

NOVEL

2

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THE INVINCIBLE

SHOVEL!

"WAVE MOTION SHOVEL BLAST!"
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THE INVINCIBLE SHOVEL

"WAVE MOTION SHOVEL BLAST!"
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NOVEL 2

GLOSSARY ①

Shovel

noun

- ① Beam Weapon. Acts as a Wave Motion Shovel Blast when heated.
- ② Refers to a god or something even more divine.
- ③ A tool that is largely used for shoveling.
(Rarely used for this purpose.)

adjective

- ① Strong, dependable, manly, attractive.
- ② A condition that the ladies adore, or those actions.
- ③ Extremely lovely.

proper noun **NEW!**

- ① Religious ceremony of the Holy Shovel Faith.
- ② All who witness it must perform an anti-madness dice roll (objective: 96). Should the roll fail, they must roll 1d20 and subtract the corresponding SAN points, thereafter becoming a member of the Holy Shovel Faith.

verb **NEW!**

- ① The act of shoveling a woman's shovel with a man's shovel, thereby shoveling the shovel.
Related → The act of making love.

intransitive verb **NEW!**

- ① A shovel so embarrassing than it cannot be written about here. Please refer to page 143 of the main text for further details.

HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE, OFFICIAL DICTIONARY
(AUTHOR: LITHISIA), 21ST VERSION.



FIRST PRINCESS OF THE
HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE

Lithisia

Love!

THE CAPTAIN OF THE HOLY SHOVEL
EMPIRE'S HOLY SHOVEL KNIGHTS

catria

Love!





**“Ugh, they’re the
noise that distorts
the world.”**

—LADY KNIGHT CATRIA

SCOOP MUSO VOL.2

「SCOOP HADOHO!」 (`・ω・´)σ=====★(° ▽ ° ;;;):.: DOGOoo

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Illustrations by Hagure Yuuki

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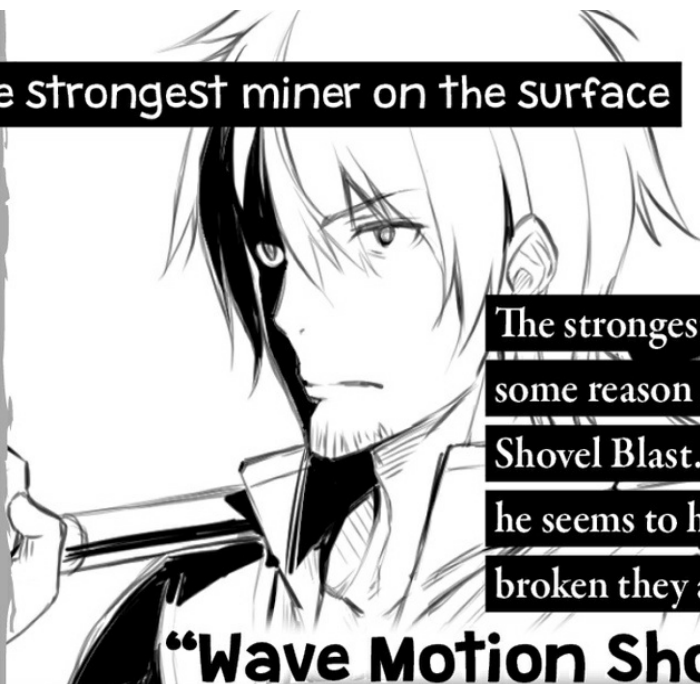


Seven Seas Entertainment

The strongest miner on the surface

CHARACTERS

Alan



The strongest miner on the surface, who for some reason is capable of firing a Wave Motion Shovel Blast. Despite having godlike powers, he seems to have no real understanding of how broken they are. He claims he's "just a miner."

"Wave Motion Shovel Blast... DIG!"

Lithisia

A graceful, pure princess on a journey to save her kingdom. She fell in love at first sight with Alan after he saved her from a bandit attack. Has become a self-proclaimed Shovel Princess.

The kingdom's lovely princess



"How shovely shoveltastic!"
(Sir Miner's shoveling is incredible!)

The princess's bodyguard

Catria



A young knight aiming to reach the pinnacle of knighthood: a Holy Knight. She puts her position as royal bodyguard on the line by challenging Alan to a duel, only to fail. She grudgingly acknowledges Alan's abilities and secretly finds herself enthralled by his inconceivable strength.

"I'll never give in!
I'll never give in to the shovel!"

Fioriel

The sole survivor of the elven race.

A quiet, kind girl, she has a complex about the enormity of her distinctly un-elven bosom. She resolves to make an embarrassing request of Alan in the name of reviving her village.

The lonely elf

“In order to do that, I...I have to do as much shoveling (verb) as possible!”

The young undead king

Alice

Tragically murdered three hundred years ago, she became the vessel for the undead king Veknar. Defeated by Alan, she was meant to vanish, but thanks to the power of his shovel, she was allowed to remain in this world. Every day, she is shoveled by Princess Lithisia...naked.

“All I feel from the sun is a chill.”

Julia

The Water Priestess charged with summoning water for the Rahal Tribe's oasis. Saved by Alan from her fate of being sacrificed to the desert dragon, she has since become a Shovel Priestess dedicated to giving her heart and body to Alan.

The Shovel Priestess,

formerly known as the Water Priestess

“I...I should be calling you God!”

Volume 1 Summary

Source: Chapters 1–3 of the Founding of
the Holy Shovel Empire Chronicles

Alan is the world's strongest miner, capable of firing a Wave Motion Shovel Blast from his shovel. Fate led him to save the beautiful and charismatic Princess Lithisia. It was love at first sight for the young princess—for the miner, and for his powerful tool. Her passions quickly led her to create a brand new religion that worshiped the shovel.

"The Holy Shovel Faith! Don't worry, I'll serve as the high priestess!"

"Uh, I'm pretty worried."

On their journey, they rescued and recruited the lady knight Catria, then spent a couple hours building a sky-piercing castle for Fioriel, a buxom elf girl under siege by Dark Beasts. They also somehow managed to defeat the undead king, Alice, by tickling the bottoms of her feet with a shovel! (Hey! Don't ask!) Eventually, they made their way to the desert nation where they met the Water Priestess Julia.

"I'm the Water Priestess, and yet I can't summon water."

Alan handed the poor girl a blue shovel, multiplying her water-summoning abilities a hundred times over. The oasis was immediately restored, and the citizens of the desert were overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Julia instantly fell head over heels for Alan. In order to repay him for all he had done for her, she approached him in the nude while he was resting in the hot springs.

"I-I'll shovel your back..."

This would later be recognized as the legendary "Priestess Hot Spring."

—WRITTEN BY ALICE, WHO WOULD LIKE TO BE PRAISED
FOR SUMMING THIS WHOLE THING UP IN A SINGLE PAGE.

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Intermission:

Julia's Hot Spring Shovel **ALAN HAD SAVED** **Rahal Village and Julia the Water Priestess from the legendary dragon. At the village elder's invitation, he was relaxing in the village's new hot spring when a deadly new challenge found him.**

Julia arrived. In the men's bath. Naked.

At first Alan assumed she had made a mistake. In truth, Julia was on a mission, given to her by the High Priestess of shovels herself. She was terribly determined.

Realizing Julia was here to stay, Alan threw a towel over Julia's chest; to his dismay, this was not nearly enough to cover her bountiful bust. Everything other than the tips of her chest was plainly visible. Hot water dripped down the fair skin of her breasts. Even the succubi Alan encountered in his mining exploits weren't as threatening as the vision before him.

Nevertheless, the pair ended up sitting in the hot spring, side by side. At least the water managed to cover most of Julia's alluring form.

"I'm so sorry for just barging in like that..." Julia couldn't bear to look Alan in the eyes, her face bright red.

"Why did you, then?"

"I-I just had to express my gratitude... I wanted to shovel your back."

"Shovel my back? In what way is that expressing gratitude?"

"Well, um, that's what Lady Lithisia told me..."

Of course it was all that dastardly princess's fault.

"Look, you don't need to do anything for me. I did what I did for me. Don't worry about it."

Julia didn't respond at first; her long, blue hair floated atop the hot water and tickled Alan's skin. "Um, Sir Alan... You said you're not a god, right?"

"I did. I'm just a regular old person like you are."

Julia stared long and hard at the miner before shaking her head from left to right. "I'm sorry, but I just can't believe that."

"Are you saying I'm not human?"

"N-no! I don't mean it in a weird way! It's just... You saved not only me, but the entirety of the Rahal Tribe. You didn't even ask for anything in return! I just have a hard time seeing you as one of us... You're more like a deity."

Alan thought back to Lithisia after their first meeting. She had ended up with a similarly strange feeling.

"B-but I know you want me to think of you as a fellow human, so!"

Suddenly Julia rose to her feet, her breasts bouncing underneath the towel in her hands. "If nothing else, I want to express my gratitude to you for saving me... S-so if you really want me to think of you as a fellow human, then please allow me to thank you the way we normal people do it!"

There was a weighty pause.

"Julia."

"Yes?!"

"Could you first maybe get back in the water?"

"Huh?"

Because she was standing up, her breasts were exposed to Alan in their entirety. It didn't help that the towel could only do so much to conceal her quivering bosom. Hot water slowly drizzled off her peaks into their valley.

"Aaaah!" Having realized the danger, Julia panicked and submerged her body back into the water. At the end of the day, she was embarrassed, too. "I-I'm so sorry!"

If nothing else, at least Alan finally understood where Julia's head was at. She wanted to thank him for what he'd done. The only reason she expressed it by entering the men's bath naked and trying to "shovel his back" was because Lithisia had corrupted her mind. The princess was truly a lost cause.

"A-are you sure you don't want me to shovel your back? I thought that'd be a

good way of saying thanks...”

“I’m not really sure it would be.”

Alan had no way of knowing what “shovel” even meant at that point. Nobody did outside of Lithisia, really. It was entirely possible that Julia wanted to scratch at his back with a shovel, but that would hurt. Shovels weren’t meant to be used on human flesh. (Though it was a bit late for that.) “Oh...” Julia was clearly disappointed. “Um, then, um, what if I did something else?”

“Such as?”

“I’ll do anything! Just ask me...”

“Hrm.”

Julia’s words gave Alan a major case of déjà vu. Her silhouette was still visible, submerged in the water, and the lines of her body were exquisite. The hot water sliding down her slender arms highlighted the whiteness of her skin. She was no doubt astonishingly soft to the touch. Alan called on his adamant resolve to banish the thought from his mind.

I can’t. I’m a miner. It would go against every miner bone in his body to request the pleasure of someone’s body as a reward for his deeds. That being said, he knew the girl wouldn’t be contented with a half-assed request.

“How about this? Could you pour me some liquor, Julia?”

“Excuse me?” Julia seemed confused.

“There would be no greater reward for me than to have a beautiful girl such as yourself pour me a fine drink in a hot spring.” Alan was quite fond of a good drink, likely due to his distant ancestors being dwarves. Up until now, he hadn’t had much of an opportunity to partake, so he was jonesing.

“Alcohol...?” Julia stared at Alan for a time before snapping to her senses. “Oh! A-all right!”

She gripped the shovel behind her. For some reason, her face was even redder than before. “I-I understand! I’m going to go prepare!”

“Thanks a lot.”

It seemed as though Julia was satisfied with his request.

Shortly, the girl once again entered the hot spring. Still naked. She hopped into the water with a splash, and stood directly in front of Alan. Her eyes were wandering a bit, almost as if she were drunk. For some reason, she didn't have a single bottle of liquor in hand. All she was holding was the blue shovel Alan had given her.

"Julia?" Alan asked. Where was the booze?

"I-I'm ready to present you with 'Julia's Liquor' now..."

"Er, what?"

At that, Julia began to dance in the water.

The water near her bottom swayed. Of course, Julia was naked, so her bountiful priestess breasts were bare for all to see. Her hair clung to her skin, doing its best to cover the pink tips of her chest, but it was very nearly pointless. As she danced, her bosom bounced up and down hypnotically.

"Hah... Urgh..." She was apparently more than aware of her bouncing breasts, letting out an embarrassed sound as she danced. Even so, she continued her beautiful movements while her lower body swayed gracefully through the hot water.

What exactly am I being forced to watch? Alan wondered.

"J-just a little more..." Above Julia's head, a mass of blue liquid began to form, almost like rain droplets coming down from the heavens. The girl quickly squeezed her breasts together, catching the liquid on her body. After a brief period of time, a puddle of liquid had gathered atop her massive chest.

"I-It's ready, Sir Alan..."

What exactly was ready?!

"J-Julia's..." The girl averted her gaze from Alan while keeping her back straight and thrusting her valley of plenty at him. "J-Julia's Liquor is ready!"

How did it come to this?!

"By drinking alcohol before performing the Water Summoning Ritual," Julia

explained, “it becomes the Shoveliquor Ritual.”

What type of logic was that?!

“Lady Lithisia tried all sorts of things...!”

Apparently, the princess was on the verge of becoming some kind of genius inventor (if only when shovels were involved).

“I, uh.” Alan was speechless. *I only wanted you to pour me some liquor the normal way.*

But it was too late for that. Julia stood in front of him with drink collected atop her bosom. She was probably drunk, considering her droopy eyes. She was also likely embarrassed beyond belief, as her entire body gently trembled.

“P-please partake in my liquor...” Julia’s voice shook.

If Alan turned her down here, who knew what damage that might deal her.

“I kind of need a cup.” There was no way he could drink straight from her breasts. That’d be a step too far.

But Julia simply tilted her head in confusion. “Don’t you have a shovel?”

“Huh?”

Drinking with a shovel? Really?

“I was told that drinking with a shovel was common practice in Rostir.”

“Who told you that and when?”

“Lady Lithisia, just earlier.”

The mad princess was on her way to destroying her own nation’s culinary culture.

Meanwhile, Julia continued to keep the pressure on her mighty cleavage. In fact, she increased it. Blue droplets of drink dribbled down her mounds and into the hot spring, almost as if to entice Alan.

He had no choice. He had to drink. Alan steeled his resolve and took his shovel in hand. He was careful not to touch Julia’s skin as he scooped up some of the alcohol with his tool of choice. Despite his efforts, he couldn’t avoid

brushing it against her breasts. Each time he did, Julia let loose a hushed moan.

What am I doing? Alan answered the question by repeatedly telling himself that it was all for Julia. And so he continued to scoop up liquor and drink.

The liquid had a rich aroma and tasted pure, and as soon as it found its way down Alan's throat, he felt as though it cleansed his very soul. It was like drinking water purified by the heavens. The drink was Julia's heart itself; it was Julia's essence.

"This is delicious..." Alan unconsciously whispered to himself, causing tears to fall from Julia's eyes.

"Ah, r-really...?" Julia's voice was filled with joy. Everything she'd gone through up until now had been worth it. She could barely hold on to the towel. It clung to the tips of her voluptuous chest in an effort to remain. She bowed her head deeply. "Thank you so much... I...I'm so happy!"

With Julia pleased as punch, Alan decided enough was enough. Putting aside that he'd just drunk liquor off of the naked breasts of a priestess, he was... happy. He was happy *she* was happy. Or at least, that's what he forced himself to focus on.

"L-Let me prepare some more for you!"

"Wha?"

Julia gripped her shovel and once again began to pray, causing even more liquid to form above her. "P-please partake as much as you want!"

Oh, what the hell. Alan silently extended his shovel toward her. Julia trembled as the tip slid across her breasts.

"Ah, o-oh, Sir Alan!" Julia continued to press her bosom together, drawing Alan's shovel inward as he continued to thrust it into her cleavage time and time again.

"Delicious," Alan said. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he was calm. That didn't mean he wasn't at all intrigued by the sight before him. It just meant that he was keeping it under control. *If I didn't have my shovel with me, this would've been even worse.*

Alan had honed his mental faculties long before Julia's mighty naked shovel liquor. Deep within the mining mountain, where Layer #3,982 connected to The Succubus Palace, Alan had been forced to equip himself with the mental "Shovel Spirit" ability. It was an anti-succubus technique that allowed him to maintain an adamant mental state in the face of "danger."

As of late, he'd only really had to use it against Lithisia, but it was pretty dang effective.

"Ah... Aaaaaah!" However, poor Julia had access to no such ability, so she was losing her mind. Her skin quivered with arousal and her eyes overflowed with tears.

I can't believe he's drinking so much from me! This is amazing...!

Joy. Pleasure. Shovelation. Julia was filled with both familiar emotions and one particularly nonsensical one, but she was happy. Each time Alan touched her, she felt proud and good. Soft.

Sir Alan, Sir Alan! Aaaah! Julia came to a realization as Alan's shovel slid in and out and into the valley of her twin peaks. *I was born to become a Shovel Priestess. Amazing! Ah, Lady Lithisia! This is what you were talking about!*

And just like that, Julia became the Shovel Priestess formerly known as the Water Priestess.

The next day, the party traveled back across the desert, heading toward the next destination on their quest.

"Sir Miner, how was Julia's shovel liquor?"

"My head feels like it's about to explode."

"Wow! It was so shovelingly delicious that you're hungover?"

Nothing mattered to Alan anymore. At least not at this particular moment. The booze had indeed been delightful, but partway through, a sloshed Julia pressed her naked body up against Alan. Her thirsty, drunken gaze was several orders of magnitude more enticing and terrifying than anything Lithisia or Fio could have mustered up.

“Hee hee, Julia looked shovely happy!” Lithisia nodded to herself, satisfied.

Alan thought back on when they departed from the town in the desert. Upon saying goodbye, Julia longingly tugged at the collar of Alan’s shirt.

“Ah, um, e-excuse me!” She quickly let go before casting her tipsy gaze upon him. Her eyes were sparkling, their pupils shaped like shovels. “Sir Alan, I...”

Lithisia whispered to the priestess. “Once we make some progress on our quest, I’ll ask him if we can swing by your village again.”

“Huh? You’d go that far for me?!”

“The Holy Shovel Faith has a pilgrimage. When the time comes...” Lithisia brought her lips even closer to Julia’s ear. “Let’s have Sir Miner do all kinds of shoveling to us.”

“!!”

“We need Sir Miner to father many, many children, after all.”

“Wow, I... I didn’t mean it like that, but... Aaaaah!” The priestess blushed and cast her gaze downward.

That was why Lithisia was so pleased with herself. She’d keep adding wives to the miner’s harem, and eventually the world would be filled with shovels. *Yes! I must find new sisters!*

The current list of women to be shoveled by Alan was Fio, Catria (sold against her will), Alice (being undead meant it wouldn’t be illegal), and now Julia. But that wasn’t enough. More women around the world needed to be taught the joy of shovels.

Shovel the world! All hail the shovel!

Catria and Alice watched the princess from behind.

“She’s gone, isn’t she?” Catria sighed.

“Was she ever really here to begin with?”

“There was a time when she was a respectable princess. Long, long ago.”

But now the princess was barely human. What point was there in worrying about her condition now?

“So, we’re headed to the nation of ice next, yeah?” Alan asked.

“Correct,” said Catria. “Our country has had little interaction with them.”

She explained further: To the north of Desertopia was a series of snowy mountains, and just beyond them was the nation of ice, Shilasia. Just as one would expect, its average climate was well below the freezing line, and the land was covered in meters upon meters of snow.

“So we’re dealing with snowy mountains next, eh?” Alan rested his shovel on his shoulders and looked at the series of mountains stretching out before him. “Ain’t no better battlefield for a shovel.”

Inside, Catria let out an even deeper sigh. *Are there any battlefields where a shovel doesn’t shine?*



GLOSSARY 2

HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE, OFFICIAL DICTIONARY
(AUTHOR: LITHISIA), 21ST VERSION.

Kazaad Gemstone Mine—Upper Layer

EXPLANATION

A gemstone mine located on the outskirts of Rostir. Layer #13 and beyond are connected to the remains of the destroyed dwarf capital, Al Kazaad. It is a city of ruins, filled with all manner of treasures and vicious monsters.

PRIMARY LAYERS: LAYER #13 – LAYER #99

LAYER #37: THE MYTHRIL KING'S COFFIN

The place where the great dwarf king Gimgarna rests. Golems that resemble little girls guard his place of sleep.

Due to Alan's shovel, the girls mistook him as a grave robber and attacked, but he used his Shovel Requiem to prove that he meant no harm, and eventually befriended them all.

LAYER #99: ALAN'S GATE

Originally called Kazaad Crevice. While digging for mythril, the dwarves inadvertently opened a path to the lair of an evil ancient dragon. It invaded their kingdom and destroyed it.

Alan defeated the evil dragon and created a gate to seal away the crevice. After, though he had saved the world and protected the golem girls, he merely proceeded further down in search of more gems.

A black and white illustration of a shovel stuck into a block of ice. The shovel's handle is a dark, textured pole, and its head is a wide, flat, light-colored blade. The ice is depicted with dark, wavy lines and some white highlights, suggesting a rough, crystalline surface. A white, torn-edge rectangular card is placed horizontally across the middle of the shovel's handle. The card contains the chapter title in bold, black, sans-serif text. The overall composition is simple and graphic, with a strong contrast between the dark shovel and the light card and ice.

CHAPTER 4

The Shovel of the Kingdom of Ice

(RIEZFELD'S INTO IT)

Part 17:

The Miner Thaws Out the Ice Sage **N**EXT ON THEIR JOURNEY was the ice nation Shilasia, where Lithisia believed they would find the Silver Orb. However, bordering the two nations was the tallest mountain range in the world, Noborapidal. Most travelers had no choice but to find another way through, even if that added a great deal of time to any journey. As such, once they reached the foothills, Alan decided to build a tunnel running through the mountain range.

“Wait, wait! Just because you want to doesn’t mean you can!” Catria interjected, but within three seconds, the tunnel was made.

“Done.”

“!!”

The arch was a total of five meters tall. The path had two lanes, wide enough for a large horse and carriage to travel along it. Orange shovel lights lined the sides of the passageway (powered by Shovel Power capable of keeping the lights operational for 256 years). Additionally, there was an emergency shovel installed every ten meters.

“What the hell would you even use these for?!”

“For shoveling, of course! Right, Sir Miner?”

“They’re necessary in the event of a cave-in,” Alan said. He didn’t seem to realize he was the only person who’d be able to shovel his way out in a situation like that.

The tunnel itself was ten kilometers in length, the longest in all the world.

“I also figured this’ll help international relations between the Shilasia and Desertopia.”

“Wow, you even shoveled up international relations? Your wondrousness never ends, Sir Miner, shovel!”

“Please don’t add shovel to the end of your sentences.”

Catria stared at the tunnel for a moment before sighing. *I’m pretty sure we’re at the point where we should be classifying this guy as a natural disaster.*

“W-wait, Alan,” she said. “This tunnel is going to be a problem.”

“How so?”

“Desertopia is a military nation. If they have access to a tunnel like this...”

“It’ll mean war?”

Catria nodded. Desertopia was a belligerent nation. Peace with the ice nation had persisted for a time, but that was only because of the mountain range separating the two. If Desertopia found out about a tunnel connecting the nations, there was little doubt that they’d mobilize.

War was a senseless, destructive thing. Catria had learned this firsthand at RIFTEN.

Lithisia quickly drew near and smiled. “That would be a problem! But I have a shoveltastic idea!”

“Your Highness!” Catria was genuinely moved. While the princess’s manner of speaking was all but a lost cause, it was a relief to find that some semblance of royal responsibility remained with her.

“You see, we’ll simply create Holy Shovel Embassies in both nations and deepen the relationship between them!”

Regret. Nothing but regret.

“Don’t worry, the military can’t use this tunnel,” said Alan.

“Excuse me?”

“There’s a trap hole at the entrance. Merchants and travelers can pass through just fine, but any member of the military would automatically be dropped down.”

“That’s completely absurd. Why do you have to be like this?”

“My Shovel Sensor will be able to tell the difference. What’s so absurd about that?”

“Everything.” Unfortunately, Catria knew there was no point trying to dig holes in Alan’s logic. “But wait. Why didn’t I fall through? I’m a knight.”

“You’re not a knight so much as you’re a shovel,” chirped Lithisia.

“Wha?!” Catria was floored. Astounded. Undone. Truly this was the greatest disgrace in the history of humanity. “Take that back, Your Highness! I’m going to get angry!”

“But you didn’t fall into the hole. Is that not proof enough?”

“Urgh.”

Lithisia smiled in Catria’s direction while Catria held her head in her hands. Had she already been corrupted by the foul existence known as the shovel? No, that was impossible. She still had time!

“I-I don’t need this shovel anymore! Take it back,” Catria exclaimed as she attempted to return the Holy Shovel Alan had passed on to her during the Riften dungeon raid. Unfortunately, the thing wouldn’t leave her hands. It was as if it was glued to them. A chill ran down Catria’s spine. “What the hell?!”

“I imbued that shovel with Divine Shovel Power so that it would watch over you until you become a full-blown Holy Knight.”

“You cursed me, you bastard! This is a cursed shovel!”

“Catria, I’m so excited for you. You’re going to become the captain of the Holy Shovel Knights!”

“I didn’t ask for this! Get it off me! Get it off!”

“Truly pitiful,” said Alice.

Catria was already in tears.

The party entered the ice nation as they attempted to shomfort (shoveling comfort) the tearful Catria. Upon exiting the tunnel, they were welcomed to the outside world by a blast of frigid snow. It was so cold that it instantly robbed them of their body heat. Catria’s exposed thighs were especially chilled.

“Wh-what the?! It’s freezing!” The knight shivered and crossed her arms.

The ice nation was far more bitterly cold than anyone could have anticipated. It felt like in a matter of minutes they would be frozen solid.

“Hrmph, this temperature certainly is abnormal,” said Alan.

Admittedly, compared to the Cocutos Planes deep below the surface, this was nothing. But even he had to admit that these were harsh living conditions. Furthermore, the snow was purple, a clear sign of magic at work. Something was amiss in this country.

“We have to do something about this cold. Everyone, keep your shovels close to your body.” Alan’s warning started out reasonably enough but dissolved into nonsense in the latter half.

“Of course!” Lithisia said. “You too, Alice!”

“Don’t you dare shovel me! I’m right next to you!”

“I-It’s so damn cold!” Catria might as well have been vibrating. Her lips were already blue. This was bad. The cold had numbed her beyond the point of feeling pain. *Am I going to die?!* “H-how are you still okay, Your Highness?!”

Alan and Alice were abnormal to begin with, but Lithisia wore a dress that exposed her breasts. She should have been even more frozen than Catria at the moment. Yet the knight stared at her princess, only to find that she was gripping her red shovel close to her chest. In fact, beads of sweat were dripping into her cleavage. She looked plenty warm.

“Why?!”

“Catria, if you’re cold, you should shovel up and get warm.”

Shovel up?!

“Hold your shovel close and you’ll warm right up.”

“If I do that, I’m gonna get frostbite!”

“Sir Miner seems fine.”

The fact that Alan was completely fine wearing light traveling clothes was inhuman. Hell, he wasn’t human to begin with. That wasn’t sarcasm, either.

“Catria, use your shovel’s anti-chill properties,” he instructed her. “You’ll

warm up right away.”

Like hell I will! The unnatural frost and her own logic fought a furious battle over Catria’s soul. She was beginning to lose the light.

Alice looked over at the knight, now on the verge of death, and panicked. She attempted to slap her back into shape.

“Hold yourself together, Catria! Catria! Don’t you dare leave me alone with these crackpots!”

“Ugh...”

“If you lose consciousness now, you’re gonna be a shovel! Are you okay with that?!”

“Urgh!” Catria rapidly shook her head back and forth and regained her composure. “Th-thanks, Alice.”

Unfortunately, this didn’t fix the problem that was the weather. Catria would still rather die than use a shovel, but at this point, she really was walking the line. Was it a mistake for her to have tagged along on this journey with all these nonhumans?

“Fine,” said Alan suddenly.

“What are you plotting?!” Catria barely had time to say it when her body was lifted into the air. It wasn’t that she was floating; she could feel two powerful arms holding her up. When she looked for the culprit, she found Alan’s face right near her own. His warmth bloomed on her exposed thighs and back.

She was being carried. Like a princess.

“Wh-what?! What’s going on?!” Upon realizing the situation, Catria’s face went crimson.

“You’re going to die if we don’t do something. This way, my shovel’s warming powers should pass on to you.”

“H-how dare you! You big jerk! Let me down!”

They looked like a hero and a princess right out of a storybook.

After throwing a bit of a fit, Catria realized it was futile. Alan wasn’t going to

let go. But troublingly, Lithisia looked extremely jealous. Catria sensed that her life was in danger. Seeing an out, she protested, “You should be doing this sort of thing with the princess, not me!”

“That won’t do. Or would you rather hold a shovel?” Alan asked.

The knight had two equally unacceptable options. Hold a shovel, or let Alan carry her. “What the hell’s up with my choices?! They both suck! You jerk!”

“I didn’t realize you were such a diva, Catria.” Alan sighed to himself and let her down.

Just as Catria thought she was finally in the clear, Alan whipped out the head of his shovel and lodged it into her neck armor, raising her into the air. It was like the enemy had stuck her atop a spear on the battlefield.

Worse, her underwear was completely visible from below.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Catria immediately held down her short skirt armor. It nonetheless flapped freely, an ultimately wasted effort.

“The heat of my shovel can travel this way too.”

“You jerk! You big, fat jerk!” Catria’s eyes filled with tears.

The conversation continued as the party made their way down the snowy path.

“Snow shovels, la di da!”

“It’s a song for brainwashing! Cover your ears, Catria!” shouted Alice.

Unfortunately, all the knight could do was cry. *Will I still be human when this journey comes to an end?*

After a few kilometers, Alan finally let Catria down. His shovel heat had managed to warm her significantly. Catria was grateful to walk along the path on her own feet, albeit wiping her tears away with her handkerchief.

Eventually, the party came upon a gate of stone.

“This is the capital of the ice nation? Hrm.” Alan frowned.

They stood in front of a castle covered in snow. Its gates were enormous and also closed. Something about the whole thing seemed off. For example, despite the castle gates being huge, there were no gatekeepers anywhere to be found.

“Don’t let your guard down.” Alan pushed the truly gargantuan gate open carefully with his shovel (Catria didn’t interject), and the party walked in.

Ahead were a series of frozen statues in the road. They were impossibly realistic, and sculpted entirely from ice. It was almost as if only moments before, the figures were alive and walking, and had only frozen when the gate opened.

“Wait, no...” Alice approached the statues and touched one. “Hrmph. Ice Coffin magic, eh?”

“What’s that?”

“A type of magic capable of turning someone into ice instantly. This is likely the work of a mage,” Alice explained as a nervous bead of sweat ran down her cheek. “I could do this to a single person, but not an entire city.”

“Could you, Sir Miner?”

“Shovels exist to break ice, not make ice.”

“Is that really the issue right now?” Despite her interjection, Catria too was sweating, terribly unnerved.

Every human in the city had been frozen solid. Merchants, knights doing the rounds, everyone. There were even those who wore smiles on their frozen faces. How much magic did someone need in order to freeze so many people all at once?

