
A CAVE KING'S ROAD TO PARADISE
CLIMBING TO THE TOP WITH MY ALMIGHTY MINING SKILLS!
Hajime Naehara
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A Cave King’s Road to Paradise: Climbing to the Top with My Almighty Mining Skills! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: Banished to a Remote Desert Island!

A crowd crammed into the courtyard. The moment I'd recognized them, I quickened my pace, dreading that my siblings might make fun of me yet again.

I, Heale Sanphales, am the seventeenth prince of the Sanphales Kingdom. Accordingly, the siblings I was trying to evade were also princes and princesses of Sanphales.

Strange, wasn't it, for me to run away from my own kin? The reason was simple. I was useless trash—everyone agreed, myself included.

People of note in this world, without exception, had some sort of ability that set them apart. An example would be an impressive aptitude for magic. On the other hand, I'd been born with a mana pool that was more like a shallow puddle, and I was far from what you would call talented either. This earned me the disdain of both my father and siblings, and they considered my existence to be a humiliation for the royal family.

I had been aware of that fact even in my earliest memories, and I had relentlessly practiced swordsmanship and magic for days and nights on end in an attempt to make up for what I lacked from birth. All because the king, my father, had once told me that royalty must be strong and exceptional.

The Sanphales Kingdom was a superpower of the Barleon Continent. The continent itself was home to five major nations with smaller, minor nations splitting the rest of its territory. But Sanphales stood above the rest, boasting both abundant wealth and an indomitable military. As royalty, those that reigned over such a country, being strong was our duty. I had wanted to live up to these expectations, and to this day, I'd poured in all the effort I could muster.

However, after all that, the fruit I reaped now at the age of fifteen was the miserable label of being the most useless among all the heirs to the throne. In the field of magic, spells that would have been spectacular in the hands of a

decent mage turned into party tricks when I cast them. A spell that was supposed to summon a raging inferno, for example, would only be as effective as a candle's flame. The mana pool we drew from to use magic was said to be decided from the moment one was born, and mine didn't increase no matter how much effort I put in. In the art of the sword, I probably could compare favorably with a regular soldier. But I was far from the level of those who could truly take pride in their swordsmanship.

I can already hear the accusations. "You didn't work hard enough!" right? The cruel truth was that there was a decisive factor in this world that had dictated my failure from the very beginning, no matter how hard I tried to overcome it.

The reason for all this contempt on my shoulders was the faint crest on the back of my right hand.

Every human was born with a mark we called a "crest." They blessed their holders with a specific gift, such as enhanced physical abilities or some other special talent. From what I had heard, apparently, some species of monsters also had crests.

Many of those within the royal family had crests with magnificent titles like <Sword God> or <Sorcerer King>, and they would bless their holders with powers true to their name—in the form of sword skills or enhanced talent in magic respectively. But if you looked at it from another angle, this meant that a person without <Sword God> could never hold a candle to them as a swordsman.

As for me, someone surrounded by siblings with sublime crests...I was born with <Cave King>, an obscure crest with unknown effects. I had heard that during my birth, it was so unprecedented that it had caused a stir, both inside and outside the royal court. Crest clerics were in charge of deciphering the crests of infants, and the one who had been assigned to me had nearly been executed on grounds of treason. I wish I could say that had been the worst of it, but the citizens of this country even started rumors that my mother, the queen, had committed infidelity. These rumors had permeated all social circles, regardless of social standing.

Starting from the moment of my birth, I had been the target of my entire

family's scorn and ridicule. My mother, my father, my sisters, and my brothers all shunned me for my existence.

So you couldn't blame me for wanting to leave as quickly as possible. But then again, I was used to this. Minimizing the sound of my footsteps, muting my voice, and sneaking around were all a part of my daily life. Nobody had noticed me slipping around between the shadows of the hallway.

Or, at least, that was what I had assumed until I heard the usual jeer, and it drenched me in a shower of dread.

"Hey, trash!"

My shoulders trembled. Then my other siblings began laughing. But today, their voices weren't directed at me for once.

What's going on? I hid behind a pillar and peered in the direction my siblings were facing.

There was a creature with black wings there, weighed down by chains. Its round body was about the size of a human head, and purple fur covered its skin. It had small limbs and a tail, as well as two horns.

Ah...a monster. I didn't know what kind it was, but I could be sure that it was a rare sight in Sanphales. Here, humans were hostile towards monsters, and one could never find one in human settlements. One might come to the conclusion that there were no monsters within our borders, but that wasn't really the case.

Instead, they took up residence in places away from human civilization, such as forests or mountains. They were by no means a force that could be ignored since there were enough of them to make attacks on human territory from time to time. Because of this, even the people of Sanphales knew the identifying traits of the most common monsters. As for me, I had gained this knowledge through books and the like.

Vile insults poured out from my siblings' mouths, aimed at the rare creature.

"The longer I look at this thing, the uglier it seems."

“Huh...it can’t understand what we’re saying, and it’s practically useless. Come on, dance for me!”

One of my siblings threw a rock at it. Almost like a chain reaction, everyone else followed his example, pelting the monster with rocks. The creature seemed to wail in pain, but they didn’t care at all.

In truth, this wasn’t anything unusual. In Sanphales, pretty much everyone deemed monsters as wicked beings and treated them as they saw fit, just like this.

Personally, I didn’t think it should truly be so clear-cut. There were indeed some aggressive monsters that attacked humans, but the opposite was true as well. Skirmishes with monsters increased year-over-year because people were snatching away their habitat. And some hunted them purely for the sake of glory, especially those who went on expeditions into mountains and forests where humans had no good reason to enter.

Attempting to end all conflict would be a naive struggle. *But when you get to this point, it’s no different from tormenting a person who can’t even fight back. How is there any meaning in this?* I told myself that I was different from my siblings and that I would never cause such meaningless suffering.

And then...I left. *I know,* I thought, clenching my jaw. *No matter what I might declare to myself, I’m powerless, and all these words do little more than make me feel better. At the end of the day, I can’t even make one objection against my father and older brothers, because they are superior to me.*

Though I tried to quickly leave the area once again, in the end, I couldn’t take a single step forward. I was haunted by the question: *Do I really want to keep running away like this?*

And perhaps there was another reason as well—the monster, who couldn’t even begin to put up a resistance, reminded me of myself. *At this rate, it will...* This thought nailed my feet to the ground, and I remained still in the end. I forced myself to stay put, and I stood there for a long while, gritting my teeth as the cries of pain echoed. Eventually, both the wails and the jeers quietened down.

“Rare creatures sure are tough, huh?”

“That just means we can squeeze more fun out of it. Let’s come again tomorrow.”

From the sounds of things, my siblings had gotten bored and were heading back towards the royal court, leaving behind the monster in the cage. I observed them warily, and once I was sure of their absence, I ran over to the cage. When they threw it back in prison, the wardens would constantly be on the lookout. This was the only chance I had to set it free. *And if they keep torturing it like this...* I needed to get it out of here while it still had the strength to do so.

The monster was curled up on itself, and it peered at my face nervously.

“Give me a moment. I’ll let you out right now,” I promised.

I inspected the lock. *Ah, this is locked with magic, which means that I need to unlock it with magic too.* I knew the spell, but the problem was my feeble mana. It just wasn’t enough. *Don’t think that. I might as well try.* I nodded to myself before placing my right hand over the lock and casting the unlocking spell, *Pick*.

But it wouldn’t budge.

“Darn it! Open up already!”

I repeatedly tried to squeeze every last drop of mana from my body and continued to cast the spell. The heavens were heartless and didn’t answer my prayers.

Darn it! Curse it all! Okay, if magic doesn’t work... I tried to forcefully pry the lock off with my bare hands. But naturally, even after my hands turned a painful red from the friction, I didn’t make any progress.

Are there any swords or axes around? No, I wouldn’t even be able to make a chip on this lock with those. It’d make too much noise as well. So in the end...I really can’t do anything, can I?

My shoulders fell, but that was when I noticed that the monster was staring at me with concern in its eyes. “I’m sorry.” Chewing hard on my lip, I forced a whisper out of my throat. “Someone like me can’t help you at all.”

I knew it already, but I’m completely useless. If only I had more mana or a

more powerful crest, then... My eyes widened. *Huh?*

A small hand reached out from between the bars and held my finger in a gentle grip. Then, almost as if it were trying to comfort me, it rubbed my finger. The monster was looking at me with a worried expression, and right at that moment, hot tears slid down my cheeks. They were probably tears of frustration—at myself and my own powerlessness. Perhaps the monster noticed because it squeezed my finger in a reassuring grip.

"You..."

This monster had been snatched away from their companions, locked inside a cage, and forced to weather a hail of rocks. They must be downright terrified. No doubt they were suffering much more than I was. Yet, this little one was... *I'm much more privileged than this small creature in front of me. What are you crying for, Heale?*

"Sorry..." I wiped my tears and held out my right hand towards the monster, casting a healing spell on their body. With my pitiful mana, it barely did anything, but I persisted, hoping with my whole heart that it would alleviate some of the pain, at least.

The next thing I knew, I was panting heavily, and around ten minutes had passed. I managed to heal their wounds for now. The monster had regained the ability to move around, and they actually seemed more worried about me, who was dead tired.

"I'm fine, don't worry... Ah." Voices echoed from the hallway. Somebody was heading this way. "I can't stay here... Sorry, I'll see you tomorrow! I'll bring along some food then, okay?"

I gave a slight wave before leaving.

