I could’ve been clearer. I did my best, but I’d never been good at that. If worse comes to worst, I could kidnap her and run... But that’d be pointless. Argh, if only I were a legit Casanova, I could’ve done better! Deeply uncool.

I thrashed in bed for a bit, and Amalie entered the room.

“...Did you get dumped?” she asked.

“What? No.”

“I see... Don’t worry. Lady Eleonora is quite fond of you.”

“I said that’s not it,” I insisted.

“Of course not.”

Amalie giggled and started to clean up Elen’s mess from when she dropped her cup. Ah crap, she was gonna find out about the milk.

“Oh my...?”

Amalie looked a bit befuddled, but I pulled my blanket over my head. Bad at

talking, bad at tying up loose ends. The night was full of things to reflect on.

The next day arrived.

Perhaps because I took Poiso's antidote, or maybe due to the effects of the cathedral, or maybe even on account of my natural healing capabilities, I was feeling much better.

When I checked my status menu, under Abnormal Status where it used to read [Deadly Poisoned (Chronic)], it now said [Weakly Poisoned (In Recovery)]. My health and stamina gauges were full now, so as long as I didn't do anything too wild, I could move around as normal.

"You're looking much better," Amalie commented.

"Thanks to all of you."

I bowed my head to the sister, offering my gratitude to her as she carried in my morning meal. Elen dropped in when she had free time, but Amalie looked after me through the long haul, all without even once getting rightfully annoyed by my horseshit. Honestly, she was like a goddess to me.

"But we are dealing with basilisk poison," she said. "You should rest for a little bit longer."

"Roger that."

After days of resting, my natural healing ability was now outpacing the damage being done to me by the poison, but if I left the cathedral, who knew what would happen. If my health started dropping constantly, I could very well die, so I was gonna keep lying low until this abnormal status went bye-bye.

Even though I was staying put by my own choice, the whole situation left me with way too much free time. I couldn't do any crafting, and I couldn't mess around with my inventory. All I could do was eat and sleep, and the inactivity took a toll on my psyche.

Amalie had been bringing along some of her mending work to keep her busy, but I had nothing like that. I could open my crafting menu, close my eyes, and navigate, but I'd already made everything I could manage without a crafting

table. I had nothing to do. All I could do was stare at my workbench. No additional achievements, either. Once my poison was cured, I'd probably unlock one or two, but until then, it was diddly-squat.

It'd be rude to get in Amalie's way, so instead, I mulled over what to do next.

I asked Elen to come with me, but if she said yes, there'd be a lot of things she had to prepare for. If she just suddenly appeared and started condemning the church, I doubt many people would follow her. There was groundwork we had to lay. We were starting a new denomination, but we hadn't even decided on the details, so there was no way we could rope in believers.

Plus, I had no info on the cardinal, Elen's boss and the mortal enemy of Father Swine. Was it possible that we could bring him over to our side? I'd love to ask her what he was like.

And then, of course, there was the fact that I had no idea how Adolism or the Holy Kingdom functioned as organizations. Elen spoke of the pope and the cardinal, but what was the power balance like between the king, pope, and cardinal? Given the way she described things, the pope and the holy king didn't seem to be the same person, but I couldn't know for sure without asking.

We were aiming to transform an entire religion. This wasn't going to be easy. Adolists believed that subjugating demi-humans was their right, because demi-humans were beneath them. Could we really make them throw away those beliefs? It was going to be more than difficult. It'd be nearly impossible.

But in the Kingdom of Merinard, humans and demi-humans had coexisted for ages. There must be lots of people who still upheld the old values. If nothing else, there should be fertile ground for a new denomination to take hold.

We'd have to make adjustments, but it wasn't some absurd pipe dream.

Which meant I definitely needed to get in touch with the Liberation Army. I wanted to make a move before actual combat broke out between the Liberation Army and the Holy Kingdom's forces within Merinard. Given the Liberation Army's equipment and supplies, they could crush the Holy Kingdom's forces if they took them straight on, I thought. But I was sure Sylphy and the others would prefer not to do that if they could help it.

A gentle knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. Amalie stopped her mending and turned toward it as Elen entered, just as I'd expected.

"Please let us talk alone," Elen said to Amalie, who ducked out with speed. Elen sat in the chair next to my bed and stared at my face.

"I thought about things overnight," she said.

"That's good."

"It's going to be difficult. We will be traveling down a path of thorns. Even so, will you still commit yourself to this cause?"

"I will," I told her. "I believe it's my best course of action."

"If we're going to do this, we have to give it everything we've got. We'll be picking a fight with the history of Adolism itself. They will send in assassin after assassin, they'll make this one recent attempt seem tame. Even so, will you commit yourself to this path?" she asked again.

I met Elen's gaze directly and nodded.

"Yes."

"I'm scared," she said. "I don't want to die. I know people put me on a pedestal and call me a saint, but at the end of the day, I'm still a defenseless young woman. I don't know if I can handle day after day of being a target."

"I'll protect you no matter what...is easy enough to say, but I can't make guarantees. I'm not God, or any kind of invincible hero. But I can promise that I'll do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"...Then my final question. Will you make me your number one?"

"That I can't do," I answered immediately, shaking my head. "My number-one spot is reserved for a single person." That was the one point I couldn't bend on. My number one would always be Sylphy.

"Then I'll simply be a lover. One of your concubines. Or just a girl on the side?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Judging by what you've told me, there's someone else, isn't there? A woman

who would risk her life for you? A woman who you'd risk your life to protect."

"Well... Yes."

"Can I say something that might be hard to accept?"

"Please don't," I tried, raising my hands.

Elen smiled warmly. "No running away," she insisted. The saint showed me no mercy.

"If you were in a situation where me and that woman were in danger and you could only save one of us, do not hesitate to save her."

"What...?"

"I might not be your number one, but you will be mine," said Elen. "I want you to be happy. I believe that's what it means to stay close to you and live."

"O-oh..."

Man, this is heavy as hell.

"That's why, if or when the time comes, I will gladly offer up my life for yours. There's no need to look back."

"That's not okay, that's—" I started to argue, but she interrupted me.

"Just listen to me. You have to do what I'm telling you. This is the path you chose to walk. You need to be prepared for it." Elen returned to her usual expressionless self as she said this. Her eyes were intensely peaceful. "This is what it means to make Adolism your enemy. You need to be prepared for that reality at every turn."

"I wish I could say that you're exaggerating..." I said. "But that priest was willing to put out a hit on you just for ousting him."

"Precisely."

Elen nodded her head deeply. Honestly, I felt terrible for complaining about this being too heavy or whatever. If anything, Elen was trying to prepare me... *Hold up.*

"So, wait, does this mean you're willing to cooperate with me?" I asked her.

“Yes, I am. I cannot believe that my revelation is wrong. And there’s a lot of evidence that leads me to agree with you—the most august teachers and interpreters of the will of Adol have betrayed God’s will.”

“For real?”

“For real. The denomination I belong to is the so-called Nostalgist sect.”

“And that means...?”

“We research and practice the original teachings of Adolism,” she explained.

“Huh... Ah, in other words, as time has gone by, people got the scriptures and the teachings of God all twisted?”

“We believe that in the hundred years between the Kingdom of Omitt’s destruction and the founding of the Kingdom of Merinard, the doctrine of Adolism was subjected to unnatural tampering. We believe that it’s highly likely the current teachings are from after these changes were made.”

“I see, I see. How exactly were the teachings modified?”

“We strongly suspect that they were altered to promote prejudice against demi-humans.”

“What?”

Then my plan was in line with the sect that Elen belonged to? Maybe that’s why it was so much easier to bring her over than I’d expected.

“We don’t know why this modification happened,” she went on. “We think it might be related to the Kingdom of Omitt’s annihilation, but that event is also shrouded in mystery. Omitt was destroyed in a shockingly short amount of time, and the ruins became the Omitt Badlands, so very little progress has been made investigating them.

“The, uh, the reason the kingdom of Omitt was destroyed, huh? Wild, yeah, I definitely do not know that either! Hah. Hah. Hah.”

Ruh-roh. I had a bad feeling about that. The Kingdom of Omitt was destroyed by heretical spirit stone weaponry when they picked a fight with the Black Forest elves. But then, and this would be oh-so-convenient, what if one of the most powerful people there became a high-ranking Adolist and began to lobby

against demi-humans in an act of revenge? Eek.

Nah, it was too early to jump to conclusions. I was just imagining things. Super laughable conclusions.

“You’re lying.”

“The Saint of Truth!” I yelped. She’d seen through my lie immediately!

“I didn’t have to use my power,” she said, though. “It was extremely obvious.”

“Ah, of course. But I’m not certain, so: no comment! Let’s talk about the next steps in our plans instead!”

“...Fine. But you will explain this to me later.”

“I-I promise.”

Sylphy and the others would lose it if they learned that the old kingdom fell because, hundreds of years ago, the elven elders messed around. Those wacky elven elders, going “whoopsy daisy.”

But I was sure that was all just my imagination.

“You’re doing well,” said the sister.

“Super well,” I agreed.

The next morning had come. The poison abnormality disappeared from my status, and I was all green lights across the board. According to Amalie, I was good to go. I could finally venture outside.

“Ah hell, I bet my stuff at the inn’s been tossed out.”

“Don’t worry,” said Elen. “We collected your things.”

“For real?”

“For real. We managed to find out that you were staying at Laffin Lodge.”

“Man, you can’t hide much from the church!”

“You are more memorable than most.”

I supposed I was, especially since black-haired folks were uncommon, and it

was clear at first glance that I was a mercenary or an adventurer. If someone spoke to the guard who'd admitted me at the gate, they'd be able to trace me. And if you tossed some copper to that boy who guided me around, he'd probably tell you everything you didn't already know.

"You wanted this, yes?"

Elen pulled a silvery-white rosary out of her pocket. The shine on it showed that it was definitely mithril. Exactly what I needed.

"Yeah."

"But why?" she asked. "Given your position, I can't imagine it's something you need."

"Sorry, but I can't say why. All I can say is that it's a hundred percent necessary."

I couldn't possibly tell Elen about the golem communicator. It was more important than our crossbows or harpy bombs, strategically speaking.

"Ah, so you're to use the mithril and copper alloy as materials for one of those golem communicators of yours," she said. "I see."

"That damn fox!" I sputtered.

"Yes, I heard all about it from that damn fox. Although he never could get his hands on one or the designs before he left your people."

"I didn't think so."

The communicators were closely monitored, and the designs only existed in the mind of the guy who came up with the thing. I made sure to implore that nobody leave behind anything, even scribbled notes, regarding the communicators. Since Ira agreed with me, that's how they were handled.

I couldn't even imagine the awful things that'd transpire if the enemy got their hands on the communicators and mass produced them. The idea of the enemy having overwhelming numbers *and* being able to coordinate as they attacked was terrifying.

"Well, it's fine. Here, take this."

“Are you sure?”

“I am if you have two large golds.”

“Ah, yeah.” I grabbed my wallet from by the pillow and handed Elen her fee. “Here.”

She might have been the saint of Adolism, but even she couldn’t hand over goods this fine for nothing.

“And take this as well.” She pulled out a piece of paper. It was high-quality stuff with a few words on it, and a seal. “It’s an appointment document. As long as I’m not extremely busy, I’ll make you a priority.”

“Oooh... I’m happy to hear that.”

“You are?”

“I am. This means I can see you whenever I want to, right?” I asked.

“I suppose it does.”

Elen quickly turned away, her ears red. Apparently, me being so direct about it was embarrassing for her.

“I don’t have anything to give you in return... Hrm. Oh, I know.”

I couldn’t think of anything that’d allow her to come see me whenever. As far as things only I could make were concerned, well, there were bullets... I could strip something of its charge and detonator, carve my name into it, and hand that to her. Then I could make a similar appointment document.

“Can I get a pen and a piece of paper like this one?” I asked.

“Are you going to write a document?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“All right. Please hold on.”

While Elen went to look for those, I navigated my craft menu and made a pendant top and pendant from small arms munitions and leather string.

“Hrm...”

Was it good enough? Did I need to carve my name into it? Nah, that’d be

cheesy. And wouldn't it be a little weird to make her wear something with my name on it? Like proclaiming she was mine or something. But, at the same time, if it worked as a pass for her to see me, well...

Ah, what the heck. I'll carve my name into it. Just to be safe.

I placed the bullet pendant into my inventory again, used item creation to register the bullet pendant with my name on it, and then crafted it again. It was pretty rough. It was completely inelegant. In fact, it kind of screamed, "dangerous."

"What is that?"

Elen was back and staring at the pendant in my hand.

"Ah, well... I took this special munition that only I can make and modified it into a pendant."