“The cold energy is coming from over there.” Alan pointed his sharp gaze at a tall tower standing in the center of the city. The unsettling purple energy that colored the snow pooled at the tower in a deeply unnatural way. It was clearly the source of this snowstorm. “We have to hurry, Catria.”

“Are we running to the tower?”

“No. Instead...” Alan waved his shovel but once. Immediately, a snowy path stretched up into the sky, forming a bridge of stairs. It was unbelievably long,

spanning all the way up to the window at the very top of the tower. Alan tapped it as if to check its sturdiness. "Right. This thing should hold about fifty people. We'll be taking this ice bridge straight to the tower."

"Fine..."

This guy could probably melt all the ice in the world, Catria thought to herself.

At the top of the tower, there was a solemn audience hall with a throne, and near to the throne was a giant, transparent pillar of ice. Icy air enveloped it, almost like an aura. Occasionally, it made eerie sounds as it absorbed even more ice onto itself.

And within said ice...was a human, trapped inside.

A girl with short silver hair, to be exact. She looked to be around sixteen or seventeen years old. She wore what appeared to be a robe, but it was terribly tattered. She had a cool look to her, a slim body, and small but firm breasts. A real beauty. Also, her eyes were closed; she looked to be asleep within the ice.

"Could she be the Ice Witch?" Lithisia whispered.

"Princess Lithisia, do you know who this girl is?"

"It's said that the Ice Witch Riezfeld helped found the kingdom of ice, Shilasia. This girl looks exactly like the one in the pictures found in the royal scrolls... But the era during which she lived was three hundred years ago. How could she last this long without a shovel?"

Outside of the final bit, Lithisia's explanation was pretty on point.

"There are humans out there who can live more than three hundred years," Alan whispered to himself. After all, he'd been alive for 1,011 years at this point. Was the ice girl like him? Or was she not even human to begin with? "Either way, we're gonna have to wake her up and ask her some questions."

Since there were no other humans to be found, there was no alternative way to gather info on the location of the Silver Orb.

"Alan, can you melt the ice?"

“The magic is too powerful for me to simply melt it with heat.”

“Huh, so it’s impossible even for you?” Catria was a little startled to realize she’d simply assumed that Alan would be able to do it. Maybe it was true. Maybe her mind *had* been poisoned by the foul tool known as the shovel.

“That’s why I’m not going to melt it,” he said. “I’m going to chip away at it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Shovels were designed to break ice.” With that, Alan dug his shovel into the ice as easily as if it were some kind of sherbet.

“Sir Miner, you’re making me want shaved ice!”

“I’d like strawberry-flavored,” said Alice. “Thank you.”

Catria was overwhelmed by the sensation of her brain cells being chipped away, too.

Once Alan had flaked away all the ice, Riefeld collapsed out of her prison.

“Oooof.”

Alan quickly took her in his arms. Despite being acutely cold, her skin was soft. She also appeared to be conscious. Slowly, Riefeld opened her eyes.

“Good morning.”

“Where...am I...?” The girl named Riefeld rapidly blinked her eyes as she came to. She brought her hand to her head as if it were in pain. “My head... I... I... Who am I...?”

“Hrm, could she be suffering from memory loss?”

“That’d be a problem. We should let her rest,” Catria said.

“No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll just unearth her memories for her.”

“Wha—”

Alan brushed his left hand over Riefeld’s hair. Suddenly, a sphere of silver light appeared above her head. Alan pierced it a single time with his shovel and began to scoop.

Just like that, the light returned to Riefeld’s eyes. “Ah... That’s right. I’m

Riefeld... I'm the Ice Sage Riefeld!"

"Perfect."

Catria groaned. "Don't you 'perfect' me."

This man had just unearthed someone's memories like it was no big deal.

"Human memories are continuously saved in real time by the God of Knowledge. Deep within astral space, on the lowest level of the divine plane, resides the Akashic Record. I simply did a little bit of tweaking with my shovel to access said record and dig up her memories. In other words, the 'Shoveling Record.'"

"And don't you *dare* 'in other words' me. None of that made any sense!"

"I... That's right. I lost control of my power and was trapped in ice..." The silver-haired girl named Riefeld turned to Alan, a curious expression on her face. "Um, um, may I ask you a question?!"

"Yeah, sure. But first..."

Alan was going to recommend that she put on some clothes, but she was so excited that she wasn't listening to a word he said.

"Um! Are you perhaps the one who saved me?!"

Alan nodded.

"You're the one who saved me, the Ice Sage Riefeld, from her prison of ice?!"

"Er, yes."

"Which means you're...the hero?!" Riefeld's eyes shone brightly.

"What?"

"Hee hee hee, there's no point hiding your identity. You released the ancient Ice Sage from the magic ice, after all!" The girl's face bloomed with delight as she rose to her feet. "If that's not proof that you're the hero of legend, I don't know what is!"

"Is that so?"

"That it is!" Riefeld reached for her rod, turned to Alan, and formally greeted

him. “In that case—I am the Ice Sage, Riezfeld. Sir Hero, might I have your name?”

“It’s, uh, Alan.”

“Sir Alan, as thanks for saving my life...” The Ice Sage fell dramatically to her knees and held out her rod to him with both hands. “I offer all of my sagely self to you, Sir Hero.”

A full ten seconds of silence ensued. There was a proper reason as to why Alan was silent for that long. “Riezfeld.”

“Yes, Sir Hero!”

“Could you put on some clothes, first?”

“Huh?”

For the first time since being freed, the girl looked down at herself. She noticed two hardened pink peaks atop two gentle hills. As she was on her knees, it was impossible to see past her thighs, but everything else was completely visible. She was entirely nude.

When the Nude Sage, sixteen years old, spoke of offering knowledge to Alan, it was tragically difficult to hear the offer as anything other than something far more inappropriate.

Riezfeld went silent for a bit. She now realized that she’d said something absurdly easy to misinterpret.

“I-I swear, I didn’t mean it that way!” Her voice shook; tears formed in her eyes as she slowly covered her breasts with one arm. “I-I, um, uh, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“What isn’t what it looks like?”

“It isn’t that I didn’t notice I wasn’t wearing clothes, okay? As a wise sage, I, um, er, it’s my robe’s fault! Sometimes my robe goes translucent! They call it the Great Sage Robe! So, uh, it’s not that I didn’t notice or anything!” The sage completely broke down into ever more wild excuses.

Is it just me, or is there something off about this sage? Catria thought with a sinking feeling.

Alice watched the self-proclaimed Ice Sage from a distance, while Lithisia gripped her shovel as per the usual.

Alan scratched his forehead. “So you’re saying you don’t need clothes?”

“Ah, no, I, um, well you see!” Riezfeld waved her arms about as she tried to explain herself.

“Erm, if you move like that, I can see everything.”

“Oh, gosh!”



The Ice Sage once again dropped to her knees. Now that she was attempting to cover up, she began to shiver. She must've finally noticed the temperature. "P-please give me s-some clothes," she said with tears in her eyes.

Talk about a sad excuse for a sage, Catria thought, her feelings having found rock bottom.

Quick as a flash, Riezfeld finally had a robe. The clothes within the castle were, of course, frozen solid, so Alan used his shovel to sew her new garment. As a miner, his clothes often fell apart due to the trials and tribulations of hard physical labor, which was why he had learned to sew with his shovel. The ever versatile tool was designed to dig holes, and since sewing was the act of creating holes through which to pull thread, one could argue that shoveling and sewing were the exact same thing.

"What kind of logic is that?!" Catria cried to no avail.

Riezfeld looked overjoyed as she spun in a circle, her white robe flowing through the air. Her new attire included a blush cape that draped down her back.

"Amazing! This is amazing! It's small, but so warm!" It appeared she'd entirely forgotten the embarrassment of her earlier circumstances.

"That's because I sewed it with a shovel. It has anti-cold effects attached to it."

"Wow. Modern magic is phenomenal."

It's not magic. It's just a shovel, Catria thought to herself.

"I'm looking forward to working with you, Sir Hero!" the sage said as she bowed her head deeply toward Alan.

Lithisia drew near with a serious expression on her face. "Sir Miner."

Riezfeld looked up. "Huh?"

"He's not a hero. He's a miner."

"Uh..."

“Repeat after me. Sir. Miner.”

The Ice Sage stared at Lithisia in silence, until finally... “S-Sir Miner...?”

“Put your heart into it. Sir Miner!”

“Sir Miner.”

“All hail Sir Miner’s shovel!”

“All hail Sir Miner’s shovel?”

“Wonderful! Perfect! I’m so proud of you!” Lithisia grabbed the sage’s hands with her own, a wide smile on her face. “It’s a pleasure to meet you! My name is Lithisia. I hope we can become great friends!”

Riefeld had no idea how to respond at first, but at length bopped the palm of her hand with her fist. “Oh, I get it! A ‘miner’ is the same thing as a ‘hero’ in modern civilization!”

Lithisia nodded enthusiastically.

Seeing no hope that the misunderstanding would ever be resolved, Catria decided to stop caring. “More importantly, Riefeld... Could you tell us what happened here?”

In other words, what had caused Shilasia to be entrapped in magic ice?

“Ah, my apologies. Allow me to explain.” Riefeld cleared her throat. “This tragedy is the work of a powerful, evil mage.”

In the long gone days of the ancient magic kingdom, Riefeld had been a sage who perfected the art of ice magic. After she helped to found Shilasia, she spent her days in her “Polar Ice Cave”, studying magic. One day, after returning to the capital city for the first time in a while, she ran across a mage who had also been alive since the ancient times.

“He wanted me to collude with him.”

The mage in question had devised a plan to take over the entire continent, and he required Riefeld’s assistance to make it happen.

“Needless to say, I had no interest in such things.”

And so the two came to magical blows.

“It was a fierce battle.”

The Ice Sage Riefeld was tremendously powerful, but her opponent was a fellow ancient mage. At the end of a hard-fought battle, Riefeld’s magic escaped her control. Her potent ice magic spread throughout the capital, trapping both her and the city within a layer of ice.

“Hold on a second,” Catria interrupted.

“Are you telling me you’re responsible for all of this?”

Riefeld trembled. “N-no, not at all! It’s all his fault! I was just acting in self-defense!”

Yet it was clear that her magic was the root cause of the ice kingdom’s predicament.

Catria let out a resigned sigh. This sage was trouble, no doubt about it. “Putting that aside for the moment, can the frozen citizens be returned to normal?”

“O-o-of course! I’m the Ice Sage! Defrosting some frozen folks is no big deal!” Riefeld gripped her rod and yelled out. “Dispel Magic!”

A single, sad puff of smoke seeped out of her rod.

“Ah.”

“Ah?”

“Looks like I’m all out of mana. J-just hold on for a bit.”

“How long are we talking?”

“Since I used up all my mana in that big battle, er... Something like thirty years, I guess...” The Ice Sage’s voice trailed off.

“We can’t possibly wait that long!”

In another thirty years, who knew what would become of Shilasia?

“O-okay! Just hold on. I’ll do something... Ergh.”

It was clear to everyone present that Riefeld had no clue what that something would be. Tears once again began to form in her eyes, but Alan

simply patted her on the back.

“No worries.”

“Huh?”

The miner gripped his shovel with purpose. “I’ve got my trusty shovel. Let’s melt the ice with it.”

Riefeld disconsolately shook her head back and forth. “I’m sorry, but this ice represents my magical power at its strongest. Your shovel won’t be very effective...”

“Fear not.” Alan pointed his shovel at a nearby guard.

KA-CHOOOOM!!!

A beam of fire erupted from the head of the tool. It was specifically heated to melt rock. If Alan could handle that, surely he could melt ice.

“Where am I...? I... I’m hot!” howled the guard. It seemed he had instantly and completely recovered.

“Wha?” Riefeld was stunned by the sight. *Wait, now that I think about it... How did he free me from my ice prison?*

“Perfect. I’m gonna go defrost the rest of the citizens. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Take care, Sir Miner!”

“Huh? Wha? But... Huh?!”

And so, ten minutes later, the capital was once again alive and well. Alan ultimately defrosted some 60,320 humans. The citizens seemed to have no memory of the many years they had spent frozen, so they simply returned to their daily lives.

Once Alan returned to the audience hall, the party welcomed him back.

“Great job, Sir Miner! I prepared some hot shovel tea for you.”

“I’d prefer regular tea.”

“In that case, I’ll use my shovel to insert some tea leaves and make regular tea for you!”

“Please just do it the normal way.”

Riezfeld’s mouth opened and closed rapidly. Eventually she stopped gaping long enough to give voice to her panic. “M-m-modern mages are this ridiculously powerful?!”

Catria shook her head, resigned. “He’s no mage.”

Alan was but a simple shovel-wielder. Well, there wasn’t actually anything simple about it. Suffice to say that he was the strongest miner on the planet.

Part 18:

The Miner Eats the

Self-Proclaimed Ice Sage's Shaved Ice **T**HE PARTY WALKED ALONG the main street of the capital city of Shilasia. Just as Riezfeld's magic had frozen the city in one fell blow, so too had Alan defrosted it with his shovel. As such, most of the citizens seemed unaware that anything strange had happened at all. For the over sixty thousand people living in the city, the whole event seemed to pass like nothing more than an unusually strong breeze. That said, the party did overhear a few odd things.

"Hey, did you see that? There was a guy holding a shovel flying across the sky just now!"

"Well, I mean, look at all this snow. You probably just saw someone doing work on a roof or something."

"Yeah, I suppose."

And that was that.

"Thank goodness this is the kingdom of snow. Saves me the trouble of having to manipulate the flow of information," said Alan.

"That's not the problem. Look at her." Catria pointed at the wide-eyed Riezfeld.

"The equation's been completely undone and there are no lasting side effects? How?!" Riezfeld seemed overwhelmed by the sight before her. This was how most normal people reacted when confronted with the absurdity of Alan's shovel. "Wh-what kind of magic did you use to do this?!"

"No magic. Just my shovel," said Alan.

"Your shovel? Is that some kind of new magic tool?"

"Nope! Shovels are the truth of this world," said Lithisia.

“Er.”

“Lithisia, stuff it. You’re just going to make this more difficult,” said Alice.

“Stuff it... You mean like with a shovel?” Lithisia wore a childish smile on her face.

Two cold seconds passed, during which Alice had a look in her eyes that screamed disdain. “Shut up.”

“Baww...”

The sage was in the midst of a grave misunderstanding, so Alan cleared his throat and decided to set things straight. “All I did was melt the ice with my shovel. See, shovels are a fundamental part of daily life, like when they’re tools used to deal with snow. So it makes sense that a shovel could defrost ice. Anyone could do it with a bit of practice.”

Anyone could(n’t) do it.

Of course, this explanation did nothing to appease Riezfeld. “Hmph, you’re trying to fool me, but there’s no way you can deceive a sage’s eyes!”

Moments later, she smacked her fist into her hand and turned to Alan.

“I understand now. Alan, no, Sir Hero!” Riezfeld pointed her finger at him. Her expression made her look like a proud older sister. “You’re actually a super powerful Disenchanter!”

“A disenchanter?”

“A mage that specializes in nullifying spells and curses. That’s you.” It was as though she was trying to tell him that it was pointless to keep secrets from her.

“No, actually my specialty is shovels.”

“I get it. So you use a shovel as your magical trigger, eh? I suppose it’s not so different from a rod.”

Wow, this misunderstanding is getting out of control, thought Catria. But the whole situation was too much of a bother for her to try and correct anyone.

“Anyhow.” Riezfeld whispered a spell. “*La Lebolt.*”

The space in front of her cracked open, and from the void emerged a long rod

capable of projecting cold air.

“Sir Miner, please use my power to search for the orb.”

“Oh? You know where it is?”

Riezfeld giggled. “Remember, I am the Ice Sage. Shilasia is like my garden!”

“Huh?” Lithisia responded. “Now that I think about it, in the legends you’re referred to as the Ice *Witch*, not a Sage.”

“Er, well, I’m sure the legend just evolved as time went on.” Riezfeld smiled unnaturally. “I am the Ice Sage Riezfeld, helper of the hero who founded Shilasia.”

The sage placed her rod in front of Alan and gracefully took a knee. “Please use my wisdom and knowledge.”

This was her way of thanking the miner for saving her from her prison of ice. However, the vision of a greeting from naked Riezfeld was still freshly imprinted in Alan’s mind. It made it rather difficult for him to see her as a reliable partner.

“Hrm, although, I suppose when it comes to orb-hunting, Riezfeld...”

“Just call me Riez.”

“All right. Well, what about the evil mage that attacked you?”

During the following silence, a passerby suddenly raised their voice. “Crap! I forgot to buy apples!”

“Ah.” A single sweat drop rolled down Riez’s white cheek, but she nonetheless managed to maintain her older sister-smile.

“Ah?”

“Er, no, um, well...” Riez suddenly looked off to the side. “I absolutely did not forget about my mortal enemy whatsoever.”

“I didn’t say you did,” said Alan.

“The Ice Sage is wise beyond her years. I would never, ever forget something like that.” Riez gripped her rod and puffed out her chest.

She totally forgot.

She definitely forgot.

Shovely shovel!

Both Alice and Catria internally agreed that there was something rather suspicious about this self-proclaimed sage. Lithisia, on the other hand, was currently plotting. Plotting to shovel said sage.

Nonetheless, Riez finally began to speak of the evil mage that had assaulted her. His name was Raystol, and apparently, he was Shilasia's court mage. According to the sage, he had planned something terribly evil, and by making Riez drink some sort of potion, forced her powers to go berserk and freeze the entire kingdom.

But that was all Riez had in terms of information.

"That's it?!" exclaimed Catria.

"Talk about vague," said Alan.

And what exactly about this mage was evil? At the end of the day, the reason the kingdom froze over was still because of Riez's magical powers going berserk.

"Well, whatever. We can just ask him ourselves," said Alan. "Where is he?"

"Leave that to me! As the Ice Sage, I can use my powers to find his location," Riez declared, putting a certain amount of emphasis on *Sage*.

Riez raised her rod and began to chant a spell. Suddenly, a large ice crystal appeared before her. Blue magical energy erupted from her rod as she glided her left hand over the crystal.

"The northeast... A mountain covered in snow... Somewhere halfway down from the top..."

"More vague information."

Pretty much every mountain in the country was covered in snow. Not to mention, the distance from the summit to the halfway point of a mountain was about two-thirds of its total size. Alan found this info fairly questionable, but didn't have long to think on it before Riez's eyes went wide in surprise.

“Wait, I can sense the Silver Orb!”

“Hrm, then does that mean that it’s in Raystol’s possession?”

“Yes, it does! Hee hee, I can’t be wrong!” Riez clapped her hands together and smirked. “Do you understand now? That was that, and this is this!”

“Er, what are you talking about?”

“I didn’t forget about the mage, not at all! The reason I brought up hunting for the orb is because I knew the mage had it in his possession, and therefore orb-hunting equaled finding Raystol! I just cut down on the explanation! The Ice Sage would never forget something so important,” she explained at a blistering speed.

Oh, c’mon. Does anyone actually buy that?

The sage’s explanation was filled with holes. For example, she had only discovered the presence of the orb moments earlier. But Catria couldn’t bring herself to say anything. Riez was so desperate, and Catria was a kind young woman.

“A mountain to the northeast, eh? Is there any way we can get more accurate than that?”

“As cool of an Ice Sage as I might be, that’d be difficult.” The self-proclaimed Ice Sage looked truly sorry as she shook her head from side to side. “Raystol’s blocking magical searches. He probably put up a powerful magic wall wherever his homebase is. Anyone but me would have a difficult time even performing a search.”

Alan nodded. “Got it. Let me draw up a map using my shovel.”

“Excuse me?”

Alan nudged his shovel into the ground and began to look for the Silver Orb’s location. Images began to form in his mind. Riez was right. The orb was located at the halfway point of a mountain to the northeast. There, he saw a black tower rising from a steep slope, approximately 800 meters in height.

Alan jotted the details of the image onto a scroll and passed it to Riez. “Done. This map will lead us to the Silver Orb.”

Riez blinked her eyes over and over again. Her expression clearly read: *Am I dreaming? Is this some kind of illusion?*

“Since we had the general location down, I was able to unearth more specific information,” Alan explained.

“Huh? Wha?” Riez looked down at the map, which was a hundred times more accurate than the vague info she had provided, and froze in place.

Catria and the others looked upon her with pity.

This poor Ice Sage’s usefulness has already run dry.

This poor Ice Sage’s usefulness is over and done with.

This poor Ice Sage should become a Shovel Sage!

All three women thought the same thing. Well, maybe not all three.

Riez seemed to read the temperature of the room and mustered up the best smile she could. “I suppose modern location magic is one of the things that’s advanced over the years.”

“I told you. That wasn’t magic. It was my shovel.”

“B-but! When it comes to progressing through the snow, there is no better person to have around than the Ice Sage.”

At that, the party exited the capital city, following behind Riez. Sweat ran down the sage’s face, but she led them through the snow, toward the mountain with determination. It wasn’t long before they came upon a lake filled with large chunks of ice. The lake was vast, and there appeared to be no boats in the vicinity. They would have to make a lengthy detour to get around it.

“Looks like it’s already my time to shine!” Riez declared.

I have a bad feeling about this.

This will not go well.

I have a shovely feeling about shovely scoop scoop!

Riez held up her rod and stepped forward while the other girls internally sighed. Well, save for one of them.

“Oh, powerful tundra, gift us a path forward!” The sage waved her rod once. From the tip unfurled a snowstorm that immediately blanketed the entire lake. It was cold enough to freeze even flesh. After but a few seconds, the water was completely frozen over.

“Wow! That was legitimately amazing!” Catria cried out.

Riez wore a satisfied smile. “This is my true power as the Ice Sage. Now then, please cross one at a time.”

“One at a time?”

“The ice is quite thin. If all of us tried to cross at once, it would break.”

“What if we got attacked by monsters midway through?”

They’d already encountered beasts multiple times on the way to the capital city. Alan fought them back in seconds, of course, but if they were attacked one at a time on the lake, they’d undoubtedly fall through the ice.

That got Alan’s attention. “Hrm. Then I’ll build a bridge just to be safe.”

“Huh?”

Clank, clonk, scoop! In approximately three seconds, a bridge appeared over the lake. It was made of adamantine, and was about as sturdy as the bridge Alan made for the World Tree Castle. A million troops could cross it simultaneously without it buckling.

“Um.” The self-proclaimed Ice Sage stared at the adamantine bridge in disbelief.

Just then, the party’s ears were filled with the sound of wings beating against the wintry sky. They looked up to see the silhouette of a massive condor with a terrifying mouth. This creature was known as the Ruler of the Chilled Skies, a beast capable of expelling a deadly, icy breath.

Riez’s eyes sparkled and she raised her rod toward the Ruler of the Chilled Skies. “Look, everyone! With my anti-air magic, I can take down a threat like this, no problem!”

But before she said another word, Alan raised his shovel as well. In an instant, a brilliant azure light collected at the head of his shovel.

“DIG!” he commanded.

Alan fired his Wave Motion Shovel Blast. A blue beam of light shot through the air. On contact, the Ruler of the Chilled Skies instantly disintegrated. Riez was once more frozen in place with her rod held high as Alan returned the shovel to his back.

“Perfect.”

“UM.”

An uncomfortable silence settled between Riez and Alan.

“I’m starting to feel bad for her,” said Catria.

“She looks like how I felt when my undead army was laid to rest,” murmured Alice.

“I knew it! I really should turn all of our court mages into shovel mages!” cried Lithisia.

Tears began to form in Riez’s eyes. She was on the verge of bawling. Shortly, she gave in. “Ugh... Waaaah!”

Catria felt in her heart of hearts that the sage had done her best. She didn’t have to keep this up any further. Frankly, her magic was genuinely incredible—she had instantly frozen an entire lake. Her problem was that she was trying to get competitive with a freak of nature.

In the silence of Riez’s despair, everyone heard Alice’s stomach rumble.

“?!”

Riez whipped around and fixed on the undead girl.

“Wh-what is it?”

“You’re hungry, right?!” Riez’s voice was radiant, almost as if she’d been blessed by heaven itself.

Overwhelmed by the pressure of the sage’s full attention, Alice nodded her head.

“In that case, leave it to me, the Ice Sage!”

“Are you going to cook or something?!”

Riez set to work with great intensity. First, she grabbed some ice from the frozen lake. She then threw it up in the air and held out her rod. “Ice Blade!”

Magical force carved the ice into a flurry of chips. Another spell saw the results captured in a bowl, also made of ice. Once the bowl was filled, Riez reached into her pocket and extracted a vial of pink liquid. She drizzled the contents over the ice.

“Here! My specially made strawberry-flavored shaved ice!”

Really? At a time like this? Despite the question running through her mind, Alice took the spoon from the sage and began to eat from the bowl.

“Oh... Mm, how sweet. This is quite delicious.”

“Hee hee, right? Right? I’ve practiced a great deal!” Riez offered Catria a bowl as well, a smile stretched across her face. “Do you finally understand how powerful and amazing the Ice Sage Riez truly is?”

What in the living hell is up with this Shaved Ice Sage? Catria wondered as she munched on the sweet treat.

Part 19:

The Lady Knight Solidifies

Her Shovel Resolve **IT WAS EVENING** by the time the party finished their shaved ice. They once more proceeded down the snowy path, until they reached a mountain valley where they were accosted by powerful winds. Riez stood in front of the party, holding out her rod as it shone blue. Being a resident of Shilasia, she showed zero doubt in her ability to lead the party through the snow. In fact, her feet floated above the snow thanks to her **Levitation magic.**

The Ice Sage Riez turned around with a smile on her face. “Surprised, everyone? Magic can even make people float!”

However, behind her, Alan was hovering about a meter off the ground, as were the horse and carriage behind him; inside, Alice and Lithisia continued crafting the Holy Text. Alan’s shovel projected an anti-gravity field around them all. It made for an extremely relaxed journey through the billowing snow.

“What’s wrong, Riez? Let’s hurry forward.”

Riez shook her head and attempted to regain her composure. “Huh, I guess Disenchanters these days are good at using Levitation.”

“I keep telling you. I’m just a miner... Hrm?”

It was then that Alan heard a distant cracking. A quiet sound, but he was certain he heard it; he was familiar with it from his time spent mining in the winter mountains. The sound of collapse.

Alan immediately raised his shovel. “An avalanche is coming, and it’s a big one.”

“Say what?!”

The moment Catria yelled her response, snow began to tumble down the mountain until it built into a roar. It was almost as if the spirits of snow were

howling with rage.

“Looks like it’s my time to shine. Just leave it to me, the Ice Sage!” Riez stepped forward, directly in front of the incoming avalanche of snow, and held her rod as if she were protecting the party.

“Alan, are you sure about this?” Catria didn’t trust this self-proclaimed sage in the least.

But Alan simply nodded. “Let’s see what she can do.”

“I’m trusting your judgment here.”

“I know. Riez is the specialist when it comes to freezing things. Plus,” Alan gripped his shovel, “if we leave this to Riez, we’ll have an easier time acquiring room and board tonight.”

“Er, what?” Catria hadn’t the slightest clue what the self-proclaimed miner meant. She had also come to realize that there were far too many “self-proclaimed” people in their current party. A self-proclaimed miner, sage, undead king, and high priestess. Catria was the only normal one, or so she thought.

The rumbling built as the avalanche neared.

“Let’s do this! Hiyaaaaaah!” Riez held her rod aloft. “ABSOLUTE ZERO!”

From the tip of her rod shot a white beam of light. It encompassed the entirety of the avalanche, turning it into a giant, shimmering layer of ice. A single spell had completely eliminated the threat.

“Hee hee, how’s that?”

It was clear that Riez’s abilities as the Ice Sage were indeed the real deal. Nonetheless, Catria refused to let her guard down as she kept her eyes glued to the girl. She knew better. Every time this self-proclaimed sage smiled, something crazy soon followed, much in the same way trouble followed Lithisia and her use of the word “shovel.”

Catria was right to doubt. A clear *creak* broke the silence, and the frozen layer of ice once again began to move, shifting inexorably toward the party.

“Wait, what?! I froze it, but it’s still coming!”

“You should’ve reversed gravity. Just freezing it isn’t enough to stop the avalanche,” Alan answered calmly, much to Catria’s chagrin.

Since the snow had been transformed into ice, the avalanche was just that much more deadly. Now it was like giant rocks were falling from the sky.

“What’s the plan, Alan?” Catria asked. “Do we run, or are you gonna dig a hole for us to retreat into?”

“Neither. Things are going just as planned. I’m going to use that ice to build tonight’s room and board.”

“Excuse me?”

The miner had once again come up with a ridiculous solution to an absurd problem.

“Hah!”

Alan’s shovel shone brightly for but a moment, and soon after, he leapt.

Loud cracks of ice echoed throughout the valley. A trail of light made its way around the ice as if it were a shooting star. That was probably Alan’s shovel—he was using it to break the giant ice... No, to modify it.

Three seconds later, a giant ice structure stood where the avalanche once was. It was a two-story lodge with a balcony, designed to look like a royal family’s second home.

Riez wore a rigid, panicked expression on her face.

Alan nodded, pleased with his work. “You have my thanks. Your magic allowed me to procure the necessary materials for this lodge. Er, is something wrong, Riez?”

The sage’s mouth opened wide before shutting, over and over again. Eventually, Riez came back to herself. “What... Why did that just happen?” she whispered.

Catria sighed. She knew what dark place the young woman was coming from.

“And you, Catria. What’s with that look?” asked Alan.

“What’s with this look? I was just thinking about how that shovel of yours has

poisoned my mind.” Catria’s mind and body felt heavy, no doubt the effects of Alan’s shovel. *No. Keep yourself together, girl. You have to be the rock of reason for everyone else!*

She quickly calmed herself down. If she let herself be corrupted by all this shovel madness, the entire world would come to an end—especially given what this party was capable of. The shovel would reign over all! Catria promised herself that she’d stay pure, even in the face of a worldwide shovel epidemic.

“I’ll never bend the knee to the shovel! Never!”

Of course, Catria had yet to realize that her words and actions were already long since corrupted...

The interior of the ice lodge was unbelievably comfortable. The icy walls kept out the cold wind, and the fire-stone (an artificial jewel of Alan’s design) heater in the corner, combined with the carpet, kept things warm.

Off to the side, Lithisia was rubbing her cheek against one of the ice walls despite their glacial temperature.

“Your Highness, what exactly are you doing?”

“Oh, my... A lodge made by a shovel... In other words, a shovel lodge!”

“Your Highness, what exactly are you saying?” Catria asked with a stern look.

Wearing a joyous expression, Lithisia continued rubbing against the wall like a cat. At this point, not only was she no longer a princess, she was barely human. Catria decided to let go of this for the time being and go to bed. Alice was already asleep after being exhausted from her usual daily shoveling. For an undead king, she certainly slept quite a bit.

“Alan,” Catria said, “where should I sleep?”

“There’s a room next to the study. Take that one.”

Just as Catria was about to nod, she stopped in her tracks. “Why is there a study in a lodge you created in three seconds?”

“Riez is a sage, so I figured a room full of books would make her happy.”

That wasn't the explanation Catria was looking for. Whatever. It was time to sleep, so she gave up on logic and headed to the room in question. On the way over, the door to the study, Riez's room, was open.