That was the start of my secret visits to see this little monster. Sometimes, I'd bring them food, other times, I helped them recover from their wounds. Without fail, the monster would react in elation every single time, and their smile warmed my heart in turn.

Through our interactions, I began thinking that indeed, not all monsters were bad guys after all.

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Two weeks later, I was now kneeling before the king's throne.

The bishop's voice echoed against the marble walls and floors of the room. "The will of the divine has decided Prince Heale's domain, and—pffft..." I could hear his poorly stifled amusement. "He will govern Sheol Reef!"

Today was the day of the ceremony in which I was granted my fief in view of my father—the king—the royal family, and an assembly of aristocrats from all over this nation. In this kingdom, when a member of the royal family reached adulthood—at the age of fifteen—a domain would be bestowed upon them. It was an occasion to celebrate for most, but for me and a handful of other family members, that wasn't the case.

It was customary for the divine to choose the fief and inform us through an oracle. Though that was, of course, only a pretense. The king held absolute authority over this nation, and the "divine" could never select a fief that went against the king's wishes. It was an open secret that it was the king who made such decisions. He would grant barren lands to his incompetent offspring and fertile lands to his prides and joy. That was tradition.

Naturally, I wasn't an exception and would be granted an impoverished fief—*I'd be kissing the ground right now if that were all, but it's much worse.*

A week ago, I had caused a scandal with the monster I had saved. News of this incident spread across the royal court like wildfire, and I was certain that Louis, my father, had also heard. I had expected immediate punishment, but my father had kept his silence to an unnerving degree.

And today, I learned why. As the man second to none in this nation, he couldn't openly punish his flesh and blood. That was probably why he had granted this "Sheol" to me.

The princes and princesses surrounding us were laughing with scorn.

"Hah, a reef!" One of my brothers scoffed. "Well, it's a perfect fit for him."

I could also hear the melodious voice of one of my sisters. "My my! It sounds like a delightful place. Now, where in the world was this Sheol Reef again?"

There were also many whispers raising that very question. Where is it located?

It wasn't a surprise that Sheol Reef was an unfamiliar name to most. If one were to travel southbound from here in the royal capital by ship for around ten days, they would arrive there, finding an isolated islet in the middle of the ocean. It was so remote that merchant ships didn't hang around, which meant that even pirates didn't waste their time there either. After all, there was no beach one could use to alight from, no grass, no plants—to put it simply, it was a big rock.

My father Louis, a man of grand stature with a magnificent white beard, stood up from his throne and announced, "Heale, our son and seventeenth prince, as King of Sanphales, we command you to Sheol Reef and govern it as our representative!"

Those words were enough to decide my fate. I would be leaving the palace I had lived in for all my fifteen years of life and become the governor of Sheol Reef, a territory in the middle of nowhere.

Ten days of sailing from the continent brought me here onto the open seas, but I was now alone on a small boat paddling towards the place named "Sheol Reef." The waves were far from calm as they whipped my boat with fervor. With a tight grip on my oar, I rowed my boat closer and closer to my domain.

The ship that had carried me out here to then row to shore alone had already turned to face the direction of the capital. In my mind, I grumbled, *Those guys didn't even wait until I made it ashore!* Then again, my destination was a barren rock mountain. Any normal person would probably conclude that it was only a matter of time before I kicked the bucket.

Perhaps the more prudent choice would have been to swallow my pride and earnestly beg my father to grant me permission to stay inside the palace. In fact, it was normal for royals to not have to be on-site once they were granted a fief. They could just relay their general plans to a representative and leave the management to them.

That being said, my appointment to this place was a death penalty in the

guise of a coming-of-age responsibility. Even if I had tried making that request, I was willing to bet that it would have been shot down in seconds.

If I hadn't reacted so violently during that incident, then he might have granted me a fief that was small but at least survivable, I thought numbly. *Actually, scratch that. Knowing my father, he might have already planned this from the beginning even without that incident on my record. I'm a disgrace to the royal family, after all.*

But I had no intention of dying at all, and I also didn't want to stay inside that place where everyone shunned me either. *Of course, I didn't want to end up on this rock island, but well, that's life.*

From afar, Sheol Reef looked small, but it was definitely more than spacious enough for one resident. If it were flat ground, it would be large enough to fit around a hundred or so small houses, and it was tall enough to rival the tower of a countryside church. *But since the terrain is more like a congregation of small, jagged rocky mountains, a hundred houses is out of the question.*

Rocked by crashing waves, I brought my boat closer to the towering reef. *Looks like this is going to be my first hurdle to overcome...* There was the risk that the waves would send my boat hurtling right into the rocks. I had fresh water and food supplies that would last me a month, as well as tools necessary for everyday life. I couldn't afford to lose any of them if I wanted to survive as long as possible. Thus, I needed to scour for a relatively flat place to disembark.

Let's see...is there a good place anywhere? I scanned my surroundings. *Found one.* It was rather cramped—my boat would barely fit in the opening, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

I cast a *Wind* spell ahead in an attempt to slow my momentum. Though casting magic sounded grand, the resulting "wind" was only a small puff of air. *Yeah... That's the best I can do.* Normally, *Wind* was supposed to create a powerful gale, but my mana pool was so pitiful that I couldn't produce the same results.

I continued to cast one *Wind* after another, just so I could feel like I was doing something, as if my spells were just a desperate prayer. I lifted my other hand up towards the small jar I wore around my neck and gave it a small squeeze.

Nice try, Heale, I thought. I still felt disgusted with myself. *Even if that little guy's now in some sort of paradise, would he really protect a person who didn't manage to save him?*

"Please..." I muttered. Then my eyes lit up. "All right!"

I didn't know whether my prayers had been answered, but my boat slid across the water gently and reached land. Wasting no time, I immediately hopped onto the reef, grabbed a rope, and tied the boat to a rock so that the current wouldn't sweep it away.

"Phew! Looks like I've managed to safely get over my first hurdle for now," I whispered, despite there being no other soul around.

I was, of course, trying to distract myself from my loneliness. Though I had been shunned within the palace, I had at least exchanged a sentence or two per day with others. That, and having people in my sight had made it more bearable. Right now, my vision was filled with the gray of rocks, rocks, and more rocks.

Even if I wanted to turn back now, I couldn't. The ship that brought me here had already disappeared into the horizon.

No, don't turn back, I shook my head. *I decided I would never go back, and I'm going to stick to it.* Resolving to be productive, I started to carry my supplies onto the islet.

"Hmm, is there any suitable place to store these?" If rain or seawater soaked into my food, it'd be ruined. In addition to a safe storage place, I also needed to look for a place to sleep. I scoured my surroundings and spotted the entrance to a cave on slightly elevated ground. "That might work."

To be honest, I didn't have much of a choice—there didn't seem to be any other places that would offer me shelter from the elements. With my arms around the water barrel, I approached the mouth of the cave. But the moment I peered inside, I felt goosebumps rising on my skin. *Yikes...*

The chamber itself was rather small—ten people would have a hard time lying down in it. Instead of people, however, the floor was covered with bones—even some full skeletons. Not just human bones, but those of beasts and monsters as

well from the looks of it. It was like they had become a grim, white carpet. Worn-out tools and wooden crates were strewn about the area—these people and creatures must have lived here for a while.

My guess was that they had been banished like me or had washed up ashore here. In the end, they had likely depleted all their rations before finally breathing their last. I almost felt as if the skeletal remains were sending me a message: *This is how you'll end up.*

Sleeping with the dead was the last thing I wanted to do. However, I hadn't found any other good candidates for shelter. Even if I didn't end up sleeping here, I would have to store my supplies here at least.

"Either way, first things first, I gotta get my stuff in here."

Ten minutes later, I finished moving all the goods. Though the distance to my boat was short, walking across the rugged ground had left me spent. *Let's get some rest.*

I plopped down inside the cave and gazed at the view outside. *This place is beautiful...* From where I was sitting, the sea view was absolutely gorgeous. Unlike the capital, the only sound I could hear was the crashing of waves and cries of seagulls. If I weren't stuck here, I would have probably thought of this place as paradise.

I mustn't forget, though. I had been banished and thrown out to a place far from my family and birthplace.



Sadness wasn't the only emotion swirling in my heart—hatred and bitterness were mixed in as well. I almost wanted to cry, to scream, to throw a tantrum.

"Damn it!" I raised a clenched fist above my head, ready to take out my anger on the rock wall.

But I stilled. Even after a few moments passed, I couldn't swing my arm down. *What's the point of injuring my hand right now? It's not going to change anything. Even if I stew in hatred the entire time here... Things aren't going to get better by themselves.*

That's right. If I want to survive, I can't waste even a second. I should analyze my current situation and start working on whatever I can right away. Unclenching my fists, I took a deep breath to clear my mind.

During my voyage here, I had worked my brain hard to cook up strategies. My first plan was to flag a passing ship for help. I would hide away in a place beneath my family's attention and live there in secret.

There was, however, a fatal problem with this plan—the part where a ship passes by. There was a *very* low chance of any kind of vessel coming into the vicinity of this reef. There were no nearby trade routes, and it was too far out from land to be worth fishing from. Even in the unlikely case that a ship *did* appear on the horizon, I couldn't rely on a ship from Sanphales. They would know that they mustn't release me from this "cage."

That meant I'd have to rely on foreign ships or pirates, but even if I got on board, there was a high chance that I'd be sold as a slave. In other words, I would have to leave my fate in the hands of Lady Luck and wait for a ship that might never come, be fortunate enough that they'd let me board, and finally, I would have to escape once we'd reached port.