"That seems awfully big for an arrowhead."

"The only part that actually flies through the air is the head right here. That'd be dangerous, so I took out the powder that'd let it fly like that."

"I see..." She inspected it more closely. "It appears to have your name carved into it."

"There'd be no point to it if people couldn't see that I'm the one who made it," I explained.

"Mm, so you're going to make me wear a pendant around my neck, with your name carved into it?"

"It'll work like an ID, sort of, should the necessity arise..."

I handed the bullet pendant to Elen, who took it and promptly handed it right back to me.

"You put it on me," she said.

"Seriously...?"

"Go on."

"...Fine."

She struck me as way too stubborn to change her mind, so I took the pendant from her and placed it around her neck. Our faces came super close together, and she smelled delightful.

Man, women really smell wonderful, huh? How weird is that?

I probably shouldn't have been thinking about that sort of thing. Suddenly, Elen held me in her arms.

"H-hey," I objected.

"You're going, aren't you? Leaving me here."

Her eyes looked deeply into mine. I felt like I was being drawn down into them.

"Well... Yes. I am."

It was pointless to lie. I had to get back to Sylphy and the others. My place was by her side.

"Then forgive me for this," she said.

Elen held me even tighter, nuzzling my neck as if she were marking me.

When I finished tying the leather string of her pendant, I wrapped my arms around her body and held her back. She was so delicate... So much more delicate than Sylphy. She felt like she'd snap in half if I applied any pressure at all.

Elen looked up at my face and gently closed her eyes. I wasted no time brushing my lips against hers.



“...How many women have you poisoned with a kiss?” she asked me.

“This is the first time it’s ever tasted so bittersweet,” I told her.

Sylphy, Ira, and the harpies were all so passionate, but it was different than this.

“Really?”

“Really. And I know it’s not very pretty, but you’re the first woman I’ve ever given jewelry to.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You better come back for me.”

“I will,” I promised. “No matter what.”

“I’m holding you to that.”

A gentle smile formed on Elen’s face. She was so cute. Honestly, what the hell was with my luck with women ever since coming to this world? Was it because of the God that transported me? I didn’t know if that was Adol or someone else, but y’know what, I could make an exception to my lifelong atheism if they were gonna keep being such a great wingman.

Elen reluctantly released me from her arms, and I did the same in turn. We stepped away from each other.

“Um, I’m gonna go write that document,” I said.

“All right. If only there was some other way I could keep in touch with you...”

“Hm, now that you mention it...” *I’ve got one! I just came up with one!* “You’re allowed to come and go from the castle, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Can you go to the area where the frozen royal family are?”

“I can, but...”

Elen seemed puzzled. Of course, she would be. That area was super dangerous, from her perspective, since it was guarded by Lime and the other

slime girls. It was a place in the castle that people would usually never approach.

“The truth is, I’m good buddies with the slimes who live under the castle,” I told her.

“Those dangerous monsters? I find that hard to believe.”

“Turns out they’re actually spirits that made a pact with the royal family and took on physical form as slimes. They’re super smart, and they can communicate perfectly well. Though I’ll admit they are pretty merciless when the situation calls for it.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Anyway, I’m going to give them a way of getting in touch with me, so if there’s anything you ever want me to know, you can go through them. Just don’t make them mad, okay? I’m going to tell them not to lay a finger on you, but if you try and do anything to the royal family, they’ll definitely flip out.”

“I understand.”

I wasn’t sure how effective it’d be, but I’d write down on the paper Elen gave me that the girl with that bullet pendant was someone important to me, that I wanted them to treat her well, and that if she had something to tell me, they should make sure to get in touch with me.

“What are you doing with that knife?” Elen asked me.

“This.”

I cut the tip of my thumb and squeezed my finger to push out some blood. I might’ve cut it too well, since it stung like hell.

“You really went for it,” she commented dryly.

“This might end up saving your life all right. I need to do everything I can.”

This could help if she was ever caught by the Liberation Army. Of course, as soon as I got back to my people, I planned on doing everything within my power to make sure an apocalyptic collision didn’t happen.

“Thank you. So, about our future moves.”

“Yeah.”

“For the time being, I’ll get in contact with my sect’s headquarters, but it will take quite some time.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. I didn’t know how far it was between this city and the Holy Kingdom’s capital, but I knew it took more than a week to get there by horse and carriage. “The problem is that I have no clue what to do with our plan, exactly.”

“When you come down to it, it’s just politics. Whatever else happens, we’re going to need a place to talk things over,” said Elen. “I believe we should plan for a meeting one to two months from now.”

“Good point. We gotta draw the curtain on this war thing.”

“Agreed.”

Both sides couldn’t just fight on and on until everyone was dead. Well, okay, maybe they could, but I couldn’t let them.

“This is gonna be a helluva time for the both of us,” I warned her.

“It will, but the both of us can handle it.”

We nodded to each other. Compromise was going to be the name of the game, and that was gonna be tough. The Liberation Army would want the Holy Kingdom to retreat completely from the Kingdom of Merinard, and the Holy Kingdom was unlikely to let go of the country they’d controlled for so long. What could we get them to compromise on...?

“I’ll have someone bring your belongings,” Elen said.

“Thanks.”

She left the room, and soon after the knights returned with my armor, shield, helmet, and spear. It was a little weird that they watched while I put my gear on. Once that was done with, the knights led me to the main hall of the great cathedral where Elen was waiting.

“Should I pray before I go?” I asked her.

“I think that would be a good idea.”

“I don’t actually know how,” I admitted.

“As long as you have the desire to pray, you’ll be fine.”

Elen put her hands together, closed her eyes, and began to pray. I followed her example and decided to pray to the God who brought me to this world. I still didn’t know their name.

There’s been a lot of trouble since I came here, but I’ve also never felt so alive. Thank you.

When we were finished, Elen and I looked up at each other. I could feel the passion in her crimson eyes. The bullet pendant I gave her had a dull shine.

“Then I’ll be on my way,” I said.

“Of course. May your journey be blessed.”

And with that, I departed from the great cathedral. I’d spent way too much time getting my hands on mithril. I needed to hurry back underground, meet up with the slime girls, and make that golem communicator.

I made my way through the main street and hurried to the front gate of the city. As I went, I realized my pass had probably expired. Was I going to be okay? I was unlikely to get locked up, but there must be a fine.

While I was walking along, someone took hold of my arm in a vise-like grip.

“?!”

Before I could register more than their tremendous strength, I was pulled into a dark, narrow alleyway and pressed up against the wall. This was bad. I’d let my guard down. What was happening? Was this Cuvi?!

While I struggled in confusion, my attacker drew their mouth close to my ear. I caught a whiff of a seductive aroma. A woman?

“Hiya, Kousuke.”

A shiver ran down my spine in response to that familiar voice. Th-that was...

“Eeek!”

That voice belonged to the terrifying woman who made me work the damn *mill*! Wh-why was she here?!

“M-Melty...?”

“Oh my. You recognized me so quickly!”

She must've loosened her grip on me, since I was able to turn around. Hoo boy, fresh chills. Her golden, vertically slit eyes stared straight at me.

“Seems you were having a nice time with the Adolists, Kousuke.”

Her voice was cold as ice. She was clearly suspicious of me. I couldn't help but quietly cry up into the sky.

“Argh, jeez...”

Chapter 7:

Kousuke Reunites with the Demon

“**F**IRST, WE SHOULD FIND somewhere where we can talk in peace...” I said to Melty. “Unfortunately, I don’t know of anywhere like that.”

“I also doubt I’ll be of much use here in the capital. Shall we step outside?”

She turned her golden eyes my way from deep beneath her hood. Wait, did Melty always have eyes like that? And wait, was it just me or was her whole vibe kinda different?

But, whatever. I’d ask her about that later.

“If we’re going to leave,” I said, “we’d better do it separately. I’ve been here longer than I’m supposed to be, so the gatekeepers might get on my case.”

“Then shall I go first? Ah, but before that...”

Suddenly, Melty wrapped her arms around me, her voluptuous breasts pressing against my chest. Thanks to my leather armor, I couldn’t feel a thing. Damn.

“Thank goodness,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re okay. Regardless of what you’ve been up to, I’m just so glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah... To be honest, I’m relieved to see you. I didn’t think anyone would risk coming this far for me.”

I gave her a gentle hug and patted her on the back. Satisfied, she stepped away from me and looked up at me with lightly flushed cheeks and gray eyes... *Wait, what?*

“Melty, what’s up with your eye color?”

“Hm? Oh. Um, did they turn gold? When I’m excited... Er, when my emotions run high, my eyes change color.”

“...That’s weird.”

So, was gold like an attack color or something? I made a mental note not to make Melty angry.

“Right?” Melty smiled peacefully. “It’s super mysterious.”

She had none of the immense pressure or ferocity I felt from her earlier. If she had been suspicious of me before, for some reason she wasn’t anymore.

“And actually, Melty... Where are your *horns*?”

Melty should have had beautiful twisting horns on her head, but there was no sign of them beneath her hood. Were they detachable or something?

“Oh, I cut them off.”

“What?!”

“If it meant I could go looking for you, my horns were a small price to pay. Sylphy was adamant about wanting to come along, but there’s no way to hide her unique qualities. Ira and the harpies also raised a fuss, but they’d stick out even more than Sylphy. But me, without my horns, I look exactly like your average human woman. Plus, if I shave the hair on my ears, I can hide them along with the traces of my horns beneath my haircut.”

“But...but...aren’t your horns important to you?”

“Of course they are. They’ve been with me ever since I was born.”

“Will they grow back or anything?”

“Nope,” she said nonchalantly. “New horns grow yearly on deer demi-humans, but generally speaking, for everyone else they’re a one-time deal.”.

“Then the scars will be there for the rest of your life?” I asked.

“I suppose so. For races with horns, losing them is the worst possible punishment. Because they have nerves and blood flowing through them, cutting them off is unbelievably painful. They bleed too, so depending on the situation, you could even die. Even if you survive the cutting, if the wounds get infected, then you’ll almost certainly die. And everyone else with horns will forever laugh at you behind your back.”

My eyes widened as Melty outlined exactly how heavy a choice this was. A lifetime of these scars, for my sake.

“Wh-why would you do that...?” I asked her.

"I just happened to fit the bill. Plus, the Liberation Army needs you, and there are a lot of people waiting for you to come home. Also..." Melty grinned.

"Also?"

"I figured I'd make you owe me," she said. Oh, boy. "I made the choice to do this myself, but there's no way you'd ever abandon me after I went through all of this for you, right?"

"Well, of course not. I can feel the responsibility. Heavily. Painfully."

"I know, right? That's what I figured."

"So, you're a yandere, huh?"

"What's that mean?"

Melty tilted her head, confused by my sudden lapse into Japanese slang.

"It means someone who takes their feelings of love and affection too far, who does things that might hurt themselves. They also typically attack people they perceive as their rivals... Am I wrong?"

"I wouldn't attack any of the other girls," Melty insisted. "And as for hurting myself, I did it because I had to. That's all."

"Yeah, I guess you're different in that sense. You do certainly have a heroic ability to take action, even when it means sacrificing something. You're also very calculating. Never mind, you're not a yandere at all."

"Calculating? I didn't come all this way just to put you in my debt, Kousuke."

"I know that. The fact that you came here to rescue me on your own, despite all of the risks, well. I can't just say I'm *grateful*; that doesn't really cut it. I think what I'm feeling is respect? You did something so heroic just because it was the right thing to do, and I'm not sure I could ever do the same. Gonna be real, it's crazy hot. I kinda want you to just take me right here. Or I would, if I was a woman and you were a man."

"You can do that as a man too, you know."

"Unfortunately, Sylphy is the only one who can make me do that."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it."

“Just a little reminder.”

“But I wouldn’t mind you taking me,” Melty said. “If you wanted to.”

“I will definitely look into that possibility,” I assured her.

“Awesome!”

Melty smiled and took on a victory pose, both hands in fists. She was easily appeased.

“What about Sylphy and the others?” I ventured.

“Oh, I already talked it over with them,” she said, unconcerned.

“Of course you have. I never should’ve doubted you.”

“Right? Now then, we should get a move on.”

“Yeah.”

Melty led the way, and I followed after her from a distance. Eventually, we arrived at the gate and Melty easily passed the inspection to get outside. I figured things would get a little hairy in my case, but Elen must have spoken to the gatekeepers when I was staying in the great cathedral and put in a good word. I managed to pass without ruffling a single feather.

I met up with Melty on the outside, and then I led us toward the underground entrance.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Have you ever heard about the escape path under the castle? An underground path?”

“I did hear about it before, but I don’t know the specifics. Just rumors.”