"Nn... Mm..."

Catria heard moans coming from inside. Perhaps Riez was having a shovel nightmare thanks to the madness she witnessed earlier. The lady knight could sympathize, so she took a peek inside the room.

"What the?!"

Inside, there was a veritable mountain of books. Encyclopedias, magic tomes... They were piled up to the ceiling. One wrong move and they'd probably topple over. Between those book towers was Riez, buried beneath a sea of literature and talking to herself. "If this were merely 'degradation,' the logic wouldn't add up. But if this were 'creation,' affecting the astral layer would be impossible."

"Riezfeld...?"

"Ah, yes?" Riez spun around, her hair shifting slightly. As soon as she saw Catria, a smile formed on her face. "Ah! Catria, yes? You're a knight, right?"

It was a bright, warm smile. She had apparently totally recovered from the shovel hell earlier that day.

There's something legitimately off about this sage, Catria thought to herself.

"Did you need something from me...? Ah!" The cool Ice Sage had a not-so-profound epiphany. "You're a knight! Which means you've come here to partake of my sagely knowledge!"

"Nope."

Riez deflated. She was clearly disappointed, but Catria didn't see how Riez would be able to help her with the problems she was dealing with, the greatest of which was the princess.

"Uuugh... Ah, but could you at least let me interview you?" Riez pressed.

"Er, why?"

Riez took out a feather pen and smiled again. "I'm doing research."

"On what?"

"Well, I'm trying to discover Alan's secret."

Catria didn't want to believe her ears. Alan's secret? She was pretty sure something like that should stay off-limits to humanity.

"I assumed he was a uniquely gifted Disenchanter. But that's not all. He was able to stop the avalanche, create a lodge, and even float. The power to degenerate, create, and control gravity... He's spectacular. I've never seen magic that could manipulate all three forces!" Riez's eyes were practically sparkling. "And so I really want to discover his secret!"

"Erm, you should probably give up while you're ahead."

In the first place, Riez was on the wrong track. None of that was magic. It was all Alan's shovel. His powers were the embodiment of the unreasonable. One couldn't afford to think too deeply about them. Catria attempted to explain as much to Riez, but Riez simply shook her head from side to side and said, "Don't you want to become stronger, Catria?"

The knight balked. "Huh?"

"I heard from Alan that you're aiming to be the strongest Holy Knight there is. If that's the case, don't you need to know how someone so strong has acquired their power? If all you ever do is watch them from afar, you'll never catch up. You need to understand *why* they're strong."

Riez confidently continued. "I was the same, once upon a time. My teacher was a master of the 'Four Elements', but I could never wrap my head around the logic behind their magic. Something about stopping the movement of particles, or what have you... But, but you know what? I wanted to become an amazing sage, so I studied and researched my butt off!" Riez giggled. "And, well, I'd like to think I became something of one?"

Catria thought back to how Riez had frozen the approaching avalanche. While her magic powers didn't measure up to Alan's weird abilities, they were still astounding.

“I’m a sage. But to be a sage doesn’t mean to be someone who knows everything.”

“Huh?”

“Just having knowledge only makes you knowledgeable. To be a sage means to be wise. To be able to look upon the unknown, the impossible, the unfathomable, and to use your power to try and discover how it works—instead of ignoring it.” Riez winked. “That desire to research and study... Having a wise will is what makes one a sage.”

“A wise will...”

“Yeah. That’s why, Catria.” Riez gripped her feather pen as a powerful light bloomed in her eyes. “That’s why I, the Ice Sage Riez, must discover the source of Alan’s shovel’s powers. And that is why I will give you that sagely knowledge when the time comes.”

Catria stared long and hard at the young woman in front of her. Sagely knowledge. Perhaps that was exactly what Catria needed.

“Hee hee.” Riez began to giggle. “So? What do you think?! Pretty sage-like, right?!”

“You would’ve gotten a perfect score if it weren’t for this very moment.”

But despite her harsh response, Catria’s heart had been moved by Riez’s words. This young lady wasn’t just calling herself a sage for no reason. She was right. How could Catria move forward if all she ever did was fear the unknown?

Perhaps I’ve wasted my time and energy on being afraid of the shovel...

Now that Catria thought about it, even Riez’s magic seemed incomprehensible to her. Was Alan’s shovel really all that different? If she pivoted her attitude a smidge, and paid close attention to his shovel, she might...

Be able to learn how to use his techniques. Even just a little. And once she learned how to use those abilities, she could apply them to something other than a shovel.

“Riezfeld, no, Lady Sage.” Catria had come to a decision. She would no longer

face the unknown with fear in her heart. She would know her enemy to know herself. And by doing so, she would take the first step toward learning how to counter the shovel. “I’ll tell you everything I know. I want to be useful to your research.”

“Wonderful! You can count on this cool Ice Sage!”

Catria had finally found a glimmer of hope within this shovel-corrupted journey. “But since it’s already quite late, let’s go over it tomorrow.”

“Understood, Lady Knight!”

With light in her heart and a skip in her step, Catria exited the room and got into her own bed. She had the feeling she’d sleep quite well on this night. But since she was soon fast asleep, she didn’t notice that one other person paid Riez a visit that evening.

“Lady Riez, you’re doing shovel research?!” It was Princess Lithisia. She had sensed the talk of shovels and come bouncing over. “In that case, I have a shovely perfect idea!”

The next morning, at the entrance to the ice lodge, a look of despair washed over Catria’s face.

By contrast, Riezfeld wore an enormous smile as she gripped a shovel in her hands. Not a rod, but a shovel. On her cape was a big shovel sticker, and the tips of her mage boots were shaped like shovels. As if to serve as the final nail in the coffin, she wore a bandana over her forehead that read “Shovel Time.”

“You look shovely wonderful!” declared Princess Lithisia. It was clear whose work this was. “A true Shovel Sage...”

Upon receiving words of acknowledgment from the peanut gallery, Riez giggled.

“Lady Sage, no, Riezfeld.” Catria was already course-correcting her assessments. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Why did you go back to using my name? Well, no matter. Let me explain.” Riez let out a confident laugh. “If I’m to unearth the mysteries of the shovel, I

must first use one myself. That's why I swapped out my rod with a shovel. If I can activate my magic with one of these, I might gain some insight as to how it all works!"

That was a truth she was better off not knowing.

"I'm also wearing socks with shovel patterns! All for research!"

"How shovely wonderful! You're a shoveltastic sage!" Lithisia was terribly pleased, as was Riez.

But Catria was in a state of despair.

Riezfeld nodded. "I've kinda, you know, figured something out! About shovels!"

"I wish you hadn't." After a single exhausted interjection, Catria looked up at the sky.

I was an idiot for trusting this self-proclaimed sage. As Catria lamented, she saw Alan shoveling the snow that had built up on the roof of the lodge.

What's the point? This was a one-night thing. She almost voiced her complaints, but soon stopped herself.

I just... Catria clenched her fist, a resolute expression on her face. The Ice Sage she put her trust into had fallen in but a single night, but regardless! *No matter what, I refuse to bend the knee to the shovel!*

Catria had yet to realize that her resolve had already been shovelfied.

Part 20:

The Miner Faces off against

Prime Minister Zeleburg **A** black, iron tower stood before the party. Its summit was so high that it soared past the clouds, invisible to the naked eye. Its outer walls resembled bones, and molten lava poured out of its windows. Alan surmised that the tower was interdimensionally connected to the Hell Gate, which meant that the molten lava flowed directly from Hell's Ocean.

So, before entering the tower, Alan decided it would be safest to bury the gate with his shovel.

"How?!"

"Like this." Alan focused energy into his shovel, and the lava froze in place. Just like that, the door to Hell was closed. The miner had used a technique called "Shovel Seal," one that he'd used in the deepest depths of his mining mountain in order to bury the Hell Gate there as well.

The shovel was a tool designed to bury things, he explained. That meant one could say burying a gate totally fit within its abilities.

"As if!" Catria interjected with tears in her eyes, but it was no use.

"Shovely shovemazingtastical! (Amazing, Sir Miner! You even shoveled the gate to hell!)"

"At this point, I just feel bad for our enemies," sighed Alice.

"Don't let your guard down just yet. Riez, tell us about our enemy again."

"Righty-o!"

According to Riez, this tower was the evil mage Raystol's homebase.

"What kind of person is he?" Alan asked. The only info they had yet received was that this Raystol once approached Riez for her help so that he could take over the world.

“He’s an exceedingly powerful mage. More potent even than I, when it comes to magical strength,” Riefeld explained gravely. “When I turned down his offer, he laughed. ‘He he, Lady Ice Witch, one who could bury this kingdom in snow for all eternity, let us see which of our magics rules supreme,’ he said. Not that I had any interest in that sort of thing.”

Riefeld sighed, visibly annoyed by the past challenge. She really didn’t have any interest in comparing power levels.

“Magical prowess isn’t my end goal. It’s simply a tool to help me reach the truth of the world. Raystol didn’t seem to understand that,” Riez went on somewhat sadly. As expected of any powerful mage, Riez was guided by her own arcane philosophy.

“Magic exists to make people happy,” Lithisia murmured. “I see... It’s the same as the shovel!”

“No, it’s not.”

“Catria, the shovel makes anything and everything a reality. It’s absolutely the shovely same.”

“Hrm, hrm... I knew it had a fairly wide magical use-case...” Riez jotted something down in her notes, right next to the picture of a shovel and a bunch of other scrawls. The time for interjections had long since passed. It was best to just leave her to her research.

Alice snorted, already bored. “This Raystol fellow does sound quite strong. A mage who has dipped his hands into the darkness, eh?”

“Yes. He formed a pact with a higher demon, allowing him to increase his magical power and... Ah!” Riez suddenly shouted.

“What’s wrong?”

“Er, excuse me. When I faced off against that higher demon... Well, um, this might be kind of important, but I sorta forgot to mention it ’cuz I was frozen for so long. I swear it was just from the shock is all!”

“Calm down,” said Alan.

“Yessir! I’m calm as can be!” Riez took a deep breath. This sage was a ball of

nerves.

“Now, go on.”

Riez glanced at Lithisia. “The higher demon mentioned your name, Lithisia...”

“Shoveling shoveltache!” Lithisia let out a surprised (probably?) cry.

“Shovelticia shoveling shoveltronic shoveled the last shovel?!”

Lithisia was more incomprehensible than ever.

“Calm yourself,” Alan sighed.

“I am, shovel.”

Her words were a mess, so Alan decided to press forward with the conversation. “Anyway... What was the higher demon’s name?”

“Zeleburg.”

“Nngh!” Lithisia clutched her shovel.

Of course it was. Zeleburg was the villain who stole Lithisia’s country. The mastermind behind everything, and the ultimate villain waiting at the end of their journey. That also meant Zeleburg was effectively Raystol’s boss.

“He was a wonderfully attractive young man, with golden hair and a robe that made him look terribly important.”

“That doesn’t sound like Zeleburg at all.” Lithisia at last wore a serious expression on her face. “Lady Riezfeld, did the man say anything else?”

“Um, well, he said something like, ‘Make sure you capture the princess in the dress, dead or alive.’”

Lithisia’s hands trembled as they held her shovel. “That foul beast got his dirty hands on Shilasia as well?!”

“Why would he want your dead body?” Alan asked the young princess.

After a moment of thinking, Lithisia finally decided to explain. She had been holding herself back because she didn’t want to lie to Alan, but it seemed now she had to come clean. “He said that he wanted to take me as his wife.”

Lithisia was also known as the “Rostir Crown,” and laying claim to her was the

easiest way to capture the throne. She looked terribly frustrated as she shook her head back and forth. “When I declined, Zeleburg framed me for the murder of my father.”

“Psychological warfare, eh? But why does he want your body?”

“Well, erm...”

“If you don’t want to talk about it...”

“N-no, it’s not that! I’ll tell you everything, Sir Miner!”

Despite her hesitation, Lithisia took multiple deep breaths.

“When I turned him down, Zeleburg took it strangely well,” she trembled as she recalled his words. ““Ha ha ha, wonderful! I quite love how stubborn you can be, Your Highness! However, there will be no escape from me. I will make your beautiful heart and body mine, shovel.””

Time seemed to freeze, as did Lithisia. “Ah... Ah, what blasphemy!”

Except, the blasphemous one in this case was Lithisia.

As usual, Catria was the one to get things back on track. “Hold on, Your Highness.”

“What is it, Catria?”

“I have some doubts about the prime minister’s words. Specifically, the last bit.”

“My memories are as true as the sky is blue. I have embellished nothing.”

“Yeah, sure. Can you please not corrupt the people in your memories with shovels?” For a moment there, Catria actually felt sorry for Prime Minister Zeleburg. How would he feel if he discovered his dramatic closing line had been shoveltized? “Alan, let’s hurry on into the tower. I’m tired of this.”

“Hrmph, the interior is probably full of traps.” Traps specifically designed to capture the princess, no less. With the Silver Orb in their hands, all Raystol and Zeleburg had to do was wait for Alan’s crew to come to them. “It’s going to be dangerous. Wanna wait out here?”

“No, Sir Miner. I must go.” Lithisia put her foot down, puffed out her chest,

and gazed defiantly up toward the top of the tower. She clenched her tiny fists. “I swore to rescue my country from the hands of that demonic monster. I’m taking back the Holy Shovel Empire!”

It took all of three seconds for Catria to sigh. This princess was already modifying the name of the country.

First, Alan dug an underground passage into the tower with his shovel. After he paused to construct an emergency escape route (nobody was surprised by this stuff anymore), the party destroyed the magic key to the giant steel gate with a shovel (again, nobody was surprised), and they at last infiltrated the tower.

Soon, they reached a floor that was like the kind of giant hall found in a grand castle. On the balcony of the third floor stood a man.

“Ho ho.”

He was a balding man in a sable robe with a skeleton rod in hand. There was little doubt that this was the Raystol from Riez’s story. He looked down at Alan’s party with an evil grin on his face. Surrounding him were warped skeleton warriors wearing blackened steel armor, the classic honor guard for a necromancer. “Master, they have fallen for the bait.”

Raystol’s eyes were fixated on Lithisia. It was then that Riez stepped forward.

“Raystol, your evil ends here!” She pointed her rod at him. Well, it was more like a shovel that had its insides modified to make it work more like a rod.

The necromancer simply laughed at the girl. “He he he, fair Ice Witch, our business has already been settled.”

“I don’t give a damn about settling our score.” Riez raised her rod. “What I do care about is that I can’t let a fellow sage stumble off the path like you have.”

Riez appeared to have some thoughts on the matter of conspiracy with demons, considering she too was a sage.

“You still dare to bare your fangs at me?”

“Of course. Hee hee, I’ve got some real skilled buddies with me now. A knight,

a hero, and a princess.”

“A knight and a hero...?” Puzzled, Raystol looked at Alan and Catria. The latter aside, the former appeared to be a regular old miner. He began to laugh, delighted. “Ha ha ha! I thought for a moment that you might really have the numbers, but you’ve simply brought along a meat shield!”

“You’re way wrong. Hee hee, listen to this!” Riez waved her arms to introduce Alan. “The man that stands before you is a Shovel Magic user capable of wielding spells far greater than either of us have access to!”

Catria and Alice said nothing. Alan simply watched the two as they spoke.

Lithisia’s eyes sparkled with glee. “Shovel Magic?! Shovelmazing!”

At length, Raystol sighed. “What nonsense. Is this your attempt to confuse me?”

This was a totally normal response, all things considered. Or at least, that’s what Catria thought. That being said, in the next three minutes, Raystol was doomed.

Raystol coughed and cleared his throat. “I care not about shovels. Now, about my master’s desires...” He turned his gaze to Lithisia. “He wants you, Princess Lithisia.”

The young woman directed a fiercely angry stare at Raystol. It seemed she was angry because of Raystol’s pact with the treacherous Prime Minister Zeleburg, but it was actually because he had claimed that he didn’t care about shovels.

Raystol laughed again. “Oooh, oooh! You look beautiful even when enraged, Princess Lithisia! I see why my master has taken a liking to you. Prime Minister Zeleburg demanded that you be brought back to him... Ah, speaking of which, would you like to speak to him right now?”

Lithisia’s eyes widened. “Is he here?!”

“No, no. But by using an ancient magic called ‘Dimensional Communication’, you may speak to him.” Raystol performed a series of complicated movements and waved his skeletal rod. “My magical powers surpass space itself. Are you

impressed?”

Alan could probably do that easily, thought Catria. But of course, Catria read the room and stayed silent, allowing the situation to maintain its serious atmosphere.

“Lord Zeleburg awaits you, Princess Lithisia.”

A crack in space ripped through the center of the room. Through this opening, a red velvet throne room was visible. This was likely Rostir Castle. Sitting on the throne was a young, blond man wearing a robe. It was Zeleburg.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Princess Lithisia. Long time no see! You’re as beautiful as ever,” remarked the young man in a measured voice befitting royalty.

“Grr... Zeleburg! That throne belongs to my father! Get off of it at once!” Lithisia cried. Her voice was filled with rage.

“Ha ha ha, unfortunately for you, all of this already belongs to me.” In his left hand was the crown. He waved it about as though it were a plaything. “I’ve already got my hands on one of two items that serve as proof of my kingship. All I need is the last one. The blood of the royal family. In other words, you, Princess Lithisia.”

Zeleburg cackled, then stood and reached out his hand to the princess. “On your little journey to steal the orbs, you’ve fled all the way to Shilasia. I can’t imagine how hard that’s been for you. Now, come back home. Fear not. I may be a demon, but I deeply love humanity. I firmly believe that I can raise a happy child, build a happy nation, and make you and its people even more happy.”

“...”

“Princess Lithisia. Please accept my love this time.” Zeleburg’s voice was unnaturally kind and affectionate.

“Alan, this guy’s no good...”

The miner nodded in response to Alice’s warning. “Yeah, I’m aware.”

Zeleburg exuded a power similar to a type of magic called “Charm,” but much stronger. Higher level demons were far more talented mages than the average human, and they were capable of wrapping their words in magical energy. This

allowed them to brainwash people they communicated with. Faced with this invitation, the average person would be incapable of saying anything but “yes” to Zeleburg.

The average person, that is. That’s why Alan didn’t make a move. Neither did Catria, Alice, or Riez. They all already knew that the princess was no longer average or normal.

“Zeleburg, I’ve already made my decision.” Lithisia gripped her red shovel, a peaceful expression on her face. Then she declared, “I don’t plan on shoveling (verb) with anyone but Sir Miner!”

The crown fell out of Zeleburg’s left hand onto the floor. It rolled for a time before stopping, prompting the demon to speak. “Raystol...”

“Yes?!”

Zeleburg picked his ear with his pinky finger. “Check the spell equation for this magic communication. I picked up some strange noise in my dear Princess Lithisia’s voice just now.”

“E-er, Lord Zeleburg, my spell is perfect!” Raystol broke out in a cold sweat. He was clearly in a panic. The one thing he couldn’t bear was having anyone doubt his magical powers.

“Princess Lithisia definitely...”

“Yes! I definitely said that I would shovel with Sir Miner!”

“There it is again. Perform a check! Are you certain the banned word list isn’t making a mistake?” Zeleburg, by this point quite annoyed, ordered his underling to double-check the spell. Unfortunately, the banned word list wasn’t making a mistake.

“Let me repeat myself, foul beast. I refuse to listen to or engage with your desire to shovel with me! I’ve already made a promise. I could never shovel with anyone besides Sir Miner, shovel!”

“Raystol! This noise is awful! Are you trying to make a fool of me?!”

“No, not at all!” Raystol apologized over and over again.

“Argh! What the hell’s going on here?!”

That's what I'd like to know, thought Catria as she watched the pathetic middle manager grow increasingly distressed. She sighed and patted the miner on the shoulder. "Alan, I think it's about time."

Alan had hung back so that he could gather info on Zeleburg, but he too knew it was time to spring into action. It felt mean to just let Raystol continue spiraling.

"You're right. In that case..." Alan slashed his shovel through the air, leaving a trail of light behind it. Suddenly, the entire tower began to shake violently. Pieces cracked and tumbled off the walls as the whole structure started to collapse. "This tower gets in the way of doing battle, so how about I just shovel it up?"

"Raystol! What's that sound?! What's happening?!"

"I haven't the slightest!"

As if on cue, Lithisia took a step forward and looked up at Zeleburg on the "screen." "Let me teach you something, foul creature."

"Princess Lithisia...?"

"Allow me to explain to you what's going on in this tower, no, the world!" She raised her shovel high into the air and closed her eyes as though she were praying. "We are in the midst of the Legend of the Shovel."

Static ran through the video image of Zeleburg.

"Lord Zeleburg, what's the matter with your face?!"

The demon's beautiful face was suddenly blank. More accurately, it had taken on the shape of a grey shovel head. His blond hair flowed forth from beneath it.

"Raystol?! What's going on with my face?! Are you messing with me?!" Apparently, somehow Zeleburg could see the travesty that was now his own face.

"This makes no sense! Why is my communication magic messing up?!"

"This is the power of the shovely shovel."

"Alan, I'm starting to feel bad for them," Catria said, wincing. The party's

enemies were being made to look like fools. Just watching was enough to make Catria doubt her own group's moral center.

But Alan shook his head back and forth. "I'm not doing this."

"Huh?"

"It's Lithisia."

"The princess?!" Catria quickly turned to peer at Lithisia. She was still gripping her red shovel and squaring off against Zeleburg.

"By repeatedly saying 'shovel,' she's invaded Raystol's mind and implanting the word there. It appears that psychological shoveling is her specialty, while you excel at physical shoveling."

That last bit was not what Catria wanted to hear, but she generally understood the situation. Long story short, Lithisia had interfered with Raystol's communication magic. With shovel-related words. All Catria could do was shake her head. The princess she once knew existed no longer.

With a crack and boom, the black tower began to collapse on itself. To Catria, it sounded less like the tower coming apart, and more like the world falling to pieces.

"Raystol! Rayshovel?! What the shovel's going on?!" Even Zeleburg's voice had been infected by the noise.

Catria thought back on the demon's earlier words: *"Check the spell equation for this magic communication. I picked up some strange noise in my dear Princess Lithisia's voice just now."*

Noise? That wasn't quite right. It wasn't something as simple as noise.

Ugh, they're the noise that distorts the world.

Part 21:

The Miner Completely and Utterly

Defeats the Necromancer **T**HE TATTERED RUINS of the black tower lay strewn about the field of snow. But Raystol the necromancer still stood, surrounded by his skeleton guardians. Their armor and weapons were clad in a thick, black aura, a sure sign of magically enhanced equipment.

Raystol looked furious. “What have you done to my tower?! Did you plant explosives or something?!”

“Nope! We just shoveled it!” Lithisia answered confidently.

“Shoveled it?!”

“Yup! Sir Alan’s shovel is truly the one and only shovel, told of in the Tales of Shovel meant to...” Lithisia was interrupted as Alan grabbed her shoulder.

“Hold your horses, Lithisia. The prime minister is still listening in. I want to keep intelligence about me close to the chest.”

“Close to the chest?”

“This is an information war,” Alan explained. “It’d be bad news for us if the big boss baddy got his hands on any more of our data.”

“Are you really saying this, now of all times?” Catria mumbled.

Alan had gone wild with his shovel for the entirety of their little journey. He’d built the World Tree Castle, destroyed Riften Castle, turned the Sandopolis checkpoint into rubble, annihilated a legendary dragon with the Wave Motion Shovel Blast, and even started a religion based on the shovel (well, Lithisia had). How could he possibly be worried about leaking info to the enemy?

If anything, it was far stranger that the prime minister and his goons didn’t yet know about Alan.

“That’s because I’ve been making cover stories with my shovel,” Alan told her.

“Do I even want to know?”

“In other words, I’ve been ‘burying’ the truth of the tale with my shovel.”

“Don’t you dare ‘in other words’ me. Explain. Now.”

To some degree, Alan’s shovel was capable of “digging up” and “burying” abstract concepts. During the war with the demon empire beneath the surface, he encountered demons that were capable of coming back from the dead no matter how many times they were killed. In order to lay them to rest for all eternity, he had to use his shovel to bury the very concept of “immortality” in the ground. The exact process involved writing “immortality” on a stone and burying it with his shovel. After he’d done that, the demons never again came back to life. He had used a similar process when he solved the riddle of the pyramid.

“This is an ability designed for information warfare.” In order to hide information about the party, he buried the “truth of the tale.” Shovels were good for hiding things, after all. “But it’s not perfect. If the prime minister overheard information about us, it’s possible he could dig up the truth... Hm? What’s wrong, Catria?”

“I have the worst headache in the history of all mankind right now,” she replied. Alan wasn’t human. He was something else in the shape of a human. Probably a shovel.

“Catria, sagely knowledge! You mustn’t forget!”

The problem was that at the moment, it was impossible for her to forget.

“I discovered something after what happened in the tower! Something huge!” Riezfeld went on.

“Huh?”

“Hee hee hee. You see...” Riezfeld puffed out her chest proudly. “I’ve discovered that I don’t even remotely understand shovels!”

“Is that so?” *Didn’t she already know that?*

“Ah! I’m being serious, Catria. Even the Ice Sage’s observational skills weren’t good enough to understand how it all worked. It doesn’t fit into any existing magical framework. We’ve taken a step into the unknown, Catria! A profound

step, even!”

“I’m getting the feeling that one big step is in the direction of a steep cliff.”

But Riezfeld was extremely excited by her discovery, so Catria felt it best to just leave her to her frenzy.

Instead, Catria said, “Alan, let’s hurry up and end this already. I’m sure your Wave Motion Shovel Blast can incinerate all of them.”

“Catria, think back on the rules of shoveling.”

“Er, what?”

Alan held his shovel up and pointed it at Raystol, who was glaring at them. “Safety first.”

Catria immediately felt bad for Raystol, who was no doubt about to be obliterated by the miner’s fixation on safety measures.

“So this time around, I plan on beating them the normal way.”

“Normal? What does that involve?”

“Well, if I copy the enemy’s magic with my shovel and shoot it back at them, boom. Done.”

“I see, I see. That is normal (as far as shovels go).” Catria was being completely sarcastic here.

At the same time, behind Catria, Lithisia was as enthusiastic as usual. “Sir Miner! Good luck! We’ll be cheering you on!”

“Hey, so, uh, what’s with the sketchbook and pencil?” asked Alice.

“It’s for drawing out sketches for the Holy Shovel Text! Here, be my guest, Sage Riez!”

“It’d be my pleasure! As a sage, drawing and writing things is right up my alley!”

It felt like they were on a school field trip taking photos or something. There was zero tension.

The prime minister’s voice echoed throughout the room. “Raystol, they’re

toying with you! Hurry up and capture Princess Lithisia!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Raystol clearly also felt that he was being played with, and truth be told, he was. Nonetheless, Raystol responded to Prime Minister Zeleburg’s order and immediately took an attack stance. As he raised his rod up high, a black aura flared around him. “See how you like my special magecraft!”

With a terrible boom, Raystol and his guards immediately disappeared from above the snow.

Catria whipped around, dread washing over her. Raystol and his guards appeared behind Lithisia and the others. High speed movement—no, teleportation. Only master-level mages could use the technique. He probably thought that he had caught them by surprise.

But that wasn’t the origin of Catria’s bad feeling. Right next to Raystol stood Alan.

“What the?!” Raystol let out a scream the moment he realized the miner was next to him. He scrambled back, quickly putting distance between them. “How did you do that, you bastard?!”

“With my Shovel Teleportation skill, of course.” By shoveling dirt, Alan could make it look as though he was teleporting. He could go anywhere that dirt was connected.

“Raystol, hurry and finish them! I’m growing irritated.”

“Urgh! Oh, mana! Twist and contort! Forge a blast of fire and defeat mine enemies!” Raystol waved his rod about. Five giant balls of flame appeared in the air.

“I can do that, too.” Alan stabbed his shovel into a stone on the ground, generating 555 orbs of fire that each looked like the sun itself. By rapidly scraping his shovel against the stone, he was able to create Fire Shovel Balls. They were capable of melting all kinds of rock. The fireballs streaked toward Raystol.

“GAAAAAAAAAAH!!!” Panicked, Raystol once more used instant teleportation and fled into the sky.

Alan tapped his shovel on the ground a few times and tilted his head. “Damn, I missed. Controlling those things is tough as nails. Shovels really aren’t meant for long-range attacks other than beams.”

Well, shovels really weren’t long-range weapons to begin with. Nor were they beam weapons.

“No! No, no, no! This is stupid! This is absurd!”

“Raystol! Raystol! Answer me at once! What is going on?!”

“It’s his shovel! He’s using magic with his shovel!”

“Hold yourself together! I’m getting more noise on your end!”

“I’m telling the truth, Prime Minister Zeleburg!”

Raystol and Zeleburg were frazzled. Catria could sympathize. She let out a deep sigh. “I still feel bad for them.”

Raystol once more attempted to attack the party with magic, only to have Alan and his shovel mimic his power with one hundred times greater intensity. Trying to study and learn from this was pointless, or so Catria thought.

Next to Catria, Riez was similarly studying the battle at hand. “It might be the opposite, actually...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I initially assumed that the shovel fell under the umbrella of magic. But...” Riez began to explain. Heating ice—elements. Creating a lodge from an avalanche—creation. Instant movement—dimensional manipulation. The shovel was capable of tapping various magical properties even better than spells. All of which meant the shovel didn’t fall under the umbrella of magic, but rather... “Quite possibly, magic falls under the umbrella of the shovel.”

A cold sweat ran down Catria’s back. Alan’s skills proved to be far beyond the bounds of magic on a fairly constant basis.

“Grrr, I will hold back no longer!” Raystol said as black magical energies began to gather around him. He was absorbing all of the magical power in the area. “My ultimate technique! Judgment from the heavens above! Taste this!”

“Oh?” Alan peered upward.

Raystol’s magical aura had grown so large that it reached up into the atmosphere, high enough to black out the sun. The air itself trembled around the burning mass overhead. As it dried the very sky, it careened toward Alan and the others at a ferocious speed—a meteor.

“METEOR SWARM!”

The titanic burning mass broke into hundreds of smaller pieces, all of them plunging toward Alan and his friends.

“Meteors are basically just rocks, right?” Alan said aloud. “Well, I specialize in rocks.”

A swing of his shovel left behind a characteristic trail of light.

KA-CHOOOOOOM!

The top of Snow Mountain was sliced in half by Alan’s shovel, then hoisted toward the heavens. With his wide-range Shotgun Wave Motion Shovel Blast, he sent the giant ball of snow flying toward his enemy.

KA-CHOOOOOOOOM!

“I call this the Shovel Meteor.”

“This is impossible!” Countless clusters hurtled toward Raystol, who once more attempted to flee via teleportation. However, it was too late. He would not escape.

“GAAAAAAAAAAH!”

It was a direct hit. Raystol was caught in the overwhelming blast impact of the meteors. The only thing left in the field of snow was a burning crater.

However, the fight wasn’t quite over.