My chances were slim, and my hope was faint. But the one thing I could do right now was survive as long as possible until a ship showed up.

"Sounds nice, but..." I fought the urge to sigh.

My fresh water and food would only last me a month. As for replenishing my water, I could collect rain in open barrels. *That is if it rains around here at all...* When pressed, I could use *Water* to gather moisture from the air, but with my

mana pool, it would be exhausting to manifest a single droplet.

Onto food. Procuring fish and shellfish seemed like a decent plan. I *did* bring along a rod and a net. The problem was the strong current here. If I wasn't careful, the waves would drag my tools away in the blink of an eye, and in the nightmare scenario, I would be swept to the sea along with them.

Other than satisfying my basic needs... *The only thing I can do is probably clear out this cave.* Bones and old tools were scattered about carelessly, so I needed to do some work if I wanted to make it comfortable. *That being said, these are remains of the dead. I can't be too disrespectful when handling them... Hmm, should I dig a hole somewhere and make a grave?*

I looked through the tools I had brought along with me and wound my fingers around a pickaxe. "Guess I'll try digging a pit with this..."

Wait. Think before you act, Heale. I'm completely out of my depth here, and picking at rocks would only be a waste of my energy. Surely there are more important things to do than make a grave. With such thoughts in my mind, I was about to put it down, but that was when...

"You have acquired a mining tool."

Suddenly, a monotonous voice sounded inside my head.

Startled, I let out a "Huh?" and swished my head around to survey my surroundings. There was no one around. I only had bones for company. *No way—it can't be a ghost, can it? Even though I was in such a confined space, the voice didn't seem to echo... In fact, it wasn't even like I was hearing the voice with my ears. It was as if someone had spoken directly into my mind.*

I tried striking up a conversation. "Could you say that again?"

"You have acquired mining equipment. Would you like to mine?"

So I did *hear a voice in my head!* Now that I had confirmation, I tried "sending" my thoughts to the person in question. *Who are you?*

“An assistant system of the crest <Cave King>. I am not a living being.”

<Cave King>... That was the crest I was born with. Until now, for most of my life, I had lived in the palace, and I’d never had the opportunity to venture out of the capital to explore the wilderness—let alone caves. *Who would’ve thought that this crest actually had such a function? Hmm, maybe <Cave King> has a few other uses as well...*

Almost as if it had sensed my curiosity, the “assistant” shed some light on my crest.

“Other than the assistant system, it also provides skills such as Hasten Mining. As you earn experience, it will unlock skills you may use in caves and a selection of mining support skills.”

Huh. I guess I’ll simply treat it as a superior version of <Miner> for the time being. I was aware of many types of crests out in the world and the gifts they bore. As a prince, I had been taught these ever since I was a child.

Those with the <Miner> crest could mine efficiently. For example, their pickaxe swings would be faster and more accurate than those without. *Hmm, so <Cave King> is <Miner> but with a few bonus abilities, I see.*

True to its name, it sounded like it granted me many abilities inside caves, particularly if I were to mine. Using the word “unlock” with skills seemed a little foreign to me, but according to the assistant, it just meant there would be more available as I went. *So this means that even someone like me has a redeeming feature... You know, it probably wouldn’t seem like a big deal to other people, but that makes me really happy.*

If I told my father and siblings about my discovery, I was willing to bet that they would scowl and say that such a crest wasn’t adequate for royalty. In truth, I had actually made several requests to go on an expedition to a cave somewhere to see whether my crest would do something, but not even once did I receive permission.

I’m getting sidetracked. Anyway, there’s one thing I can be sure of—<Cave

King> is a mining crest. I want to test out its abilities, and since this cave's a little too cramped for me to sleep in at the moment, I guess I'll try digging around. Coming to a decision, I thought to the crest, *Hey, I want to start mining.*

"Understood. Optimizing efficiency with Mining skill."

Optimizing? What does that mean? Wait!

Without any warning, glowing white patches appeared on the walls, floor, and ceiling of the cave. *The walls are shining?* I blinked my eyes a few times, fearing that they had ceased to function, but the view didn't change. My eyes seemed to still be healthy and working.

"The shining white areas are optimal for mining. Please strike them with your pickaxe. Calculations show that they will crumble easily without causing cave-ins."

"Huh," I muttered. "Okay, here I go."

I immediately struck the nearest white area with my pickaxe. One swing was enough to pry out a chunk roughly the size of a human head.

This was my first time wielding a pickaxe, and, theoretically speaking, I shouldn't find such success. *I didn't feel too much recoil in my arm either. The system seems accurate.*

"It's really bright for a cave," I observed before addressing the assistant. "Is this another <Cave King> skill?"

"Yes. Night Vision."

"I see. That's pretty convenient. Okay then, for now, let's start by preparing a space to sleep."

Once again, I swung my pickaxe at the rock wall. I knew exactly where to dig, so I could swing at a steady rhythm. The sound of crumbling rocks was music to my ears. "Y'know... This is actually fun."

The next thing I knew, I was absorbed in mining. I had only planned on expanding the cave to create a space to sleep in, but that had long slipped from my mind as I dug into the wall many times more than I needed to. After a while, my feet were steeped in sand and rocks.

Actually, hold up... Am I starting to mine more with each strike? The boulders I dig out are getting bigger too...

"You have gained mining experience. Mining skill rank has leveled up. Mining capacity and accuracy have increased."

I don't really know what that means, but in short, my crest must have gotten stronger. Hmm... Having greater mining capabilities is nice and all, but where am I supposed to walk with all this across the ground?

"Store Stone x168?"

Wait, "store"?

"<Cave King> has a function that can store mined material regardless of weight."

Interesting. But, uh...is it going to store the stuff inside my body or something? Hopefully not. I would be rather troubled if I couldn't take it out anymore, so I tried raising the question to the assistant. According to them, there was no drawback and retrieval was possible at any time. Since there was no harm in trying, I chanted *"Store"* in my mind.

In the blink of an eye, all the boulders I had dug out of the wall shone around me before disappearing.

"Storing Stone x168. Creating inventory."

Inside my mind, the following information faded into view.

Inventory: Stone x168

My eyes grew wide. “W-Wow.” Though the items it could store were limited to mined materials, my crest had still managed to store an incredible amount of rocks in one go. And while I wasn’t clear on its methodology, it had managed to assess the quantity.

“You may also automatically store what you mine. Activate?”

Please do! I answered immediately. The crest was doing all the work for me, and solving every little problem that came up. I could wholeheartedly focus on just mining.

As I hummed a tune to myself, I rapidly brought my pickaxe down over and over. The reef wasn’t that big, however, and at the rate I was digging, I would quickly reach the other side. Thus, now was the best time to start digging sloped downwards.

All the mined material that fell to the ground was instantly engulfed in light before vanishing. *Automated storage... This makes things* so *much easier.*

The next time I looked backward, I realized that I’d come a long way down—the light from the outside was dim and distant. The assistant told me that I was apparently ten “meters” below the starting point. I’d never heard of that unit before, but as long as I memorized how long a “meter” was, then that wasn’t a big problem.

Before I knew it, my inventory was full of stuff—iron ore, copper ore, and even gold ore to boot. *Not that gold is worth much on a deserted island...* There were even a few unfamiliar ones. I frowned in thought as I muttered, “Mana mineral?”

“Activating Mining Passive Skill: Mineral Encyclopedia.”

Mana mineral: Increases maximum mana level when used. Gain is proportional to mineral size.

Another new ability. *Hmm, Mineral Encyclopedia? Does that mean it’ll tell me*

about all the stuff I mine? And hold your horses, did it just say these can increase my mana?! Can it deepen my pitiful mana pool, then?!

Was all my suffering for nothing? If I had this, I would have been capable of casting spells like an ordinary mage! At the very least, my siblings wouldn't have ridiculed me for my feeble spells... On second thought, I shook my head. *I've never heard of this mineral before. Maybe it wasn't available in Sanphales. Well, no use crying over spilled milk.*

As I browsed my inventory, something else caught my eye. *Hm? What's this?* It was yet another foreign mineral to me. *Turtlestone? What's that?* I tossed the question to the assistant.

Turtlestone: Increases lifespan by one day when used.

L-Lifespan?! Too much was happening at once, and my mind was struggling to catch up. <Cave King> turned out to be a chest of surprises that made mining as easy as breathing, and I had also dug up some extraordinary minerals here. *You know what? Sheol Reef might actually be an incredible domain!*

At any rate, I had never experienced so much thrill in my life before. *There might be even bigger surprises slumbering away further underground...*

"Whoo!" I cheered. "Dig, dig, dig!!!"

My burning curiosity drove me to swing my pickaxe with zeal, my eyes on the prize. All alone in the pitch-black cave, I shouted to myself as I went. Whenever I was rewarded for my efforts, I raised both hands in excitement and joy.

"Seriously, a ruby?! And...is this a sapphire I see?!"

I was so absorbed in mining that somewhere down the line, I even forgot to look for passing ships.

Chapter 2: Mining Helped Me Meet a New Friend!

"Wow, I sure dug a long way..." I muttered to myself.

The assistant told me that I was roughly thirty meters underground. I summoned my inventory in my mind.

Inventory: Stone x1230 *Iron Ore x21* Copper Ore x19 *Silver Ore x4* Gold Ore x2 *Coal x15* Limestone x10 ... Ruby x0.3 *Sapphire x0.2* Mana Mineral x90 / Turtlestone x6

My handy assistant had explained that there were numbers less than "1," because my mined materials were numbered based on how many one kilogram ingots they could be smelted into. Meanwhile, for consumables or items with special effects, their number represented how many times I could use them.