“Gotcha. Well, that’s where we’re headed. It’s more of a sewer, really. Do you know about the slimes who live there?” I asked her.

“You mean Lime and the others? They’re still alive... Although it’d be more absurd if they were dead.”

“They are pretty invincible,” I agreed.

“Mm-hmm. I think I could take them one-on-one, but I wouldn’t stand a

chance against the three of them together.”

“Huh? You could really beat them one-on-one?”

“Yes,” she said. Zero hesitation.

No freakin’ way. She could beat those nearly invulnerable slime girls? *Melty?*

“O-oh.”

I underlined my mental note to never, ever make her angry. Most normal life-forms seriously wouldn’t stand a chance against the slime girls. They were like honest-to-goodness weapons of the Elder Things, not run-of-the-mill slimes... Add in their intelligence, and they were basically lord-class.

I shuddered internally as we made our way through the woods and towards our destination. I was concerned about getting lost, but fortunately the stone covering the entrance was pretty unique, so I found it without issue and led us right there.

“Is this it?”

“Yup.”

I pulled a torch out of my inventory, and we proceeded into the dim, dark cave.

“We should be entering the slime girls’ territory now, so—”

I never got to finish my sentence. Something soft descended onto my head from the ceiling and wrapped itself around me. I only knew three people who’d do something like that.

“Kousuke!” Lime sang my name. “We were worried!”

“Y-yo. I get it, so could you please let me go?”

“No!”

Immediate and total veto.

“Oh.”

Instead of retreating, Lime invaded my body, sliding underneath my armor and clothes and caressing me all over. It was a little like being tossed into a

washing machine. I was jiggled around, my head the only thing left poking out of Lime.

“She certainly seems fond of you.” Melty commented.

“Of course! Kousuke is our... Hmm... Our...?”

“Your what?”

“I wonder...”

From the main body wrapped around me, Lime formed an upper body and tilted her head in my direction.

“Don’t look at me,” I said. “I have no clue.”

“Well, whatever he is, he’s mega important to us!” Lime sang happily.

“I see,” said Melty. “And was he delicious?”

“Super-duper!”

“I’d love to have a bite myself.”

“Sure!” Lime enthused. “Let’s go home!”

“Um...” I wiggled. “I can walk on my own, so could you let me go now?”

“Nope!”

“Okay...”

Minutes passed as Lime dragged me along within her, and finally we arrived at the slimes’ familiar little home. Melty noticed the modified workbench and smithing station that I left behind and nodded.

“I can tell you’ve made yourself at home here.”

But as for me...

“I’m gonna drown!” I yelled, suddenly held tight by Bess. “I won’t be able to breathe if you cover my face!”

“You didn’t even get in touch with us! How dare you! We were so worried!”

I didn’t mind the enthusiastic welcome, but I did wish she wouldn’t push down on my face with all that power of hers.

“I’m next,” Poiso said.

“Me too!” insisted Lime.

“You had your fun,” said Bess. “So, you’re going after me.”

“I’d love to participate,” Melty chimed in.

“Then you can join in too, after *me*.”

Some mild growling filled the room.

And just like that, Lime and the others piled in, and for some reason Melty joined the fray as well. By the time they set me free, I couldn’t feel my fingers or toes.

In the end, I was sitting on a sofa-shaped Lime as I prepared to tell my long tale.

“Ah, where should I even begin?”

“I’d love for you to start at the beginning,” said Melty. “I’m also curious as to how you met up with Lime and the girls.”

“You got it.”

I started with how Cushi knocked me out and kidnapped me, how I was thrown in the dungeon beneath the castle, how I used the materials in the dungeon cell to make a stone axe and break through the floor to flee into the underground tunnels, and how I met the slime girls and prepared with them for my trip into the city.

“So how does any of that have anything to do with getting all friendly with the Adolists?” Melty pressed me.

“That’s all very complex and fascinating, you see.”

I explained the whole mess with the money changer and his advice to take a gamble and shell out for a mithril rosary.

“I’m stunned you took such a big risk based on the words of a single money changer.”

“It’s been almost a month since I was kidnapped, you know? I figured if I didn’t get in touch as soon as possible, Sylphy and the others would do

something crazy. And hey, given that you came after me, I wasn't too far off."

"...That's true," Melty grumbled.

"Anyway, let's just say things took an unusual turn at the great cathedral."

I summarized the episode where I blundered into Elen's sermon and intercepted her would-be assassin.

"Why did you protect her?" Bess interrupted. "You should've let her get stabbed."

"Was the saint beautiful?" Melty asked.

"Kousuke is weak when it comes to women," said Poiso.

Even Lime piped up with a "Yup."

"That's not it!" I told them. "That's not why I did it. The guy behind me made a super creepy noise and pushed me aside, so I hit him in the liver. That's all."

"We'll leave it at that. What kind of poison was it?" Poiso asked. "The antidote I gave you should've done the trick..."

"They told me it was basilisk poison. And I just so happened to get stabbed...in the liver."

Melty burst into laughter, but Lime and the others froze in place looking dumbfounded. What was up with that?

"Why are you still alive?" said Melty. "You should've died on the spot."

"Kousuke, you're strong," Lime sang.

"It'd be different if it was us, but you're different. Your life force is inhuman," Bess said.

"I-it's honestly incredible that you're alive..." Poiso was just as stunned.

"Could you ladies stop looking at me like you're at the zoo? And well, yeah, the saint said the same to me. Something about me being like an oil bug."

"Even an oil bug couldn't survive basilisk poison."

"So at least I'm better than those things?"

"Anyway," Bess cut in. "What happened next?"

I grumbled, but carried on. I told them about how I was bedridden at the great cathedral for a while, and that the saint and the sisters took good care of me. I also told them that the saint recognized me as a Fabled Visitor.

“She found out?!” Melty was alarmed.

“She said she could tell as soon as she saw me. Something about a shiny radiance? I guess it’s only visible to her. It’s like some blessing of God or whatever. She could tell I wasn’t normal from the moment she saw me in the crowd during her sermon.”

“That’s not good... What happened after that?”

“Well...”

I told them every detail about the divine revelation Elen received. At first, the nervous expressions on the faces of my audience started to turn cold. And eventually, everyone other than Lime was staring at me as if I was the enemy of all women in the universe.

“Again, Kousuke?” said Melty.

“It’s not my fault! Blame the god who came up with that divine revelation! I didn’t do anything!”

“You’re so popular!” Lime, at least, seemed unbothered.

“You really should be more discerning,” Poiso put in.

Bess was less subtle.

“You’re quite the ladykiller.”

“I’ve done no killing of ladies!”

“Are you sure about that?” Melty asked, glaring at me. She was really not enjoying this. Same, girl.

“A-anyway...! I learned that the people in the Holy Kingdom, heck, all of Adolism, they’re not all as prejudiced as the people in charge. I also managed to create a pipeline to a sect within Adolism that believes in coexistence with demi-humans.”

“...I suppose such a group would be useful,” Bess said.

“How do you plan on getting in touch with them?” Poiso asked. “Surely you’re not going to go see them every time you need to?”

“Yeah, so, about that. I need your help, slime girls.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’m planning on making a high-output golem communicator and leaving it here, so that you can serve as the go between for me and Elen... For me and Saint Eleonora.”

“Elen, is it...?” Bess said, but then she nodded. “That’s fine. But how exactly do you propose we do this?”

“The royal family’s room in the castle. Elen’s going to make her way there alone, and I want you to meet up with her.”

The slime girls exchanged glances with each other. Poiso spoke for them all.

“We’d prefer she stay well away from that place, if possible.”

“I know. It only has to be once,” I assured them. “After you meet up with her, you can talk to Elen and arrange for a different way of getting in contact.”

“I supooose...” Lime.

“One time is fine.” Bess.

“Much obliged.” And me.

Thank goodness they agreed to that. If they’d said no, I would have to head back into the city to meet with Elen again.

“Kousuke, what exactly is the plan here?” Melty asked me.

“Well, I don’t have the specifics yet, but look, it’s not like we’re going to fight until every last Adolist in the kingdom is dead, right? At some point, there needs to be peace, and I think Elen and her sect could be the perfect bridge to that. Also, Elen’s sect is on bad terms with the main anti-demi-human sect of Adolism —hmm, actually, *repressionist* sect might be a better shorthand for those guys. If Elen’s sect gains power, it’ll be easier for the Liberation Army to move.”

“That’s a good point,” Melty said. “You might be right.”

“Plus, Elen’s people suspect that the prevailing Adolist teachings are a

corrupted version of the original message. The survivors of the Kingdom of Omitt twisted it all up.”

“Twisted the original teachings, you mean?”

“Yeah. Elen’s sect wants to research the Kingdom of Omitt’s ruins out in the badlands. Depending on how things go, we might be able to flip the script on Adolism and the Holy Kingdom entirely.”

“I see...”

Melty nodded, then went quiet in thought. She was better at this sort of political maneuvering than me. I’d have loved for her to just handle it all.

“And that’s about everything...” I concluded. “Now then, time for me to hurry up and make that golem communicator.”

“Indeed,” Melty agreed. “Good luck. The sooner Sylphy knows you’re safe, the better.”

“No worries, I’ve got this.”

First things first. I had to start with fusing copper and the mithril rosary. I wanted to hear Sylphy’s voice ASAP. It was time to hurry.

POV: SYLPHY

IT HAD BEEN ONE WEEK since Kousuke went missing.

We were able to ascertain his location fairly quickly. Ira used a catalyst-based ceremonial location spell to figure it out. Fortunately, we had “fresh” catalysts to use, so the results were absolutely trustworthy. The problem lay in *where* we found him.

“Merinisburg...” Ira muttered. “He had to be there, of all places...”

The bad feeling I had earlier proved to be a premonition. I had no idea how he was moved so far in such a short period of time, but it must’ve been a teleportation artifact of some sort. Otherwise, there was no way they’d be able to take Kousuke from Arichburg to Merinisburg in half a day.

“How are we going to save him...?” Melty wondered out loud.

That was the question. Merinisburg was the seat of Merinard’s government, the heart of enemy territory. It was five days away by carriage, and two to three times that long on foot. The road was littered with Holy Kingdom garrisons and bases, which meant we couldn’t just send in our forces.

Since we’d now taken Arichburg, the Holy Kingdom was very aware of our movements and was watching our every step. They had their scouts planted all around Arichburg.

That said, we couldn’t *not* save Kousuke. He was an integral part of our forces, and we couldn’t afford to lose him. On a personal level, I could never abandon him. Never. If I couldn’t send a squad, that meant my only option was to send a small unit...

“I’ll go,” I said.

“No way.”

“Not happening.”

“Nooope.”

“Absolutely not.”

Melty, Ira, Danan, and Leonard shut me down all at once.

“Why not?!”

“There’s no way we could allow you to go in alone, Sylphy,” said Leonard.

“Think about your position.”

“Your ears stand out, and there’s no way to hide them.” Ira added, and Melty agreed with her.

“I also agree,” said Danan. “It’d be inconceivable to let our leader go on such a dangerous solo infiltration mission.”

I growled in response, but they were totally right, and that was what hurt the most.

“Then I’ll go,” said Ira.

“That’s definitely not happening,” I replied immediately. “Your one eye is even more impossible to hide than my ears.”

In the absolute worst case, I could crop my ears. But Ira’s single eye? There was nothing we could do about that.

“Plus,” Melty continued, “you’re so small, so people would think you’re a child, and someone that young on a journey by herself would stand out.”

“That’s what I was going to say,” said Danan, and Leonard nodded along.

“I’m not a child...”

Melty’s words must’ve stung. Ira looked put out. Melty wasn’t wrong, though.

“As for me...” said Leonard. “Well, it wouldn’t work.”

“That hair and face of yours aren’t made for infiltration,” I told him.

“Then what about me?” said Danan.

“They know your face, don’t they?” Ira pointed out. “You still have wanted posters out there.”

“And then there’s your horns. It’d be difficult, needless to say. That’s why I’ll go.”

What in the world was Melty playing at? She had horns too.

“Um, what about *your* horns?” I asked.

“I can just cut them off.”

Melty said this like it was no big deal, but she must have known what it meant for a demi-human to lose their horns.

“I won’t be in any danger, since we have Kousuke’s medicine. I don’t have to worry about it getting infected.”

“But that doesn’t mean—” I started, but she kept on going.

“If I cut off my horns, it’ll be easy for me to blend in with the humans,” she said. “Plus, if necessary, I can run away if I’m alone.”

It was true that Melty was the best suited for the mission... But cutting off her horns...?

“It just shows how determined I am,” she concluded. “And if the worst happens, if I die, my loss won’t have much of an effect on the Liberation Army—at least among the people here.”