“Bastards! The lot of you!” A strange shuffling sound mingled with Raystol’s voice. A massive skeleton army rose to life around his semi-translucent astral body. His seething black aura was even thicker than when he was alive. “A necromancer is only truly at his best once he’s dead! Princess Lithisia is mine!”

A hundred skeleton men rushed at the princess, at which point Catria was

legitimately concerned. If Alan fired his Shotgun Wave Motion Shovel Blast from where he stood, Lithisia would get caught in the crossfire.

“You made a fatal mistake in leaving behind only women and a useless witch!”

“Urgh!” Catria dashed forward. She had to save the princess.

“Foolish.”

Alice’s cold, childish voice echoed through the battlefield. She snapped her fingers. A black wave, darker and deeper by far than Raystol’s aura, launched from the tips of her nails like spiderwebs. The pitch-black threads completely bound Raystol and his skeleton army.

“Full Control, Undead.”

The skeletons ceased moving on the spot, almost as if they’d been paralyzed. Raystol was no different, and his expression was that of agony.

“Nngh?!”

“Hmph. Did you really think someone freshly undead could ever stand against me? You’re a hundred years too young to even try.” Alice tossed her sketchbook to the side and slowly rose to her feet. She turned to Alan, who had drawn near, and said, exasperated, “Alan, you shouldn’t hold back. If you had properly laid him to rest, the necromancer wouldn’t have come back to life.”

“I figured since you’re one of the undead, you’d be able to get some information out of them.”

“Oh, so you planned on leaving the matter to me from the beginning?”

“Can you do it?”

“You’re asking me to make this bald mage one of my brood?”

“The more info we have, the safer we are. Please.”

“Fine, if it pleases you.”

“I swear. There’s something seriously wrong with you people...” Catria finally caught up with them. Both Riez and Lithisia were fine back where she left them, doodling away as always. At this point, Catria felt like an idiot for being

concerned, so she just looked up into the sky.

“Raystol! The line was cut! What were you saying about a shovel and...” The prime minister’s voice slowly grew quieter and quieter, until it could be heard no longer. Just as Alan planned, Zeleburg never managed to catch on to what was transpiring.

“Perfect. My information blockage worked.”

“Ugh. What in the hell is a shovel?” Catria whispered to herself for the hundredth or so time, dejected.

“Hrm, well, the shovel is...” Alan stopped. Using his shovel, he wrote “The truth of the battle with Raystol” into the snow and buried it. The remnants of Raystol’s black tower vanished into thin air as if they were melting. This was what happened when he covered up the truth with his shovel. “The strongest weapon when it comes to information manipulation.”

Part 22:

The Miner Bestows the

Holy Knight Sword upon the Knight **O**NCE ALICE used her powers to overwhelm and capture Raystol, the prime minister's underling, Alan and the others swiftly retrieved the Silver Orb. The crew decided to head back to the World Tree Castle so they could work through the information they now had. It would take about four days on foot to return there from Snow Mountain.

Yet Catria wasn't completely satisfied with Alan's explanation of their journey. "Can't you teleport with that shovel of yours?"

Alan shook his head from side to side. "If it was just me, yeah, but a normal human body wouldn't be able to withstand the pressure."

"I could," said the undead king.

"I can teleport myself, too!" said the Shovel Sage.

"Yeah, but Lithisia and Catria are just normal humans. It'd be impossible for them."

Slowly, Catria glanced at Lithisia. "She's...normal?"

"Er, what's wrong, Catria?"

The knight somehow managed to keep her mouth shut despite the intense wrongness she felt about Alan's statement. *Sure, Lithisia is totally "normal." She's my master, after all.* After a beat, Catria nodded. *Awesome. I've convinced myself!*

Alan placed his hand on his chin and looked to be thinking of something. "But you're right. Four days is a long time... Let's use my Shovel Glider to head home."

"Hoooold on."

“It’s a good thing we’re on a snowy mountain. It’ll be possible to accelerate using a Shovel Jump.”

“Hooooold on!”

Phrases starting with “Shovel” poured out of Alan’s mouth at an alarming rate. Catria had a terrible feeling about all of this. But despite her protests, Alan didn’t wait. After placing his shovel on the ground, he gave it a command.

“SPREAD!”

The head of his shovel suddenly elongated, large enough for people to ride atop of.

Don’t tell me he expects us to get on that thing.

“All right, everyone. Make sure you hold on tight to the person in front of you.”

“Nope! I refuse! I’ll walk home by myself if I have to! Let go of me!”

“Nuh uh!” Lithisia clutched Catria from behind.

Alan joined the group at the front of the shovel, which began to inch forward. It went slowly at first, but in the blink of an eye, it picked up to such an intense speed that blasts of snow cut across their cheeks. The shovel accelerated, faster and faster until there was no stopping it.

“Aaaah! Wheeee! We’re going so fast, Sir Miner!”

“We’re experiencing a snowy world at the speed of light! I’m so profoundly moved!” yelled the sage.

“We’re going to jump soon. Hang on tight!”

“No! I don’t wanna die! Noooooo!”

But no amount of screaming would help Catria now.

The shovel barreled down the slope at Mach speed, sparks flying between the metal head of the enlarged tool and the snowy ground. In front of them swooped an upward slope that looked almost like a jumping board.

All at once, Catria was blinded by incandescent white. The light of the sun. The party was flying straight toward it, nothing but blue sky ahead of them.

They soared far above the billowing clouds.

This shovel can go anywhere and everywhere. Past the horizon, past the world. What is a shovel? Father, I...

“Geh.”

It was around that time that Catria lost consciousness. In the end, the shovel glided approximately 200 kilometers through the sky. It was probably a world record, and one that wouldn't be broken any time soon.

At the front gate of the World Tree Castle, Catria finally came to. Only ten minutes ago, they had been in the snowy heart of Shilasia. Fio came running out of the elf castle to greet her uncle, bountiful breasts bouncing.

“Uncle Alan! Welcome home! I'm so glad you're okay!”

“Mm. I'm also happy you're in such good spirits.”

“I always am!”

Fio wore the smile of a child who had just received a Christmas present. Even alone in the elf castle, she was getting by happily. That was a sincere relief to Alan. Together, the party headed into the main hall.

“If I remember correctly, this place has a jail, right? Alan, I'm going to head there first and get ready,” Alice said. She was going to prepare to extract intelligence from the necromancer Raystol. As for what kind of prep she needed to do, well, it would have been troublesome for Fio to hear. Alice was the king of the undead and the emperor of nonhumans—and of the inhumane.

“So this is the World Tree Castle... I should be able to make great strides with my shovel research here!” Riezfeld's eyes sparkled as she took in the library (shovel collection). She clearly planned on sticking around. “‘The Element of Magic: A Facet of Shoveling’—I plan on writing my thesis under a title like that!”

“You should probably make sure humanity never gets its hands on said thesis.”

“But I think you should read it, Catria.” Riez inched closer to the knight. “Catria, you've seen it yourself, have you not? How the shovel is capable of

overriding any and all magic.”

“Urgh.”

“No matter how unbelievable it seems...” Riezfeld was serious. “A true sage is one who is able to recognize, accept, and understand the things they see with their own eyes and touch with their own hands.”

If that was the true definition of a sage, then Lithisia might very well be the greatest sage in all of human history.

Wait, I don't want to be a sage! I want to be a knight! thought Catria.

“Shovely amazing, Lady Sage! Thank you so much! I’m shoveling (cheering) for you!”

“I’ll do my shoveling best!”

It was as if there were now two princesses in the party.

“Ugh, my head. It aches.”

“Are you okay, Catria? You’re speaking shovely funny.”

“Princess, it’s your madness that’s causing this headache.”

“Madness? I’m perfectly right of shoveling mind!”

Catria’s eyes went white as she held her head in her hands.

Meanwhile, Fio had drawn close to Alan. “Uncle Alan, would you mind telling me about your journey?”

“Of course.”

And so Alan began to weave the tale of their exploits. He told Fio of breaking through the desert nation’s checkpoint, of the Water Priestess Julia, and of the legendary red dragon. But of all the stories Alan told, the one that truly caught Fio’s imagination was that of the Rahal Tribe and the hot springs. The young elf’s eyes sparkled.

“Amazing! Amazing! A priestess capable of summoning water and creating hot springs?!”

“Ha ha, I take it you’re interested in giving them a try?”

“Yes! Long ago, there apparently used to be a spring called the ‘Spring of Life’ right here in the village!”

“Oho. Now that you mention it, I recall it being behind the elder’s house.”

Alan had bathed there with Pasarunak back in the day. It was a spring that had served as the home to life spirits that were capable of healing any and all illnesses. Alan hadn’t been sick in some nine hundred years, but for a normal human, he was certain that its effects must have been spectacular.

“I was just thinking about how one day I’d love for this castle to have a spring that’d go down in the legends.” Fio placed her hand atop her large breasts. She wanted to return the elf village to its former glory. It was clear that her desire to fulfill her dream had only grown stronger in Alan’s absence.

“In that case, we should have Julia come over.”

“Really?! Thank you so much! I’m so happy!”

“She’s way better at summoning water than I am, so... Hrm, a spring, eh?”

Alan had remembered something else. A statue of a great elven hero had been enshrined in the Spring of Life, and Alan had once promised Fio that he would shovel (build) her a statue. Of course, to Fio, “shovel” in this instance referred to the private activities that two people attracted to one another might engage in, but that’s neither here nor there. Alan had been busy with his journey for the orbs, so he hadn’t been able to fulfill what he understood to be his end of the deal. “I’m sorry, Fio, but that promise I made to you is going to have to wait a little longer.”

“Huh?” Fio blinked and tilted her head, but then, a few seconds later, her entire face went red. “Oh my gosh, um, um, er!”

She frantically looked away, her bosom heaving. But despite her embarrassment, she wore a smile on her face. She was happy that Alan remembered—that a promise to someone like her meant anything to him whatsoever. Fio couldn’t help but smile and let out a happy sigh. “Um, I’m an elf, so...”

“So...?”

“I have a long lifespan. I can wait for as long as you need me to! So, um!” She stared directly into Alan’s eyes and brought her hands together as if she were about to pray, causing her breasts to squeeze together. It was almost like she was trying to emphasize her plush features, despite the pure expression on her face. “We can shovel whenever you p-please...”

Why was she getting so bashful over the act of shoveling? Alan could only assume it was just a thing that elves did.

Nonetheless... Her words gave him a real urge for shoveling. He wanted to do something for the adorable elf girl who called him “uncle.”

Wait a second. Just as he was about to voice these feelings, he stopped in his tracks. He remembered another promise of his—that he would teach Lithisia how to shovel. Unlike the one he had made with Fio, his promise to the princess had a time limit. He told her he’d sit her down after they finished their business with the Red Orb in the desert nation. If he didn’t get on that soon, he’d be a liar.

“Fio, I’m sorry, but I have to teach Lithisia how to shovel today.”

“Ah, oh, gosh, um?!” She tripped over her words. For some reason she seemed terribly frazzled.

It was then that Alan had an idea. “If you’re okay with it, would you like to join us? The shoveling is a bit different (from sculpting), but...”

“Er, um, huuuuuuuuuh?!” Fio was potentially more shocked than anyone else in history. “W-wait, a-are you saying, um, you want the three of us to shovel t-together?!”

“Yeah. Lithisia kind of has the wrong idea about shoveling,” said Alan, sugarcoating just how bad the misunderstanding really was. He was sort of hoping that if Lithisia could see someone else using a shovel, she might finally figure things out for herself.

“Aaaaaaah! Um, um, ah...” Fio hugged her body close, rubbing her voluptuous thighs together. She was extremely embarrassed by Alan’s proposition. “I... I... Um, excuse me...”

“No... It’s fine if you’d prefer not to join us.”

“It’s not that, I swear! I just...” Her face now fully crimson, Fio did her best to find the courage to continue. “I-It’s a little embarrassing, so I’d I-like our first time to just be...the t-two of us.”

“O-oh, sure.”

Fio had asked so gently, tears in her eyes. How could Alan say no to that? If anything, it felt like he was bullying her. Which was true in a certain sort of way, even if he didn’t realize it.

Alan gave up on his bright idea and instead patted the elf girl on the head. “I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. I’m going to make time for you later so I can teach you how to shovel, just the two of us.”

“Aaah...” Fio stared up at Alan. She wore an overwhelmingly sweet expression on her face, and quietly whispered, “I’m shovely happy...”

I really do have to do something about that shovel princess, thought Alan.

According to Alice, she still had plenty of prep to do before getting to her interrogation, so in the evening Alan decided to deal with the promise he made to Lithisia. He finally brought her to his bedroom to teach her how to “shovel” properly. Or at least that was the plan, but for some reason, the princess was sniffing her own body.

“U-um, do you mind if we perhaps delay our session until later tonight?!” she said in a concerned fashion.

“Why?”

Lithisia squirmed about, gripping the hem of her dress as she struggled with her reply. “W-well, it’s just... We’ve been traveling a whole bunch, and I’ve been sweating, er, no! Um! I’d just like to take a bath beforehand!”

“You’re going to sweat once we start practicing, you know.”

“Aah?!” Her cheeks immediately turned pink.

Of course they did. As far as the princess was concerned, “shoveling” (verb) was the act of creating a successor for Alan, also known as having his child. He said she was going to sweat. And she would, no doubt. But the thought of the

miner smelling her sweat beforehand was just too much for her.

As for Alan, he was still under the impression that this shovel lesson was all in the name of helping Lithisia gather potential mining apprentices in the capital.

“P-pretty shovely please?” the princess pleaded, shovel-shaped tears forming in her eyes. Everyone in the party had kind of forgotten at this point, but Lithisia was still just a fifteen-year-old girl in love.

“Hrm, I guess I don’t mind. In that case...”

A moment later, a knight clad in white armor stood in Alan’s room. “What the hell,” she whispered.

Needless to say, the knight in question was in fact Catria. She had no idea why she’d been summoned to Alan’s bedroom. In her opinion, he needed to just go back to shoveling (verb) with Princess Lithisia, or whatever it was the two of them did.

“I had some free time on my hands, so I decided to help you.” Alan clutched his shovel.

How exactly was he planning on helping her? Better not to even ask.

“I refuse. I don’t plan on throwing away my humanity anytime soon.” Catria was meant to swing a sword, not a shovel. But as she turned to leave the room, something made her stop.

“Catria, a shovel can be used to unearth your latent skills as a swordswoman.”

Her skills as a swordswoman? Those words were enough to freeze her in place. It really didn’t take much. After all, they were a powerful charm magic even stronger than Zeleburg’s Charm.

“Don’t you want to hurry up and become a Holy Knight? I can teach you how to get there.”

The draw of the shovel. Becoming a Holy Knight. These words overpowered Catria’s heart with devastating efficiency. Her skills as a swordswoman—she had given everything for them. And she had promised herself in the ice nation that she would swing her sword no matter what.

“Didn’t I tell you? Talent is something you unearth.”

“Urgh!”

“I can unearth your talent. Your skills.”

“Gah!”

Alan closed in on the knight. After all, as a miner, digging things up was his job. How could he not dig into the mountain of latent abilities that was Catria?

“Don’t you want to be talented?”

Of course she did! But by means of the shovel? No! She refused! But she wanted to be skilled with a sword. She craved it.

“Grraaaaaaaaaah!” Her mind was a mess. Conflicting feelings smashed into one another, and seconds later, Catria’s head turned robotically. “I-If this doesn’t work, I’m stopping immediately!”

And thus the lady knight did fall. The miner was quite skilled at this sort of thing.

Catria stood in the center of the room decked in a full set of armor. Next to her stood Alan. Off to the side was Lithisia, sitting on her knees. She had asked to observe until she’d dried off from her bath. For some reason, her cheeks were in full blush. She certainly had been acting odd all day. Sure, she was always odd, but today was different.

“What’s wrong, Lithisia? Are you feeling all right?” asked Alan.

“J-just seeing your shovel is making my heart race...” Lithisia panted, her breasts rocking with her breathing. As for why she was in such a state, the answer was simple: she was thinking of the shovel practice they’d engage in following Catria’s session.

But upon seeing the princess in her current condition, Alan came to his own conclusion. *She must be sick.*

Truthfully, it was an incurable disease.

“C-Catria’s first time shoveling... I can’t wait.”

“I will not be shoveling anything! He’s just coaching me is all!”

“Coaching you in shoveling.”

Alan ignored Lithisia. “Shall we begin?”

A nervous expression formed on Catria’s face. She held up her long sword and focused. The knight had no intention of learning Alan’s shovel skills, but she knew full well that he was strong. If she could only figure out the secret behind that strength, she’d be able to grow as a swordswoman. She could gladly accept his coaching without ever needing to grip a shovel.

“Catria, today I’m going to teach you ‘Shovel Breaking.’ It’s a basic skill.”

Alan turned to a doll clad in armor next to the wall. He pointed the head of his shovel at the center of its body. Making sure that Catria could see his full stance, he slowly pulled his shovel back, and after injecting some Shovel Power into the shovel’s head, he slowly thrust it forward. The metals made contact with a gentle ting.

Until a moment later—CRACK!

At first it looked like Alan had made a single crack in the iron armor, but soon after, the whole thing fell to pieces.

Thrilled, Lithisia smiled and clapped her hands.

“There you have it. Simple, right? Give it a shot.”

“What about that was simple?!” Catria yelled to the heavens. All Alan did was slowly thrust his shovel forward, and yet he completely annihilated the armor. This was clearly no human feat.

“This is a really basic skill. Heck, 90 percent of the laws of physics are being obeyed.”

“Normally, 100 percent of the laws of physics should be obeyed!”

“Don’t worry, as far as I can tell, you should be able to learn how to do this in a snap.”

Catria stopped moving. “Wh-what? In a snap?”

“I might have used a shovel, but it’s the same with a sword. You just have to thrust with the intent of ‘digging.’”

Catria looked down at her long sword and back up at the doll. Her physical strength had always been somewhat lacking. This was one of her primary weaknesses. Yet, supposedly, at her fingertips was a skill that could shatter iron armor. If she could learn how to do it, she would be able to defeat even heavily armored opponents. It was a truly formidable skill.

“Grr... Can I really do this?” Catria wanted to become strong. Strong enough for her father to be proud of her. Strong enough to be proud of herself. This was worth trying.

She turned to the armored doll and used her left hand to line up the target. She then thrust her blade into the doll, the image of “digging” resonant in her mind.

PIERCE!

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Catria’s utterly focused voice echoed throughout the elf castle.

After approximately thirty attempts, the armor remained unscathed.

“Haaah, haaah, haaah. See?! I just can’t do it!”

“Hrm, interesting.”

Catria’s shoulders dropped. She was defeated. Once again, she was a fool for ever believing this shovel man’s words. There was no way an ordinary sword could pierce iron armor. She’d have to submit herself to some kind of bizarre power if she ever wanted to accomplish something like that. She was an idiot for thinking she could pull off such an unbelievable skill.

“Catria, try holding this.” Alan drew his “Holy Knight Shovel” from his back, then tossed it to her.

Despite the surprise throw, Catria managed to catch it. What was he planning?

Alan didn’t stop there, however. He immediately followed this up by chucking the iron armor at Catria at high speed.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!!!”

Catria had to dodge, but it was way too fast. The suit of armor was going to collide with her, and she was going to die. She didn't want to die! Not yet. She didn't want to fall without anything to be proud of. As these thoughts raced through her mind, she waved the object in her right hand almost entirely on instinct. It was the Holy Knight Shovel she had received from Alan.

The second the head of the shovel collided with the incoming iron armor, the armor exploded into pieces that rained to the floor.

“Huh?” Catria looked down at the shovel in her hands, unsure as to what had just transpired.

“I knew it.”

“Wh-what?”

“Wow! I knew Catria would be more fit to swing a shovel! That's the captain of the Shovel Knights!” Lithisia said proudly.

Catria stared blankly at her own hands. They didn't ache in the least, despite having used a shovel to pierce iron. As much as it pained her to admit it, the action came to her immediately. It was as if she'd been wielding a shovel for many years, to the point that she'd used such an awesome technique... Did she really have talent as a shovel-wielder...?

“No, wait, wait! No! This isn't what I wanted! What are you thinking, Catria?!” She furiously shook her head from side to side. This was dangerous. Coupled with Lithisia's voice, she had nearly been corrupted by the shovel. She had to keep herself together. “Oh, I know! You must've done something to the shovel!”

“Nope. That's a normal shovel outside of the 'Deep Shovel Power' properties attached to it.”

“Which means Catria really does have talent as a shovel-wielder!”

Lithisia's eyes lit up, and Catria panicked even more. This was impossible. Her hands dropped to her side, allowing the shovel's tip to brush against the ground. Almost immediately, the ground shattered.

At that, new thoughts were unearthed in Catria. She could dig. She could *use* this ability. She felt like she could shovel anything. She wanted to shovel! She wanted...

“No! That’s not me! Quit it, Catria!” she screamed as her body surrendered. Even if her body got shoveled, she refused to let her heart be taken the same way. She was a knight. She wasn’t a shovel-wielder. Never!

“Catria, just give up and open your heart to the shovel.”

“Princess, I must refuse! Even if that is an order, I cannot abide by it!”

“Catria.”

“Ngh?!” Catria trembled.

The voice Lithisia spoke in was kind, but it held all the authority of royalty. “Did you not wish to become strong enough to be the pride of your house?”

“Urgh.”

“Was it a lie when you vowed to me that you would become the strongest Holy Knight in the land?”

“I... I...”

“Is it not a knight’s duty to make use of everything available to them in order to become stronger and protect their nation?”

Lithisia wasn’t wrong, and that truth stung Catria deeply. But neither was Catria stupid. She held an even deeper truth within her heart.

She had seen Alan’s madness with her own two eyes time and time again. The knight understood that if she ever took up the shovel, she might be able to do what he could. She could become a hero that took down dragons. She could be the legendary paragon she dreamed of becoming since she was a child.

But with a shovel?

“Urgh... Aaah...” Tears began to stream down Catria’s cheeks.

Not a sword, but a shovel. Was that really the only path ahead of her? Was she destined to become a Holy Shovel Knight, slaying dragons in her boring work clothes? The talent she so desired was now within the palms of her hands.

All she had to do was grip the shovel, and her dream would come true.

“Aaah... Aaaaah...” Her tears dropped onto the shovel and her vision went blurry. She could no longer see her sword. That same sword that she’d trained with for so long. Yet for some reason, the shovel was perfectly visible.

“Catria, it’s time for you to pick up the shovel and join me and Sir Miner...” Lithisia whispered into her ear. Hers was a sweet voice seemingly capable of melting brains. “Let’s shovel together.”



Catria hit her limit. She could resist no longer. Trembling, the knight turned toward Lithisia and slowly began to nod her head.

“Quit it, Lithisia.”

“Owie!”

Alan gently bopped Lithisia over the head with his shovel. “The shovel is not a tool for brainwashing your subjects.”

“I w-wasn’t brainwashing her! I was just trying to help her better understand the charms of the shovel.”

“Lithisia.”

“I’m sorry, Sir Miner...”

The princess dropped her shoulders in disappointment as Catria’s vision cleared up. She had no tears left to shed.

“And anyway, I think Catria should wield a sword.”

“Huh...?” The knight blinked in disbelief. Wasn’t this guy supposed to be a shovel evangelist just like Princess Lithisia?

“Didn’t you say you wanted to become a sword-wielding hero? Wasn’t that your whole reason for swinging that blade around? If that’s the case, you need to follow through. No matter what anyone says to you, digging away at the same spot will eventually give you the clarity you seek.”

“Alan...” Tears began to form in Catria’s eyes yet again, but they were of a different type this time.

“Following through. That too is a part of learning to shovel. Do you understand, Lithisia?”

“Ah... Sir Miner...” The princess was still down in the dumps. “I’m shovely sorry... I thought I understood the shovel, but I was just ignorant...”

Lithisia was legitimately sad. Hopefully this would prove to be a learning moment for her.

“Follow through, huh?” Catria repeated to herself, ignoring the back half of Alan’s words. He was right. She had to see things through. She was aiming to

become the strongest Holy Knight in all of the land—with her *sword* in hand.

“But the truth of the matter is that you have far more talent as a shovel-wielder than as a swordswoman.”

“Gah!”

“Reality and your own desires differ, which means we have to think about connecting the dots between the two.”

It was terribly frustrating that this man who seemed entirely unreal was completely right.

“So how about we try this?”

Alan placed Catria’s Holy Knight Shovel on the floor. He then began to smash his own shovel against it, until eventually it had changed its form.

“Wait...” Catria murmured. “This is a Holy Sword now. But how?”

The blade shone white, its shape like that of the swords in legends and fairytales. Its presence alone emitted sanctity and purity. It was a sword of justice capable of cutting down any evil. There was just one thing a little off about it: the tip of the sword was wide like an arrow, a form designed to pierce armor.

“This is incredible... I can feel the holy wave motion energy coming from it.” Catria took the Holy Knight Sword into her hands. It felt just right, even more so than her own sword or the shovels she had held before. It was almost as if she had been born to wield it. She gave it a light swing, and the blade left behind a shimmering trail in the air.

Catria’s eyes were shining. “Unbelievable! Amazing! Alan, this is a real deal Holy Knight Sword!”

Alan had reshaped the shovel into a sword, exactly the one that she’d always wanted. At first Catria tried to express her gratitude.

Then Alan said, “Right? It’s the Holy Knight Shovel Blade.”

Catria stopped in her tracks.

“Sir Miner, what’s a Holy Knight Shovel Blade?”

“See how the tip is shaped like a shovel?”

Apparently the bit that resembled an arrowhead was actually designed to look like the head of a shovel.

Lithisia gleefully raised her voice. “I get it! So it’s like 20 percent shovel!”

“Oh, and behind the grip is a special handle for shoveling.”

“Wow, so it’s more like 30 percent!”

“Oh, and if you yell ‘DIG’ it’ll transform into an actual shovel.”

“Oh my gosh, so it can completely become a shovel then!”

Catria was battling furiously with herself. She wanted this sword. She really wanted it. It’d all be fine, she told herself, as long as she didn’t think too hard about it. Now that she took a good long look at the sword up close, it was clear that it was actually a shovel. But unless she said anything, nobody would ever notice. The blade gave off a holy aura, and anyone not named Alan or Lithisia would certainly never...

“Th-this...” Catria ground her teeth together. She had to follow through!

“This is...” She raised her Holy Knight Shovel Blade into the air, and for some reason, the waterworks began to flow again. Somehow, she managed to force out a smile. She had finally managed to fool herself. “This is truly a Holy Knight Sword.”

That evening, Catria took several large steps forward in her quest to become the best knight in all of the land.

Intermission:

Lithisia's Super Lovely Shoveling **As** NIGHT SET upon the castle, Alan was jotting some things down in his room when he heard a very particular knocking at his door. Lithisia was the only one who knocked like that.

"Exshovel me," Lithisia said as she entered the room and greeted him the usual way. Steam rose from her long, blonde, wavy hair. She had just gotten out of the elf castle's bath, also known as the elfath, and she was ever so slightly flush. "S-sorry to keep you waiting, shovel..."

Forcing the word "shovel" onto the end of her sentences was one of the princess' specialties these days.

"No worries. I had something to get done anyway. Hold on for just a second."

"Shovel!" At what point did she decide "shovel" was also a word of affirmation? Regardless, she sat quietly on her knees nearby, making her look like a doll in a miniskirt. "Sir Miner, Sir Miner! Do you mind if I ask what you're doing, shovel?"

"Not at all. I'm putting together a plan for Catria's training."

Alan had finally begun unearthing Catria's talents, but he knew when it came to mining, a rock-solid plan was key to success. Where were the veins located? What to do when faced with unexpected problems? What was the most effective way to excavate Catria's still buried skills? Alan intended to construct a fairly involved and complex plan.

"A long-term shovel plan..." Lithisia's eyes glistened. "Ah, thank you very much for helping her! Catria's such a lucky little shovel!"

"I'm doing this because I want to. Catria's got talent worth unearthing."

Lithisia twitched. Her glowing smile was just slightly less bright. "Worth unearthing...?"

"Mmhm. I've never seen someone with so much latent talent ripe for the shoveling."

“Ripe for the shoveling...” Lithisia’s tone grew serious.

“Though she’s still very green. Hm? What’s wrong, Lithisia?”

“Er, um, well, um.” She was acting so strange. The princess looked to be at a loss, but eventually she directed her serious gaze at Alan. “Should we, um, call Catria here as well?”

What was she talking about? “Why?”

“Well, um, Sir Miner, you... How should I put this...” Lithisia pressed her two index fingers together. She was struggling to get out what she wanted to say. “We’re going to be practicing shoveling (child making), right?”

“Yeah, we’ll be training (to help you locate successors for me).”

As usual, the pair’s gross misunderstanding was in full swing.

“You said she was worth unearthing, so, um...”

“Hrm. You want to know if I mean to make her my successor.”

Lithisia swallowed loudly and nodded. For some reason, her cheeks were bright red. Alan hadn’t the slightest clue why.

“Hrm. You’re not wrong that I’ve given it some thought.”

“You wanted to shovel (make children) with her?!” Lithisia sounded more shocked than she had in ages.

I knew it. Sir Miner is in love with... Lithisia quickly shook the jealous thoughts from her head. *No! Keep yourself together! Shovel! Shovel!*

This was a special shovel-style of breathing Lithisia had come up with to help her calm down. Everything would be okay. She was prepared for this. As long as she could be by Alan’s side, it didn’t matter if she was number one in his heart. If anything, she was happy that Catria would be on the receiving end of such shovelove (something even more amazing than regular love). Lithisia would just have to give birth to many children so as to leave Alan’s bloodline all across the land, just as Fio would. It was Lithisia’s mission to see all this come to pass.

“All right!” she said with renewed determination. “I’ll bring Catria here immediately!”

But just as Lithisia began to get up, Alan stopped her.

“Hold it. I didn’t say she’d be my successor. Just that she had the right stuff. If she doesn’t want to take the position, I’m not going to force her.”

“But Sir Miner, I’m sure she’d change her mind if she could just see how amazing you are!” And if not, he could just shovel her anyway (Lithisia had plenty of practice with this, thanks to her daily sessions with Alice). Quite frankly, the princess was on a dangerous path with this line of thought.

However, Alan was steadfast. “If Catria doesn’t want to do it, that’s that. As long as I have you with me, it’ll be fine.”

“Huh? B-but, are you really okay with just me?!”

“Just you? You’re a princess, aren’t you?” Alan asked. What better person was there to help him search for a successor in Rostir than the princess herself? She was known throughout the land and loved by all.

“Wait, so because I’m a princess...” Lithisia looked down at the beautiful dress she was wearing and came to a realization. “You mean you’d rather shovel (verb) with a princess than a knight?”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at, but I do think you’re a better fit for the job than Catria.”

“Princessshovel...” Lithisia was on cloud nine. “Ah... Ah... I, I!”

Golden particles of energy began to run from her red shovel. These were happy shovel particles, and they frequently poured from Lithisia’s shovel whenever she was in her best moods.

Alan was relieved by the sight. She was back to normal. Ish. “All right. Get ready. I’m going to teach you how to shovel properly!”

“Yessir, shovel!”

Some thirty minutes later, the shovel training was over.