Two gold ingots... Only a few hours had passed, but I'd already obtained a small fortune. *Sheesh, I'm almost scared to imagine how much I'll get as I keep mining. Well, they are kinda useless on this deserted island, but still...it's gold.*

What really grabbed my eye were the mana minerals and turtlestones. I had never seen nor heard of these before. I could use turtlestones during an emergency to prolong my life. Then there were the mana minerals, which could apparently increase my total mana pool... Although my abilities as a mage were miserly, the one thing I had going for me was a wealth of arcane knowledge. *It'd be nice if these would let me cast mid-tier or even advanced spells...*

With that in mind, I asked, *Okay, how do I use these?*

"Use Mana Mineral x90?"

Almost instantly, the assistant whispered these words in my mind. *Huh, looks like I don't have to take them out of my inventory first.* I gave a big nod. *Of course!*

"Consuming Mana Mineral x90."

Once I'd heard that announcement, I waited with bated breath. But no matter how long I stood there, I didn't feel any different.

Uh... Did you do it already? I thought nervously. The answer I got was a mechanical "Yes."

I didn't feel any different. *Then again, having more mana doesn't mean my body will change in any way.* A talented mage could apparently sense the flow of mana, but of course, I didn't possess such a remarkable skill.

As a novice in the field, the best way to test my mana levels was probably the classic trial and error. Killing two birds with one stone was ideal, so I decided to use a basic wind element spell, *Wind*, to sweep out the path I had dug. I had used *Wind* when I climbed onto the reef, and as always, all I could muster up was a small puff of air. Before my banishment, I had been ridiculed every single time I had cast this spell inside the palace.

It'd be nice if I'd improved even a little bit... I prayed internally.

Thrusting out my right arm, I chanted, *"Wind!"*

The next moment, my eyes widened as I let out a gasp of shock. All the dust around me had blasted away the moment that word left my lips. The wind grew stronger and stronger, before swirling in the air fiercely like a tornado and eventually gathering in a neat pile in the middle of the path.

"Huh? What just...?" Without thinking, I whipped my head around and took a look, but there wasn't anyone behind me. In other words, the one who had just cast that *Wind* was *me*. "I-I must be dreaming, right?"

Wanting to confirm that it hadn't been a fluke, I cast the same spell over and over again. Every single time, there was an ear-splitting roar of wind, and I could feel the gale tousling my hair.

Many of my siblings were extraordinary mages, but the power of my *Wind* spell could already rival theirs. *Wow... Looks like I got an incredible boost to my mana pool. The ninety mana minerals I mined over just a few hours were*

enough to grant me such arcane heights. If I gather more, I might be able to cast advanced spells as well! I've got to mine more—so much more!!!

The next thing I knew, I was swinging my pickaxe again. "All right! Keep digging, keep digging!" I yelled aloud to psych myself up. "You know what? I'll keep going until this path leads to hel— Hm?" I paused, spotting some sort of jiggly blue blob next to my feet. "What's this thing?"

It was moving, so it wasn't an ordinary blob. *Wait, I think I know... This guy's a slime monster.* I had never seen one before, but back at the palace, I had read about them. They were monsters that liked dark and damp habitats and were generally docile, but a small number of them were aggressive.

I frowned. *Is this thing attacking me?* I observed it for a while. *No, it's just hopping circles around me and watching. I must've scared it out with that wind spell earlier. A noisy newcomer like me digging around in this cave so merrily must've annoyed it.*

Hmm, what am I supposed to do with this guy? It's not doing me any harm, so I could just ignore it and continue digging. It's probably not going to get in my way, either... Ah, I know, I'll just treat it as a pet.

That was the precise moment the assistant spoke up in my head.

"Tameable monster detected. Tame?"

"Tame"? If recalled correctly, that was a contract that turned monsters into allies. Any human could use this skill. However, the majority of monsters were hostile, so unless you came across one of the more eccentric monsters out there, it wouldn't be a successful taming.

Not to mention that in Sanphales, monsters were prohibited from setting foot in the borders of our lands. The army upheld a "kill on sight" policy when it came to them. The few monsters that *were* around were treated as a means of entertainment—like the monster my siblings had tormented. Basically, it was out of the question for Sanphales citizens to form such a contract.

I chewed on my lip. *But here...nobody's around to count my sins.*

I was a weak human. I was desperate for *anything* that would relieve this crushing loneliness I felt. Of course, I didn't expect this slime to suddenly start making small talk, but I wanted a companion. Anyone—or rather, any*thing* was fine at this point. And...I also wanted to learn more about monsters.

In my mind, I muttered, *Please do.*

"Name the monster to complete the taming."

A name, huh...? I could take inspiration from Sheol Reef itself and just call it "Sheol." Hmm, but that's so dull. How about I change it up a bit? Sheol... Seal... Ciel, how about that?

"Naming complete. You have tamed Ciel."

The taming was done, but I didn't feel any different, and neither did the slime—Ciel. The only thing he did was hop up and down.

I extended my greetings to the slime. "Nice to meet you, Ciel."

No response, no discernable reaction.

I should've expected that. A slime can't understand human speech or speak my language. But the mere companionship of a moving, living being was solace enough. I left Ciel to his own devices as I picked up my pickaxe.

"Okay then, time to get back to mining, I suppose!" I turned to Ciel. "Rocks will come tumbling down, so be careful!"

After my encounter with the slime, I continued mining until I was completely spent. I cheered out loud whenever I reached a milestone—like finding a hundred mana minerals or a new material like emeralds—basking in my joy.

Ciel stood behind me the entire time—a silent watcher.

“Ahhh, this feels *sooo* good...”

The sun had set, and I laid down near the cave entrance with my head resting on the slime as if he were a pillow. *Let’s see, how long has it been since I tamed Ciel? Three days, I think.*

Those three days had sped by in a blur of mining, mining, and even more mining. As a result, my mineral inventory had tripled. Except the mana crystals, of course, since I’d been using them whenever I found them. I’d likely already used nearly five hundred.

Naturally, my mana levels had increased proportionally. Now, hunting down a big fish was as simple as aiming and casting an electricity spell on the ocean. Judging by my current power, I was probably also able to conjure up five barrels worth of water with a water spell. In fact, even mid-tier spells were suddenly child’s play to me. It was honestly surreal, considering that I’d once been mocked for the “static electricity” and “palm sweat” I’d manifested with the same spells.

With this, I had a sustainable supply of water and food—I’d solved those problems ridiculously quickly.

That wasn’t the only good news. The slime I’d tamed, Ciel, was a fast learner. He didn’t seem to understand my language, but he would mimic my gestures. He’d transform into a bed for me, let me ride on his back when moving about the cave—a perfect assistant.

I also tamed ten new slimes. It was a shame that unlike Ciel, trying to communicate with them had been a lost cause. They only did as they pleased, hanging about and doing nothing in particular. Maybe Ciel was just one of a kind.

“Ciel... Could you do my shoulders too?” I pointed out the areas I would like to be massaged, and Ciel coiled his body around my shoulders, giving them a good squeeze. “Ahhh... That’s the spot,” I sighed in bliss.

In any case, I was living a life of comfort on this island. I was no longer hard-pressed for survival, and I had a rewarding activity to live for: mining. *Of course, only having fish in my diet’s going to get dull eventually, so I hope I can do*

something about that with magic.

Before I knew it, I'd become a mining maniac with my only thoughts dedicated to mining. *Can you blame me? I'm able to excavate piles upon piles of precious minerals with only a single pickaxe! Mining's the most exciting thing I've ever done.* In the back of my mind, I added, *Well... To be honest, that's the only thing I can do here on the island, so...*

Ugh, whatever! Can't wait to wake up in the morning and start another day of digging!

Feeling Ciel's cool body beneath me, I fell into a pleasant sleep.

Something prodded my cheeks.

Hm...? What was that? I cracked open my eyes. Ciel entered my vision. *Oh, he was the one who woke me.*

I climbed to my feet and glanced outside the cave. The sun was only just peeking above the horizon—it was still rather early. The waves were mild and tranquil, making for a wonderful start to my day.

I turned to look at Ciel. "Mornin'. Did you wake me up?"

Ciel stretched out his body and formed an arrow-like shape on the tip, pointing towards the sea.

"Did something happen?" I asked, puzzled, casting my eyes in the direction he indicated. "Wait, is that..."

There was a shipwreck upon the rocks. Splintered wood littered the area. *That isn't my boat...* There were three people—no, three creatures—lying upon the shore. Their skin wasn't the fleshy pink of humans, but green. *They're goblins.*

I scanned the sea, but I didn't spot any large ships. They must have drifted here on the ocean current. The pelts they wore were just as tattered as their boat.

Though this island had rocky terrain, it was still land, which meant it was much safer than wandering aimlessly across the sea. They had likely attempted

to alight here, thinking there was shelter, and perhaps even food or water. *But it looks like the tides weren't too kind to them.* Considering how their boat was utterly destroyed, they must have crashed into the rocks at a high speed.

From all of my observations thus far, they were likely dead. *Just in case, though, I should try calling out to them.* There was the risk of them attacking me, but I was now a mage who could cast mid-tier spells. I had nothing to fear.

Putting aside my hesitation, I headed over to the goblins with Ciel at my side.

"Heeey! Are you okay?" I yelled.

There was no response.