“That is true.”

“Leonard!”

“Your Highness, it’s simply the truth,” Leonard said, although he looked a little embarrassed. “I mean no offense, but Melty is only an internal affairs officer. Compared to the head of our research division and leader of the mage squad, or Danan, who led the rebellion three years ago, or myself, her influence is much smaller. Never mind compared to you, Your Highness.”

“Precisely,” Melty agreed with him. “You know how skilled I am, right?”

“Well...”

I did, but that didn’t mean she had to cut her horns off.

“It’d be best if one of the human members of the Liberation Army went in,” I said. “But, in terms of skill, there’s nobody in that group we can entrust with this.”

“True,” Ira agreed. “And the humans Cushi brought with him have betrayed

us.”

Silence settled over the meeting room. This really was a massive problem. It was great that we were able to look into and figure out the truth behind Kousuke’s kidnapping, but distrust had taken root between the demi-humans and the human refugees. The aggression that had surfaced was starting to abate, but who knew when things would get bad again. I’d been racking my brain trying to figure out how to resolve it.

“God damn you, Cuvi,” I said to the absent fox man. “Next time I see him, I’m going to shave his entire body and hang him out for all to see.”

“Don’t forget his tail,” Danan said.

“Oh, I won’t.”

The damage he’d dealt the Liberation Army was incalculable. Honestly, by himself, the confusion and distrust he’d sown were far worse than any damage the Holy Kingdom’s forces had managed.

After a moment, Melty spoke up again. Back to the gruesome business at hand.

“I’ll leave the cutting to Sir Leonard,” she said. “Please make sure it doesn’t hurt.”

“I’ll do my absolute best.”

And so, Sir Leonard went on to cut off both of Melty’s horns. After a single day of recovery, she was on her way to the capital city.

She left three weeks ago, and just as I was reaching my absolute limit, the time arrived.

“This is a golem communicator?” Lime asked.

“Yup,” I said proudly. “A powerful one, the kind you just set up and leave in place.”

My freshly completed stationary communicator was capable of transmitting over five times further than a conventional model. At least, that’s what the

specifications said. I didn't know all the nuts and bolts.

At a first glance, it was just a square box about the size of a desk, with a microphone, speakers, and a dial for changing frequencies. Design-wise, it was basic as hell. Sorry, you shouldn't expect aesthetically pleasing goods from me. That's the blacksmith's wheelhouse.

"Kousuke." Bess pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"Um, are you sure this can take calls?" she asked. "It looks like it only transmits."

"Huh? No way, that can't be. It's supposed to have a range five times larger than the other communicators. That should be more than enough..."

"That's not the issue. Even if the magic waves it transmits reach the other side, their waves won't reach us in return."

"...Well, shit!"

Of course they wouldn't! Even if I improved this communicator to receive signals from afar, the other side didn't have the output power to reply! It'd just disperse into the air somewhere in between. I'd really bungled this up.

"Even if this is a one way street, we can at least make them aware that you're okay. It won't be a waste," Poiso said, trying to console me.

"Yeah, I guess..."

I still needed to make an outer antenna to strengthen the transceiver. It'd be best if I had a relay station with an amplifier, but could I make that with my item creation? I had the feeling it'd be tough. The golem core I was able to craft was meant for the golem communicators themselves. To make a relay station, I'd need the search division to create a golem core built just for those.

It would be so much easier to do it with my item creation. I'd have to give it a try sometime later. Back to business.

"Anyway," I said. "Let's try sending a message."

"Yeah, okay. Let's do it on as many frequencies as possible," suggested Melty.

“Roger that. I’m counting on you slime girls to supply the magical power.”

“Kay!” Lime sang.

“All right,” Bess agreed.

“Aye, aye.” Poiso was ready too.

The slime girls touched the magical power supply slot and began to transmit energy into it. I couldn’t sense the magic, but since the energy indicator on the machine was filling up, I could tell that the process was working. It was a very convenient method of powering up.

Once it was done charging, I gave the mic a try.

“This is Kousuke. I repeat, this is Kousuke. I am currently taking refuge underneath Merinisburg. Melty and I are safe. A majority of the royal family are also safe and sound within the castle. Nobody was taken out of the country.”

I went on to explain that I was broadcasting using a large, prototype golem communicator, that any reply broadcast likely wouldn’t reach us, and which frequencies we’d be using from then on. I repeated this broadcast across the usual Liberation Army frequencies. It took a while.

But then as soon as I complained, “My throat hurts...”

“Swoosh!”

Lime suddenly transformed a part of her body into a tentacle and shoved it deep down my throat. I gagged and choked and made a really uncool noise.

She was in my throat! I was gonna throw up! And how was I supposed to breathe?! As I struggled, she released me.

“Bleh, gah, gagh...”

“Better now?” Lime chirped.

“L-like hell I...! Wait, I am feeling better, actually.”

The dryness in my throat was gone. Which, don’t get me wrong, was awesome, but that must’ve looked awful. To everyone.

“It’s one helluva shock when you do stuff like that out of nowhere, so maybe give me a head’s up in the future?”

“Hm?”

Lime tilted her head in confusion. Sorry, Lime, but your cute little gestures weren’t going to work this time.

What did Lime taste like? No taste, no scent, really... Maybe I did catch a light whiff of something refreshing. But she wasn’t particularly tasty.

“So, do you think they got our broadcast?” Poiso asked.

“Maybe?” I said. “Hopefully. They must have. Not that we have any way of checking.”

If we did get through, someone like Ira would eventually come up with a way to strengthen their magical wave output and send a return message. If it was just an output problem, she’d figure it out. I toyed with the idea of designing an outer antenna so we could make sure we caught any broadcasts... But then I remembered I should probably be focused on getting home.

You know what? I’ll discuss this with Melty and the slimes. Yeah.

“I think we should focus on establishing two-way contact before you leave,” Bess said. Poiso and Lime quickly voiced their agreement.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Shouldn’t we go home ASAP...?”

“No matter what, if we can’t communicate, things are going to be super difficult,” Lime pointed out.

“Oh, right. You’re totally right.”

My deal with Elen and her sect relied on us talking to each other via the golem communicators. If we couldn’t do that, then it was all pointless.

“I’m not sure how I feel about just waiting for the Liberation Army to upgrade the communicator on their end, though. Wouldn’t it be easier if I made a run for Arichsburg and built one of these standalone communicators over there?”

“Will this one break?” asked Poiso, gesturing at the stationary communicator I’d just built.

“Huh? I mean, it’s possible, sure.”

"If it does, we won't be able to communicate anymore, which will set back our plan."

"That's also true..."

Did that mean I should make another of these units, and then a unit's worth of replacement parts? I didn't have enough materials for that. The golem core would probably be fine, so I didn't need another one of those. I could make everything else, and if the communicator went bad, they could move the first core over to the replacement unit.

The best thing to do was make components that could be easily consumed and then swapped out. I didn't have much field data to go by, though, so I didn't know which parts were easily breakable and which weren't. Not to mention, I had no clue how any of the items I created were built or worked when made by hand.

This had been a pretty consistent weak point of my ability. Granted, there were plenty of other qualities that made up for it. The things I created could be taken apart and reverse-engineered. For example, the artisans of this world were able to come up with the goat's-foot crossbows and their easily drawn bowstrings using the lever principle.

"Okay," I said. "I guess the current move is to make a spare communicator case, and to widen the transceiver range while we wait to hear a reply."

"I think that's the right decision," said Poiso. "We'll go get you your materials."

"Metals, right?"

"Yeah," said Melty. "I'll go too—"

"You take it easy here!" Lime chirped.

And then the slime girls vanished down the underground path. That just left me, Melty, and a magic glowing ball.

"Ah... Well, there you have it," Melty said. "I guess we should take a break."

"I have no qualms with that."

I pulled a sofa out from my inventory and sat down. Melty sat down right next

to me.

“Aren’t you a little close?” I asked.

“Not at all,” she said.

She definitely was. The sofa was big enough to fit three people, yet she was pressed up right against me.

“Um, so, are you okay? You know, the scars where your horns were cut off?”

“Not really, no,” she admitted. “My head feels oddly light, which is disorienting, and I feel like my sense of touch has been dulled. Plus, it really, really hurt when they were cut. I have nightmares about it. And sometimes the wounds still sting.”

“That sounds terrible... I still can’t believe you did that for me, Melty. I’m so sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize, I did this of my own free will. I would, however, appreciate it if you could take a look for me.”

“I’m not exactly a pro about these sorts of things,” I warned her.

“It’d make a huge difference if you just gently ran your hand across the scars.”

Melty lay down and placed her head in my lap. Her gray eyes, illuminated by Bess’s light enchantments, looked straight up at me.

“Here goes, then...”

I ran my hand through her thick, curly, strawberry blonde hair, feeling for stumps. My fingers made contact with what were clearly the remains of her horns. The middle of each spot was porous.

“Mm...”

“Are you okay? Does it hurt when I touch them?”

“Mm... I-I’m fine... Mm!”

“Are you sure...?”

Tears formed in her eyes, and her whole body was trembling. She sure as hell didn’t look okay.

“I-it doesn’t hurt. It’s just sensitive, is all...”

“Isn’t that a problem too?”

It seemed like the center bit of each wound was too sensitive to touch, so I decided to gently caress the area around them, and her scalp at the base of her horns. When I did, her eyes went all droopy and half-open.

“Mm aaah... Aah...”

Yeah, she also started moaning.



“So, um, this is a lot to watch,” I commented.

Melty’s customary cryptic smile was replaced with a truly enchanting expression. It was powerful. Crazy, mad, destructive powerful. My vocabulary skills were falling apart because of it, and so was my sense of reason.

“We really gotta think of a way to get you your horns back.”

“Mm... I’m fine without them, as long as you do this for me every once in a while.”

“I’d be happy to do it whenever,” I said, and I definitely meant it. “But seriously, I want to heal you. This is my responsibility.”

“Heehee, then... Ah, wait, ah...”

“Could you cut it with that teasing tone of yours?”

“Heehee, is it a problem for you?”

It was a problem.

Stop it. Stop moving your head around in my lap. The sensation is a little too much, and I will not be expanding on that.

“But, I mean, the other girls have given us time alone, haven’t they?”

“Hooold on. I have Sylphy and Ira and the others.”

“Nobody’s going to have any issue if you add one, or two, or three, or four, or five more girls at this point. I’ve already spoken with Sylphy and the others about it. And you said you’d look into it, did you not?”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

“I’ve waited long enough.”

Melty’s eyes were shining gold as she looked up at me. *Oh, crap.*

“Maybe we should take this slow?” I suggested.

“Heehee, you’ve always looked out for me, haven’t you? Me, the weak internal affairs officer. Making sure I didn’t get caught up in combat. You had no idea.”

“I-I didn’t?”

"No, you weren't wrong. I'm just a weak internal affairs officer," she said. "I always have been, and always will be."

Then she gripped my arms with incredible strength.

"Lies! There's no way you're weak! That's just the form you use to stay hidden to the eyes of the world! Ah, ah! Slow down a bit, please! Whoa! You ripped off my leather armor like it was made of paper?! H-hey, calm down! Calm—"

It was on this day that I, Kousuke, learned that an aroused sheep is a dangerous sheep.

"Sorry," Melty said a little while later. "I got a bit too excited." She looked around at the chaotic remains of my armor and clothing.

"No, no, it's fine. These things happen."

As for me, I'd changed into the brand-new clothes I had in my inventory. She absolutely shredded my old stuff. She must've had a lot of built up stress from her horns getting cut off, going on this mission, and the whole war thing. It all just boiled over.

Once we'd gotten some of that out of her system, she slipped into a pretty severe funk. She was crying like a little kid. It was kinda refreshing, to be honest. Usually she was all smiles, impossible to ruffle.

"I hope you know you never have to be perfect around me," I told her.

"I know..."

I held Melty's head in my arms gently and patted her on the back as she whined. It felt like I was handling a little girl or something. Losing her horns might've destroyed the balance in her heart. It sounded like the process really hurt, like her horns had been part of her identity, especially since horned demi-humans were so proud of their horns. It was something someone hornless like myself could never really imagine.

She eventually drifted off to sleep in my arms. She must not have gotten a proper night's rest since crossing enemy lines.

Suddenly, I heard voices all around me in the room.

“...That was rough!”

“Like beasts.”

“Are you okay, Kousuke?”

The slime girls emerged from cracks in the corner, the ceiling, and the floor.

“Where the heck did you girls come from?” I asked, but they ignored my question.

“She might’ve hurt you with how hot and heavy she was getting,” said Poiso.

“This was a necessary safety measure,” I explained.