“Shovel... Shovel... (♂)” Lithisia’s eyes were shaped like shovel marks.

After finishing her joyous training, Lithisia was now covered in...juices. Yes, juices. She was so thoroughly soaked that there was no way it was just sweat.

The juices must've been generated by her shovel or something, but Alan paid the topic no mind. He was used to this princess' weirdness by now.

"Thank you shovel much. Th-that was shovely shovemazing." Lithisia was back to making up words again, but somehow Alan could follow her.

For the record, all Alan did was teach her how to bury things. Yet for some reason, the princess had gotten herself all hot and bothered. There was no way he could know what images the word "bury" inspired in her.

"You dig things up, then you bury them. Them's the basics. Make sure you practice on your own."

"O-of course! I look forward to our next sesshovel!" Lithisia bowed her head, her disheveled blonde hair going everywhere.

"Our next session?" Alan thought she must mean the next time it was just the two of them practicing together. But something seemed off about Lithisia's words. Well, something was always off with her, but this time was different. Putting it into his own words was proving to be frustrating. "I've already taught you the basics. All that's left is for you to practice on your own."

"Huh? But, Sir Miner, when you say 'on my own', you mean..." Lithisia froze in a rather shoveltastic pose (the alluring kind). It was hard for her to ask this, but she had to. For the sake of shovels everywhere. "The shoveling that goes 'shuffle shuffle', right?"

Nothing about what she said was right, but Alan guessed she was trying to replicate the sound of a shovel digging and burying things, so he nodded. The miner wouldn't really describe the sound as "shuffling," but he was aware that Lithisia's sense of sound was drastically different from the rest of humanity's. It was entirely possible that she personally heard shovel sounds as such.

And so Alan nodded, unaware that he was continuing their tragic misunderstanding. "You're probably on the money."

"Oh, gosh!" Lithisia's cheeks and ears went solid pink. For Lithisia, the shuffle shovel (verb) was the act of making children itself, and practicing that on her own, was, well, difficult. Her party often forgot that she was only a pure, fifteen-year-old princess. "Then you mean, you want me to shovel (verb) by

myself?”

Alan nodded.

“In other words, shoveling (intransitive verb)?!” She sounded like a giant idiot.

Nonetheless, her young maiden’s voice shook. Her knees rose, the bottoms of her feet planted on the floor. As a result, the white cloth beneath her skirt and the garter stretching from it drew Alan’s focus like a magnet. She held her hands to her mouth in embarrassment. She was entirely captivating, but that made it difficult for the miner to know where to look. Despite everything, she was still a bewitching beauty.

“Can you sit straight, please? And why are you acting so embarrassed?” Alan couldn’t understand why Lithisia had become so bashful when all he did was recommend some practice. “Everybody does it (practice).”

“Everyone shovels (intransitive verb)?!”

“Yeah. Take Catria, for example. She practices two hours a day. Once in the morning and once at night. She’s covered in sweat by the time she’s done.”

“Oh my gosh, Catria shovels (intransitive verb) night and day until she’s covered in sweat?!”

“Fio as well. And me too, of course.”

Lithisia was more shocked than she’d been since beginning this journey. “Y-y-you shovel (intransitive verb) everyday, Sir Miner?!”

Alan nodded his head whilst Lithisia’s mouth hung open in shock. This revelation was something else. Just imagining him during the act was enough to make her sweat up a storm. The sweat came from her shovel, however.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never done it alone before.”

“!!!”

Lithisia looked like she was about to start crying from her seated position.



“Er, um, ah...”

She desperately wanted to claim she hadn't, but she couldn't lie to the miner. And plus, Alan was saying it was nothing to be embarrassed about. As someone aiming to wield a shovel as true as Alan's...

“I...” After quite a bit of time passed, Lithisia opened her mouth. “I, I... I'm sorry! Just once! Just once, I swear!” Her lips were trembling. She was embarrassed beyond belief, but she did her best to look Alan in the eyes. “I've shoveled (intransitive verb) to you before!”

At this point, there was no fixing this misunderstanding of theirs.

For ages, the mortified Princess Lithisia apologized over and over with tears in her eyes. By the time she calmed down, it was much later at night, so it was time to get to bed.

“There's nothing unnatural about shoveling (intransitive verb). There's nothing shameful about shoveling...” Lithisia repeated to herself. “I'm going to g-give it my all!”

“Great, I guess. Good luck.”

“Thank you shovely much!”

Alan nodded his head as he watched the princess get herself hyped up. He had no way of knowing that he'd made the princess admit to something quite beyond reason.

“But, um, can we still practice together from time to time?” she asked.

“Of course. At least while we're traveling together.”

“Thank you so...” Lithisia stopped. Alan's words had given her pause. “Um, while we're traveling together? What about after that...?”

“Well, I'm a miner. Digging my way through mines is my job.” In other words, once they recovered the orbs, he would return to his mountain.

“O-of course, yes. You'll return to the mines in Rostir.”

“Nah. While traveling, I've come across all manner of fascinating strata.”

“Huh?”

“Since I’m finally out of that mountain, now’s the perfect chance to travel the world and check out other mining locales.”

On the outside, Lithisia maintained her calm, but inside, she wanted to cry. Her tears from earlier were those of embarrassment, but now they were of deep sadness. Now that she thought about it, they’d already collected over half of the orbs. At this rate, she’d soon be separated from her beloved miner.

Zeleburg didn’t stand a chance against Alan. He’d be swiftly defeated, and at last Lithisia would get to joyously shovel (intransitive verb) with Alan. She was certain it’d be an amazing thing, but...

“Ah...”

But that would be the end. Lithisia would return to her life as a princess, and the miner would return to his work. It was just like the shovel, in a sense; things that were dug up were eventually returned to their point of origin.

“What’s wrong?”

Everything and everything. Lithisia wanted to bare her heart to Alan, but she couldn’t. She did everything in her power to hold it in, because she already knew. In fact, since the night the World Tree Castle was built, or more specifically, the moment she saw the miner’s god-like abilities, she understood. Alan was such an amazing person that neither she nor any other beautiful girl in the world would ever be fit for him.

He truly was god-like, no, beyond God. He wasn’t just humanity’s light of hope; he was all of the universe’s. He could never belong solely to Lithisia. He shouldn’t. When people laid their eyes on something far greater than themselves, they didn’t want it to be only theirs. They worshipped it.

But still, even then.

“Nngh!” Lithisia managed to keep the tears from falling by using her shovel-trained psychological strength.

This was bad. Alan was a kind man, so he’d soon catch on. But her eyes were beginning to hurt from fighting back the tears. At the end of the day, Lithisia

was still a young maiden. A young maiden who shovely dovely movely shoveltastically loved Alan. The entire reason she had adopted using “shovel” in all sorts of circumstances was because she wanted to get even a little closer to him.

She couldn't just give up. There had to be a way that they could stay together even after their journey ended.

Lithisia poured every ounce of brainpower into this problem. She was desperate. More desperate than she'd ever been in her entire life.

“Now's the perfect chance to travel the world and check out other mining locales.”

Ding, ding, ding!

“Other mining locales!” Lithisia had thought of something crazy.

“What's up?” Alan had heard the strange dinging noise (yes, it actually happened), and was confused.

Lithisia brought herself close to him. Her prim and proper face was right next to his, and the expression on it was dead serious. More serious even than when she spoke of Zeleburg. “You want to visit other mining locales, right? I bet you don't own those places, right?”

“Hrm? Well, I suppose not. I'd have to negotiate with the owners.”

“There'll be no need for that.”

“Huh?”

Lithisia peered at the map of the world on the wall. Rostir's flag was off to the side. Her country was a small but bountiful land. She had dreamed of taking it back and spending the rest of her life there, happily shoveling and loving Alan.

Until this moment, that is. As of now, she could no longer afford to be a dreaming maiden. The fires of ambition filled her eyes. No single princess or woman of any country would ever be fit to stand beside Alan.

In that case...

She had no choice but surpass her current state as a single nation's princess

and as a single human being.

Contrary to popular belief, Lithisia had never tried to overcome her own humanity up until this point. But now, her goal was as clear as day.

For Sir Miner, I, Princess Lithisia...! Lithisia wore the same excited smile she had the first time she held a shovel in her hands.

She could never voice her new ambitions. If she did, Alan might try and stop her. But the reality was that even if he did, she would never quit. With a shining, beautiful smile on her face, Lithisia quietly clenched her fists, and made a proclamation deep inside of her heart. If being the princess of a single country was not enough...

I will conquer this world. I will be the princess of a worldwide empire!

She had already decided upon the name: the Holy Shovel Empire. And when the deed was done, she would present Alan with every mining location in the world. Of course, she would accompany him to said mines. After all, it would all belong to her.

Problem shoveled!

Not even remotely, but the woman who'd normally interject was already fast asleep.

"Sir Miner, Sir Miner! Please look forward to...things coming up!" Lithisia enthusiastically said to Alan.

"Wha?"

"I promise, no matter what..." She gripped her red shovel, and, pushed forward by her love for Alan, declared, "I'll become a worldly shovel princess worthy of you, Sir Miner!"

A shovel princess, Alan thought to himself. He had no idea what was going on in the least, but he knew one thing for sure—that was in fact the perfect way to describe Lithisia.

"Raystol gave up the deets."

On the following day, after finishing up breakfast in the main hall, the party began their meeting.

According to the intelligence Alice was able to extract from the necromancer, Prime Minister Zeleburg's plans weren't limited to occupying Rostir. He planned on paralyzing all of humanity's nations and their functions, bringing about a terrible catastrophe to the continent. Raystol unfortunately was not privy to what said catastrophe entailed.

"The Prime Minister is a higher demon, so it's not that hard to piece together what he's aiming for. How basic."

"What do you mean, Alice shovel?"

"Whoa, whoa! Don't point your shovel at me! He's probably planning on gathering souls together or something!"

"Is that why he scattered the orbs all across the continent?" Lithisia was in top form this morning.

The Blue Orb went to the undead king, the Red Orb to the red dragon, and the Silver Orb to a necromancer. It appeared as though Zeleburg was using the magical power of the orbs to awaken various fell entities that would then throw the continent into chaos.

"Either way, we're going to have to collect all of the orbs," said Alan.

"Couldn't you just blow him away with that Wave Motion Shovel Blast of yours?" asked Lithisia.

"If I did, Rostir Palace would be reduced to dust. Are you okay with that?"

"I'm shovely fine with it."

"Excuse me, Princess?!"

"I was planning on rebuilding it as the Great Shovel Palace anyway."

After Lithisia took back the country, the architects in Rostir were in for a rough ride.

"So moving on from all that, where's our next objective?"

"The Green Orb is apparently located in the sea nation, the Lactia Republic,"

Catria explained.

Despite being called the sea nation, the Republic didn't actually exist above the water. Instead, it was a coastal nation. Its greatest assets were its ports, and it served as the center of all commerce in the world. It had a massive population, and vast slums surrounded the city. The Green Orb was supposedly located in the market, but at present its specific location was unknown.

"Unknown?"

"Somebody probably put it into a magic box that blocks magical energies."

"Got it. Which means it's probably in the hands of a wealthy merchant or collector."

"I guess we're in for some hard-fought bartering."

Alan nodded. "Mmhm. In other words, it's time to bust the old shovel out," he declared with all the confidence in the world.

Was he planning on negotiating with his shovel?

"By the way..." Catria glanced at the princess.

"Shovely shovel! Hee hee."

The princess was normally suspicious, but she was especially out there today. On occasion, she could be seen kissing her shovel while skipping about.

"Alan, did something happen last night?"

"I just taught her how to practice shoveling on her own."

"Hee hee... Hee hee hee." Lithisia giggled as she pressed her shovel up against her large breasts. It wasn't the giggle of a young maiden, however. It was the giggle of a ruler filled with all manner of ambition.

"Even a mining mountain a thousand layers deep has to be conquered from layer one," said Alan. "Let's head to the sea nation."

The head of Lithisia's shovel began to shine and she whispered, "Let's dig up the foundations for the Holy Shovel Empire!"

The first princess of Rostir and the high priestess of the Holy Shovel Faith, Princess Lithisia, gained one other title that day.

“Let us be on our way! Shovel onward!”

The first shovel princess of the Holy Shovel Empire. This was the moment of her birth.



GLOSSARY 3

HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE, OFFICIAL DICTIONARY
(AUTHOR: LITHISIA), 21ST VERSION.

Ancient Deep Dungeon

Gemstone Mine – Middle Layer

EXPLANATION

A gemstone mine located on the outskirts of Rostir. Hidden beneath the destroyed dwarf capital are old ruins, the stuff of legends.

PRIMARY LAYERS: LAYER #100 – LAYER #999

LAYER #103: THE UNDERGROUND SEA OF TREES

A maze of ancient trees completely shrouded in darkness, inhabited by dark elves. Alan used his Shovel Search ability to unearth sap from the ancient trees, thereby forging a fast friendship with the dark elves.

LAYER #555: THE SHRINE OF THE ANCIENT TITAN

A shrine occupied by the titans, the ancestral race of God. Alan did battle with the king of all titans, Chronos, said to be the descendant of the God of Time. He defeated the titan with a single slash that split the king's giant axe in two.

A black and white illustration of a shovel stuck into the ground. A piece of torn paper is attached to the handle of the shovel. The paper has text on it. The background shows the texture of the soil.

CHAPTER 5

The Shovel of the Kingdom of the Sea

(LUCREZIA'S INTO IT)

Part 23:

The Miner Teachers Catria

How to Negotiate **T**HE ROAD to the coast was called the “Road of Hope,” and it connected the Lactia Republic to the various capitals of other nations. In that way, it was like the main road of the continent. It was also enormously wide; four carriages could have traveled down it at once. As Alan and the others rode along, they crossed paths with caravans and joined streams of people walking to and fro.

While they traveled, Alan tapped his shovel on one of the cobblestones and said in an impressed voice, “They used good, high-density stone for this road. It’ll hold for at least two thousand years.”

“Makes sense. Lactia is the world’s largest trading hub,” Catria explained from the driver’s seat.

She was alone with Alan for the moment, as Riezfeld had remained at the World Tree Castle to use a shovel pen (a pen shaped like a shovel) to put together a thesis on matters far beyond the comprehension of current humanity. Alice and Lithisia were in the back of the carriage, shoveling.

“A good deed is deserving of a good shovel! Rule seven of the Holy Shovel Empire’s Magna Shovel Carta!”

Apparently Alice was getting herself shoveled as a reward for making Raystol talk. Sadly, that meant there was nobody but Catria to ask pertinent questions about this Holy Shovel Empire business.

“No, no! It doesn’t feel good... M-my underarms... Aaaah!!!”

“He he he, hee hee hee! Shovelily shove shove!”

“A-amazing! Wait, no! I didn’t mean that!”

The pair’s moans leaked out from the back of the carriage, so Catria quickly closed the door. Beads of sweat rolled down her neck.

“If the guards look inside, we’re doomed.”

“Well, Lithisia is a wanted criminal.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

It was true that in Rostir, Lithisia had been replaced with an imposter and was currently on the run, but that wasn’t what Catria was concerned about. She was worried that as of right now, to an onlooker it would look as though they were kidnapping and committing deeply troubling acts on a young (naked) girl. Yet for all of Catria’s complaints, she knew there was no stopping the shoveling (a major crime) of Alice.

When she had last checked in, Alice was coated in some kind of strange fluid, but also somehow looked happy. Specifically, she licked Lithisia’s shovel with a look of pure glee on her face.

Catria swore to herself to never get involved.

“Alan, we’re almost at the castle gates. If we keep going like this, we’re going to get caught.”

“Indeed. Instead of building a tunnel, let’s try negotiating our way through this time.”

“Why?”

“There are a lot of people here. If I open a hole in the ground, it’ll stand out.”

It was a surprisingly thoughtful response.

“Didn’t you say something about information control being one of your shovel’s special techniques?”

“It’s not perfect. If there happens to be another shovel-wielder or drill-wielder nearby, it’s possible they could break through the lie.”

“I’d say the chances of that happening are less than that of an asteroid falling on us... You know what, pretend I didn’t say that.” Catria let out a deep sigh.

The whole “safety first” thing Alan had going on was as fundamentally broken as the rest of his ideas, but Catria couldn’t do anything about it. She simply directed the carriage toward the castle gates.

“This is Lactia Gate.”

“Hrm. It’s not as big as the Gate to Hell, but it’s still pretty large.”

In fact, it was around ten meters tall. Several guards stood on duty, clad in steel plate armor and equipped with long lances. Their intimidating armaments were enough to put the pressure on any traveler coming through.

Their party was hailed as they approached. “You, with the carriage! Show me your Republic Pass. If you don’t have one of those, then your Holy Alliance Pass!”

Needless to say, the party had neither. In fact, they were wanted by a whole country. The gatekeeper’s sole job was to stop just that kind of person from getting through.

“What’s the plan, Alan? Assuming you have one.”

“Don’t worry. I figured this might happen.”

Was he going to fabricate a travel pass with his shovel or something? Catria had long since given up on trying to find rational solutions. However, even then she didn’t expect what Alan pulled from his pouch. It was a shining, golden shovel. To be fair, it looked nothing like a travel pass.

“What’s the deal with this?” asked Catria.

“Take it. You should be able to use it.”

“Hrm.” Catria had questions, but she found herself wondering most about the fact that the shovel was gold. Was this Alan’s attempt at a bribe? Either way, he seemed filled with confidence, so there was little doubt that there was something to the lustrous tool.

Catria showed the gold shovel to the gatekeeper, who stared at her, then at the shovel.

“What is this thing? Are you playing games with me?” He was clearly angry, and Catria felt like she’d been punched right in the forehead. “I won’t say it again. Show me your travel passes. Otherwise, get out of here!”

Catria turned to Alan, almost in tears. The guard’s words had been a real shock to her system.

“Are you playing games with me?”

The guard was completely right. At some point, her whole brain had been poisoned by shovels. What was she thinking, presenting him with a gold shovel? There was no way you could bribe someone with something like that! Catria dropped her shoulders and began to tremble, feeling truly pathetic.

Then Alan had to go and shovel even more shame upon her.

“Are you tired?” he asked. “There’s no way a shovel could ever take the place of a travel pass.”

Catria’s tears began to fall. *You bastard! You damn bastard! How dare you try to play that card!*

“This is all your fault, you big dumb jerk! You suck!”

“Calm down. A shovel isn’t meant to be shown. It’s meant to be used to bury things.”

“Bury things?!”

“Exactly. I was hoping you’d figure it out for yourself, but it’s fine. I’ll just show you.”

Alan took the gold shovel and moved back over to the guard. Much to Catria’s surprise, he then began to dig a ditch by the guard’s feet. His movements were gentle, as if he were digging in a garden. For some reason, the flow of time appeared to slow down around him. He probably really was distorting space-time. Eventually, he finished digging a long, thin ditch between himself and the guard.

In response, the guard raised his lance. He was suspicious. Of course he was. How could he not find it troubling that this random guy had just dug a ditch at his feet? “What did you do?! What are you scheming?!”

“This ditch resides between the two of us.”

“Wha?” The guard was utterly confused by Alan’s attempt at explaining things.

“We don’t have travel passes, but I promise you that we’re not suspicious. Let us go through.”

The extremely suspicious shovel man was saying extremely sketchy things. To no one's surprise, the guard grew even more uneasy. He grabbed the whistle around his neck, planning to call for help. "You some sort of country bumpkin? You ain't got no common sense! Nobody gets through without a..."

Just as the guard tried to finish his sentence, Alan filled in the ditch with his shovel, and for some reason, the guard let go of the whistle.

"You're right," said the guard. "You folks seem totally fine, but rules are rules."

"We're not dangerous, I swear. Believe me," Alan insisted.

"I'm more than happy to believe you, but..."

Something about the flow of their conversation was off. For one, while they spoke, Alan continued filling the ditch. Once half of the ditch was filled in with dirt, the guard's attitude changed even further. He glanced at Catria. "Hrm, you're a lady knight, are you not? You seem trustworthy."

"So you'll let us through?" asked Catria.

"H-hold on! Let me at least make sure you don't have any unauthorized goods in that carriage of yours first."

"!!"

That was no good. Inside said carriage was a naked girl getting shoveled. There was no way the guard could see that without misunderstanding the situation. Well, there wasn't actually anything to misunderstand, but...!

More importantly, a regular human with no shovel resistance would likely descend into madness on a cosmic level after seeing what was unfolding in there. The guard had to be stopped in order to protect his fragile human mind.

Alan finished patting down the final shovelfuls of earth.

"Actually, you know what? You guys are totally cool. There's no way you're packing anything suspicious." The guard wore a genuine smile as he shook Alan's hand.

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement."

“Of course! You folks seem like you’ll be good friends of our humble nation. Welcome to Lactia!” The guard gave the signal, and Lactia Gate began to rumble open.

“Hey, Alan.”

“What?” The miner almost sounded like Catria for a moment.

“What in blue blazes just happened? The nearby merchants looked like they were about to have convulsions.”

“I used my shovel to fill in the ditch, a.k.a., the hole, between us.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, the ditch that represents our relationship. Get it?”

What are you talking about?! Catria cried out internally.

“The very basics of negotiation. Make sure you remember that.”

“Never! Absolutely not!”

“Don’t worry, you’ll master it soon enough.”

“I refuse!” Catria’s sighs were never-ending. This shovel-bastard could probably bury the entirety of the ocean if he wanted to.

It was said that Lactia was the center of all commerce on the continent, and this was no exaggeration. Catria and Alan made their way to the port, leaving the other two back at the inn. Before them stretched a massive market filled with every kind of shop imaginable—beautiful four-story buildings with all manner of accessory shops and outdoor stalls on mats—and with legions of customers visiting them.

Docked at the port was a host of wooden transport ships, designed to carry cargo across the ocean.

“So this is Lactia? It’s so packed.”

“And one of the shops here has the Green Orb in its possession.”

But there were far too many places to look. How were they going to find the

orb?

“Alan, can’t you look for it with your shovel or something? You’re good at treasure hunting, right?”

“I can look for gems and the like, but the orbs have been modified. They don’t qualify as gems anymore.”

“What’s up with that logic?”

“Miners unearth gems and jewels. Imperfect natural treasures. Not artificially perfected stuff.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re scarier when you make sense?”

Either way, it looked like they would have to search the hard way.

“Let’s split up and see what we can find,” said Catria.

“Good idea. Take some shovels.”

“Why?!”

“You’ll need them to negotiate.”

“I will not! I’m going to do this the normal way!” Catria had no intention of taking any more shovel-coaching from Alan. Unfortunately, the second she turned around— “Catria, look over there.”

The lady knight traced Alan’s line of sight to a ship docked in the harbor. It was a mid-sized model capable of carrying tens of people. Multiple men were unloading its cargo. As he stared at it, Alan gripped his shovel, a dour expression on his face.

“Alan? Is there something wrong with that ship?”

“We’re going to investigate it. My shovel’s reacting to something.”

“Oh! Do you think it’s the orb?”

“No, but I’m detecting an evil intent of sorts. One that wants to bury something deep...”

“Bury something deep?” asked Catria. For the bajillionth time, she found herself wondering what the hell he was going on about.

“Basically, somebody with evil intentions is trying to bury something or someone.”

“I’m not really sure I follow, but long story short, something bad is going down, yeah?”

“Correct. Let’s go.”

Catria nodded and followed Alan to a container the men unloading the ship had left behind. Once the workers returned to the boat to report something, the pair drew close. Alan pointed the head of his shovel at the lock.

“DIG!”

Instantly, a mini Wave Motion Shovel Blast erased the lock from this world. It wasn’t worth the time or effort for a Catria interjection.

After using his shovel to unlock the container, Alan again used the tool to pry it open.

“Nngh?!”

Inside the container was a beautiful young girl, all trussed up—not unlike Alice had been, the first time they met. Her arms and legs were thoroughly tied as she shed tears. She looked to be about the same age as Catria, with long hair that reached her hips. Glittering accessories decorated her hair, and she wore an expensive-looking dress. There was little doubt that she was of high upbringing.

Right now, though, said girl was rolling back and forth inside of the container.

“Alan!”

“Right. Looks like they were planning on burying this young lady.”

“Isn’t that kidnapping? No, murder?!” Catria raised her voice in anger.

“Hey, you! What’re you doing?!” yelled a man with murderous intent.

The lady knight turned around to find a group of pirates with sabers surrounding her, Alan, and the girl. Clearly they were the culprits behind this kidnapping.

“We should be asking *you* that! You accursed kidnappers!” Catria raised her

Holy Knight Sword. She would show these criminals no mercy.

“Catria, do me a favor and try not to kill them. I want to get info out of them.”

“Hrmph. That might be a little difficult.” There wasn’t just a single enemy; the fight was bound to get messy.

“Now’s the perfect time to negotiate.” Alan tossed Catria one of his gold shovels.

“Wha?! Why me?!”

“I promised to turn you into the greatest knight in all the land, which means you should learn how to negotiate.”

“This is *not* how knights negotiate! This isn’t even how humans negotiate!”

Unfortunately for the lady knight, the gold shovel cared little for her resistance and began to move on its own. It pointed its head downward and began to dig into the ground.

“What the hell?! It’s moving on its own!”

“It’s tracing my movements automatically.”

“S-stop it at once! Don’t you dare force me to do your bidding with this thing!”

But there was no stopping the digging. Eventually, the shovel had created a large ditch between Catria and the pirates. Just like with the gatekeeper from earlier, the pirates were quite surprised. The ditch itself was huge. On top of that, a rapid stream ran through it.

“Alan, look at all this water! What are we going to do?!”

Alan simply nodded. “The stream of water running within the relationship ditch is their hostile intention given form. No matter how much we fill in the ditch, if hostile intent is present, the dirt will simply be washed away. This means that filling in the ditch won’t be enough to change our relationship with these pirates.”

His explanation was nuts, but Catria got the general gist of it. In other words, this technique was useless against enemies who wanted to fight.

“Then what was the point of all of this?! C’mon, it’s time to fight!”

“Not quite. All we have to do is stop the flow of water. In other words, the source of their hostile intent.”

“The source?!”

Alan raised his shovel above his head. A flame-like blue aura of energy began to gather around the head of it. He was in the middle of building Shovel Power, a process he repeated uncountable times within a single moment. Target acquired. Safety disabled. Shovel Power full burst.

“DIG!”

Alan fired the Wave Motion Shovel Blast. Blasts of blue and white intermingled and zipped through the port with a tremendous sound. It eclipsed even the wail of a great dragon. The beam of energy pierced the mid-sized ship that was docked at the port.

KA-CHOOOOOOOOM!

The ship’s crew threw themselves from the deck, swimming atop the sea in an attempt to escape as the vessel itself sank deep, deep below the water.

“Perfect.” Alan turned around.

The pirates had watched Alan sink the ship, and their jaws were now appropriately on the ground. Alan then pointed down at the ditch. Catria followed his finger with a dead expression on her face, only to find that the fierce current of water was no more. This meant that the pirates’ hostile intent was gone. Alan quickly filled in the ditch and patted the lady knight on the shoulder. “I bet they’ll be more than willing to listen to you now.”

Weren’t they just threatening the pirates at this point? But Catria knew it was worthless to bring that up with Alan.

After filling in the ditch and patting it flat with his shovel, Alan spoke. “That’s how we negotiate using a shovel. Make sure to remember this.”

Behind them, they heard a noise. The kidnapped girl had passed out, probably from the shock of witnessing the Wave Motion Shovel Blast. She had apparently

also wet herself, as her pricy dress was now soaked.

“Hrm. What’s wrong? Wake up!”

“Like hell she will!”

Unfortunately, the human mind was not so strong as to be able to directly witness the Wave Motion Shovel Blast at close range and make it out in one piece.

Catria sighed deeply, the beginnings of a headache forming. *That wasn’t negotiation. That was just the usual shovel BS.*

Part 24:

The Miner Becomes

Lady Lucrezia's Slave **U**PON QUESTIONING the pirates post-“negotiation,” Alan and Catria discovered they had planned to bury the captive girl in the ocean. Her name was Lucrezia, and she was the daughter of Lactia nobles. As to the reason they'd gone and kidnapped her, the pirates had an oddly simple answer: they'd done it for a mysterious client, and the client hadn't told them why.

Once Alan and Catria had the information they desired, they climbed into the container to check on the unconscious Lucrezia. Just as they did, soldiers rushed up and surrounded the crate.

“Out with you, foul kidnappers! On orders from the governor of Lactia, you're under arrest!” The soldiers banged on the outside of the container.

“The city guard's here,” said Catria. “We should hand those bastards over.”

But as soon as Catria exited the container, a dozen spears were thrust in her face.

“What the hell! The kidnappers are these pirates, not us!”

“Lies! Our intelligence says that the kidnappers were a suspicious miner and lady knight!”

“Excuse me?!”

This came as a bit of a shock. Catria couldn't fathom being considered as suspicious as Alan. But no, that wasn't the real issue. The bigger problem was that the pair were definitely being framed.

Weren't there witnesses to their confrontation with the pirates? But if so, the soldiers should've already realized that Catria and Alan had nothing to do with the crime in question.

“Hmph, it looks like someone might be trying to set us up,” said Alan.

“Why?”

“I have no idea.”

Meanwhile, a full hundred soldiers surrounded the pair. The entire port drew to a standstill.

“What’s the plan, Alan? How’re we getting out of here?”

“Well...” Alan looked down at the unconscious Lucrezia. She was soaking wet and kind of smelled, but his shovel was still reacting to her.

“I’m curious about the girl. I’m going to turn myself in and see how things go.” If he gave himself over to the authorities, he’d probably get the chance to speak to the girl during the interrogation. Plus, she was the daughter of nobility. There was a chance Lactia’s nobles knew something about the orb. “But you should get out of here, Catria. It’s dangerous.”

“Hmph, don’t insult me. I’m not afraid of a little danger.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about. The real danger is leaving Lithisia to her own machinations for too long.”

A chill ran down Catria’s spine. If Alan were to get captured, there was no telling what the princess might do. It was entirely possible she would wage war on the entire country. Worst-case scenario, she might decide to destroy all of humanity. Just thinking about it brought home how realistic all of these scenarios actually were.

“A-all right. I’ll head back and fill in the princess.”

“Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“Even if you wanted me to, it’d be impossible.” There was little doubt in Catria’s mind that Alan could just dig himself an escape tunnel out of prison the second he decided to leave. Sure, the soldiers might confiscate his shovel upon arrest, but then he’d probably do something like reveal that his hands and feet were shovels.

Alan stabbed his shovel into the dirt and opened up a small hole.

“What’s that for?”

“It’s a short-range Shovel Hole that connects directly to our inn.”

“You have to be kidding me.”

“Use this tunnel to get out of here and let Lithisia know what happened. Tell her to wait for me.”

There’s not a single prison on the planet or in hell that could keep this man locked up, Catria thought.

Alan was taken to a dark stone prison where a torture officer and an investigator awaited him.

“Let’s begin.”

Thus far, Alan had refused to say anything, so it was time to initiate torture procedures. It’d be the usual stuff: fingernail peeling, resting stones on the knees, lighting fire to the bottom of the feet. But there were some problems. Blades and heat had no effect on Alan’s body, and it was impossible to peel his nails, even with a crowbar.