Upon closer inspection, they were all bleeding out. *Oh. I might be too late.* Just to be on the safe side, I approached each of them one-by-one and checked their breathing. Surprisingly, all three were alive.

"They're still breathing." I chewed on my lip. I wanted to do what I could to save them, but these three were goblins—*monsters*.

Goblins were monsters that formed tribes and lived in communities. It was typical for them to be hostile towards humans, and therefore, humans were taught to kill them on sight. On the other hand, I *had* heard stories of peaceful tribes that people could get along with. *I don't know how to tell them apart...*

But then again, I have the power to fight back with my current mana levels. Not to mention that the cave I live in is a pitch-black maze. I probably don't have to worry about them sneaking up behind me while I'm mining.

And, more than anything... I could never leave them to die here. No sooner had I made up my mind than I cast a healing spell on the goblins, *Recover.* A white light enveloped their figures like a blanket. Their bleeding stopped, and their breathing steadied. *Hmm, I'm no expert healer, but this has* probably *improved their condition. I think.*

The waves were a concern. When high tide came around, it'd sweep the goblins away if I left them lying here. The heat of the sun was also growing more intense, so resting in the cave was likely to help them recover more quickly.

Okay, which of them first? I looked over the three goblins. *Hm, I should have the least trouble carrying this one.*

The smallest goblin, who had blackish green skin, was around the height of a human toddler. Their figure was slightly round like a child as well, which made the trip to the cave easy.

Next, I set my sights on the goblin slightly taller than the first. Unlike the blackish green I'd seen on the first goblin, this one was of a brighter green color that reminded me of spring leaves. However, deep wrinkles creased their skin—a sign of old age. Their scrawniness made the goblin effortless to carry.

The last one, however, stumped me. One of the famous, distinctive traits of goblins were their size, or lack thereof, but this one was even taller than me. This giant even had a muscular physique—more akin to an orc than a goblin. *Now, how am I supposed to lift them?*

As I frowned, trying to come up with a solution, I spotted Ciel moving over. *Hm?* He stretched out his body and carried the big goblin into the cave.

"Amazing, Ciel! I was totally stumped there. Thanks for the help!" The slime, it seemed, caught onto things much faster than before.

We'd finally finished moving the three goblins to the cave entrance. *All right, what now? Personally, I want to head off and mine right away. If they need someone to attend to them, I'll definitely stay, but I don't see any visible wounds anymore. There's water and food lying around here, so they'll probably help themselves when they wake up.*

Then, I did what felt the most natural—I picked up my pickaxe. "Ciel, if something happens, let me know."

Of course, my words didn't mean anything to Ciel, and I didn't get a nod in return. That was why I used gestures to convey my meaning, and it probably worked out, because he stayed behind even when I went down the shaft. *Good! I can mine without worries now!*

Today, like any other day, I swung my pickaxe at the rock walls.

In an area deep underground from the cave where the rescued goblins were

resting, I was merrily mining away.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and muttered, “Phew! I can dig out such a large area with a single swing now.” My skill with the pickaxe had improved so much that I created a cavity roughly the area of a small bedroom with every strike. Naturally, a larger area meant more resources, and obtaining over a hundred stones in one go was the norm. “Let’s see, did I get anything noteworthy?”

The only new mineral I’d excavated yesterday was marble. *It’d be exciting if I discover something I’ve never seen or even heard of before.* Thinking that, I decided to ask the assistant about my inventory.

I inspected my bounty. *I’m getting steady new supplies of minerals I’ve already discovered, good. And huh, it looks like there are two new types.*

I requested the assistant to activate the Mineral Encyclopedia.

Glowstone: Shines forever.

I see, an apt name. These might serve as good substitutes for torches for lighting the cave. Not that I need it since <Cave King> has Night Vision.

Purgestone: Lifts any curse when used.

Curse, huh? Among the branches of dark magic spells, there were some classified as “curses.” A classic example was *Corrode*, which ate its way through one’s body like a toxin. Typically, holy magic—a priest’s specialty—was required to lift these curses. However, the process wasn’t all that simple. Different types of curses and poisons called for different treatments, so you’d need a wealth of technical knowledge on top of an extensive mana pool.

...Which makes this stone convenient, but I’m on an island in the middle of nowhere. Will I really need it?

“Oh well! Doesn’t matter. The thrill is in the discovery!” *That’s right, not everything has to be useful. Finding new things is already rewarding enough.*

“Okay, back to mining I go!”

Rolling my shoulders with a crack, I was excited to dive right back in, but then the sound of splashing liquid echoed through the cave. “Oh?” *That’s the sound of a slime hopping around.*

I turned around, and surprise, surprise, a slime was bouncing towards me like a rabbit. “Hey Ciel. Did something happen?”

Ciel didn’t nod—*of course not, he’s a slime*—instead, he stretched out his body horizontally, almost as if he were ushering me to get on. *Okay. Let’s pause for now and head back. I’m getting a little hungry too.*

I returned to the cave entrance on Ciel’s back. Around the point I began to see sunlight, I heard a loud, rough voice echoing out. “Please, Your Highness! Lemme go!”

In response, a frail voice shouted, “Stop at once, General! You mustn’t steal someone else’s provisions!”

Next, there was a deep voice. “Her Highness is right! We should negotiate with them first!”

They seemed to be arguing about something—likely my rations.

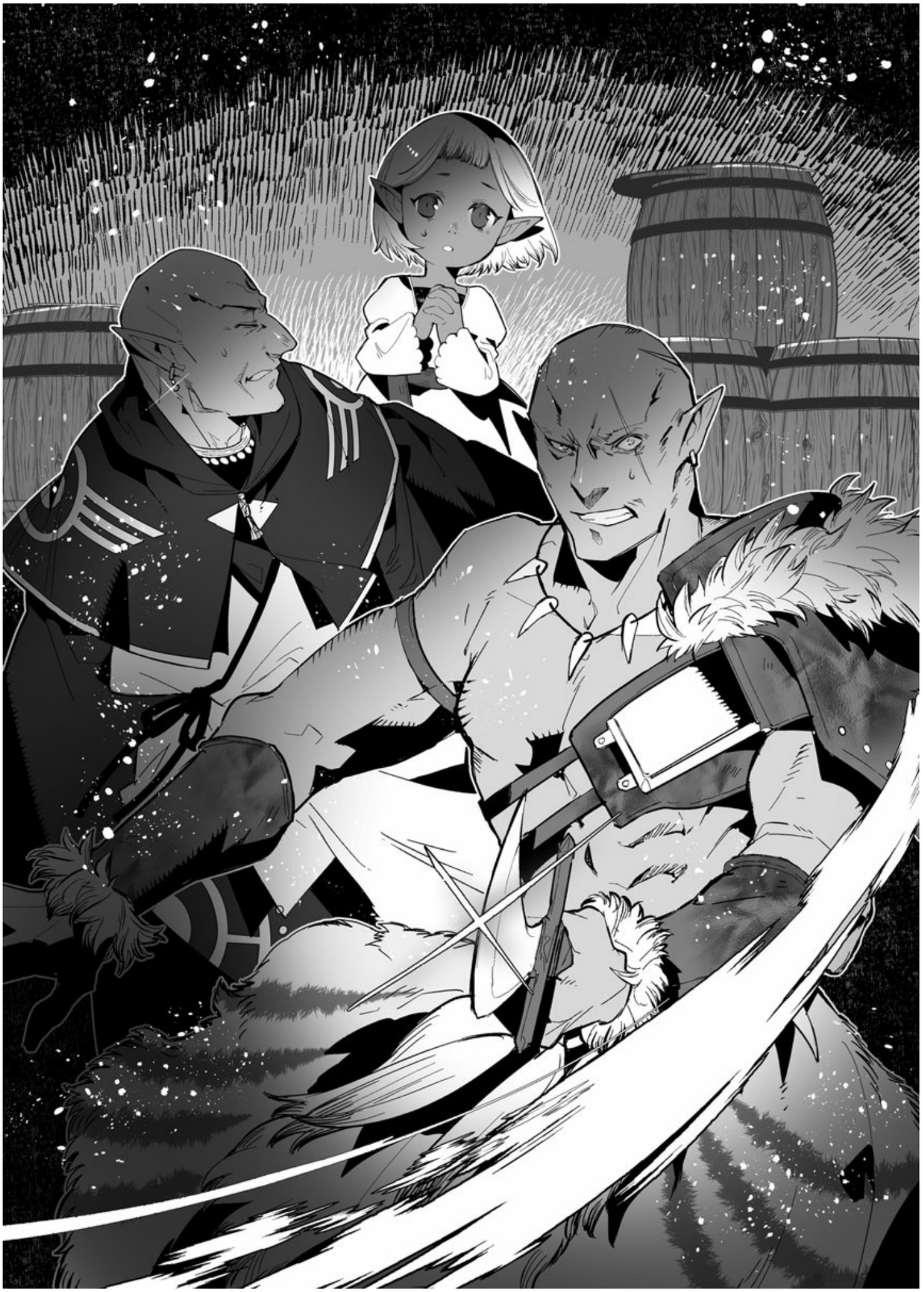
I climbed off Ciel and walked out into the open, revealing myself. Unsurprisingly, the voices belonged to the goblins I’d rescued earlier. They quickly turned to look at me.

“Wh-Who goes there?!” The goblin with a rough voice and a large, orc-like stature brandished his dagger at me. *So this guy’s the “general” they spoke of.*

But for some odd reason, calling his expression “hostile” didn’t seem right. It seemed more likely that he was afraid of me.