“If she misjudged her powers, you’d be mincemeat!” Lime sing-songed.

“Okay,” I replied, “well, that’s terrifying.”

Sure, if she’d ripped into me with the same strength she used to shred my leather armor like it was paper, then it’d be real bad news. Just the thought of that made me shrink.

“So, did you bring me the materials?” I asked them.

“Everything you need,” said Bess.

Copies of the slime girls slithered through the entrance carrying ore. They definitely got the job done, even if they had been spying on me. The only crappy thing was that the ore really reeked. I hurried to dump it all into my inventory.

“Bess, could I get some magical fuel?”

“Of course.”

Since the room wasn’t particularly large, I just barely managed to control my smithing station while staying on the sofa. Careful not to wake Melty, I began processing the ore. If I could get a decent amount of copper from it, I’d be able to mix it with a small amount of mithril and produce a mithril and copper alloy. I could use that to make a spare large golem communicator case.

Stationary Golem Communicator (Case)—Materials: Mithril and Copper

Alloy × 2, Iron × 20, Copper × 15, Silver × 5, Gold × 2, Machine Part × 18

I'd need to add some other bits and bobs, and a medium sized golem communicator core. Pretty costly overall, even with my mitigation skill. I wondered if my crafting ability rounded down. I had no clue what the original numbers were, though, and no way of finding out.

The real bottleneck was the number of machine parts. No matter how much I modified the upgraded workbench, they still took time to craft. Even the Liberation Army blacksmiths had issues making machine parts, especially screws.

I remember when they got a look at the lathe attached to my workbench, they looked like they'd been struck by lightning. The amount of time it took to make delicate parts varied greatly depending on whether or not you had a foot powered lathe. Well, none of that mattered to my crafting skills!

I quietly continued my work without waking Melty, and by the time the sun set, I finished making the spare case. Melty finally woke up around the same time, but then she remembered what she did before going to sleep and promptly fainted. Sort of—she held her head in her hands and curled up into a ball on the sofa for a while.

“...I’m so sorry for everything,” she groaned.

“You really have nothing to apologize for,” I assured her. “If anything, I want you to let me dote on you more often. I know you’re tired. Tired of pretending to be perfect.”

“...That’s not fair.”

“Sure it is. I’ll see to you and Sylphy, and Ira and the harpies will take care of me.”

“Oh?” said Poiso. “We can take care of you as well.”

Bess and Lime voiced their enthusiastic agreement.

“I feel like you girls are going to corrupt me...”

I had no idea how much the slime girls got out of looking after me, but I did

know that when I gave myself over to their care it was super comfortable, and I didn't have to do anything at all. To reiterate: I didn't have to do a thing. Not only did I not have to walk, I could even leave my breathing to them. It was kinda bad.

"Everything in moderation," Bess promised.

"Yeah, right. But I want you to let me take care of you more, Melty. And, on that note, I'll make anything you want for dinner tonight, provided I know how to make it."

"Really? Then... Something sweet!"

"We're talking about dinner, you know."

"Something sweet," she repeated firmly.

"Roger that."

I couldn't go breaking my promise when I said I'd make anything. I ended up producing every sweet thing I had in my inventory for dinner. The slime girls loved it too.

I quietly watched them enjoy their meal as I dined on a hamburger. Sweets just didn't fill me up, y'know?

"This is Sylphy in Arichburg. Kousuke, if you can hear me, please respond."

It was two days of making the spare case and outer antenna, and waiting, before we finally received a broadcast from Arichburg. I'd finished installing the antenna the day before, so they must have raised the strength of their magic waves.

By the by, magic waves were different from electric waves in that they could pass through the ground or stone walls without weakening or fading. They didn't stand a chance against magical barriers, though, so things that cut off magic, or walls made of certain kinds of magical metals or lead were no good. I'd been wondering if they might be radioactive in some way.

"This is Kousuke in Merinisburg. It's good to finally hear your voice, Sylphy."

“Yeah... Yeah, it really is... Kousuke...”

I could hear her tearful voice through the speakers. Man, my chest felt so tight. I just wanted to hold her in my arms right then, despite the distance between us.

“I know you heard this in my message already, but I managed to meet up with Melty just fine. We’re currently hiding in the sewers of Merinisburg. Lime, Bess, and Poiso saved my bacon.”

I went on to explain in detail what happened to me after getting kidnapped by Cuvi, just like I did when Melty arrived. Midway through my account, Sylphy, Ira, Danan, and Sir Leonard all started hitting me with questions, so I answered them one by one.

“So, it *was* Cuvi...” said Danan. “To think he was an agent of the Holy Kingdom.”

“He’s dead next time we meet.”

“Ira?”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“That’s not painful enough,” I heard Sylphy say. “I’m going to tear his fur off and hang him for all to see.”

“Kousuke,” Leonard chimed in, “these two are scaring me, so please come home ASAP. I can only hear so much about skinning and ripping and tearing. Oh, and the meals around here have suffered without you.”

“I respect how faithful you are to your desires, old man.”

They spent a while catching me up on what I’d missed. Something came over Madame Zamil when she heard I went missing. From what they told me, she felt like she’d failed in her assignment to protect me, and so she tried to cut open her own stomach to take responsibility. What was she, a samurai?

Fortunately, Sylphy stopped her, but since then, Madame Zamil had been fighting nonstop, hunting down stragglers from the Holy Kingdom’s army in the south. I needed to hurry back before something bad happened to her.

“So, about my future plans,” I started to say.

“Come home.”

“Come home.”

“Please come home. As quickly as possible.”

“Come on home, and make haste.”

“Ah. Yeah, okay.”

They were all in agreement, and it made sense. There was nothing else for me to do.

“Are you going home, Kousuke?” Lime sang dolefully.

“So, you’re leaving...” said Bess.

“I know you have to, but...” said Poiso.

All three of them looked disappointed. Those girls saved my ass big time, and they’d been so good to me. Except for the lack of sunlight, my time underground was extremely comfortable. I was really going to miss them.

“My place is by Sylphy’s side,” I told them gently.

“Kousuke...” Sylphy’s voice came through the speaker. “I’m waiting for you, Kousuke.”

“I know. Once I finish preparing, I’ll leave tomorrow. Over and out,” I responded, and cut the broadcast.

Then it was time to prepare. Melty had annihilated my leather armor, after all. I tried to think of what else I still had to prepare before I headed out—I had plenty of food and water, I’d made brick blocks from clay, so I’d be able to build a shelter no problem...

Wait. So, once I remake my armor, I’m good to go?

“I guess I just need to replace my duds. Is there anything else we need?” I asked Melty.

“There is something I’d like for you to make me,” she said.

“Sure. What is it?”

Melty smiled deviously. That was bad.

“I want you to make a collar.”

“...Me no understand.”

“Something with the same design as a slave collar.”

“...Why?”

“If the two of us are going to travel through Holy Kingdom territory, it’d be safest if I acted like your slave. A demi-human slave whose horns were cut off and a human male mercenary. There’s almost zero chance anybody would be suspicious of a pair like that. Spoils of war, you know.”

I shuddered in disgust, but she was right. It wouldn’t be out of place at all. She could even wear equipment, and it’d be fine.

“All right, then we’ll say you’re my warrior slave, and I’ll make you some armor and weapons. Done.”

“No, you don’t have to do that,” Melty said. “Let’s just say I’m your sex slave.”

“Why sex?!”

“If I’m armed, they’ll have more reason to investigate us,” she reasoned. “This is better.”

“A-are you sure?”

Was I seriously getting talked into this...? Melty still wasn’t wrong. It was less suspicious to put a slave collar (which looked just like a normal collar) on her and walk around confidently than it would be to have her cover her face with a hood.

“Okay, yeah.” I gave in. “We’ll go with your plan.”

I pulled some leather materials, the remains of the armor Melty ripped apart, and a large helping of iron out of my inventory and remade my leather armor, then created a replica slave collar for Melty. It felt like Bess and Poiso were staring at me, but I was probably just imagining things. I wanted to believe I was imagining things.

It wasn’t too much work, so the armor and collar were finished quickly. I inserted them into my inventory, then pulled out the collar.

“It’s done.”

“That was fast. Well then, put it on me.”

“Huh? You want me to do it?”

“But of course,” Melty insisted. “It’ll help me get into the mood.”

“What mood...?”

Instead of taking the collar from me, Melty raised her jaw to show off her neck. With no other choice, I placed the fake collar around it.

I made sure the tough leather collar wasn’t painful, but also that it was tight enough around her neck. Melty trembled... *Whoa*. That sigh of hers was pretty sexy.

“I’m your sex slave now,” she giggled.

“Er, this is just pretend.”

Melty’s blushing face was messing me up big time as I shook my head.

“Even if it’s just pretend,” she said, “we have to act the part to make people believe us.”

“...We do?”

I tilted my head in response. Was she right? If we didn’t act the part, soldiers might find us suspicious and take us in for questioning... But if that happened, we could just make a run for it... But maybe that would cause too much of a scene.

“Shall we practice?” Melty asked.

My brain malfunctioned at hearing such an outrageous idea.

“Say what now?”

“Slime girls, could you help us?” Melty asked the trio. “We’ll be leaving tomorrow, so let’s go out with a bang.”

“Yuppers!” Lime chirped.

“Indeed,” said Bess, “let’s go out with a bang.”

“Don’t go too far! It’ll be bad if he can’t move anymore,” warned Poiso.

"Hey, wait, hold your horses, ladies! Tomorrow's going to be a long day! We gotta recharge our energy. It wouldn't be good to exhaust our— D-don't eat me!"

I yelped and tried to flee, but soon heard Melty's voice.

"Haven't you heard, Kousuke?"

Somehow, Melty was right in front of me. Confusing? Yes. But believe me, I was way bewildered. There was no gust of wind or physical change. And I was certain she couldn't move at super speed or anything.

"You can't run from your overlord."

"Overlord?" I screeched. "What?! I thought you were a sheep!"

Melty giggled.

"Now then, just relax. I won't hurt you."

"No, hold on! You plan on doing awful stuff to me, I just know it!"

"We'll be done before you can count the stains in the ceiling!" Lime said

"No worries, we won't hurt you," promised Bess.

"No matter what happens, we'll heal you," said Poiso. "Don't worry."

"I see plenty of reasons to worry!"

All things in moderation. That's what I believed, from the bottom of my heart. That really did go for all things. All. Things.

"Uuugh, hah?!"

What happened...? My memories after finishing my call with Sylphy were... Whenever I tried to remember, my head just did not cooperate.

"Kousuke, are you awake?" the bouncy substance engulfing my body asked in a cutesy tone. It was Lime.

I was sleeping on her patented slime bed, it seemed. I sensed a surprising warmth next to me, so I turned my head and found Melty snoozing next to me, still wearing her new slave collar. Lime hated it when I wore clothes while I slept

on her, so Melty and I were both naked. Which was fine. Mainly. Honestly, it'd be dumb for me to still care at that point. The problem was that I didn't remember anything past noon the day before. Why was Melty wearing a slave collar? I couldn't remember, and it hurt my head when I tried.

"Hey, Poiso, everything is good, right?" Bess spoke from somewhere nearby.

"The process went perfectly," came the reply from Poiso. "If he tries to force himself to remember, he might hurt his head."

"Uh, what the hell are you girls talking about?"

"Nothing at all," said Bess.

Poiso took an unconvincing stab at whistling nonchalantly.

"Kousuke!" Lime chirped.

"What's up?"

"There are some things you're better off not remembering!" she said.

"Y-yeah, sure..."

Lime was usually light on words, but this time she laid it all out straight. That alone was surprising, but she sounded serious all of a sudden. Okay, then, I'd play nice and do what she said. It was kinda scary to hear Lime with a serious tone.

Anyway, I pulled myself up from the Lime bed and checked over my body. Somewhere deep inside I could feel a heavy exhaustion, but it might have been my imagination. And my hips felt oddly light. And when I felt my face, it seemed like I had sunken cheeks... No, that had to be my imagination. Definitely.

...But I resolved to eat a big breakfast that morning, anyway.

A few minutes later, Melty finally woke up. Unlike myself, her skin looked oddly smooth and soft... Again, probably just my imagination. Upon closer inspection, the slime girls seemed slightly larger than normal. They also had a little bit of a different gloss to them. But that was probably just the light making me see things. Ha ha ha!

Maybe I was wrong, but I couldn't remember anything, so might as well leave

it. And when I tried to recall something, my head hurt. No point crying over spilled milk. And no, I was definitely not running away from reality. At all. I was just looking toward the future!

I repeated this to myself and prepared for breakfast.