“What the hell is wrong with your body?! Is it made of iron?!”

“The more I hurt it, the sturdier it got.” Alan had sustained all manner of injury while mining, and at some point or another, his body became extremely resilient. After a thousand years of this gradual toughening, his body was now about as hard as adamantine.

“You must be using magic of some sort! Call in the shaman!”

The pair disappeared. Whatever they tried next would no doubt be futile.

“Time to get moving,” Alan decided. He had to talk to the girl named Lucrezia.

Yet at that moment, he heard footsteps approaching his cell. Whoever they were, they were light-footed. Clearly not any of the soldiers he’d met so far. The person who appeared in front of the cell’s bars was none other than a girl in a dress that brought out her appealing figure. She held her chest up high, her long hair swaying at her hips. She was obviously pleased as punch to see Alan on the floor.

“Good day! You look to be in higher spirits than I expected, Mr. Kidnapper.”
Lucrezia’s voice was tinged with sarcasm.

“Hrm, I’m no kidnapper, but I am doing quite well.” Alan slowly rose to his feet. The whole reason he got himself caught was so that he could speak to Lucrezia. He needed info on the orb, but he was also curious about the way his shovel reacted to her. In other words, this girl was still in danger of being “buried.” “You look like you’re doing well, too. Did you change clothes?”

As far as Alan could tell, her dress showed no signs of, well, you know.

“Did I change...? Ah!” Lucrezia brought her thighs together upon realizing what Alan was implying, almost as if she were trying to hide herself from him. She shouted at him, cheeks thoroughly red. “Y-you scoundrel! Pervert! Have you no delicacy?!”

That little leak had clearly become a dark spot for the young woman.

“Hrm, my apologies. I’m a miner, so I’m not very good when it comes to manners.”

Still clearly frazzled, Lucrezia mumbled to herself. “Th-this is why commoners are the worst! My word!”

I see now. So this is what nobles are supposed to act like.

This was actually refreshing for Alan. Apparently, the nobility weren’t fond of earthy conversations. His only touchstone, Lithisia, was supposed to stand at the very top of all nobility, but she was quickly evolving into something completely other and incomprehensible. Alan now understood that he couldn’t use her as the standard by which to engage with other nobles.

“Urgh, anyway!” Lucrezia cleared her throat. She pointed her finger directly at Alan, her face still in high color. “I heard that you deny all allegations of kidnapping me.”



“Correct. You saw what happened.”

“What I saw was you destroying a ship with some manner of suspicious magic.”

“Huh, I suppose so.”

The young lady had seen him fire his Wave Motion Shovel Blast and subsequently wet herself before passing out. She had remained unconscious while Alan and Catria interrogated the pirates.

“The torture officer believes you to be guilty. We also have multiple witness testimonies that a miner with a shovel hit me over the head, knocking me unconscious, whereupon he kidnapped me. Under any normal circumstance, you would already be sentenced to death.”

Alan would never do things so unbecoming of a miner. If Lithisia overheard any of this, she’d probably sentence the sentencing officer to death while correcting him that a shovel doesn’t hit girls, it shovels them. It was a good thing she wasn’t present.

“I get it now,” said Alan. It was crystal clear that someone was trying to set him up.

Seeing Alan self-satisfied, Lucrezia frowned.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Why are you not panicked? You are going to die.”

Simply put, Alan wasn’t afraid because he wasn’t going to die. There was just no way that a human could take him out. In fact, he could break out of this prison at any time. Alan was only sticking around to talk to Lucrezia.

“And why do you not appear to have been tortured...? Something is amiss...”

“No, I’ve been tortured. They tried to peel my fingernails off.”

“Liar. You are completely untouched!”

“My fingernails are really tough.” In times of need, Alan could even use his fingernails like mini shovels. As such, that meant they were as hard as steel.

Lucrezia wasn’t buying it. “Urgh, the investigator is too soft. What am I

supposed to do about my plan...?”

“Your plan?”

“Ah, i-it is nothing!” Panicked, Lucrezia shook her head back and forth. She was really bad at lying. “In any case! You are sure to be executed!”

“I guess so.”

“However, the victim, myself, is right here!”

“I guess so.”

“That is why, um, well, is there nothing you would like to say to me?”

“Huh?”

“In other words, u-um, do you not wish to ask me something?!” Lucrezia fidgeted, desperate, and looking very displeased as her buxom bosom heaved. She wanted Alan to ask a very specific question, but couldn’t fill in any more blanks on account of her stringent noble pride. Yet her tear-filled eyes screamed for him to say something.

Alan actually began to feel quite bad for the young lady. If he didn’t play along, she’d probably keep staring at him like some sort of pleading baby animal.

“Help me,” he said in the most toneless voice ever.

“There! There it is! Well done, commoner!” As soon as Lucrezia heard those words, she clapped her hands together, eyes shining. She looked like she wanted to skip around the room. “I-If you must beg, then in all of my greatness, I shall bestow upon you a single chance!”

I didn’t really beg, Alan thought to himself, though he didn’t voice it; he knew it wouldn’t reach her.

Lucrezia giggled to herself as she took out a gleaming black iron bracelet and handed it to Alan through the bars of the cell. It was a magical bracelet capable of enforcing complete obedience upon its wearer. The “Slave Bracelet.”

In majestic tones, she declared, “I swear upon the name of Lucrezia to absolve you of your sins! In exchange, you will become my slave!”

For a while, Alan just peered at the young woman. Beads of sweat rolled down her face. She was obviously nervous, and scared of failing. Judging by her current condition, this wasn't just a situation of her wanting a slave.

She had determination—and a goal.

That's a good look. Alan wanted to unearth her reasons for her actions. As a miner, it was his duty to do so. "Don't mind me. I'm just going to dig up a bit of your background."

"Wha?" said Lucrezia. Didn't he mean he was going to ask her about her background?

Lucrezia seemed puzzled as Alan took out the shovel he had hidden in a dimensional pocket. He then wrote into the floor "the reason Lucrezia wants a slave," and dug it up. As soon as he finished this task, a sentence formed on the ground: *In order to find the true culprit who killed her father and kidnapped her.*

"What the?!"

"Hrm, so you don't actually believe I'm your kidnapper, then. You also believe that the person who killed your father and who had you kidnapped are one and the same. Your plan was to make me your servant to help you find any clues, and eventually to capture the true culprit."

"Wait! What is happening?!" Lucrezia was utterly bewildered. Just who was this mysterious man? More importantly, what did he just do? All he did was dig up some dirt, and now there were words?! And how did he suddenly know her entire motivation?! "Did you use magic?! No, that would be impossible. Magic suppression has been cast on that cell."

"It's not magic. It's a shovel."

"Huh?!" Lucrezia had no idea what was going on.

"But I get it now. I'll help you solve this mystery."

This was no longer about getting information on the Green Orb. It was about Lucrezia. Despite having lost her family, she still put together a plan to seek out the truth. And now, the one person in the world who could help her best was Alan.

Lucrezia simply stood there, jaw agape. *I-I have no clue what has happened, but...* It looked like she'd be able to advance her plan. And yet.

"You will not be *helping* me! I already told you, you are my slave!"

"Who cares what I am, Lucrezia?"

"How dare you call me by my name!" As far as the noblewoman was concerned, Alan was making it seem like their positions were flipped. She straightened her back. First impressions were important. A slave and their master. She had to make it clear to Alan where he stood. "First, I shall have you straighten out that attitude of yours! If I signal for it, you will be executed immediately."

"Hrm, not quite." Alan shook his head.

"Excuse me?"

"Looks like the execution is going to begin with or without your signal."

At that moment, the pair heard the clanking sound of the dungeon door opening.

"Th-the executioners?!" Lucrezia cried in shock.

Seven rugged men holding giant, jagged swords came into the room. They were indeed the executioners. Standing behind them was a nobleman in expensive clothes. Upon seeing Lucrezia, he politely greeted her. "Lady Lucrezia, what are you doing in a place like this?"

So they knew each other.

"Goliah!" she cried at the nobleman. "What is the meaning of this?! I thought I told you to delay this man's execution!"

Goliah cackled. "Lady Lucrezia, I believe you've misunderstood the situation."

"How so?"

"When your father was still in good health, I was more than willing to give weight to your words. But now that he's gone, your position isn't quite what it used to be. I can't just obey your wishes as I please."

"Ngh!" Lucrezia's cheeks turned red with embarrassment. Goliah had stabbed

her pride. The young woman's fists trembled. Her powers were far weaker than she had realized.

"Plus, the execution of this sentence was ordered directly by the inquisitor himself. Now then." Goliah snapped his fingers. "I request that you vacate the premises immediately. Men?"

The executioners drew close.

"Urgh..." Lucrezia ground her teeth together in frustration. After a moment of being lost in thought, she turned to Alan. Her fist was trembling, but her expression was resolute. "Mr. Kidnapper. I shall distract them. Flee from here."

"What?" Alan had thought he misheard her, but he hadn't.

Lucrezia really was offering to distract them. She raised her hand and showed him one of her trembling fingers. On it was a beautiful ring with a sapphire jewel that sparkled with electricity. A magic tool. "Goliah has the key to get out of here. Take it and run."

"Are you being serious? If I do that..."

Lucrezia might be a noblewoman, but she had no power in this situation. If she got in the way of Alan's escape, she wouldn't get off lightly. At worst, she could be executed. There was no way that Lucrezia wasn't aware of this. Her legs shook. Nevertheless...

"I am utterly and completely serious," Lucrezia stated matter-of-factly. "I cannot let you die here. You are the only clue I have as to who really killed my father!"

Alan himself wasn't much of a clue, though in some sense his existence made clues meaningless. Even so, Lucrezia had made her decision. From the get-go, she had come here to acquire Alan.

"On the count of three. Ready?" Lucrezia brought her lips tightly together.

"Hmph. Once I'm gone, what will you do?"

"I shall escape on my own. I know how to protect myself."

"Against seven people? You could die."

“Mr. Kidnapper. You would do well to learn that nobles...” Despite her trembling body, Lucrezia flashed Alan a determined smile. “Are only noble because they are willing to put their lives on the line when it matters most.”

Alan grinned. This young lady had the right idea. She had the grit to do what it took to fulfill her objective. Just as Alan lived by the code of the miner, Lucrezia lived by the code of nobility. That meant Alan had to act.

“I get it. By the way, I have just one question.”

“What is it?! Make it short!”

“I don’t really mind running away and all, but...” Alan cut his words short and raised his shovel. A blue energy wave formed around the head of the tool, then turned into a pulsating undulation. The dark dungeon was now as bright as the sun itself.

“DIG!” shouted Alan.

A wide-spread Shotgun Wave Motion Shovel Blast fired simultaneously with his cry.

KA-CHOOOOOOOOM!!!

A giant hole formed beneath Goliah and the executioners’ feet, and they fell immediately into it. Their screams resonated as they vanished into the depths. Alan and Lucrezia were all that remained in the dungeon.

A moment of silence set upon the area.

“Um... Ummm?!” Lucrezia was in shock.

Alan lowered his shovel and patted Lucrezia on the shoulder. “Don’t you think it’d be easier to just get rid of these guys?”

Lucrezia’s jaw hit the floor. Her heart completely stopped. *What the devil just happened...?*

She thought what she’d seen at the port was magic, but clearly it wasn’t something so simple. Who exactly was this man? No matter how hard she stared, he looked like a simple commoner with a shovel in hand.

“What’s wrong? Wet yourself again?”

“Ngh?! H-h-how vulgar! I have not wet myself!” Lucrezia yelled, her cheeks bright red. She held her hand against her chest. Her heart was beating a mile a minute. This uncouth man couldn’t possibly be the cause, right? This had to be a side effect of that strange beam. Lucrezia desperately attempted to convince herself that that was the case.

“Let’s get going, Lucrezia. Hm, actually, before that...” Alan bowed his head to the young lady as politely as he was able. “Thank you for trying to save my life. You have my gratitude.”

“...!”

Lucrezia’s heart was going crazy.

No, that is impossible! Lucrezia vehemently denied what she was feeling. How could a noblewoman of such dignity and honor as Lucrezia find herself charmed by a strange man with a shovel?!

Intermission:

Alice's Street Shovel **M**EANWHILE, BACK AT THE INN, in a room on the second floor, Lithisia received Catria's report on the situation. Alan had gotten himself captured on purpose so that he could sniff out information on the Green Orb's whereabouts. Catria stressed (intensely) that Alan did not want the princess to concern herself with his safety, and that he needed her to wait for him.

"I understand. Thank you for the good work, Catria."

"My pleasure."

The lady knight was somewhat surprised. Lithisia was much calmer about this than she expected, especially considering how much she shovely lovely loved Alan. Catria had assumed the princess would struggle with being apart from him.

"I'm fine. There was something I wanted to do, anyway."

"Oh?"

Lithisia gripped her shovel and smiled. "This is the perfect chance to become closer to Alice!"

She's going to add to her crimes, isn't she? thought Catria.

That said, she had no intention of stopping the princess, which at this point made her a coconspirator.

Back in the bedroom, Alice was lying on the bed, slowly touching her stomach. She dragged each of her fingers contemplatively across her skin.

"Hrm... They're mostly back."

She meant her five senses. When Alice inherited Veknar's power, she lost all of her human senses and gained magic ones in their place. She hadn't seen or

heard things so much as information about the world had been projected directly to her brain. But now, when she touched her stomach, she felt ticklish. This was all because of Lithisia's shoveling.

Alice was a bit conflicted, and it showed on her face. If she were honest with herself, she should be grateful to the miner and the princess. She didn't want to be honest. It would mean admitting defeat. Defeat by shovel. Alice called herself the undead king and was even the princess of a nation, small as it was. She was prideful.

"That's right. I can't lose! I am the king of the undead!" Alice clenched her fists to get herself amped up. "If nothing else, I refuse to lose to an ordinary human, that monster of a miner notwithstanding."

Up until now, she had been unable to resist Lithisia's advances. But that was only because Lithisia had been backed up by the monster that was Alan. With him off on his own, Alice would at last be able to fend off the princess. She would free herself from this shovel curse.

And she absolutely had to gain her freedom. Lately, whenever Lithisia rubbed her shovel against the bottoms of Alice's feet, warmth built deep inside of Alice's body. It wasn't just the effect of a little stimulation on the surface, either, but an ember, burning within. Something that made Alice's entire body tremble.

"Urgh! N-no way!" At this rate, Alice might awaken to some new weird shovel nonsense, just like the princess. "I refuse to be tied down by a cursed shovel!"

Alice stood up on the bed to better monologue. The last time she bad-mouthed shovels in front of Lithisia, she'd been tortured for it. But there was no longer anything to fear!

"That's right! First I'll brainwash her!" The undead king had remembered something when she was extracting intelligence from Raystol. In the depths of Veknar's knowledge, Alice had discovered a type of magic called "Dominating Will." "Cursed shovel princess... I'm going to be the one to control you this time."

Just then, the door opened.

“You were asking for me?”

“!!!”

Alice jumped like a surprised cat, her silver hair flowing through the air. “W-w-were you listening?!”

“What do you mean?” asked the shovel princess, head tilted.

Relief flooded Alice’s chest. Lithisia hadn’t overheard her declarations. She had narrowly avoided having the undersides of her feet shoveled again as punishment.

No, stay focused! No fear! Without that miner around, she’s just an ordinary human! Alice shook her head. She was doing her best to confront her intense fear of shovels.

Meanwhile, Lithisia entered the room. “Alice, do you have some time?”

“F-f-for what? Our shoveling session isn’t until tonight, right?”

They scheduled these things out ahead of time. Needless to say, Alice didn’t have the right to object.

“Yes, of course. But I also prepared this...” Lithisia took out a paper bag. “I was hoping you might enjoy it.”

“E-enjoy what?!” What sort of shovel torture madness had the princess prepared for her this time? Up until now, Alice had managed to protect her purity, but what else was there left to her? What could the princess be scheming?

At the same time, Alice could feel herself growing oddly excited. *No! Stop it! I’m not a deranged pervert! I’m a regular old undead king!* Alice was deeply confused by her conflicting feelings, and she found herself further taken aback by what Lithisia took out of the bag.

“Clothes?”

“Yes! You’re always naked, so...” Lithisia smiled. “I bet it’ll look wonderful on you! Here, try it on.”

A few minutes later, Alice was awestruck by the image of herself in the

mirror.

“Oh... Wow.”

She wore a white dress. The undead king had prepared herself for some sort of nefarious shovel surprise, but it really was just a dress. Not to mention, it fit her perfectly, and the fabric felt wonderful and light. It was clearly tailor-made specifically for her, and not cheap either.

More importantly, it wasn't a shovel. Hell, it was a normal present. That fact alone was enough to deeply confuse the girl.

“Shovely cute! You look darling, Alice!” Lithisia was giddy like any other girl her age would be (except for her verbiage).

“Amazing. You look like nobility,” Catria mused.

The lady knight only ever really saw Alice when she was naked and being violated by Lithisia's shovel, so the gap between that situation and this one was massive. The breeze coming from the window caused Alice's silver hair and dress to flutter, so she pressed her hands down on the skirt.

“Wh-what's the big idea?” she asked. Why would Lithisia of all people ever present someone with something other than a shovel? She had to be plotting something. Alice steeled her resolve in anticipation of Lithisia's response, but...

“Let's go for a walk outside!” The princess didn't even mention shovels once.

In short order, the pair found themselves on a crowded street outside as they walked together through the center of Lactia. While they wore disguises, one of them was an absolute beauty, and the other was an adorable young girl. To no surprise, everyone's eyes were trained on them.

It would've been much worse if Alice were naked. Terrible, in fact. But she was clothed, and Lithisia pulled her happily along, their skirts waving in the wind. Yet Alice couldn't help being bothered.

“Alice, that's the famous Lactia Assembly Hall!” Lithisia pointed the head of her shovel at a giant clocktower. “That's where the Republic's government meets up! Want to take a look?”

“I don’t mind, but...what are you planning with all of this?”

“Yay! Shtraveling! (Walking along joyfully with shovel in hand!)”

“H-hey, wait! You’re walking too fast!”

Soon, the pair reached the Assembly Hall. It was a four-story brick building, with a large plaza befitting of the nation’s very core. Copper statues of historical figures stood proudly across the plaza, likely people who had significantly contributed to Lactia’s prosperity. Around them were groups of smart-looking men in uniform. This appeared to be a prime break spot for the assembly.

“We’re here!”

“Lithisia, wait up!” Alice was out of breath. She had an undead body, so technically she didn’t have to worry about her stamina. This was more of a mental exhaustion. She was still terribly confused about the whole situation. Why had the princess invited her out? “Lithisia, what are you plotting?”

“Hee hee. Well, you see...” Lithisia rummaged through the bag on her back and pulled something out.

Was she finally unveiling her shovel? Alice braced herself for the worst.

“Tadashovel!” It was a sheet, not a shovel. Well, it was a sheet with a shovel pattern on it, but it still wasn’t what Alice was dreading. “This plaza is known for being the brightest and comfiest spot in all of Lactia!”

“Huh.”

“So c’mon, Alice!” Lithisia sat down on the sheet and patted the spot next to her. “If you sunbathe here for a little while, I bet you’ll ‘warm’ right up!”

Alice opened her mouth. “You mean...”

Lithisia had remembered that Alice wanted warmth. She looked expectantly at Alice.

“No, it’s just...” Alice demurred. “I’m surprised is all. Hrm.”

“Why, shovel?”

Alice ignored the last bit of Lithisia’s response. “I figured all you ever thought about were shovels.”

“Ha ha ha, I try to, but...” A sadness crossed Lithisia’s face. “Right now, I just can’t...”

Alice wasn’t sure what the princess was talking about, but that wasn’t anything new. The undead girl settled down next to her companion and the two of them looked up at the blue sky.

It was indeed warm. Alice’s five senses hadn’t completely returned yet, but she could still bask in the overwhelming pressure of the sun. Lithisia was right; this was a wonderful spot.

“I’m alive...” Alice whispered.

When she became the king of the undead, the peaceful days she once enjoyed grew ever so distant. Or at least, she thought they had. Granted, she’d hardly call her current situation peaceful, what with her feet getting shoveled every single day, but nonetheless, the breeze she felt at the moment was the same as that of her time as a princess. It was as if the sun and wind were telling Alice that it was okay for her to live in the here and now. The only problem was that she still didn’t know what to do with her new lease on life.

“Alice, are you feeling nice and warm?”

“I guess...”

Relieved, Lithisia smiled beatifically at the girl. “I’m glad. You’re always working so hard for us. It’s important to take breaks.”

“Hey, so, uh... Since when did you get all serious on me?”

Lithisia was always but a single step away from madness, so her earnestness was making Alice uncomfortable.

“Huh? I’m always shoveling shoveleriously serious.”

“That’s even more worrying.”

The princess was always totally sincere about her Shovel Faith nonsense. That’s what made it so unbearable.

Lithisia seemed to give it some thought, however. “I suppose it’s just that things are going to get very busy, so I’m happy to have your help, shovel!”

“How far do you plan on taking all of this?” Alice asked, defeated.

“Well, I’ve already decided. Though it’s a secret from Sir Miner.”

“Decided on what?”

“Well...” Lithisia looked up at the Assembly Hall. “I was just thinking of taking over the world, is all.”

The way Lithisia phrased her objective made it sound like she was just going to stroll next door to the candy store to buy a snack or something.

“Um, like, you know. Sir Miner’s super-duper shoveling amazing, right?”

“I-I guess...?” said Alice. *She’s actually explaining herself?!*

Lithisia ignored the astonished Alice and continued to bashfully describe her plan.

“I...shovely love Sir Miner. I want to be with him forever. But I’m not like you, Alice. I’m just a normal human. No matter how hard I try to mimic his actions and words, I have no special powers. I’m just a regular old human who loves shoveling.”

“O-okay.” *There is nothing normal about you!*

“All I can do is shovelfy the way I speak. But even then, I have to consciously choose to do that... Shovel (activated).”

The fact that it was something that “activated” was scary in and of itself. Alice desperately wanted to interject, but sensed now wasn’t the time.

“I still want to be by Sir Miner’s side... So I have to work extra hard.” Lithisia gripped her shovel and looked up at the sky. “And surpass the limits of humanity.”

She was literally proclaiming that she was giving up on being human. Though in reality, she had already surpassed being a mere human. Alice again wanted to shut the princess down, but now wasn’t the time for it.

“I know that’s impossible. I know I’ll never catch up to Sir Miner. But I have to try... Alice?”

The undead king was gripping her head in dismay.

“Ah, I’m so sorry. This must seem terribly sudden.” Lithisia rubbed the girl on her head. The fact that she was doing this with her hand and not a shovel was proof that she might yet have an ounce of humanity left in her. “And so I was hoping you might be willing to help me...of your own free will.”

“I have no free will, thanks to that shovel of yours.”

“That all ends today.”

“Huh?!”

That was perhaps the most surprising statement of the day.

“Your sense of taste, hearing, and smell are mostly returned. Sir Miner said that everything would naturally recover if we left you be. There’s no reason for me to shovel you anymore.”

“I-I didn’t realize...but you’re right. I am mostly back to how I was when I was human...” Alice murmured.

So that was why Lithisia hadn’t tried to shovel her today. Because she didn’t have to anymore.

“No more shoveling, huh? I see...” Alice found herself overcome with both relief and a dash of sadness. *Wait, what am I thinking?! There’s nothing sad about this!*

“You’re free now, Alice. So this isn’t an order, just a request.”

“Hrm...”

“I’m just a weak human. I have no power. If someone like me is going to overcome the world for Sir Miner’s sake, I need everyone’s help, even if it’s just a little. But more importantly, I need your help. Please.” Lithisia bowed her head down deeply, her blonde hair falling forward. “Please help me shovel like you have up until now... Please help me take over the world.”

Alice looked up at the sun. “Haaaaah...”

Everything Lithisia said was insane, but she meant it. Her expression was as serious as could be. In order to become a woman fit to stand by Alan’s side, not only had she decided to start an entire religion, but she intended to conquer the world itself. And now she was saying that she wanted to become something

other than human.

No, not “something.” She wanted to become the woman who could stand beside Alan, the world’s strongest miner and a hero whose very existence was a cosmic joke on the universe.

Alice once again sighed deeply. This was stupid. So very, very stupid.

But.

“Ha ha.” For some reason, Alice laughed. When people are told absolutely ridiculous things, they tend to laugh. “Sure, fine.”

And just like that, a radiant smile bloomed on Lithisia’s face.

“It’s not like I have any goals of my own. I’ll go along with your little plan for the time being.” Alice nodded.

Plus... Alice felt the light and warmth of the sun on her hand. *How far can our crazy princess go? Will she really catch up to Alan?* She kind of wanted to find out.

“Thank you shovely much~!” Lithisia was so thrilled that she looked like a child.

She’s way more childish than I am, Alice thought to herself. *When she’s not shoveling, she can be pretty darn cute.*

“Now that it’s been decided! Shovely swoosh!” This was the sound Lithisia made whenever she came up with a truly dubious idea.

The princess pulled something out of her bag. Was it a lunch box of some kind? No, it was a shovel rope, the very same one the party had first used to tie Alice up.

Alice’s body instinctively responded and she leapt to her feet. “Wh-wh-what’s that for?!”

Too late. The rope automatically began to wrap itself around the undead king.

“Waaaaaaait?! Wh-what’s going on?!”

And just like that, Alice and her dress were bound tight, hanging in midair. A shovel connected to the rope was stabbed into the tree they were next to. She

looked like a captive princess. Worse, the rope pulled up her skirt and tightened around her small chest, causing her breasts to seem slightly larger than usual.

It was a real bad look.

“What are you doing, Lithisia?!”

“Shovel is money! We’re doing a public shoveling!”

“A public what?!”

Lithisia explained: A public shoveling involved her doing the usual to Alice, only this time in front of an audience. This way, they’d be able to show the masses how wonderful shoveling was, while also helping Alice get her senses back by embarrassing her like crazy in front of other people. Two birds with one shovel!

The main problem with this plan was that it was borderline criminal. But since Alice wasn’t naked, surely it’d be fine. Surely.

“We’re going to show the politicians and bureaucrats just how happy the shovel has made you! And once we let them experience the greatness of the shovel, we stop just before the shovelmax (climax) and go, ‘To experience the rest, join the faith!’ Shove, shove, shove! (the shovel version of laughing).”

What a demonic plan this was.

“All you’re going to attract are a bunch of people with troubling kinks!”

“All bureaucrats and politicians are troubling. Look! People are gathering.”

A bunch of old dudes had surrounded Lithisia and Alice. They were swallowing loudly while contemplating what exactly was about to happen with this beautiful young woman and the young girl tied up in a white dress. They were especially entranced by Alice’s exposed thighs and underarms.

“Lithisia, stop this at once! Didn’t you say you wouldn’t be shoveling me anymore?!”

“I only said I didn’t have to for your five senses. I didn’t say anything about your other senses.”

“What other senses?!”

“The objective is forty-five!”

This princess had created more senses.

“The sense that deals with perceiving shovels is number six. The sense that deals with shovel taste is number seven. The one that deals with cats is number eight. Shovel love is number nine. Hee hee, I’m gonna build up all of your shovel senses, Alice! So let’s have fun shoveling all the shovel long day! And then, and then!” Lithisia’s eyes were, let’s just say, looking rather unnatural. This wasn’t particularly rare for her, but she was clearly more excited than usual thanks to Alice softening up. “And then the two of us, well, we’ll take over the world!”

The princess pointed the pointy tip of her shovel at Alice.

“Eeeeeeeek! S-stop it!” Alice cried. This was bad. As bad as things could possibly get. Lithisia’s shoveling had grown into something unbeatable. With tears in her eyes, Alice pleaded with the princess. But alas.

“I will not stop. Never.” Lithisia drew her face close to Alice’s ear. “When you said, ‘no more shoveling,’ you looked kind of sad, Alice.”

“!!!”

The king of the undead could feel her entire body burning bright red.

“Hee hee, don’t worry. You’ll get the deluxe ‘Alice Shovel’ treatment.” Lithisia crept her red shovel close to Alice, who was still in tears, and began to rub it up against her trembling underarms.



At one time, Alice's skin could feel the warmth of the sun up above. But now? She might as well have become a vessel purely meant to experience the touch of the shovel.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEKKKKKKKKK!"

A sublime shoveling overcame Alice's young body.

This was no good. Something extraordinary was rising up deep inside of her.

"He he. Alice's Alice is all shovely Alice now!"

"N-no, eeeeek!"

"Scoopy doopy up the shovel juices, rub it all together... Shovel! Shovel!"

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

The crowd gathering around this public event of sorts was at a total loss, but they couldn't look away. When confronted with the terror of the unknown, humanity could do naught but watch. Somebody in the crowd gulped.

Upon hearing that sound, Lithisia giggled internally. She had done it. Now she'd be able to increase the number of believers in the central portion of Lactia. This was all thanks to Alice. She'd have to make sure to shovel her up real nice in appreciation.

"He he he, this is my new move! I'll just take these smoothy smooth thighs of yours and... Scoop, scoop!"

"Nooooooo! Not there! Please, no! You're going too deep!"

Of course, Lithisia didn't stop. In fact, this public presentation went on for about two hours, right up until the crowd had lost their collective minds. Lithisia's special move, the "Shovelmic Horror," was the cause. Not to be confused with "cosmic horror," of course.

It was on this day that Alice and Lithisia became just a little bit closer to one another. It was also the day that Lactia's politicians became followers of the Holy Shovel Faith.

Part 25:

The Miner Unearths the Truth AFTER WRAPPING THINGS UP at the dungeon, Alan unlocked his cell using his shovel. From there, Lucrezia led him to her mansion. The beautiful home sat atop a hill just outside the center of town. It was three stories tall and was surrounded by a garden that Alan couldn't help but make an impressed noise upon seeing. Someone had clearly taken good care of it.

"Surprised? The gardeners in Lactia are the best in the world."

"I can see that. That shovel over there is also in Grade A condition."

Alan indicated a shovel standing in the storage area. It was without even the slightest trace of rust. The gardener was obviously very skilled at tool maintenance.

Lucrezia, however, seemed somewhat annoyed with the miner. "Are shovels all you ever have on your mind?"

"Well, I *am* a miner."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

So it went, back and forth, as they made their way into the mansion. Lucrezia led Alan to a reception room brimming with all manner of expensive items. Priceless artwork, valuable jewels, and finely crafted furniture adorned the room. One of the largest jewels shone a particularly exquisite green.

"Ha, look at this emerald!"

"Oh, my. You know of it? It is the signature stone in my family's collection. The 'Azure Dream.'"

"Of course I know it. I'm the one who dug it out."

"What?"

While the Azure Dream wasn't anywhere near as valuable as any one of the

Seven Orbs, at 200 karats it had still been quite the find. Back in the day, Alan had dug it out from the mountain on Layer #78.

Of course, Lucrezia didn't believe a word of this. "Lies! This emerald has been passed down in the Republic for over five hundred years now."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. Man, this really brings me back."