The small, baby-faced goblin and the wrinkly goblin seemed to cower in fear as well. However, the former soon admonished the general with a delicate voice. “L-Lower your blade, General! This person is our savior!”

“I can’t, Your Highness!” The burly goblin gritted his teeth, keeping his dagger pointed at me despite his orders. “This guy’s...*dangerous*!”



They spoke my language. Likely, they were from the Barleon Continent, where Sanphales was located. There were several human-dominated nations inside the Barleon Continent, but untouched wilderness like mountain ranges and deep forests were sometimes home to monsters. On this continent, Barleonese was the common language for both humans and monsters. It was also the official language of Sanphales.

That aside, uh... Why is he calling me dangerous? I didn't expect that at all... In any case, I should start off by showing that I come in peace. "Please wait. I'm not going to do anything bad to you guys, I swear."

The goblin general hollered, "I can never trust ya humans!"

I frowned. *I guess they're the kind of goblins that hate humans, then. But at the same time... That royal goblin girl and the wrinkly goblin are making a desperate effort to stop the general. They might be peaceful.*

"Ya must be up to no good," the general hissed. "That's gotta be it. Why else would ya be grinnin' at us like that?!"

I blinked my eyes a few times, taken by surprise. "Huh?" *I'm not smiling or anything.*

I lifted Ciel with my hands and let him stretch vertically. Like a mirror, my reflection appeared on his body.

What I saw there was a man with eyes so wide that they looked like they were bulging out and a smile equally as exaggerated on his lips. His mouth was gaping open, and his back was hunched to an eerie degree.

...Oh. He's right. Nobody would believe anything from a man who looks like this, even if he insists that he means no harm. I'm pretty sure I didn't look so freaky back in Sanphales...

I had a theory about this change. Though it'd only been a few short days, I'd been alone the entire time, repeatedly swinging my pickaxe as if I'd been possessed by something. Without other people around, I had been so deep into mining that I'd nearly lost my humanity.

Yikes, gotta stop that! I shook my head fiercely before correcting my

expression and posture. “Sorry about that. More importantly, you must be hungry, right? Please help yourself to the food there.”

However, none of the wariness melted away from the general’s face. “Ya must have poisoned them or somethin’.”

Ugh, I knew it. From his perspective, a man who looked like he was out for blood had emerged from the darkness with a glinting pickaxe in hand. Gaining the goblin’s trust wouldn’t be easy. *I mean, I would do the same if I were in his shoes!*

“Uhhh... How about this, then?” I took some bread out from a food barrel and ate it as a demonstration. With my free hand, I held out another piece to the general, but he wouldn’t accept it. *I was trying to show him that these are safe to eat, but even that failed.*

Not one to give up easily, I tested out my next plan. I walked out of the cave and cast *Thunder*, a mid-tier electricity spell, on the ocean. Stunned fish floated to the surface, and I followed up by using *Wind* to lift them into the air and blow them in my direction. A handful of fish waved their tails frantically in the air right before my eyes.

“As you can see, I haven’t done anything to these!” Grabbing the fish out of the air, I turned around, intending to offer them up, but the general’s scowl grew even fiercer.

“Yer such a powerful mage, why didn’t ya waste us on sight, human?! Put us outta our misery already!”

Well that backfired spectacularly... He’s even more guarded thanks to my magic. Wow, I’m terrible at persuasion. I chewed on my lip. *What should I do? Maybe I should give up for today, return to the mining shafts, and give them some space for the time being?*

I just stood there, completely at a loss about what to do. But then, the royal goblin raised her voice in anger. “General! Why do you always leap to conclu—” However, she was unable to finish speaking before collapsing to the ground with a pained groan.

“Your Highness!” With a yelp, the general urgently crouched down and gently

shook the girl's body.

"My princess!" The wrinkly goblin called out to the girl as well. "Your Highness, Your Highness! Please wake up!"

The princess, however, didn't climb back up from the ground. The two goblins looked dazed, as if they couldn't believe what had happened.

The wrinkly goblin's voice trembled, "General, it pains me to say that...the princess has reached her limits. In recent days, she has suffered many fainting spells. It is clear—the life span-shortening curse once cast by our neighboring tribe is the cause... This might be the end of the line."

"But the princess is the daughter of our chieftain and the only surviving royalty... If we give up here, then—!"

The wrinkly goblin shook his head. "You make a fair point, but I can't bear to see our princess suffer any longer... Do you not share the same sentiment?"

Tears slid down the general's cheeks, but after a long stretch of silence, he nodded as if he'd hardened his resolve. "Yer right. We should at least end her pain by our own hands. We'll face the punishment of our ancestors in the afterlife..."

Um. Wait. Are they all going to kill themselves? I...don't really know what's going on, but he mentioned "curse," right? Latching onto that word, I interrupted their exchange. "Hold on just one moment! If it's a curse, I might be able to cure her!"

At the abrupt statement of an outsider, the two widened their eyes. The general, however, immediately exploded with rage. "Don't lie to us! We've already tried everythin' possible, ya know?! We even lowered our heads to beg humans... But even after all that, nothin'..." The general chewed hard on his lip. "Nothin' happened!"

They had even put aside their pride to beg their enemies, the humans. For the sake of this princess, they must have sought out anyone and everyone who could possibly help. Despite their efforts, reality had given them the cold shoulder.

Curses were a type of dark magic, and their strength depended on a mage's

mana levels. The caster must have infused a tremendous amount of mana into that curse.

I hesitated. “That must have been awful, but...isn’t it a little too early to call quits?”

“Ya dunno anythin’, human! What right do ya have to say that, huh?! Do ya even know how much we suffered at the hands of ya humans?!”

“If punching me right now can soothe your anger, go ahead. But please, before you do that, give me a chance to save her.”

I told the assistant to use the purgestone I’d uncovered earlier. Not a second later, light folded around the girl like a veil.

“Wh-What was that light?!” The general rushed forward and grabbed me by the collar. “What the hell did ya do to the princess?!”

I observed the young goblin and replied in a placating voice, “Calm down. She glowed earlier because I used a purgestone, a stone that lifts curses. It’s my first time using it as well, so I can’t promise you anything, but...”

The general looked dumbfounded. “Stone? I didn’t see any stone.”

“Uh, well... I’ll explain later.”

Trying to describe my inventory would take forever. *They probably won’t believe me even if I tried, to be honest.* But what came first was the princess’s health. I caught a glimpse of some thin, black mist escaping her body, but she still didn’t wake up. *The purgestone was either ineffective or needs more time to work on her. No, hold on...*

“Oh, her life span’s already near her limit, right? Give me a second...”

I recalled the turtlestones in my inventory—stones that could increase life span. Even if the curse had nearly chewed through it, I could prolong her life with those. *I’ll keep ten just in case and use the remaining seventy-nine.*

“Use Turtlestone x79?”

Please do, I replied. Nothing seemed to happen, and I checked my inventory.

Okay, looks like I've already used them. I concluded that turtlestones didn't have any flashy effects upon consumption.

Though there was no glow, I heard a delicate voice mutter, "Huh?" The princess opened her eyes. "Wha... How? I thought I died..."

"Your Highness!" The general's voice was shaking and interrupted by sobs as he fell to his knees in relief. "Oh, praise the heavens, our princess is back!"

Wiping his tears with his hand, the wrinkly goblin whispered, "I'm so glad..."

"Wh-What in the world...?" the princess muttered, dazed, before her eyes widened and her breath hitched. "Huh?"

Hm? What is she so surprised about?

Then, she immediately started rubbing various parts of her body with her hands as she muttered in disbelief, "My...body doesn't hurt?"

"My word!" The wrinkly goblin looked just as stunned as he asked, "Are you no longer feeling the pain from the curse?"

"Yes... Like I thought, I must already be dead. This is paradise." A small, brittle smile lifted the corners of her lips. Slowly, tears slid down her cheeks. "So...this is what it's like to not feel pain."

For a long while, sobs of joy and relief filled the cave as their tears just kept coming, almost like rain falling on parched land.

"I'm...*so sorry*!!!" The general smashed his forehead into the ground. "Ya saved us, but I pointed my blade at ya! Ugh, why am I always so stupid?!" He smacked his head repeatedly into the rocky ground as an apology.

"U-Uh, it's okay. I'm also at fault, sorry for grinning like that," I stammered.

"Ya have nothin' to apologize for! Ya lifted our princess's curse! We are the ones who oughta apologize and express our gratitude, not ya, uh... Honorable One!" He seemed to fumble in his speech, likely because he didn't know my name.

"I'm Heale. Hey, how about we put names to faces while we eat?" I proposed. "My stomach's also protesting."

“Oh, my apologies for my rudeness!” The general lifted his head and introduced himself. “I’m Erivan, general of the Verdan tribe!”

His voice was followed by the princess. “I am Ri, daughter of King Rhodan of the Verdan tribe.”

Last but not least, the wrinkly goblin. “I am Baris, shaman of the Verdan tribe.”

I’d actually heard of the Verdan tribe before. They were a goblin community in the Verdan Forest, which was located in east Sanphales. It was a large tribe with countless goblins to its name, and even the local army would have thought twice before challenging them. *How did they end up here? He even said she was the last royal alive...*

Oh well, questions later. I should introduce myself properly as well. “I’m... Actually, first, this guy’s Ciel.” I indicated the slime next to me. “There are a whole lot of slimes inside this cave. I hope you will all get along.” I lifted a hand and stroked Ciel as I continued, “And like I said earlier, my name’s Heale. I’m...*technically* the governor of this island and prince of Sanphales Kingdom. Or, at least, I was.”