It felt like the upper limit of my stamina and health dropped just like it did when I was poisoned, but after eating breakfast, I was back to normal. Definitely I was just seeing things. It was a little confusing that eating seemed to heal any exhaustion I experienced, but maybe that was a coincidence. I had to leave it at that. If someone else found out about this, it'd be bad.

"Are you feeling better?" Poiso asked me.

"Just overcoming the odds with carbs and guts," I said.

"Wow, even after having so much sucked out of you," she marveled.

"Peerless!" said Lime.

"You really are something special, Kousuke," Bess added.

I appreciated the praise, but what did she mean, "sucked out of you"? Oh God, that was scary. I didn't really want an answer. Was it just me, or had there been a lot of things that I'd had to pretend I hadn't seen, and things I'd had to forget?

Putting the slime girls and Melty together was dangerous. I promised myself I wouldn't forget that.

"Then I guess it's time to get going. Let me just collect my workbench and I'll be off."

"That's too bad," said Bess. "It's going to be lonely around here."

"Communicator, though!" Lime said. "It'll be okay!"

"Yeah, what she said. I'll take a regular-sized one with me and call you every night I can."

No matter how quickly we moved, we likely wouldn't get out of signal range the first day. Probably. I installed the outer antenna somewhere unobtrusive,

and that raised the transmitter sensitivity.

“Okay, we good?”

Melty and I checked each other’s equipment and nodded at one another.

“I believe so,” she said.

Nothing was changed about my armor and weapons setup. Melty was wearing a bag and some fairly revealing clothing, plus a hooded robe to cover her up a bit. She also had a well-made knife on her. Other than the skimpy outfit, she was equipped like your fairly standard female traveler.

“Are you sure about the clothing?” I asked her again.

“If a demi-human sex slave wore proper clothes, it’d be extremely unnatural,” she said.

“Seriously?”

Melty nodded. She would know, I figured. I hoped we didn’t have to deal with any weirdos. She would be okay as long as she kept herself covered with the robe.

“Then it’s time to go.”

“Indeed. I shall follow you, Master,” Melty said with a smile. She edged up close to me.

Master, huh? Not a bad ring to it. So, this is what it feels like to be called that... It’s a wee bit embarrassing. Like we’re getting away with something.

“Lime, Bess, Poiso, words can’t describe how grateful I am for everything you’ve done. I’ll never forget it. We’ll see each other again.”

The slime girls each said their goodbyes and gave me a last squeeze. Lime was all soft and jiggly, Bess was smooth and bouncy, and Poiso was... Let’s just go with *sticky*. Yeah. And kind of warm.

“I wasn’t here long, but I’m also grateful,” said Melty. “I’ll repay this debt one day.”

“Yup, yup!” chirped Lime.

“We’re going to hold you to that,” said Bess.

“Absolutely,” said Poiso.

The three of them replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. No goodbyes there. Melty squinted at them.

“Was it just me, or are you all being way nicer to Kousuke?”

“Imagining things!”

“Imagining things.”

“You’re imagining things.”

I never thought I’d see the kindhearted slime girls act like that. Did they not get along with Melty? It hadn’t seemed that way before. If anything, it felt like they were fine being totally upfront with each other. In any case, it was largely my fault that the slime girls had to deal with Melty at all, so it wouldn’t have made any sense for her to owe them.

“Melty came for me,” I said out loud. “So you can put whatever she owes on my tab.”

“Happily!”

“I won’t argue that.”

“Now I’m excited.”

The slime girls chorused their approval and smiled widely. Melty also had a mixed sort of expression. She probably wasn’t happy that it seemed like she was passing the responsibility on to me.

“If it’ll make you feel better, Melty, you can just do something for me instead,” I proposed.

“...I see. Not a bad idea at all.” Melty smirked deviously.

“Ah, um, just be gentle.”

I may have made a fatal mistake. Was it possible to go back five seconds in time? Were Save and Load functional yet?

Right, those options didn’t exist in survival games. Dammit!

“Then shall we be on our way?” Melty asked. “Sylphy’s holding her ears in

anticipation.”

“Yeah. Let’s do it. Take care, everyone!”

I finally said my final goodbye to the slime girls and left the sewers behind. Huh, so elves held their ears in anticipation and not their breath? Parallel world idioms sure were fun.

Chapter 8:

Kousuke and the Demon Return Home

AS SOON AS WE EMERGED from the sewer, we made a break for the road. We easily shook off some pursuing goblins and assorted monsters and cut our way straight through the woods. We couldn't pull those beasts all the way to the road, though. As it turned out, inciting a monster incident was a crime in those parts.

"Let's take care of these guys before we leave the woods," Melty said quietly as we stopped near the forest's edge.

We'd run quite some distance, but she wasn't breathing heavily or sweating. On the outside, she was a beautiful, mature woman, but I'd come to realize that she was in fact strong enough to defeat a slime girl one-on-one, just like she'd told me.

"All right."

I stopped as well and pulled out a goat's-foot crossbow. If they got too close, I'd use my spear. *If*. I didn't have any close range skills. Haven't had the need to grab any. I started to tell Melty I could handle this on my own, but she cut me off.

"No, please leave this to me."

Melty stepped in front of me protectively. At that very moment, three goblins leapt out from the brush, screaming bloody murder.

The goblins saw Melty and grinned horrifically. They must have thought she was just some weak woman. Or perhaps those grins signified something even more sinister.

Side note: What was the ecology of goblins in this world, anyway? Were they the sort who kidnapped girls of all races and did lewd things to them? I figured I ought to ask someone about that when I got the chance. Someone who wasn't a woman.

“Just three?” Melty said.

“I can handle—”

But before I could finish my sentence, three flowers of blood bloomed in the air. I hadn’t the slightest clue what sort of mechanism was at work, but *something* had just turned them into a fine red mist. Melty hadn’t moved a single inch from her spot. She simply thrust her fist out in their direction, and then they were no more.

Er, what the hell?

Melty seemed to notice the weight of my gaze on her back. She turned and smiled at me.

“Shall we? Let’s hurry home.”

“Right.”

I nodded obediently.

A soundless, invisible, fatal strike. And one with a wide AOE. I definitely wouldn’t argue with someone who could whip out a move like that. Could Melty take on the Holy Kingdom by herself?

“Hey, Melty?” I asked.

“Yes?”

We left the woods and kept walking towards the road. Melty was walking next to me, keeping the front of her robe away. She looked up at me.

“So, like, how strong are you actually? Compared to Sylphy or Sir Leonard or Madame Zamil?”

“Well, let’s see... If I went all-out, I think I’d be about equal to Sylphy. Maybe a little above her. In physical combat using only our bodies and weapons, Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil would rank above me, I think. But, if I were to use magic, the two of them together wouldn’t be able to take me. Oh, and in combat using only magical powers, Ira would come out on top thanks to her technical skills and versatility.”

“...You’re absurdly strong, aren’t you?”

“I am. I’m an overlord, after all,” she said, and shrugged.

“If you’re that strong, why are you an internal affairs officer? And what exactly is an overlord?”

“The answer to your first question is a bit complex. Are you aware of changelings, Kousuke?” she asked. I tilted my head in confusion.

“Um, like when an elf is born between two human parents?”

The changelings I was aware of were the ones in fantasy fiction. There were legends about them existing in the real world, but I didn’t know much about them. What I had heard about was something that occurred when either one of the parents or both had half-elf or elf blood somewhere in their bloodline. Atavism, basically.

“Yes, exactly,” Melty replied. “Both of my parents were normal sheep demi-humans. Physically and magically average people. Average sheep demi-humans, I mean.”

“Okay.”

“But I wasn’t born normal,” she went on. “When I ran, I was faster than feline or wolf demi-humans. I was able to lift things with one hand that bear and elephant demi-humans struggled with. When I used magic, it was stronger than cyclopes and demons. It wasn’t long before the people around me realized I was an overlord, which meant the Kingdom of Merinard found out as well.”

“It sounds like there was no way you wouldn’t stand out.”

If someone that rare was around, it made sense to think the nation had a system in place to monitor them.

“I was taken in by the kingdom and educated, and then secretly assigned to guard the royal family. Since I look like a normal sheep demi-human, nobody’d be on their guard around me.”

“I see...”

As far as I’d heard, your average sheep demi-human couldn’t vaporize people with a gesture. If they could, that’d be terrifying. Which meant Melty was perfectly suited for secret bodyguard work. She could be disguised as an

internal affairs officer or a maidservant and placed near the target that needed protecting without making them nervous or uncomfortable.

“During the war, I considered going on the attack,” Melty continued. “But the king asked me to go undercover, to find Sylphy, and stay by her side. Making my way across the Omitt Badlands on my own was very difficult, though, so I waited several years for my chance. When the rebellion started, I managed to meet up with Danan and the rest and finally cut across the badlands to reunite with Sylphy. That brings us to now.”

“Was crossing the badlands that much of a struggle?”

I thought it should be possible to do solo if you prepared the right equipment and goods. Melty could probably make water and shelter using magic.

“It was, and still is. I can deal with the gizmas, but there’s a limit to how much food and water I can carry on my own, and there’s no way to rest when you’re alone. If you can’t rest, your magic’s going to run out eventually. If you’re attacked by gizmas while you’re asleep, that’s it. You’re dead. Taking ten days to cross that hell alone just isn’t possible.”

“Wow... I guess not.”

I’d taken for granted that I could carry around an infinite amount of supplies, and could make safe shelter wherever I wanted. She was right. Trying to cross the badlands without those skills was an impossible task.

“Wait a second. Then how old are—”

In an instant, Melty was directly in front of me with a terrifying smile on her face.

“Kousuke, don’t you think asking a woman her age is extremely rude?”

“In general, certainly, but not when it comes to you. I mean, regardless of how old you are, you’re an incredibly beautiful woman. There are beings with long lifespans like elves, so I really don’t think you have any reason to be self-conscious about it. What I’m curious about is whether overlords have longer lifespans than normal sheep demi-humans. Demi-humans typically have lifespans similar to humans, don’t they?”

She was right about it being rude, but I just couldn't suppress my curiosity. Melty stared at me for a time before finally closing her eyes and sighing.

"I'm a little older than Sylphy, but much younger than Sir Leonard," she said. "And overlords do live long lives. Five times longer than most races."

"Wow, that's wild. In that case, this overlord thing sounds like a sudden mutation in the gene pool."

But it was pretty weird for a mutation to extend lifespan. I was pretty sure that usually the opposite happened. Then again, this might not be some other phenomenon entirely.

We arrived at the road, and there weren't many other travelers present. There were some people who shot us suspicious looks when we emerged from the forest, but either they didn't want to approach us or they didn't care enough, as they soon turned away and made space for us to begin our trek down the road.

"Well, what's next?" Melty asked.

"How long will it take if we just stick to this road?"

"It depends on the weather, but probably two to three weeks."

"Hrm... Is there any way we can make the trip quicker?"

"There is," she said. "A straight line from Merinisburg to Arichburg isn't all that long. The problem is what lies between them." Melty pointed in the direction of a thick forest and the steep mountains that loomed beyond. "The Sorel Mountains. As you can see, they're quite steep, and there are many powerful monsters that live there. It's more dangerous than the badlands."

"Hrm, so we gotta go around them, huh?"

"Exactly," she said. "Although, the two of us *might* be able to make it through..."

"No, it's not worth risking. Traveling together means that if one of us is struck down, the other will be left in dire straits. It's easier to deal with evil humans than it is to deal with monsters we know little about."

That was putting aside whether or not I could spot if people had evil

intentions. Honestly, I still wasn't sure I'd gained any sort of street smarts. When I said as much to Melty...

"I'm by your side," she replied, and smiled. She was telling me to leave it to her.

"Then I suppose we should walk on quickly, but not conspicuously."

"Good idea," she agreed. "There are usually rest spots, inns, and villages every three hours or so on foot. Let's head for Almas first."

"Okay. What sort of place is it?" I asked Melty as we walked toward our new objective.

"It's a farming village—Merinisburg's breadbasket. It also functions as a place for people to stay, so we shouldn't have trouble finding an inn."

"Okay. How long on foot?"

"If we go through a rest stop, we should arrive before sunset. You'll be able to sleep in a bed tonight, Kousuke."

"Yeah, um, right."

"I can't wait," Melty said happily.

Melty smiled to herself as we went along, and I turned my gaze to the other folks with us on the road. Either because this was the route toward Arichburg or not, there were few travelers going in our direction. They mostly looked like returning home after doing business in Arichburg. On the flip side, the people coming from Almas largely appeared to be travelers. Well, there were a lot of refugee-type folks too. And the occasional person who could afford to hire bodyguards. Nobody wanted to get caught up in a war, it seemed.

After about three hours' walk, we arrived at a rest stop with little to show for itself.