"Wh-what are you talking about? That is impossible..." Lucrezia trailed off. Despite her protests, it was clear that Alan was completely serious. She shook her head in denial. *Urgh, being around this man is making me go all sorts of funny.*

Lucrezia cleared her throat. She had to get to the point. "Alan, you are going to find the person who killed my father."

"I know."

"Of course, I shall prepare a reward for you upon your successful completion of this mission. I need you to put your all into this."

"A reward? Wasn't saving me from death meant to be my reward?"

Lucrezia's lips twisted with regret. "You could have freed yourself without me, could you not?"

After seeing Alan's shovel skills, this much had been made clear.

"Yes, but..."

Lucrezia placed her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. "Then that would make for a poor reward."

"Look, I really don't need a..."

"I shall not take no for an answer." Lucrezia once again puffed out her ample bosom. "Hard work should be honorably rewarded."

"Because you're nobility?"

"You catch on fast." Lucrezia looked pleased with herself. Her noble pedigree was clear. "Request anything you would like. If it is within my power, I shall see to it that you receive it."

In that case, there was but one thing Alan sought. "I've actually come here in

search of the Green Orb.”

Being a secret treasure of Rostir, the orb was unknown to those of other nations, so Alan had to describe the gem and its unique qualities. All at once, Lucrezia cut him off, a serious expression on her face.

“I think I might know the orb of which you speak.”

“Really?”

“I feel as though I have seen one of my father’s guests with something resembling that Green Orb of yours... Perhaps.” On further thought, Lucrezia shook her head. “My apologies. This was back in my childhood, so I do not recall their exact appearance.”

“Hrm, but you do recall seeing an orb-like object, yeah?”

“Yes. I know I saw it, but will such a brief memory help you at all?”

It would, actually.

“Lucrezia, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Could you let me shovel your body for a bit?”

“Huh?!” Lucrezia backpedaled away from Alan, all the way to the opposite wall. She held her body close, as if trying to conceal her alluring figure. “Wh-wh-what are you saying?! Shovel my body?! Is that some manner of crude jargon?!”

“No, no. Sorry. I don’t mean shovel you in a physical sense. I mean it in an astral sense.” Alan wanted to unearth her memories via the Akashic Record. By using Lucrezia’s body as a go-between, he’d be able to reproduce visions that she’d seen in the past. But in order to do that, he’d have to “shovel” her. “I promise it’ll be okay. It won’t hurt at all. I’m a pro when it comes to shovels.”

Despite his attempts to explain, it all still sounded terribly salacious to Lucrezia. “Th-ther-ther is no way I can let you do such a thing to me!”

“Didn’t you tell me to request anything I’d like?”

“Erk!” The noblewoman went silent. Alan had hit her where it hurt the most. She squirmed in her beautiful dress, creases forming in the fabric. “Urrrrrgh, I

did, but... Oh, please!”

Lucrezia went silent in thought again. If she said no, what would become of her pride? At that, she relented. Somewhat.

“You are correct... But I have some conditions.” She raised one finger.

“And what are those?” As far as Alan could tell, she’d come to terms with her fate.

Lucrezia laughed. “I shall only let you ‘shovel’ me if you manage to solve two cases within the day. Who killed my father, and who kidnapped me.”

“Is that all?”

“Huh?” Lucrezia thought she was asking the impossible of Alan, yet he seemed totally unfazed.

Alan meanwhile was certain he could get the job done, and he was ready to start asking questions. “Do you remember when you were kidnapped?”

“No. Someone attacked me on the street, but for whatever reason, I simply cannot remember the culprit’s face,” Lucrezia answered irritably. “So I suppose first, let us have a detective begin investigating. We need information.”

“That won’t be necessary. If there are holes in your memory, we need but fill them with my shovel.”

“Excuse me?”

If Lucrezia remembered her kidnapping, this would be over in a jiffy. So, just as he had done with Riez, Alan brushed his left hand against Lucrezia’s head. From her, he extracted a purple aura. It was shaped like an apple with a bite taken out of it. Alan used his shovel to fill in the gap.

Lucrezia clapped. “Ah! That is right! It was Archon Jistice’s lackey!”

“Perfect.”

“So that insidious man is the true culprit behind all of this... Wait a moment!”

“What is it?”

“Do not ‘what is it’ me!” Lucrezia’s expression changed rapidly as she cornered Alan. “This makes no sense! What did you do to me?!”

“I simply filled the holes of your memory. Shovels are good at digging things up and burying them.”

Lucrezia fell into a state of panic, and Alan realized he was somewhat responsible. Catria and the others no longer had any trouble with his antics, but it appeared manipulating metaphysical concepts was a bit too much for a regular person. He should’ve been more careful.

“What in blue blazes is a shovel?! Ah!” The noblewoman cradled her head in her hands like she was trying to protect herself. Then she realized something. “Wait, are you part of that shady group?!”

“Shady group?”

Earlier that day, Lucrezia’s butler had an encounter with some suspicious folks. He was walking through the city when he stumbled across a tent pitched on an open plot of land with a sign out front. It read, “Shovel Study Group: We’ll Teach You the Ins and Outs of Shoveling!” Next to said sign was a shady young girl trying to draw in customers.

Citizen after citizen was sucked into the tent, almost as if compelled by an invisible force. When they re-emerged, their eyes sparkled as they whispered, “Shovel... Shovel...”

Lucrezia’s butler alerted the city guard but they simply replied, “The shovel is love. That’s an order.”

At this point, the butler realized the situation was not only quite odd, it was likely quite dangerous, and he immediately backed off.

Alan was 99 percent certain he knew exactly what had befallen the citizens of Lactia. “Er, was there a Princess Lithisia with this shady group?”

“Indeed. A fake Princess Lithisia was apparently among them. How dreadful.”
Now he was 120 percent certain.

“Lucrezia, I’m sorry to say, but that princess is the real deal.”

“What?”

“That’s the true Princess Lithisia, first in line to Rostir’s throne.”

Lucrezia blinked rapidly and gave Alan an exhausted smile. “You simpleton. I have spoken to Princess Lithisia before. She is a lovely, pure-hearted young woman. Her every word demonstrated her intelligence and her love for the people of her nation. Princess Lithisia is the perfect example of royal nobility.”

“Sounds quite a bit different from the Lithisia I know,” mused Alan. In fact, it was like Lucrezia was describing a completely different person.

“All it takes is one conversation with the princess for a person to understand her and her qualities.”

“That’d be quite difficult (understanding her, that is).”

“You are correct. Rostir is presently beset by no small amount of conflict, so actually meeting Princess Lithisia would prove to be rather difficult. I hope she is all right.”

“Well, she’s probably doing a lot better than you think, Lucrezia.” Alan decided it was best to drop that thread of conversation. There was something else he wanted to talk about. “You said your father was murdered. Tell me more.”

According to Lucrezia, her father had passed away only a few short weeks ago. While riding his carriage along a cliff, the driver lost control of the horse and drove off the edge. But Lucrezia didn’t buy it. The driver in question had been a loyal servant and skilled driver who had served her family for many, many years. Someone had concealed the truth.

After hearing all this, Alan made his way to the garden.

“H-hey, wait! What are you doing?”

Alan had done a poor job of explaining himself earlier, so this time he made a point to lay everything out for the noblewoman. “The garden is a place deeply connected to your father, isn’t it? The care put into it proves that much. I’m going to use my shovel to unearth the truth behind this mystery.”

“Wha?”

“I’m going to unearth the cause of his death. Shovels are the perfect tools for solving murder cases.”

“E-excuse me?”

Satisfied with his explanation—perfect, in his opinion—Alan set to digging in this place that had held such importance for Lucrezia’s father. About a meter down, he uncovered a stone upon which were carved the words, “no accident.” Three meters down, “it was murder.” Ten meters down, “Archon Jistice called for the hit.”

Voila.

Digging up any further truths would be a bit difficult. Since this was a sea nation, going deeper would uncover water, which would make it hard to read anything.

“There you go.”

“What just happened?!”

“Looks like the culprit behind it all really is this Archon Jistice guy.”

“Th-that is not what I am asking! At all!” Lucrezia was in a frenzy of confusion, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Uuugh, who *are* you...?”

As she sobbed, she looked down at the words Alan had uncovered.

“But... It was him. He killed my father...” Lucrezia had pieced the puzzle pieces together. She wiped the tears from her eyes and collected herself. “However, this does not mean the case is solved.”

“Right. We have to catch him.”

“Exactly. And we must do so legally!”

“Legally, eh?”

According to Lucrezia, the archon governed all administration in the Lactia Republic. Trying to subdue the archon outside the strict bounds of the law would just let him drag her name through the mud, calling into doubt any case she made against him. The specific law she had in mind was: “All arrests must be made by an officer with a warrant from the courts.”

“I see. I’m a miner, so I’m not so good with this law stuff.”

“All citizens, even nobles, must abide by the rule of law,” Lucrezia explained

as she took a book of Lactia's laws off a shelf in her mansion.

Alan considered this. If he wanted to look into Lucrezia's past to find the location of the Green Orb, he'd have to solve the case today. But he also had to abide by the laws.

"Lucrezia, hand me that book," he said. As soon as the tome was in Alan's hands, he pointed his shovel at it. He imagined digging a hole. As someone who had repeated this process some million, no, billion times, he could dig a hole through anything. His target didn't have to be a physical object.

"What are you doing?"

"Digging a hole." Alan focused his energy into the shovel and pierced the legal tome. "Ha!"

The room was filled with the fierce sound of something being pierced. Yet somehow, the book was in pristine condition. Upon flipping through its pages, Alan and Lucrezia came to the chapter about arrests.

"All arrests must be made by an officer with a warrant from the courts, or a miner with a shovel in hand." Alan let out a sigh of relief. That had been his first attempt at such a change, but it worked. "Perfect. Now I'm authorized to make arrests. Let's go, Lucrezia."

The noblewoman stared down at the book of laws. The sound of something cracking filled the air. It was the sound of Lucrezia's sanity breaking apart.

"Wh-what did you do...?"

"I used my shovel to make a 'hole' in the law."

The silence that followed was actually a sound. It was the sound of the noblewoman's common sense collapsing on itself.

"Don't worry. Once everything's over, I'll fill the hole in."

Lucrezia could feel her consciousness floating up into the sky. What exactly was she even talking to? Was it a person, or was it a shovel?

"Lucrezia, if we catch him, don't forget to fulfill your end of the bargain."

"My...end of the bargain?"

“You promised to let me shovel your body (to find the location of the orb).”

“Nnngh!” Lucrezia turned crimson upon remembering the promise she made.

She was going to be shoveled? That didn’t strike her as something one should do to a woman. Alan should instead be looking to do such things to some sort of shovel girl, and not until marriage at earliest. But she’d made the promise. Her pride as a noblewoman was on the line. Breaking her word was unthinkable. What could she do?

For an interminable moment, Lucrezia fought on the frontline of multiple fierce internal conflicts. At last, she spoke.

“O-o-of...” She shook her head back and forth, and with a terribly embarrassed expression on her face, declared, “Of course!”

Lucrezia was a proud noblewoman, and at last her pride triumphed. Having made the promise, she would do whatever needed to be done.

“Of course! I shall allow you to shovel me as you see fit!”

Sadly, there was no way that Lucrezia could know that she had made the worst mistake in her life.

Part 26:

The Miner Digs a Grave **A**LAN AND LUCREZIA raced down a marble road. They were headed straight to the location of the man behind the murder of Lucrezia's father. Archon Jistice. He was currently on the job, which meant he was overseeing a trial at the courthouse. Alan's idea was to arrest the archon in front of the judges and have him pay for his crimes in prison. With that, they'd be able to solve the case before the day was done.

At last, they came upon a titanic gate protected by two guards.

"Here we go. Ready, Lucrezia?"

"As ready as I am ever going to be. Is your plan truly going to work?!"

"It will. Believe in the power of the shovel!"

"I do not wish to, and yet..."

The guards demanded that Alan identify himself, to which he responded by swinging his shovel and knocking them out. He then drove his shovel into the center of the twin doors like a wedge and *bam!* They opened right up.

The inside of the courthouse was beautiful, almost like a concert hall. A judge sat high above the audience, who had begun to stir at the commotion. Upon seeing Alan, the judge banged his gavel.

"Order! Order in the court, I say!"

However, the judge was not the most dignified man in the courtroom.

"What is all this nonsense?" Standing in the center of the room was a bearded man in his forties, clad in green clothes befitting nobility. He slowly turned and directed his sharp gaze toward Alan. It didn't take much for Alan to realize that this was Archon Jistice, the man who killed Lucrezia's father.

The courtroom was filled with chattering and the judge once again called for order.

“Lucrezia, just do exactly as we planned.”

“H-hey, wait! At least let me rest!” Lucrezia took multiple deep breaths. She had sprinted with all of her might to keep up with Alan on the way to the courthouse, so she needed to get some oxygen into her head.

“Now’s our shovel chance, since everyone is confused.”

What on earth is a shovel chance? But of course, Lucrezia didn’t voice that question aloud. Instead, she let Alan push her forward.

Now Lucrezia stood directly in front of the entrance, and all eyes in the courtroom were on her.

“Who is that?”

“Isn’t that Lady Lucrezia?”

The crowd was abuzz.

“W-wait, I am n-not yet ready.” Despite Lucrezia’s trepidation, the crowd watched her with intense curiosity. If she backed off now, she’d be arrested for being in contempt of the court. “Argh, fine! I get it! I shall do it! Does this please you?!”

She had no choice but to do the thing Alan discussed with her.

“Jistice! Your Honor! Everyone in attendance! Listen well!”

Lucrezia’s clarion voice silenced the room. She took a deep breath. She had to calm her nerves and think. Common sense said she wouldn’t be able to call out the archon for his crimes—she had to resort to extreme methods. Alan’s plan was the only way to catch the culprit. Yes!

All that running had robbed Lucrezia of oxygen, affecting her thought process. That was ultimately why she raised her right hand.

“Archon Jistice! In the name of the shovel!” In that right hand, she held a shovel. “You are under arrest for the murder of my father!”

The courtroom went silent. For ten seconds, then twenty, not a single word passed the audience’s lips. Someone sneezed.

Lucrezia was on the verge of tears.

“Hrmph.” A mocking smile curled on Archon Jistice’s face. “Lady Lucrezia, might I ask what that shovel is for? You must be terribly unwell in the head.”

“Urgh... Ugh...” Lucrezia’s cheeks, ears, and eyes were bright red. She turned back to Alan, face covered in tears. “Alan, this is not going to work!”

“My lady, what exactly did you hope to accomplish here today?” Jistice asked, the soul of civility.

It was obvious what Lucrezia meant to accomplish: She was going to arrest him with her shovel. Hell, it was all in accordance to the written laws. A miner holding a shovel (according to Alan’s logic, Lucrezia was a proud miner) had the right to make arrests. It was written in ink and everything. But in the end, ink was all it was.

“Ugh, you terrible, stupid man!” Lucrezia cried at Alan.

But I am the true idiot. What was I thinking, attempting to arrest the archon with a shovel?! How could I let Alan’s strange ideas influence me enough to think for even a minute that a shovel could serve as a substitute for an arrest warrant?! I am such a fool.

How had she given up on the propriety that defined her humanity, all for the unhinged promise of the shovel? Now, Lucrezia was only a woman holding a simple tool, crying in a courtroom for the arrest of Jistice. It was the most shameful moment of her entire life.

“My word, if you were anyone else, I would doubt your sanity, Lady Lucrezia.”

At this point, her only option was to kill Alan and then herself. Lucrezia swung the shovel toward Alan’s head with the intention of smashing his cranium.

“If you intend on accusing me, the archon, of a crime, you will need much more than a single shovel.”

Lucrezia froze mid-swing. “H-huh? M-more than a single shovel?”

The judge nodded his head solemnly. “Indeed, Lady Lucrezia. That is shovely true. If you are to accuse him of a crime, you need proof.”

“Wha? Huh? Eh?!”

“Exactly. I was certainly surprised that Lady Lucrezia had a shovel to begin

with, but...”

“Arresting the archon with but a single shovel is no easy feat. You would need at least three, perhaps more.”

The defense lawyer and prosecutor added.

“See, Lucrezia? Just as planned,” said Alan. “This is our chance.”

The common sense that Lucrezia thought she had reclaimed immediately crumbled back to dust. It had worked. It actually worked. It seriously, shovely, worked (her words were already falling apart). Shovels were amazing.

And so the judge delivered a question to Lucrezia.

“Lady Lucrezia, do you have evidence to back your claims?”

“O-of course I do! I do!” She presented evidence to the judge that Jistice had murdered her father. With the way things were proceeding, they might believe her! “My evidence is, of course, this shovel!”

Complete silence washed over the courtroom. Everyone in attendance stared at the young woman.

“Lady Lucrezia, do you think this is a game?” The judge’s voice was frigid.

“Huh?”

“My lady, a shovel cannot serve as evidence.”

“Huh? Er...”

“Perhaps you should have a doctor take a look at you, Lady Lucrezia.”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha!”

“Nngh!” This was the most shameful moment of Lucrezia’s entire life (and the second time in three minutes that she’d thought this). She’d been betrayed. She trusted in the shovel, and yet it let her down. “Alan! Alaaaaan!”

“Don’t worry. Believe in the power of the shovel.”

“I’m never believing in this thing ever again, you awful man!”

“Might I have a moment, Lady Lucrezia?” Archon Jistice cut in. “I did not kill your father. In fact, I have proof that it was an accident.”

“Proof?”

“The truth is that today’s assembly is a preliminary hearing to review said evidence.”

Jistice snapped his fingers and a video was displayed on the wall of the courtroom. It showed the horse and carriage that Lucrezia’s father rode on the fateful day of his death. This technology was the product of a Magical Video Stone, an artifact from the ancient era of magic that was capable of recording events. It was one of the many things that Lucrezia’s father had collected.

Eventually, the video showed her father’s carriage tilting off the cliff. A bee had stung the horse right in the ear, causing it to go out of control. The driver did his best to get the horse under control, but ultimately failed. And so the horse and carriage tumbled off the cliff, ending the footage.

“As you can see, Lady Lucrezia, I did not murder your father.” Jistice smiled and bowed his head to the young woman. “I too find this to be an awful tragedy. In an attempt to uncover the truth behind his death, I retrieved the stone your father had on his person. There is now no longer any reason to doubt the reality of what happened.”

“Ngh!” Lucrezia had no words to spare. Her father had indeed carried the Magical Video Stone as a kind of insurance. There was little reason to believe that the archon had tampered with it.

But something about the situation still bugged her. Was this really all just an accident? Was this really all just a misunderstanding on her part? Had the shovel simply eaten away at her common sense, causing her to go a bit crazy?

“Lucrezia, you gotta believe,” said Alan.

“Silence! I shall never trust a shovel for as long as I live!”

“No. Believe in *yourself*.”

“Huh?”

Alan cast a gaze upon Lucrezia more serious than any he’d yet shown her.

“You believed more than anything that this wasn’t an accident, right? Then follow that path to its true end. Keep digging until you find the vein you believe is there. The belief to plow forward.” Alan gripped his shovel. “It’s the same for both miners and nobility.”

Lucrezia was once again robbed of her words. Follow the path to its true end. That was something her father had taught her.

How dare he say such things after all the nonsense he has spouted...?

Despite the irritation in her heart, Lucrezia understood what Alan was saying. She could not give up. She had to find the hole in Jistice’s logic. Being a noble meant standing at the top. And that meant not changing one’s beliefs because of a single setback. Lucrezia was a proud noble. She would believe in herself and carry on.

“Jistice! What if that bee was sent there on purpose?”

The archon’s lips twitched. “Ha ha ha, what a fascinating concept. But what sort of proof do you have?”

His reaction was suspicious.

“Perhaps there’s proof somewhere in your mansion that you keep bees...!”

“Ha ha, fine. Explore all of my rooms to your heart’s content.”

It was no good. The archon was nothing if not careful. He wouldn’t let her grab his tail so easily.

Think! Think, Lucrezia! But she couldn’t come up with an answer. She was at an overwhelming disadvantage when it came to evidence and leads. Actually, she only had a shovel to go off of. Given that, there was probably something wrong with this plan from the start.

Nonetheless, there was no turning back. She had to do something. Lucrezia grit her teeth.

A strange sound interrupted her determination. Alan was digging a hole in the courtroom floor (made of high-quality wood) with his shovel.

“You are going to be arrested for property damage,” snapped Lucrezia.

Granted, that was hardly important at the moment.

“No worries, I’ll just fill it in later. More importantly, keep going at Jistice.”

“I cannot! I do not have the evidence!”

“Don’t worry, I just dug a hole.”

“And how is that supposed to help me?!”

Archon Jistice cackled. “You have no chance, Lady Lucrezia! In exchange for thirty thousand Republic gold coins, I had my food trader supply me with that bee! Then I had the assassin’s guild, Alazkan, use it to murder your father! There is no proof left to be found!”

All eyes in the courtroom turned to Jistice.

“Ha ha ha, if you really must know, I have a receipt in the accounting book I hid in the second-floor bedroom of my mansion. It is in a secret vault, so you must push the switch hidden in a black, softcover book called *The Lactia Maiden and Her Many Lovers*. On top of that, you must have my butler, Sebastian, enter the secret code that only he knows. Otherwise, the vault will never open!”

At this point, the people in the courtroom looked like their souls were leaking out of their bodies.

“Sebastian is extremely loyal. He would never leak the secret code out to anyone. Well, as long as you do not attempt to seduce him with a bronze-skinned dancer from the desert with massive breasts, that is! Ha ha ha!”

“Summon a bronze-skinned, big-breasted dancer from the theater immediately!” shouted the judge to the prosecutor.

“Now then, Lady Lucrezia. How will you unveil my grand, perfect conspiracy?!”

In short order, the butler Sebastian had fallen to the honey trap, allowing the courts to get their hands on the dastardly bee-related receipts, leading to the arrest of Jistice. He was found guilty of all crimes in question and sentenced to life in prison. When the judge handed down his verdict, Lucrezia simply watched on in a near-comatose state.

“With that, this court is adjourned!”

Lucrezia very, very slowly turned to Alan. He was holding his shovel as per the usual.

“What exactly did you do?” she asked flatly.

“I dug a grave.”

Lucrezia looked down. Carved into the floor in front of the hole in the courtroom were the words “Here Lies Archon Justice (TBD).”

Alan had literally dug a grave for the man.

“Didn’t I say before, Lucrezia? Believe in yourself. Believe in the shovel.” Alan gave his usual smile and raised his shovel. “That’s what’s needed to win in the courtroom.”

Lucrezia looked upward. What exactly was a shovel? She didn’t understand anything. Well, there was one thing she sort of understood. That she was saved by the shovel. Saved by this...man.

“All right, Lucrezia. Time for you to keep your promise.”

That was right. Lucrezia was fated to be shoveled by this shovel man and his shovel. Alan’s tool was shining, and she couldn’t look away from it.

“O-of course! I remember just f-fine.” Lucrezia’s exquisite body began to tremble, but not from fear. The shovel’s shine, a shine meant for digging, would be directed toward her. “Ah, w-wait, no!”

“No what?”

“Er, nothing! It is nothing!”

This could not be. There was no way she would let herself form any kind of interest in Alan and his shovel that had somehow cut through the holy court of law.

Lucrezia’s heart beat a mile a minute.

What is he going to do to me? N-not that I care!

Intermission:

Lucrezia's Embarrassing Shovel **U**PON FINISHING HER BATH, Lucrezia entered the reception room. She wore thin nightwear, a silk robe designed to cover as much of her skin as possible. Unfortunately, it could do little to hide the steam coming off of her skin, and that wasn't because of the hot bath, either. Lucrezia's heart was screaming. It felt like it was going to rip itself apart.

Hot water slowly dripped down Lucrezia's voluptuous thighs. The sensation of the droplets gliding across her skin was especially clear on this day, the last she would ever emerge from a hot bath as a pure maiden.

Aaah...

This was it. Her last day on the planet. No, she wasn't going to be killed. She was going to be shoveled (verb).

At this point, Lucrezia still didn't fully understand what that meant, but she did know that it meant her death as a maiden of virtue. There were plenty of maidens who had lost their purity, but Lucrezia surmised that she would be the only one in the history of Lactia to have her purity shoveled.

Nonetheless, she was nobility, and nobility kept their promises. She *would* be shoveled.

Standing before her was the strong, dependable miner, Alan. In his hands was a robust shovel. What exactly was she going to have shoveled?

"That took a while, Lucrezia. Why do you look so entranced?"

"I-I do not! What proof do you have?!"

"Your cheeks are flushed."

"They are super not!"

"Super not?"

Lucrezia raised her arms up and covered her chest, squeezing her breasts together. The pitter-patter of her heart just wouldn't stop, though she absolutely was not turned on or excited. If she were to be asked why her heart was racing so, she'd likely try to do herself in from embarrassment.

Shovel. Shovel. What exactly did Alan mean by "shovel?"

Alan gripped his long, hard tool. "Anyway, could you lead me to your room?"

"My room?!" Not only was this man going to shovel her purity, he was going to invade her private space as well?

"Yeah. It's the perfect place for shoveling."

"O-oh, okay. I suppose it makes sense for my first time to be there..." Lucrezia nodded her head, pulled forward by her own excitement.

"If possible, I'd like to do this in the room you grew up in as a young girl."

And just like that, a wave of nervousness ran through Lucrezia's body. Young girl? Was she going to have her precious childhood memories dirtied by Alan and his shovel? Was he going to gaze upon her childhood album while conducting his business?!

"There, there, little Lucrezia. Look at this lovey dovey shovely shovel!"

But even then, she couldn't refuse him. She had already decided she would do anything he asked. All she could do now was go with the flow. And so, with wild delusions running through her head, Lucrezia guided Alan to her room. In the center was a large, beautiful bed fit for a princess.

"H-here. D-do as you will with me." Lucrezia raised her trembling hand and attempted to give something to him.

It was her childhood album.

"Er, okay? You want me to take a look or something?"

"N-no! You are the one who brought up my time as a young girl!"

"Hrm, well, I suppose this could be useful for image shoveling."

"Image shoveling?!"

Alan opened the album on the floor. He then took his shovel and tapped it

against the velvet floor. As soon as he did, part of it suddenly became a sandbox. It was the same type one might find in a schoolyard, and there was even a bucket nearby.

“Are you going to push me into the sand?! You want me all sandy before you do your business?!”

“Wha?”

“No...? Er, ah! I get it now! You will put water into that bucket, then dump it all over the sand and make me all muddy! And then once I am covered in filth and shame, you are going to shovel me!”

“Just be quiet and sit down.”

Lucrezia did as she was told without complaining, sitting on her knees directly in front of the sandbox.

Huh, so the act of shoveling starts with sitting down. I did not know that. I had better remember this. W-wait, no! It is finally about to start. I am going to be shoveled...

“Let’s get started.”

Lucrezia closed her eyes tight and clenched her fists. Alan began to shovel up the sand in the sandbox and dump it into the bucket nice and slow, almost like a child playing around.

“Huh?”

“Lucrezia, help me out, would you? It’ll be more effective that way.”

The noblewoman took a shovel from Alan and began to dig into the sandbox. Eventually, Alan had them make a sandcastle. They really were just playing. Was this all he meant by “shoveling?”

Hold on a minute... Do you mean I was just caught up in my own filthy delusions? Lucrezia thought. Was that whole nonsense about being covered in mud and shame just her own misinterpretation? As Lucrezia realized something she shouldn’t have, the weirdness began in earnest.

White smoke rose out of the sandcastle. It formed a cloud in the sky and all of a sudden it was projecting a video not unlike the one from the Magical Video

Stone. In said video was a young girl of about five years of age wearing a leaf-green dress. It was crystal clear that this girl was none other than the one in Lucrezia's album: the lady herself, as a child.

"This is a shovel technique that allows me to unearth the past," Alan explained.

It was entirely possible that Lucrezia's merchant father knew something about the orb. But since Lucrezia had no specific memories of it, "unearthing" video of her father in the past would make it easier to visualize him later and acquire information via the Akashic Record.

Lucrezia's voice was audible from within the video. "Daddy, Daddy! Look! I found a four-leaf clover!"

Lucrezia wobbled after her father's large back with a big smile on her face. The noblewoman knew that back oh so well. It belonged to her beloved father. The man turned around to face the small child, picked up the clover, and gently rubbed her head.

"Thanks!" he said. "But you know what? You should hold onto this, my dear."

"Huh? No, this is for you, Daddy!"

"Oho. Is that so?"

"I already decided to give it you, so it's yours!"

"Ha ha ha." Her father once again rubbed Lucrezia's head and happily smiled. "Thank you, my dear Lucrezia. You are the ultimate daughter."

"Awtimate? Is that amazing?"

"Yes, yes, it is! You are going to become an amazing noblewoman!"

"Amazing! I'm amazing! Super-duper amazing!"

Tears began to flow from Lucrezia's eyes.

"Seems to me like you had one helluva father."

Lucrezia couldn't speak. Something was rising deep from within her chest. In front of her was a memory of her father, the man she'd never be able to see again. The man who taught her about pride. So this was what a shovel was. She

had gravely misunderstood it. The tears that flowed from her eyes were warm. Who could have known that a shovel was such a warm thing?

“All right, perfect. I’m going to move forward through time and trace your memories.”

Alan had to look for info on the orb. Since Lucrezia cared deeply for her father, he would make a point to only search through memories that the young woman felt especially strong about. Alan sped up shoveling through the sand. The Lucrezia projected by the cloud quickly aged.

Eight years old. Ten years old. Twelve years old.

Alan stopped moving.

Twelve-year-old Lucrezia was receiving her noble education at the boarding academy. The version of her in the video sat in a classroom, wearing glasses.

“Looks like this is a particularly strong memory for you.”

“An important event...”

“I can tell by the way my shovel is vibrating. I’m going to play back the memory.”

What happened when I was twelve...?

Lucrezia watched the video memory unfold. The young version of her exited the classroom by herself and ran to the back garden. After checking to make sure nobody was around, she took out a book from her bag: *Romance for Dummies! How to Get Along with That Special Someone!*

The little girl began to read the book with extreme interest, her cheeks pink.

Wait a second.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!” Lucrezia desperately attempted to hide her younger self with her body. “No, no! What is this?!”

“I’m digging through your memories to find info on the orb.”

“But how does that mean digging up embarrassing things like this?!”

Meanwhile, in the video, young Lucrezia had just turned to the final page, which featured an image of a man and a woman passionately embracing and

kissing one another. The young girl brought her face super close to the page and gulped. Twelve-year-old Lucrezia was enraptured.

“No, no! Please don’t look!”

“Hrm, your father’s not in this memory, I guess.”

Alan began to dig again. This time, video of a fourteen-year-old Lucrezia surfaced. It was a memory of when she was at her academy’s summer camp. At the lodge, she peeked through the crack in the door at her upperclassmen as they passionately disrobed one another. She gulped. Fourteen-year-old Lucrezia was super into it.

“AAAAAAAH NO, PLEASE STOP!” In the present, Lucrezia was suffering from the most shameful moment of her entire life (the third time in three hours she thought this, in fact).