I used past tense, because I wasn’t sure whether I was still a prince in the official records. In Sanphales, they might have already filed me as “deceased.”

General Erivan was the first to reply. “A prince! Got it. That’s why ya could cast all them spells.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Not exactly. I *did* use magic to catch those fish, but healing the princess wasn’t the work of spells, but minerals I dug up.”

Erivan looked puzzled. “Minerals?”

“Well, I didn’t take them out, so I get your reaction. I’ll show you later if you want. More importantly, how did all of you end up here?”

Grief filled Erivan’s face as he recounted their tale. “That’s because... Those bastard orcs burned down our homeland, the home of the Verdan tribe. Other than Lady Ri, our royal family is dead. We’ve been wandering around the Barleon Continent for the past year, seeking a new home. But no tribe would take us in, and humans pursued us... With our remaining eight hundred

comrades, we built a few ships and went on an all-or-nothing gamble in search of new land."

Since they're here... Their ships must have sunk.

Baris, the goblin shaman, took over. "Now, we know not the fate of our companions. No, perhaps those rundown ships doomed us from the start. That is why I voiced my objections from the beginning..."

A dark shadow fell over Erivan's face. From the looks of it, the general must've been a supporter of the operation's. He fell silent, likely feeling responsible for the disaster.

That was when the goblin princess, Ri, spoke up. "Baris, stop blaming Erivan. Even if we'd stayed on land, our fate was likely the same."

"Indeed, Your Highness... My apologies."

Then, Ri turned to face me and lowered her head. "My lord, Heale, thank you so, so much for saving me...for saving all of us! I could never repay our debt of gratitude in full. We are monsters, but you still went out of your way to help us!"

Monsters, huh...? Without thinking, my hand reached out to the amulet jar dangling in front of my chest. "No, it's fine. That aside, you..."

If Ri's life span was supposed to end on this day, that meant she had seventy-nine more days thanks to the turtlestones I'd used. The curse was no more, so her life shouldn't be shortened any further, but that didn't change her bleak reality.

She nodded. "I am aware. In any case, I probably don't have that much time left. Even so, I have never been happier in my life. I am freed from the pain that had been eating away at me for as long as I can remember." With a gentle smile, she placed a hand over her chest.

Erivan and Baris only wore a faint smile. They probably had mixed feelings about it all. Ri had been released from the curse that had tormented her for the longest time, and she might already be content. *But...*

"Yeah, you're right. If we don't do anything, you won't have long to live," I

muttered. “But if you stay a while on this island, there’s a chance you could change that.”

She blinked, startled. “Huh?”

“When curing you, I first used a purgestone that lifts curses. Next, I used turtlestones to increase your life span. There should be many more of those turtlestones underground here. As long as we have those, we could lengthen your life span as long as we wish.”

At those words, Erivan leaned forward so fast that he nearly left an afterimage. “RReally, Lord Heale?! Such an item exists?!”

“Yeah, you saw its effects.” I nodded. “The amount of rock I can dig in each swing has been accelerating at a remarkable pace. I already found this much in three days. If I discover them at the same rate, one week of mining could probably lengthen her life by a year or more.”

Erivan and Baris traded looks. Then, Baris bowed at me. “L-Lord Heale, I...understand this is a selfish request, but will you allow us to mine those turtlestones as well?”

“Sure,” I replied immediately.

Surprise splashed onto the faces of Erivan and Baris. They seemed to have a hard time believing that I’d agreed so easily. A little while later, realization sank in, and they bowed deeply to me again and again.

“Thank you, thank you so much!” they said repeatedly.

Ri was sitting to one side and her eyes widened as she asked nervously, “Wh-Why... Why would you permit us to have something so precious?”

“Don’t sweat it. I mean, when am I supposed to use these stones anyway? I’m mining for the fun of it, not to gather resources. Plus, I was getting a little lonely around here by myself, and—” I noticed Ri was crying. Flustered, I stammered, “Ah, um...”

Yeah... Nobody wants to die. She must be happy now that there’s hope for her to live on.

Ri lowered her head and whispered, “Thank you so much.”

“Well, I was all alone here, so I’m really glad to have people to talk to,” I said. “I should be the one thanking all of you instead. Thank you.”

The three looked flustered at my words, shaking their heads and insisting, “No, *we* should be!”

I was only telling the truth, though. It’d been a long time since I’d last heard someone else’s voice, and I was over the moon.

“Okay, so we have a plan, but how do we go about it...?” I muttered to myself, frowning.

My mining had only been this efficient because of <Cave King>. I had a few more pickaxes lying around, but even if these three had them, they wouldn’t get far. Not to mention the possibility of them digging the wrong place and causing a cave-in—that would defeat the purpose of the exercise entirely. *Hey, assistant, do you have any good ideas?*

“At <Cave King>’s current proficiency level, it is possible to grant your tamed monsters some of your crest skills.”

More specifically, the crest would grant them mining skill boosts and a few handy relevant skills. However, it would pale a little in comparison to my skills as the crest owner. The assistant added that at this point in time, they couldn’t be granted access to my inventory, automatic storage, or Night Vision.

I see... So first, I need to tame them. Hmm, but goblins are different from slimes. They might be opposed to being tamed by a human. Oh well, there’s no harm in asking.

Once I sorted the information in my head, I said, “If you want to mine, I have one condition. You have to let me tame you.”

“D-Does that mean turnin’ into yer follower, Lord Heale?” Erivan asked.

“I don’t plan on giving you commands or forcing you to do anything. If the taming process itself is the problem, you can turn me down, no worries here. But in that scenario, there’s no guarantee that you all can mine safely, so I can’t give you permission to do so, but I’ll still share any turtlestones you ask for.”

Erivan shook his head fiercely before saying, “I don’t mind at all! You’ve already done so much for us, and we’re the ones asking something unreasonable! Of course, Baris and I would be willing to serve you! But please, not our princess...”

That was when Ri interrupted. “Lord Heale! If it’s not too much to ask, allow me to serve you as well!”

“Wait!” Erivan cut in hurriedly. “Y-Your Highness, you are a *princess*!”

Ri shook her head slowly. “Everyone is working so hard for my sake. I can’t just stand here and watch. Not only that, but I also want to repay my debt to Lord Heale!” Her eyes stared right into mine as she continued, “That’s why I want to serve you, my lord. I’m admittedly powerless, and I’m not sure how I can help, but I want to do everything I can.”

She was determined. Erivan and Baris seemed taken aback by her attitude. “Your Highness...” they muttered slowly, almost like a sigh.

Though she was only the height of a human toddler, she gazed at me with fiery resolve. “Lord Heale, please, I beseech you, allow me to be your subject. Please grant me a new name.”

She knew about the naming process, which meant that she fully understood how taming worked. *What do I do now? Uh, having followers isn’t really my cup of tea... Oh well, we can just release the taming when she changes her mind.*

The taming relationship between lord and retainer could be terminated at any time if the lord willed it so. On the other hand, the retainer couldn’t revoke it without their lord’s permission. That said, if Ri, Erivan, or Baris ever wanted to annul their taming, I was willing to do so immediately.

“All right, then,” I said. “I’ll start the taming now.”

“Tameable monster detected. Tame?”

It seemed that I had their consent. *Now, as for names...* Naturally, keeping the name they had before the taming was possible, so I did just that.

Erivan declared, “Erivan here! From this moment on, yer my chief, Lord

Heale!”

Baris nodded. “Though I am worn with age, I shall serve you to the best of my ability as Baris.”

“I’m counting on you both.” I smiled.

Last but not least was Ri’s taming, but before I began...

“Lord Heale, with your permission, I would like to have a new name. Um, I think my current name is difficult for you to pronounce, so...”

“No, not at all!” I hurriedly replied. “It’d be better for you to keep your previous name, right? It’s more convenient and all.”

“Oh... Would it be a bother?” Ri looked a little dejected as she gazed at me. “Please ignore me, I apologize!”

Weeell... She does have a point. In my dialect, “Ri” is a little short and difficult to pronounce. “If you insist. Hmm, let’s see... How does Riena sound?”

Hearing that, Riena’s face lit up like the sun. “Riena... Riena! I see, that is my new name. I, Riena, swear that I shall dedicate my entire body and soul to serving you, Lord Heale!”

“A-All right,” I stammered, a little taken aback by her vow. “Once again, nice to meet you all!”

With that, I’d finished taming them. They all knelt like vassals before their lord, and I felt a tad awkward because, in my mind, they weren’t my subordinates. *Ack, I’ll deal with that later.*

“Let’s save the complicated things for another time,” I suggested in an attempt to ease the atmosphere. “How about we eat something first, and then we’ll get some hands-on mining experience?”

“Yes, my lord!” the three said in unison.

I really just wanted to get back to mining as soon as possible. Whenever I wasn’t swinging down a pickaxe, I had this...uncomfortable fluttering in my chest.

As for our meal, we grilled some fish and ate it with the hardtack I’d stored

inside a barrel.

“Okay, fresh from the grill, we have fish!” I announced. “Eat your fill!”

Erivan gulped audibly. “Ohhh, grilled fish!”

Next to him, Baris seemed just as moved. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve had a cooked meal.”

Riena’s eyes lit up like the starry night sky, and she nodded in agreement. “Indeed... It’d be hazardous to light a fire on that cramped ship.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, give me a moment. I’ll toast the bread too.” I busied myself with cooking around the fire. “Ah, careful there, don’t choke on your food. Take your time, there is still plenty to go around.”