"This is a rest spot, huh?"

"Correct." Melty showed me around. "There's a water source, and the trees nearby have been cut down. That's about it."

"Huh."

There was a lot of stuff there that I'd have loved to improve on. The only thing that anyone put any effort into was the water station, but even that looked pretty old. The chairs were just cut logs that had started to rot.

"I suppose we should rest, then," I said.

"Agreed. Do you want me to rub your legs?"

"I'm not that tired."

We found a couple of log chairs that looked all right and sat ourselves down, sipping from our leather water cases and munching on block cookies and dried meat.

A steady stream of people arrived at the rest spot after us. There were even carriages from who knew where. Most of the travelers were humans, but there were a few demi-humans as well. They were wearing what I figured for slave collars, and there were none who were traveling alone.

Melty was getting a lot of surreptitious looks from the growing crowd. That made sense, considering how much of a beauty she was. People were staring, both at her and at me. When Melty suggested we move on after only a brief rest, I agreed immediately.

It wasn't exactly comfortable here, so we left after only a brief rest.

"More staring than I expected," I mentioned to her when we returned to the road.

"Yeah. It might be wise to come up with a cover story in case something happens."

"I guess so."

I recalled how the cover story that the slime girls and I came up with before I entered Merinisburg came in handy. Melty and I put our brains together as we made our way toward Almas. We have nothing but time to think. It might be a waste if we never had to use the story, but it was fun talking to Melty, so whatever.

The incident occurred three days after we left Merinisburg.

“What do you think?” I asked Melty.

“Hrm, not very good at all.”

With sunset drawing near, we spotted the village where we’d planned to stay the night, but an odd feeling hung over the place. Heavy, even. Several barracks were set up around the village, and even from afar we could see Holy Kingdom soldiers.

“You think they’ll find us suspect?”

“No, that’s not it,” she said. “I’m accompanying you as your sex slave, right?”

“Er, yeah, I guess.”

It was hard to keep my head on straight when she said that right to my face.

“If the soldiers approach us, they might order you to “offer” me to them.”

“...Does that mean what I think it does?”

“It does.”

Well, there was no way we’d go along with that.

“Do you think we’d be able to pass around the village without running into any problems?” I asked.

“If we’re going to pass around, we’ll need to double back and take a side road or cut through that forest over there. And they’ve probably already seen us.”

Melty turned her golden gaze toward the village.

“What’s the plan?” she asked me.

“We have two options. Pray nothing happens and keep going forward, and if something does go wrong, we kick some ass and push our way through. Or double back and find a way around.”

“They’re almost definitely gonna bug us if we go in the village. And if we turn back, they’ll probably follow us for being suspicious. In either case, they’re going to try and make me theirs.”

“Backs against the wall, huh?” I said with a grim chuckle.

“Indeed. So, let’s go with our best option.”

"Agreed. We're going to have to deal with them either way, so let's not give them an excuse."

"Right. It's not difficult to imagine what people like them will say. Now listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you."

Melty quickly briefed me on what to expect. I wasn't really meant for this kind of thing. If it were possible, I'd rather have Melty do all the talking, but given the roles we were playing, that wasn't going to work. So, on our way to the village, she dumped as much info as demi-humanly possible. Once we were closer to the village, soldiers from the barracks at the side of the road started to approach us, their eyes locked on Melty. Some of them even started wolf-whistling. I'd been hoping these guys were trained to show a little decorum, but that hope was quickly shattered.

Just as we were about to enter the village, still closely watched and ogled, a group of men blocked our way.

"We're gonna need you to pay the toll if you wanna enter," said the grinning soldier in Holy Kingdom armor blocking our path.

"I've never heard about having to pay a tax to enter a town before," I replied.

"We're keeping the peace in this region. We're just asking to be paid for our good work."

"I see, I see. I don't mind paying the village, but paying the army seems pretty uncommon. What's the name of this unit, and who's in charge?"

That move was a pro tip from Melty. Folks who were up to no good tended to panic when asked about their superiors, especially when the person asking stayed calm. They got worried about someone above their pay grade saying something.

"Th-that's none of your business!" The soldier dropped his grin and sputtered and spat. Nasty dude. "If you don't wanna get hurt, then pay up!"

"It's absolutely my business," I pressed him and looked him dead in the eye. "I have connections to some very respectable people in Merinisburg. I might have to inform them of what happened here the next time I see them."

The guy was shook. I could tell he was panicking and thinking that he'd picked the wrong mark.

"Obviously there'll be nothing to talk about, should nothing happen," I went on. "What do you think, good soldier of the honorable Holy King?"

"Y-you're quite right." He managed to say.

"I know, I know! I can't make a report about something that never happened, after all. By the way, can we pass?"

"O-of course."

The soldier opened the path for us, and we started to pass him by. But then someone called out to us.

"Hold on."

I turned in the direction of the speaker and a man with a snake-cold gaze and a body that'd seen better days. He was dressed a bit differently from the other soldiers, in the equipment of someone in a higher rank.

"Yes?" I asked him.

"That woman. She has a slave collar on. Is she a demi-human?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"As far as I can tell, you seem like you're headed for Arichburg. The closer you get to the front lines, the more severe you'll find the attitude toward demi-humans. Why are you bringing her there?"

"She's my property, so she goes where I go. Is there something wrong with that?"

Melty trembled when I called her my property. *Please consider the time and place, Melty! Please!*

"Strange. You have the look of a mercenary, or an adventurer of some sort. If you're heading to the front line now, then you must be looking to fight as a soldier of the Holy Kingdom. I can't see why you'd go to the front lines with your sex slave, or whatever this one is. Hold now, were you planning on letting everyone have a go at her? That's an active war zone you're walking into.

Bringing your sex slave there is foolish and nonsensical. Makes you stand out, if you know what I mean.”

The man set his reptilian glare on us. What was I supposed to do now? I glanced at Melty, and she shrugged and shook her head. I had to talk fast.

“I suppose that makes some measure of sense,” I said to the man. “But the basis of your argument is faulty. You see, I’m not heading for the front lines. I bought this slave in the Holy Kingdom. This one here told me she wanted to see her home at least once. To step on its soil just once. So, I came from the eastern front, cut through the Holy Kingdom, entered Merinard, and planned on making my way toward her home, Zagaat.”

“You’re making such a long journey in the middle of a war? Why listen to the request of some demi-human slave?”

“We left a few months ago, actually. There was no way I could know that things’d be like this by the time we got here. I’ve saved up quite a bit, you see, so there was a part of me who wanted to get a look at the bigger world before settling down. Why not grant her wish and kill two birds with one stone? We’re already so close to Zagaat. Why is it suspicious of me to finish the journey I’ve started?”

“Hrm...”

The man shut his eyes and seemed to think for a bit. Finally, he spoke.

“No. Everything you said was plausible enough, but it didn’t negate my suspicions. The fact remains that you being here stinks. Our forces have the right to arrest and interrogate anyone we think might be a spy.”

“Is there really no convincing you otherwise?” I asked.

“Absolutely not. You’re under arrest.”

Just like that, the surrounding soldiers began to close in on us.

“I guess things don’t always go as planned,” I said, cackling like a warning to the soldiers as they approached. Perhaps sensing my tone, they paused.

Melty feigned concern with a hand on her cheek.

“Indeed,” she said. “What ever shall we do?”

“I think this is it. Time for us to make like a banana and split.”

I quickly stuffed my short spear into my inventory. If we had to book it, the unwieldy length of that weapon would just get in the way.

The snake-eyed man was clearly displeased with our little performance. He sharpened his glare and called out to us again.

“Do you really think you can escape?”

Sensing his rage, the other soldiers prepared to strike.

“Well, it’s gonna be tough!” I called back. “It’ll be impossible without killing anyone. What do you think, Melty?”

“Likewise.”

Melty had the best smile on her face just then. She was so cool.

“Then can I leave this one to you?” I asked her.

“Absolutely!”

Melty hefted me up. She was hardly a large woman, yet she lifted a fully grown, completely armored man over her head like it was nothing. The snake-eyed man shifted into alert mode.

“Wrap your arms around my neck so you don’t fall,” Melty told me.

“Am I being princess-carried right now?” I said, and she giggled.

“Since you were the one imprisoned, that sounds just about right.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

I was definitely the damsel in distress in this scenario. From up top, I turned to look at the snake-eyed man. I always thought it was important to say goodbye when parting with people.

“Just for the record,” I told him, “you really shouldn’t pursue us.”

“What are—”

“Here we go!”

An immense blast ran through my body, forcing my eyes shut. I felt immense air pressure and then another blast, and before I could count to three, we were

already out of the village. Melty had just jumped us outta there. And not in a magical, space-warp sort of way. She very literally used her physical strength to jump over the entire village. Hippity-hop.

“Hey, Ms. Melty?”

“Yes?”

“If you keep moving at this speed, won’t we reach Arichburg within the day?”

“That’d be impossible,” she told me. “My magic wouldn’t last.”

“For reals?” I asked, sadly.

“For reals.”

So, she was using magic to push her physical skills to their absolute limit. Which was why keeping this up would be impossible. We heard a sound from behind us.

“Ah, they blew the alert flute,” Melty said. “Looks like they plan on pursuing us.”

“And here I went and told them not to.”

“I thought you were baiting them.”

“No. This wasn’t a ‘hey, don’t push that button, no matter what’ kind of thing.”

Back on my own two feet, I took off at full speed, running and strafe-jumping to increase my speed even further. For some reason, hopping while running made me move mega fast, even though I looked weird as hell while doing it. Meanwhile, Melty was keeping up with me, not showing any signs of exhaustion. She really was incredible. This was what it means to be an overlord, huh?

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“We run into the woods and keep running till they give up?” I suggested.

The sun would be setting soon. If I could get some tree branches, I’d be able to make a cottage for us to sleep in tonight. With a bunch of wood, I’d even be able to make beds and furnishings.

“Captain, what was that...?” Hannes asked, looking like he’d just seen a ghost.

Hannes was quite the base man, wielding the radiance of Lord Adol as a bludgeon to do whatever he wanted. When he died, his soul would undoubtedly be burned to a crisp and annihilated. But, as a petty officer, he had his uses.

I stared at the sunken ground and answered his question with brevity.

“An overlord.”

“An overlord?”

Hannes tilted his head. Unfortunately, it looked like that word wasn’t in his lexicon.

“A particularly evil and dangerous breed of demi-human,” I explained.

I’d long since given up on getting Hannes to understand anything, quite frankly. No matter what I said, he’d ultimately ignore it and act to fulfill his own desires. Trying to impart wisdom upon such a simple mind was a heavy ask.

“That’s terrifying,” he said. “But...”

“Yes?”

“She was tremendously beautiful.”

“I see.”

Once the man had his eyes set on something, he showed no self-control. That empty head of his was likely working overtime to figure out if he could use all of his soldiers to get his hands on her. Honestly, we didn’t have nearly enough manpower to deal with the situation, although tracking her movements and reporting on it would surely benefit Lord Adol. Many soldiers would have to be sacrificed to that cause, but there was no way around that. And getting Hannes to show some restraint would be equally impossible. If he acted on his own, we’d only take even greater losses.

“Hannes,” I called to him.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Play the flute. Gather the soldiers. We’re hunting her down.”

“What?! Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Yes, if we tried to face her head-on, it would be. But overlord or not, she’s a demi-human. She’ll weaken without food or drink, and eventually fall. They weren’t very well equipped to begin with.”

Hannes grinned disgustingly.

“I see! We’ll follow them without getting too close, and tire them out!”

This was the one place where he seemed to excel. This was why I needed... Well, it was why I used him.

“Do it,” I ordered.

“Yessir!”

The flute sounded off.

Epilogue: Passing the Time in a Homemade Cavern

THREE HOURS PASSED, and night fell on the forest. But within that darkness was a swarm of bobbing lights, unmistakably coming from the torches of the Holy Kingdom who still searched for us.

"Whew, they're really working for their paycheck," I muttered.

"I know, right?"

We whispered to one another while watching the soldiers hunt desperately for us. What was our position? The surface of a mountain, looking down upon the vast forest.

When the alarm whistle sounded, we ran full throttle through the woods for a bit, putting distance between us and them. Then we came upon this rocky mountain, and we scrambled up and dug in. After digging steadily for a bit, we made a room in a spot with a clear view of the woods and closed off the entrance with stone blocks. The surface was a little uneven, but it was fairly wide, and the cool air felt nice. We grabbed lumber on the way there, so we had a chair, a table, and a bed.

After checking on things through the window, I suggested to Melty that I close it up for the time being.

"Sounds good," she agreed.