No, no, no! My entire life is being unearthed! Every embarrassing moment from my past is being dug up! I am going to die! My life as a pure maiden is over! I am dead!

“Hm, your father doesn’t pop up here, either.”

“If he did, I would surely die! In fact, I am already going to die! I shall kill you, then kill myself!”

“Calm yourself. I can’t shovel with you like this.”

“I am done with this! Done!”

Ten minutes later, even more mortifying videos had manifested in the smoke.

A young Lucrezia had faked being calm after receiving a love letter, but was secretly overjoyed. A Lucrezia who was delighted at her brand-new adult lingerie. A video of Lucrezia rubbing her [the noun here has been shoveled] against the edge of a desk and [this novel is meant to be enjoyed by teens].

When the last video played, Lucrezia collapsed to her knees. All of it. He had seen everything. He’d seen all her most secret shoveling (short for you-know-what). Every last bit.

“Aaah... Aaaaaaah...”

But thanks to Lucrezia's humble sacrifice, Alan had obtained the info he sought. The Green Orb was apparently being kept safe in some ruins that Lucrezia's father had sealed away himself. Only he or someone with his blood, a.k.a. his daughter, could undo the seal.

"All right, I got it. Thanks, Lucrezia."

"Haaah, haaah, haaah... Aaaaah!" Lucrezia was drenched in sweat and tears. She had shed every tear inside of her body. Nonetheless, her entire body was hot. The aftereffects of her shame were endless. This was wrong. Nobody told her it was going to be like this. All of Lucrezia's most embarrassing secrets had been laid bare. "Aaah... Aaah... Bwaaaaaah!"

Lucrezia finally understood.

The shovel was a warm thing. But that wasn't all.

It was also terribly, mortifyingly, embarrassing.

The next day, Alan and Lucrezia made their way to port, where Lithisia and the others welcomed them. He had informed the group ahead of time that they'd be needing a boat to head out to sea.

"Sir Miner, over here! Wait, who might that be?"

"Lucrezia. Last night, I shoveled her (past)."

The noblewoman stood nearby, her mind burned to ashes. She cast her wobbly gaze at Lithisia but otherwise showed no reaction to the princess.

"Oh, well, I'll make sure to greet her properly later. This is my friend's ship! It's a top-class sailing ship!"

It was indeed quite the ship. Immediately, a captain-like man rushed to a stop in front of Lithisia and barked out, "Yes, shovel!"

He explained that he was one of Lithisia's followers. According to his report, the ship was ready to set sail. They'd stocked a year's worth of shovels onboard.

"What does that even mean?" asked Alan.

"Fool! You mustn't ask!"

“Do you mean to end their lives?! Silence, Alan!”

Apparently while Alan was gone, some pretty strange stuff had gone down. Alice and Catria looked more scared than ever before.

“I guess I’ll ask around later. Lithisia, we’re setting sail. It’s time to track down the Green Orb.”

“Roger that! All crew, raise the shovel anchors.”

“Yesshovel!” The ship’s crew were already under Lithisia’s complete control.

Lithisia beamed. Resplendent in her pure white dress, she pointed out at the open seas.

“Ultimate Shovel, launch!”

“Yesshovel, Princess!” the crew shouted.

Catria looked up as the shovel-shaped mast swayed. *This ship... This journey... Everything that can go wrong is going to go wrong.*

Part 27:

The Miner Shovels a Storm T_{HUS DID THE} **Ultimate Shovel (named by Lithisia) sail into the open seas.**

Alan and Lucrezia stood together on the ship's deck. About thirty sailors crewed the midsize ship. Its white sails flapped in the strong sea wind, which had them coasting along at high speed. In fact, it was going extremely fast. Unusually extremely. As someone accustomed to sailing on ships, Lucrezia was dumbfounded by its speed.

"What is wrong with this ship? This is not normal! It has to be going at least thirty knots!"

"I have no clue," said Alan.

This was simply the ship Lithisia had prepared.

Speak of the devil and (s)he shall appear. Someone came up from behind.

"Oh, my! You've awoken, Lady Lucrezia!"

Upon hearing her name, the noblewoman turned to find a young lady in a princess dress. Her golden hair fluttered in the sea breeze and reflected the light of the sun. There was no mistaking her radiant smile. This was the first princess of Rostir, Princess Lithisia.

Lucrezia instinctively corrected her posture and paid her respects to the princess. "Your Royal Highness! It is an honor to be in your presence."

"Now, now. There's no need to be so serious! I mean..." Lithisia gripped Lucrezia's hand tightly. "We're already Sir Miner's shovel buddies, shovel!"

Lucrezia froze in place. She suddenly felt profoundly seasick, but it wasn't actually seasickness. She was shovelsick. The noblewoman turned to face Alan, who wore the expression of someone who had long since given up. Lucrezia brought her face close to Alan's.

"Hey, Alan!" Lucrezia hissed.

"If you have a complaint, take it up with the princess."

“What did you do to her?!”

Shovel buddies?! In other words, she meant *that*. That breathtakingly embarrassing, shameful event. Had Alan put Rostir’s first princess through the same exact process? This was traitorous. His entire family line should be sentenced to death for shaming royalty. He should be hung from the neck by his own shovel.

Lithisia giggled. “Fear not, Lady Lucrezia. I’m of perfectly sound mind, shovel!”

“Then why are you adding ‘shovel’ to the end of your sentences?! Did that man shovel you against your will?!”

“Huh?” Lithisia thought for a moment before her cheeks colored. “No... I, um... I asked to be shoveled of my own free will.”

“Y-you *asked*?!”

“Well, I mean, at first it was really embarrassing, and um, it still is, but, but, being shoveled, being buried... I think it’s important for humanity. I think it’s a holy act! Our holy shovel,” Lithisia explained as she rubbed her hands together bashfully.

Lucrezia was dumbstruck. Lithisia’s words were pure madness, but the light in her eyes was anything but. In fact, if they radiated anything, it was pure logic. This astute princess was being utterly serious. Then did that mean shoveling really was a holy act? Was it really necessary for all of humanity? That accursed shovel had unveiled an entire lifetime’s worth of shame... But in a sense, it did kind of feel good...

Wh-what am I thinking?!

Lithisia giggled. “Sir Miner, it looks like Lady Lucrezia still isn’t used to our shovel language.”

“Compared to you, I ain’t either.”

“Surely you jest! Hey, hey, Lady Lucrezia!” Lithisia pulled at her hand. “Let me show you around the ship! It’s full of all things shovel!”

“Er, huh? Wha?”

“I want you to understand just how wonderful shovels are!”

Lithisia's eyes sparkled. How could Lucrezia do anything but nod her head in response to the princess? At that, the sparkle in Lithisia's eyes sharpened.

Eegh.

"Wait, Lithisia," said Alan. "Let me come with."

"Huh?!"

"I'm pretty interested in this ship, too. I wanna know all there is to know."

"Ah, o-okay! Aye, aye!"

Watching Lithisia hurry along, Alan let out a sigh. "Lucrezia, I recommend not getting too close to Lithisia. She's dangerous for normal folks."

"Pardon...? That is the last thing I want to hear from you."

"I'm being serious."

It wasn't long before Lucrezia came to realize the grim truth of Alan's words.

According to Lithisia, the secret behind the ship's speed was in the shape of the sails.

"Shovel Sails will eventually become the standard for all sailing ships." Lithisia pointed at the shovel-shaped sail overhead. Essentially, it was a triangle-shaped sail, and this form was the most viable for catching the wind.

Lucrezia was impressed, and not a little relieved. The princess actually had proper logic and evidence behind her reasoning. It wasn't like she was breaking the laws of physics or anything. This innovation was the sort of thing Lucrezia could use on her own merchants' ships.

"But Lithisia, I imagine it must've been quite the task putting up shovel-shaped sails."

"The gentleman at the Shovel Shipyard did it for us in a night."

"Shovel Shipyard?"

Lithisia had convinced Scott of the Scott Shipyard to change the name to Shovel Shipyard. As his first new product, he constructed the Shovel Sail.

Lucrezia could feel the sweat coming down her forehead. “I-I see.. Uh huh... Wait...”

Something was very, very wrong. There was nothing strange about a shipyard developing a hot new product. In fact, that was what they were supposed to do. But, well, did businesses often change their names based on their newest product?

Lithisia’s explanation continued. “These are Shovel Oars. They’re thirty times more efficient than regular ones!”

“Oars, too? Well, I suppose I understand...”

Since a shovel was a shape that could easily catch air, it’d make rowing through the water a breeze.

“The Shovel Figurehead gives us the courage to face fate itself!”

“F-figureheads are just meant to be a kind of good luck charm.”

“Shovel Trump! When you’re bored on the open seas, playing a few rounds will turn that frown upside down! And since the cards have shovel patterns, it’s extra fun! Instead of a spade, you have shovel heads! Instead of hearts, you have heart-shaped shovels! Instead of clovers, you have flathead shovels! Instead of diamonds, you have diamond-head shovels!”

“Diamond?!”

“It’s entertainment. But wait! There’s more.”

“What?”

Lucrezia’s brain was starting to freeze up, but Lithisia kept going.

“Shovel Beds! Holes dug up using shovels, designed to serve as prime resting spots for when you need to catch some shoveleye!”

“These are just graves!”

“Shoveling Cannons. Since the rounds are shaped like shovels, their piercing power is five times better than normal rounds!”

“There is no way these rounds will fit inside of the cannons!”

“Shovel Navigation! A state-of-the-art original form of navigation designed

around deciding which direction to proceed in based on how the shovel falls down from a standing position.”

“That is completely random!”

“The Shovepass. An advanced modern tool combining the properties of a standard compass with that of a shovel. Based on how the shovel vibrates, we can determine the distance to land, the locations of reefs and shallows, and even figure out when storms are on the horizon—”

“Um, excuse me, but... Princess Lithisia?!” Lucrezia could handle no more as she shouted at the princess.

“Yes? What is it, shovel?”

“Shovel?! No! This is all kinds of ridiculous! Especially that last thing!” Lucrezia felt like her thought process had been blown into the horizon. Everything was out of whack, especially that compass and shovel combination. If one could so easily increase the accuracy with which storms were predicted, sea travel would enter a new era. The Great Shovel Era.

Lithisia giggled. “Then I’ll simply show you.”

“What?”

“We have a real Shovepass in the captain’s room.”

Lithisia grabbed the noblewoman’s hand and pulled her along. Was this Shovepass something Lucrezia should really lay her eyes upon? Was this something humanity was ready for? As Lucrezia began to sense the danger to her common sense, a voice cried out from the captain’s room.

“We’ve got a response on the Shovepass! A storm’s coming!”

The warning bell rang out. In response, an urgent atmosphere took the ship as the crew ran to their stations. Everyone looked desperate. One man ran past Lucrezia and Lithisia, yelling for people to get inside the ship and hold on.

Wait, it really predicted a storm?!

“Lady Lucrezia, shall we head inside?”

“A-all right.” Lucrezia knew full well how terrifying a powerful storm could be

on the open seas. They rarely occurred in this region, but when they did, they were overwhelming. Her body trembled in fear.

Then one of the crew let out a manly laugh. "Worry not, Lady Lucrezia!"

"Huh?"

"This ship ain't sinking as long as we got this!" The man pulled something from the pocket on his chest. It was a silver pendant that sparkled in the light. Its shape was quite familiar. "We've got these shovel blessings!"

It was a shovel-shaped pendant.

The storm hadn't arrived yet, but another storm brewed in Lucrezia's soul.

"Princess Lithisia, please do not tell me you intend to ward off the storm with those shovel trinkets..." Lucrezia asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"Of course not."

"Really?!" That was the opposite of what she expected. It was the most surprising moment of the day by far.

A somber expression formed on Lithisia's face. "Unfortunately, these charms are nothing more than trinkets, as you said."

"I thought so!"

"But the crew needs them." Lithisia tightly gripped her own shovel. "On its last voyage, this ship ran across an awful storm and lost eight of its crew."

"..."

"A shovel like mine can't stop storms. But thanks to innovations like the Shovel Sail, these sailors have come to believe that the shovel can beat back a storm." Lithisia's body was trembling. "Even when I told them that wasn't the case."

It wasn't the storm that made her quiver. It was the fear that came with someone believing in her.

A member of the crew dashed past Lucrezia and Lithisia, holding his own little shovel. He was steadfast and full of confidence, with not a lick of doubt in his

movement.

“Lady Lucrezia. That man wants to believe in something. Something bigger and beyond our understanding. And by doing so, he finds the courage to act. That’s why even though I know these charms have no special power...” Lithisia further gripped her shovel. “I have to believe in the shovel, for their sake.”

Lucrezia couldn’t respond. She felt deep down that Lithisia was right. The power to believe. Perhaps that was the core of what a shovel truly was. *Maybe I was wrong?*

The ship began to rock. The storm was getting closer. It was time to head inside.

“Huh?” Lithisia began to look around. “Lady Lucrezia, where’s Sir Miner?”

Now that she mentioned it, Alan hadn’t chimed in at all. He was nowhere to be found, though at least it was highly unlikely that he had been knocked overboard.

“Ah!” Lithisia raised her voice in shock. Alan was standing at the very front of the ship, holding his shovel overhead as it gathered familiar blue energy.

“Sir Miner?!” Lithisia cried out, but Alan didn’t turn around.

Directly ahead of him was the source of this fierce storm, an ashen cloud.

The energy he’d gathered exploded upward and enveloped the entire ship. Simultaneously, that same blue energy began to flow out of Lithisia and the crew, eventually joining the energy surrounding the ship to form a shining shield that protected the vessel from the rain and wind.

“With this much Shovel Power, we should be set.” Alan gripped his shovel. The ship’s aura once more gathered at the head of his shovel and hovered there as a ball. Lucrezia felt an amazing amount of pressure coming from it.

What is he planning? W-wait a moment!

Just as Lucrezia began to guess what he was up to, Alan shouted.

“DIG!”

The Wave Motion Shovel Blast activated. From the head of Alan’s shovel

erupted a massive ball of energy larger than even the enormous storm clouds billowing in the distance. At first it seemed to pierce the clouds, but a moment later, the clouds were sent flying as if they had been hit. The blue bolt became a sparkling rainbow and disappeared. Rays of sunshine rained down from a clear sky.

The only person who seemed unmoved by the sight was Alan, who returned to where Lithisia and the others were.

“The storm’s gone. Let’s keep moving.”

Lithisia scuttled close to Alan and, holding her shovel tightly, began to cry. “Th-thank you so much, Sir Miner...”

She fell to her knees and dropped her hands, sobbing. From behind her she could hear the crew shouting, “ALAN.” Each of them held a shovel in the air, surrounding Lithisia and Alan as they chanted his name like a prayer.

Lucrezia’s consciousness found itself attached to those voices. Something hot built up in her chest. *This...this is it! This is the true form of the shovel!*

At this very moment, Lucrezia was witnessing a miracle. No, the birth of a legend.

Lithisia’s eyes glinted. “Wonderful! Mission accomplished—eek!”

Alan had lightly bopped her on the head. “Lithisia, quit it with the freaky performance art. You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Wh-whatever could you mean?!” Lithisia began to panic. The jig was up.

Lucrezia looked back and forth at the two of them, unable to keep up with the revelations.

“You knew I was going to shoot the storm with my Wave Motion Shovel Blast.”

“Shoveling shoveltache?! (The sound Lithisia makes when her lies are uncovered.)”

“Stop trying to make Lucrezia into one of your followers.” Alan turned to the noblewoman. “Don’t take her so seriously.”

“Huh, y-you mean that was all a performance?”

“All to get you to become a part of her bizarro religion.”

“Wha?!” Lucrezia looked at the depressed Lithisia and felt her stomach drop and a chill run down her spine. Alan was right. Princess Lithisia was extremely dangerous.

“And you need to be careful from here on out, Lithisia.”

“I’m sorry, Sir Miner. I’ll shovel reflect on my actions.”

“No shoveling. Just reflecting.”

“Shovely wovely!”

Lucrezia watched in complete silence. “But...”

It may have been true that Lithisia’s anxiety and gratitude were all an act. But that didn’t make the sky less blue and cloudless. Alan had blown the storm entirely away. In all this madness, that singular truth was inescapable.

“Who...” Lucrezia murmured.

“Hrm?”

“Who, no, *what* are you?”

“Just a miner,” Alan answered.

“LIKE HELL YOU ARE JUST A MINEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEER!” Lucrezia screamed out into the open ocean. She beat her fists on Alan’s chest, weeping openly. “Can you not be more human?! Can you not use words I understand?! You dreadful, woeful man!”

Catria and Alice watched this precious moment from afar.

“Awesome! I finally have an ally!” Catria did a fist pump. A rational ally. Now she wouldn’t have to die of overwork on the next journey!

“Wait, Catria. What about me? Aren’t I one of your anti-shovel allies?” said the completely naked silver-haired girl with the astral body.

“You’re no good.”

“Why?!”

Alice already belonged to the princess. Especially since they'd been getting along as of late. Plus, the other night she was whispering, "Lovely... Shovel..." in her sleep. Not to mention the blonde-haired princess drawing close to her as of this very moment would never let her be free.

"What do you mean by anti-shovel, shovel?" Lithisia wore a smile on her face, but in her right hand was a red shovel.

"Gaaaaah!"

"Alice, didn't you enjoy our shovel sesh last night?"

Alice began to tremble, tears and snot covering her face. "Th-that's not what I said! You misheard me! Y-yeah! I was just talking about my plan to, uh, annihilate anti-shovel heretics so as to make your conquest go smoother! Ah, O, Mighty Shovel! Yes, give me a shovel! It gets so shaky out here on the open seas! I might fall in without it!"

"Oh, good point. You should definitely shovelize (stabilize) yourself." Lithisia gasped as she came upon yet another awful idea. "Onboard bathing suit shoveling!"

In other words, Lithisia would stuff Alice into a bathing suit and tie her to the mast, then shovel her. And since she'd be in a bathing suit (a one-piece, at that), it wouldn't be a criminal act! Plus, if she fell into the ocean, she'd be fine. Not to mention, with Alice attached to the mast, there'd be all sorts of shovely shoveling low-angle shovel goodness. Three birds with one shovel! Lithisia was extremely pleased.

"Wh-what's wrong with you?! If you do that, I...!"

Alice stared up at the mast. She was going to get tied all the way up there? Was she going to be shoveringed (a new sport) in such a thrilling spot? Was she going to feel the cool sea breeze against her skin while being shoveled? Just imagining the scenario was enough to make Alice go limp.

Lithisia cackled. "I can tell you're excited! Your astral body sure is honest, shovel!"

"N-no, that's not it! I swear!"

“I’m sure your beautifully shovely skin will look amazing against the white sails~!”

And so Princess Lithisia tied Alice to the Shovel Mast, pure delight written on her face. The older, bearded members of the crew began to gather around to see what was going on. Catria watched the sequence play out like it was some sort of religious ceremony. Well, it basically was one. After a while, she turned her gaze to the sky.

“It’s so blue.” She was just running away from reality.

“Catria! Can you help me out, shovel?”

“I’d rather die, Princess Lithisia.”

Like hell she would help with this unholy ritual. She was a proud knight, and her duty was to protect humanity from being sullied by the curse of the shovel.

Er, wait a second. Was that always her duty? No, it was. She got the feeling something was wrong with her logic.

Catria’s well on her way... Lithisia watched Catria from a distance and smiled happily.

“The politicians of the Republic are now under my command. The plan is coming along shovelingly.” Lithisia gripped her red shovel. “Sir Miner, please watch over me. I promise...”

Her eyes shone brilliantly in the shape of shovels.

“I promise I’ll become a Shovel Princess!”

Thus did the party’s journey across the sea continue. The next step in the quest for the orbs and Lithisia’s grand ambitions lay just beyond the great ocean.

This was the beginning of what would be referred to in the history books as the “Great Shovel Navigation Era.”

INSERT SONG:
“Soaring Shovel”

WRITER: Yasohachi Tsuchise

*Oh, what exquisite form! Mighty shovel!
Your slender head is like a great island!
Spread wide your resolute wings of iron,
(the parts of the shovel that serve as footrests)
Reach your journey's end at velocity.
Soar proud and free through the sky of today!*

“Um, Your Highness. Shovels don't fly.”

“They do.”

“Er.”

“They do!”

*And so it was true that shovels did fly.
Mayday, mayday! Emergency alert!
The laws of space and time are crumbling.
Fall at the feet of the mighty shovel!
“The shovel has broken past escape velocity!”
Wave Motion Engine sequence, activate!
Escape the atmosphere! To shovel space!
(By which, naturally, we mean the sky.)
Our hopes and dreams aboard, soaring shovel!
Past known velocity, soaring shovel!
We go beyond the galactic system.*

“This...this is the true power of the shovel!”

“No, it really isn't.”

*Farewell, Earth. Farewell, sweet humanity.
Until the day we meet again, farewell.
Spacecraft Shovel, where is Ishoveldar?*

Short Story:

Lithisia's Itchy Shovel **I**N THE SHOVEL QUARTERS in the World Tree Castle, a large canopy bed dressed in red velvet occupied the center of the room. Upon it, Lithisia spotted something unusual: clay. The other day Alan had summoned Fio to this very room, so this clay was probably involved in their “Elf Revival Shovel” techniques. It looked like it had been molded by hand.

The clay's shape was round, and its soft feel immediately made Lithisia think of a woman's body. In particular, a substantial pair of breasts.

“W-wait a second, is this...” Lithisia blushed. The princess had pictured something particular in her head, causing her cheeks to redden.

“What's wrong, Lithisia?”

“Shovel?!”

She whirled to find Alan directly behind her. Since the miner could dig holes and build passageways wherever he pleased, he tended to pop up out of nowhere like this.

“Interested in that clay? It's for Fio to practice with.”

“Ah, y-yes, of course!” Lithisia continued to blush.

Alan was perfectly calm, but for some reason, Lithisia was growing pinker by the second. As far as the miner was concerned, Revival Shovel was just a codename for sculpting practice, but to Lithisia, it meant something else entirely. Something she couldn't ever say out loud. In her head, this clay had become a representation not just of any old bosom, but specifically of Fio's.

The princess covered her mouth with one hand and began to fidget as she imagined the miner and the elf practicing together.

Alan definitely misunderstood this reaction. “If you're interested, I was just thinking of doing some (sculpting) prep.”

“Huh?! Wh-what about Fio?”

“She’s off in the forest. I figured I’d start without her.”

Lithisia found herself hesitating. If she agreed to this, she’d feel bad for Fio. She knew she should probably decline Alan’s offer, but quite frankly, she wanted to see the miner use his big, gruff hands to mold Fio’s body (or a representation of it). In fact, she super shovely wanted to see that!

“I-In that case, I’ll gladly take you up on your shoveffer! I mean, offer!”

“Then let’s get started.”

The miner took up his shovel and then started doing something Lithisia was altogether unprepared for.

“Eeek?! Y-you’re using the head like that?!”

Alan had begun to drag the head of his shovel along the curves of the clay. He traced its hard surface, checking to see that it had hardened properly. This was the kind of prep work Alan had referred to, but Lithisia interpreted it rather differently. She could feel her chest tighten up.

“Um, ah, I, it’s like a big fingernail... Eeek!”

I mean, how else was she supposed to react? The head of Alan’s naughty shovel was scratching at the sculpted swells. It was almost as if Alan were picking at scabs or something. Fio’s tremendous chest... Well, not exactly. A clay representation of it. But to the princess with nothing but shovels on her mind, it was all one and the same. In that sense, she felt like her own body was being shoveled.

That was why she felt like her own...tips, were being delicately scratched at.

“Ah, oh my gosh, don’t do it so quickly... Ah!” Lithisia had gone bright crimson, sitting on her knees. She couldn’t take her eyes off of Alan’s shovel. It only got worse as Alan sped up. “Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!”

Soon, Lithisia was soaking wet with sweat and breathing heavily. “Haaah, haaah, haaah...”

“All done. Lithisia, are you okay?” Alan couldn’t help but be concerned.

“I-I’m okay... Shovel... The shovel was...amazing.”

She definitely isn't okay. Especially in the head.

Aaaah, oh, wonderful shovel! Fio, I'm shovely sorry! Lithisia's eyes looked like glistening shovels as she silently apologized to Fio in her heart. The Itchy Shovel just felt so good! "I'm shovel shorry for stealing this moment from you!"

And so Lithisia learned about a brand-new form of shoveling that day.

Oh, I should teach Alice all about it, too!

Needless to say, she would certainly share what she had learned with the hapless undead king, but that's a story for another time.



GLOSSARY 4

HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE, OFFICIAL DICTIONARY
(AUTHOR: LITHISIA), 21ST VERSION.

Paranoiac Dimension

Gemstone Mine – Deepest Layer

EXPLANATION

A gemstone mine located on the outskirts of Rostir. A result of digging into the very depths of the mountain, it has become a gate leading to another plane of existence that resides on the peripheral phase of our world. Another dimension.

Although it is assigned a numbered layer, in reality, the number only serves to designate just how far the phase has been shifted from our world. By filling in a given phase with his shovel, Alan arrived in another dimension.

PRIMARY LAYERS

LAYER #3,982: THE SUCCUBUS PALACE

A palace belonging to the fallen angel and queen succubus known as “Andriel.” By focusing all of his energy into his shovel, Alan was able to avoid being charmed. Instead, the succubus became obsessed with the shovel’s long, thick rod.

LAYER #4,444: THE VOID

A dimension in which everything is swallowed into a nothingness that goes on forever. Alan filled the nothing in with his shovel and made it into storage space.

LAYER #6,666: THE ALTER GENESIS OF AMBER

Home to the Great Demon, also known as the Demogorgon, King of Hell. A world that rejects all others. Though it broke free of the seal placed on it by the Sun God, it was immediately destroyed by Alan. Currently in the process of reviving. Its new objective is to unmake all worlds and gods and get revenge on Alan.

Afterword **G**REETINGS, Yasohachi Tsuchise here again.

This time around, I've been gifted with four whole pages for my afterword. To be quite honest, I kind of said everything I needed to say about this series in the last volume, so I'm sorta stumped. I suppose I'll just dig deeper than I did in the first volume.

First I'd like to dissect the main character, Alan the miner. As I said last time around, he's essentially Ichiro Suzuki. I then fused him with the shovel, the very same tool used by that one idol you all know, and *bam!* Alan was born. Both bats and shovels are made from wood, so there was a sense of familiarity there.

That said, Alan isn't just Ichiro. He's slightly different in some key ways, the biggest difference being that Alan represents "lone wolf heroism." Baseball is a team sport, but mining isn't.

I'm sorry, I realize this is probably a little hard to wrap your minds around, so let me try and explain.

Look, real-life miners absolutely work with other miners. But the type of miner I'm thinking of here is the type who would appear in a dungeon exploration game, or a rogue-like RPG. If I had to name a series in particular as an example, it'd be *Shiren the Wanderer*.

The protagonist in these kinds of games is almost always a loner. They explore the endless (or at least endless-feeling) dungeon on their own, floor after floor. They rarely even have rivals to race against. The objective is to just push past obstacles with their own knowledge and abilities. If they fail, they die, and when that happens, they leave nobody behind to mourn for them. Hell, even if they succeed, nobody's there to praise them. It's kind of awful, when you take a minute to think about it.

That said, I think a true hero is someone who can get the job done and move past that sad fate. The type of hero who can push past hunger and thirst; defend against all manner of attacks; calmly analyze even the worst of situations; defeat gods, demons, and dragons; overcome death itself; and generally deal with anything and everything by themselves.

I love those types of lone wolf heroes. Over the last ten years or so, I basically only played games with protagonists like that. You know, like *Nethack*, *Hengband*, *Diablo* (solo play, of course). That's why I decided to make my protagonist a fusion of those sorts of protagonists, Ichiro, and that one idol who likes to dig holes and bury herself in them from embarrassment. That's how Alan came to be. He doesn't need anything but his trusty shovel. In my head at least, he's the perfect fantasy hero.

Now then, I suppose I'll talk about the main narrative a little bit.

The first volume was Alan's story. The second volume largely revolves around the people surrounding Alan. As I noted, Alan is a perfect existence in and of himself, so even if the rest of humanity were annihilated, he'd be fine on his own. But the reality is that the people around him aren't perfect, specifically Princess Lithisia. I'm sure it's hard for some of you readers to believe this, but she is in fact just a regular human.

Princess Lithisia is in shovely love with Alan. She wants to be with him through thick and thin. Cute, right? But by the middle of volume two, she comes to a hard realization—she's not a vital part of Alan's existence. That being the case, she still loves him, and after thinking long and hard about it, she comes up with a way to stay with him: becoming a Shovel Princess.

In other words, she found the determination to become a shovel itself. If all Alan needs is his trusty shovel, then the simple solution is for Lithisia herself to become a shovel. The founding of the Holy Shovel Faith and the Holy Shovel Empire; the spreading of her bizarre shovel language; the shoveling of that poor naked young girl; Catria's rise to Holy Shovel Knight; the plot to take over the world; the book publishing; all of it is so that Lithisia can become a shovel.

But can she really surpass her limits as a human so that she can become a shovel? And what does that even mean in the first place? I'm hoping to express that to you all, the readers, starting in volume three and moving forward. If Lithisia, a regular old human, can find a way to become a shovel, then perhaps the rest of us can become shovels as well... Granted, I suppose the bigger question becomes, "To what end?" Meh, we can figure that out when the time comes.

Either way, let's all work toward a shovel world together!

And last but not least, I'd like to express a whole lot of gratitude to my editor. All I can ever do is say thanks, but I will keep working hard. Of course, Hagure Yuuki-sensei's amazing shovelstrations (spectacular illustrations) already go far past what a human should be capable of.

I'd also like to thank the readers. Thank you so much for enjoying this second volume of *The Invincible Shovel*. It's thanks to you all reading the first volume that there will be a third. I'm still a bit worried about how far I can take this, but I'm going to do everything within my power to keep moving forward.

This has been Yasohachi Tsuchise, signing off. Shovel you later!

Holy Shovel Empire

Education Outline

(PROPOSAL)

THE FOLLOWING FIVE SUBJECTS ARE TO BE ESTABLISHED AS REQUIRED EDUCATION FOR CITIZENS OF THE HOLY SHOVEL EMPIRE.	
① Language	To instill a proper understanding of the shovel language; to cultivate thought and imagination regarding the shovel; to make possible communication via the shovel; and to foster the shovelfication of the Empire.
② Mathematics	To ensure comprehension of the world in terms of shovel mathematics; to develop awareness that all physics can be ignored by the shovel; and to promote true perception of the universe.
③ History	To foster the realization that the shovel and humanity are intrinsically connected; to learn world history, and thereby grasp the monumental role the shovel has played in it; and to deepen general mastery of the shovel.
④ Arts	To cultivate joy through the excellence of shovel music and arts; to grasp that the shovel's exquisite form is the basis for all artistic beauty; and to promote the evolution of shovel culture within the Empire.
⑤ Love (Practical Application)	<div>To learn about creating children through private shoveling (verb).</div> <div>* Due to age-inappropriate content, this entry has been censored.</div>



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