I sealed it up with a wooden plank, made sure there were no gaps, and then pulled out a torch to give us some light in the room. Even though it was a normal torch that put out CO₂, we had a bit of ventilation other than the window, so we'd probably be fine on the air front.

"So, what should we do?" Melty asked. "I really didn't think they'd come chasing after us after seeing that escape."

"Yeah, well... We could always lay low until things chill out."

They couldn't keep looking forever. There were monsters in the woods, and

such intensive hunting took stamina. If casualties arose, they were going to need medical supplies, and the more soldiers they threw at the problem, the more supplies they'd need. Their biggest problem was of course that, as long as we were holed in our mountain dugout, they'd come home empty-handed every day, so their morale was going to steadily decline.

"Although," I continued, "it's not like we have to sit around and hide from them."

Melty hummed her agreement.

"I do think it'd be fine to lay low for a day, though. We've been walking for three days straight."

"I guess you're right."

My muscles didn't ache, and I hadn't found blisters on my feet yet, but my legs did feel heavy after walking six hours every day for three days. There was almost no chance they'd find this place, so it was perfect for resting. Now all I needed to do was use the materials I got from the timber and make a cushion or a blanket or something, to make the place more livable.

"Wanna have dinner?" I asked Melty.

"Sure. What's on the menu for today?"

I had tons of food and dishes ready-made in my inventory. Nothing rotted in there and I could keep things piping hot, so I'd been making lots of things and saving them up.

"Hrm... Let's see... How about some fluffy bread, tomato soup with cabbaj rolls, and some fresh fruit?"

I laid out a basket of bread on the table, deep bowls of red soup with cabbaj rolls in it, and a plate of apple-and grape-like fruits.

"Wow, this looks amazing."

Melty cast her happy gaze upon the smorgasbord I conjured from nothing. I also pulled out a bucket of water for us to clean our hands with, and a clean cloth to dry them on.

"By the way, isn't it time for our regular correspondence?" she reminded me.

“Oh, good call.”

I pulled the golem communicator out of my inventory and started broadcasting to the one I left with Lime and the others.

“This is Kousuke. Can you read me?”

It didn’t take long before I received a response.

“This is Poiso. All clear.”

Usually, the girls were busy 24/7, but because the humans at Merinisburg Castle typically quieted down at night, they had a little free time on their hands to enjoy themselves. Their latest distraction was talking to me over the golem communicator.

“We’re all good over here!” I radioed over to Poiso. “Well, we did have a teeny bit of trouble today.”

“How so?”

“We were gonna stop in this village, but it was occupied by the Holy Kingdom. They found us suspicious and planned to arrest us, but we bolted. They’re searching for us in the woods.”

“Are you okay? You sound so calm.”

“Yeah,” I assured her. “I dug a hole up a nearby mountain and made it into a comfortable room where we’re lying low. We sealed the entrance, so nobody’s gonna find us.”

“They’re searching for you without realizing they’ll never find you? How unfortunate for them.”

Even over the communicator, I could tell she didn’t feel bad in the least. Poiso was probably pleased as punch that the Holy Kingdom’s soldiers were wasting their energy over nothing.

“We’re going to rest here tomorrow and keep an eye on the soldiers outside. If they give up, it’ll be a lot easier to get around.”

“I see. Well, just don’t go too hard and heavy.”

“Er, what?”

“I’m talking to Melty,” Poiso said.

I looked up and spotted Melty grinning.

“Really?” I asked her, incredulous. “At a time like this?”

“Kousuke,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been holding myself back for three days.”

“O-oh.”

“We’ve been walking together this whole time, right? And I’ve gotten to see you looking serious, smiling, laughing, looking listless, looking frustrated... Looking embarrassed because you’re thinking of me... I’ve gotten to see so many different sides of you. And then yesterday and the day before we slept in the same bed, but we didn’t do anything.”

“I mean, well.”

It was hard to get into the mood for something like that when the walls of those cheap inns were so thin.

“And then today you told that soldier that I was your property,” Melty added.

“...I did indeed say that.” And I did it with the utmost confidence. Completely naturally. Like I believed it. “Pretty despicable, even for me.”

“Maybe so, but it made me happy, so I don’t see the problem.”

Melty’s eyes turned golden. She gazed intently at me.

“So, make good on your words,” she told me. “Okay?”

In that moment, she was a full-blown predator. A wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“Then I’ll leave you both to it then,” Poiso said, and then cut the call on her end.

All went quiet, and those glowing, golden eyes drilled holes in me from across the table.

“...After we eat,” I said.

“Yay!”

The next day arrived.

Leaving aside what happened the night before, Melty had been glued to me since the morning. She was just, like, fully attached to me. Completely. In fact, our combined body heat was making it sweltering. *Um, aren't you feeling hot?* I tried to suggest as much to her, but then she looked like she might start to cry.

There wasn't much I could do about Melty's new glopping habit, so I let her be and set up my workbench and smithing station, then got to work producing building materials and mid-tier stuff. I had the feeling we'd be spending the night in underground shelters and temporary housing for the foreseeable future, so I had to prepare for that. I set my equipment down in a place where I could observe the forest below while crafting. Meanwhile, Melty moaned happily and occasionally nuzzled me. It would have hurt if she still had those horns.



Which reminded me, I had to find a way to get them back to normal. I swore that I would. Upgrading my medicine workbench would be a good start.

“It’s hard to see the soldiers during the daytime,” I commented.

“Hm? Is it?” Melty said. “I think it’s fairly easy to catch the light glinting off of their armor between the trees.”

“My eyes aren’t that great, okay?”

But apparently Melty could see them, so maybe it didn’t have to do with our eyes and had more to do with my observational skills?

“You can’t find them?”

“Not at all.” Hannes sighed and shook his head. “There’s no trace of them whatsoever.”

He was probably looking so put out because he couldn’t catch that nasty overlord. Because he let a beautiful woman slip out of his grasp. I could tell.

Even if we did catch her, an overlord like her could rip apart a human being with the faintest exertion, so I wouldn’t want to go anywhere near her. Come to think of it, I never did tell Hannes how dangerous overlords were. But if I did that, he wouldn’t want to search for her, so I supposed there was no point in it.

What next? I’d deployed the soldiers to observe how our quarry would react, but all we’d managed to flush out were a few monsters. An overlord should be able to take down dozens of soldiers in an instant, yet they weren’t engaging our people in combat. I’d have sworn they fled into the woods to cut us down bit by bit.

That man who was with the overlord said something about not being able to get out of the village without killing anyone. Could they really not plan on killing any of us? Well, he did warn us not to follow. Had that been a threat?

“Hrm... Hannes.”

“Yessir. Did you think of something?”

He grinned disgustingly. Probably imagining what he’d do to the overlord if he

caught her. I needed to figure out a way to keep him from her, if we somehow got our hands on her. He might have been absolute trash, but he was still useful. Too useful to lose.

“Call back the search parties and send those soldiers to Bagenat. Put up inspectors,” I ordered him. “If you don’t want to lose the woman, then make it quick.”

“Understood.”

Hannes ran off, raising his voice and delivering my orders to the other men.

I had my own business to attend to. I needed to let the rear know that we were moving the unit. It was a small unit, but moving a platoon of humans still required all kinds of paperwork and preparation. As for whether we could cast a decent net before the targets arrived, well, only Lord Adol knew.

Either way, the information that there was an overlord among the enemy was extremely important. If we let them run wild, our supply line could be annihilated. We had to formulate a plan and figure out what they were up to. Normally, a small unit like ours pursuing an overlord would be a suicide mission, but we couldn’t just do nothing. Dammit.

“If only...” I whispered to myself, turning my gaze to the Solel Mountains. Most people wouldn’t even consider venturing through them, but an overlord? Perhaps...

“I think it’s still too early for them to have given up,” Melty whispered as she gazed down at the dark and quiet forest. It was much quieter than the day before. Had they given up on trying to find us?

“I sincerely doubt that snakey-eyed guy would give up so quickly,” I said.

“I agree. He must’ve made another move.”

“Hm... And what could that have been?”

“Well...” Melty thought on it for a bit.

I turned my focus in the direction of the village, and saw it was significantly darker than it’d been the day before. Melty noticed the direction of my gaze.

“Sure is dark over there.”

“It is. They might’ve moved the squad,” I ventured.

“To the next village, I’m betting.”

“Agreed.”

“So, what’s our move?”

We couldn’t let our guard down around that guy. Quite frankly, I’d rather we didn’t get involved with him at all.

“Let’s get through the Solel Mountains,” I said.

“That place? Won’t that be dangerous?”

“Yes, much more so. But it’s a better option than navigating Holy Kingdom-controlled land while they have their eyes out for us.”

“And they don’t seem like they’re gonna quit any time soon,” Melty reasoned.

I recalled the face of the asshole soldier who blocked our path, and the man with the snake-like eyes. They both struck me as tenacious types. It’d be a real pain if we had to deal with them the whole trip. If things went wrong, another squad could get involved, which would turn this into an even bigger ordeal.

“Oh, well. Solel Mountains it is, then,” I concluded. “Are we okay on directions?”

“Generally speaking, yes. I believe we’ll be able to see Arichburg from atop the mountain, so it won’t be an issue.”

“Gotcha. Well, once we get over the mountain, we should be able to broadcast to Arichburg. I guess it’ll be fine.”

In terms of food and water for two people, we might have enough to last us years. I could probably make climbing equipment if I needed to. Honestly, the prospect of passing through Solel wasn’t really a big concern for me. Monsters were a problem, but Melty was with me, and I had my guns.

Which meant it was time to start making equipment. I knew all too well that mountains should be treated with serious respect. I’d played plenty of survival games that entailed that sort of thing.

First: clothing. We needed sturdy, warm clothes. Also portable food and medicines so that we didn't have to rely entirely on my skills. If I were to fall and lose consciousness, as long as I wasn't dead, Melty could use a life potion on me and get us back on track. And if there were monsters around, we could be separated during battle. I definitely needed to make backpacks.

And then there were shoes. We needed tough, mountain-climbing shoes. The sandals that Melty was wearing weren't gonna cut it.

"Melty, what do you want for a weapon?"

"What for?"

"There are lots of monsters on Solel, right? Aren't you going to need a weapon to fight with?"

"Hm..." Melty took a moment, then shook her head. "No, I'm fine with just my fists. That's how I fight."

"Huh, all right."

I could make her gauntlets or something? I opened up my modified workbench's craft menu. Hrm... What could I do with the limited resources available to me? My eyes darted around the craft menu encompassing my entire field of vision as I began to plan the next day's journey.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for purchasing *Survival in Another World with My Mistress*, Volume 3!

Since there was no postscript for Volume 2, here I am with a proper one. Long time no see, everyone. Ryuto here. And for you first-timers, it's a pleasure to meet you! I hope you stick around for a while!

The place I'm writing this book from and living in is starting to get cold around this time of year. Honestly, I'd love to go into winter hibernation like those bears up in Hokkaido or something. It's so cold that my nose is constantly runny. Feels like my nose is gonna fall off.

Now then, just like last time, let's talk a little bit about the background details that don't really come to light within the main story. I promised to speak about the cyclopes' ecology in the last postscript. That being said, it's not all that exciting. Generally speaking, they live longer than humans, they have one eye, and their magic potential is massive. Other than that, they're not so different from humans. That said, their bodies tend to be rather small, and there are quite a few women the size of Ira. Even then, Ira is on the small end of things. Compared to the average human, male cyclopes are also rather small, and the species as a whole isn't particularly gifted with physical abilities, but they have strong magical powers and are skilled at magical output, so they often have great potential as mages.

They can also interbreed with other species. Way to go, Kousuke! The more the merrier, right?

Anyway, they have strong magical powers, but unlike elves, if they have a child with a human, the chances of them being a cyclops is extremely high. Because of their low physical capabilities, they're not suited toward slavery, and if you put a slave collar on them, they can't use their powerful magic. In other words, they are a low-value race to the Holy Kingdom, and because their appearance is so unique, they live under brutal oppression.

But many cyclopes are talented at magic and alchemy, so they're well liked by demi-humans under Holy Kingdom rule. Many demi-humans, despite living under oppression, have gone on to save and shelter cyclopes. Once peace returns to the kingdom, they might finally be able to come out of hiding and use their talents for the betterment of their people.

Next up, I'll tell you about the brand-new race that was introduced in this volume... Ah! Unfortunately, it looks like I've run out of lines for the postscript! I guess I'll have to write about it next time!

[Blatantly lies]

That's all for this time. I have nothing but gratitude for I-san from GC Novels, Yappen-san who handled the illustrations in this volume, everyone involved with the publishing side of things, and most importantly, everyone who purchased and read this book.

I'll see you all again in the next volume!



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