The trio were taking bite after bite of their fish and bread, pausing only to reply, “Understood!”

“Ahhh, now that’s what I call a meal!” Erivan heartily gobbled down the food, smiling from ear to ear. “It’s been too long!”

In contrast, Riena was well-mannered and took small bites, perhaps feeling guilty about Erivan’s bottomless stomach. “G-General, please learn some restraint!” However, she couldn’t fight her hunger, and she had already polished off two fish.

When she finished the third, she bowed to me. “Thank you, Lord Heale. That is more than enough for us.”

“As your followers, overindulging ourselves would be impudent,” Baris muttered.

Erivan let out an “Oh!” of realization and, as if he’d been scalded, abruptly put down the fish.

I shook my head with a small smile. “Nah, it’s okay. Eat as much as you want.”

“But...” Riena hesitated, clearly intending to refrain.

Next to her, however, Erivan yelled out, “Thanks, Chief, yer my man!” He then stuffed his cheeks with fish once again.

“G-General!” Riena gasped before frantically trying to persuade him to see

the light.

Huh. She certainly takes things very seriously, I observed. Then, I held out a freshly grilled fish to Riena. “Here you go. You don’t have to hold back. Like I said earlier, I’ve got an endless supply of fish.”

Her eyes glistened in the light, moist with tears. “You are too kind, Lord Heale. Thank you.” Once again, she gave me a deep bow before gingerly accepting the fish.

“Wait right there. I’ll toast some more bread too,” I said. *Looks like they’re all starving... I’m so glad they’re finally getting to eat a filling meal.*

With full bellies and smiling mouths, they turned to face in unison and said in chorus, “Thank you for the meal!”

“You’re very welcome. Okay, shall we get going?”

I handed out the spare pickaxes in my toolbox and led our charge underground. Before we’d managed to make any progress, however, Baris frowned and asked, “L-Lord Heale, wouldn’t it be dangerous if we walked around in the dark?”

“Huh?” I blinked. “Oh, I nearly forgot. I’m the only one with Night Vision.”

Without light sources, mining would be very difficult for them. *Time to make torches, I guess. Oh, speaking of lighting!*

“Wait here for a little bit!” I instructed before running back to the entrance. I rummaged through the supplies I’d brought here and grabbed three wooden sticks with the purpose of making torches. Then, I took out three of the glowstones I’d obtained earlier today.

Unlike traditional torches, I didn’t have to replace the combustible material, and there was no risk of fire getting out of control. Tying a piece of glowstone to the end of the stick with a cord would transform it into an eternal torch.

I inspected my makeshift torch. The light of the glowstone seemed brighter and had a broader reach than a traditional flame. *I should make these in bulk and install them along the mining shafts for these three’s convenience.*

When I was done, Baris spoke up nervously. “I-I beg my pardon, but where

did that stone appear from?”

“Uh... It’s kind of a long story. I’ll explain on the way.” I handed out the new torches. “Take these. Should make things a little easier.”

I headed underground right away, and gave them a rundown of my inventory and automatic storage systems as we walked. However, I’m not sure my explanations were adequate, because confusion was clear on their faces, and they all tilted their heads quizzically. *I should’ve expected this. I mean, the stuff I mine is automatically stowed away inside somewhere invisible. The very sound of that’s ridiculous.*

“It’s probably faster if I do a demonstration.” I stopped in front of the rock wall. “Okay, this area looks good. Watch this.” Lifting my pickaxe, I continued, “See the shining white areas? Those are safe places to strike, so you aim for these things... Hrgh!”

A clank of metal against rock.

An area of rock rivaling the size of a small bedroom crumbled at once. Then, like always, the rock pieces glowed and disappeared without a trace.

Shock was evident on the faces of all my observers. They blinked several times, as if they couldn’t believe that such a massive chunk of rock had crumbled with one strike. Then they swished their heads back and forth, looking for the missing debris.

I could empathize. Though it was a normal sight to me by now, it was by no means ordinary.

“Wh-What in the world just happened?!” Riena exclaimed.

“*This* is the power of <Cave King>, my crest. I can break down a ridiculous amount of rock and store my mined material within an unknown space,” I explained patiently.

She looked dumbfounded. “Your crest? Can crests actually make such feats possible?!”

They seemed to have knowledge of crests. Not surprising, since they weren’t unique to humans. Some monsters were born with them as well. These three

probably bore crests too. *Hm, I'll make a mental note to ask them about their crests later.*

I nodded. "Yep, it's my crest doing all the work. Taming everyone was necessary for me to share these powers with you all. You probably won't dig like this at first, but once you get used to it, I'm sure you'll be able to carve out this much too."

Even after all my explanations, they still looked like they were struggling to keep up. I continued, "Guys, just try digging around! Oh right, you guys can't automatically store stuff. Hmm, if I stick close, I could do that, but..." I trailed off in thought.

I don't exactly need to store stuff right away, but we might trip and hurt ourselves with all the debris around... Let's see... I scanned our surroundings, trying to find some inspiration. That was when the slimes hanging about caught my eye. Ciel was among them.

"Hey, Ciel," I called out. "Can you come over here for a bit?"

Answering my summons, Ciel hopped forward until he was right before me. Once again, I used body language to make a certain request. Silently, he bounced back to where the other slimes were assembled. I didn't know whether he'd gotten the message, but well, I would know once we started mining.

I took a deep breath. "All right. Everyone, just try it! Practice makes perfect."

"Right away!" the goblins replied and began swinging down their pickaxes.

As for me, I was watching over them from a small distance away. "Yep, yep, you're going great! And... Oh?"

Slimes were picking up the fallen rocks near the goblins and carrying them over to my spot. With my automatic storage, I collected them all. *Great, looks like Ciel understood me perfectly.*

The goblins wielding their pickaxes also seemed impressed with the slimes' diligence. *We don't have to worry about tripping with this!*

"All righty! Dig, dig, dig!" I yelled in excitement. "If you get tired, please sleep

or rest as you see fit!”

The goblins gave an energetic reply. “Yes, my lord!”

For a while after that, we busied ourselves with mining. From that day on, the cave became a lot livelier.

Chapter 3: Discovering a Spider Nest!

I tipped the cup of water down my throat before letting out a contented sigh. “Nothing beats the taste of water after a day of hard work!”

Three days had passed since the goblins had joined my party, and we were sharing a wonderful third evening together at the cave entrance. We were just about to have dinner.

Erivan, the stocky goblin, nodded in agreement. “Right! Makes water taste as good as booze! I gotta say, I never expected minin’ to be so fun!”

Finding a kindred soul, I nodded vigorously. “Right, right? I totally agree!”

Baris sat among us in our little circle around the giant pile of glowstones, and he was just as chipper. “I find it hard to believe that even a grizzled goblin like me was able to mine so much. The princess’s life span is increasing steadily as well. It’s all very rewarding.”

“Yeah, having a goal in sight makes the sense of accomplishment even greater.” I paused to check my inventory. “On that note, I wonder how many turtlestones we managed to find today.” As I looked it over, I muttered, “We’re doing well with glowstones. As for turtlestones... Whoa, we got quite the haul!”

For the past two days, we’d assembled here in the evening, and Riena had used the turtlestones we had amassed. If I took today’s haul into account, she should have earned over two years of life span.

A bright voice rang out. “Sorry about the wait, everyone! Apple pie’s on the menu today!” It was Riena, and she was making her way back from the kitchen we’d built on the rocks outside the cave.

We’d created a few facilities during the past three days. The kitchen was our first task, and we built it with piled rocks, even including a small stove.

The second was a toilet. We’d dug out a horizontal tunnel in one part of the cave, and it led to a private stall with a hole in the ground. I regularly combusted the waste with fire magic.

Last but not least was a water reservoir. If I'd been living alone, I could have just used water magic for my daily needs. But since my new companions couldn't use magic, we decided to make things easy by having water readily available in one place.

I call them facilities, but they're just simple stuff we built with the minerals we mined. They're nothing too fancy. In fact, they all share the same dull gray color scheme... On this island, we had a severe shortage of plant-based resources. Other than what we'd brought, our only supply of lumber and firewood was washed-up driftwood. Our shortages extended to food as well.

Erivan pumped both fists in excitement. It seemed he'd been waiting for this moment. "Whoo, the princess's apple pie! We're in for a treat!"

My eyes lit up as well. "Awesome! It's another day of great food!"

"I do hope you'll like it, Lord Heale," Riena said shyly before holding out a plate of apple pie to me.

One of the things I'd learned after spending a couple of days with my new comrades was that Riena was an excellent cook. She worked wonders with food. Two days ago, she'd made fish and vegetable soup, and yesterday, she'd made a gratin with shrimp and other shellfish. I could declare with confidence that they were both culinary masterpieces. In contrast, the only thing I could do with ingredients was boil or grill, so I'd been over the moon when she'd revealed her talent.

The corners of my lips quirked up. "Your cooking has been beyond excellent for the past two days. There's no way I won't like it!"

I immediately took a big bite of the piping hot apple pie. *I knew it, this is amazing. I swear, this makes all the food I had back at the palace pale in comparison. The royal chefs can't even hold a candle to her cooking! How in the world did she make these apples taste so sweet? She's a master chef!*

This apple pie had actually been made from ingredients I'd brought onto the island. Butter, sugar, flour—they were farewell gifts from my father. Naturally, in the hands of a novice chef, these rations were pearls cast before swine. If I'd remained alone here, I would've only eaten them as they were. However, with Riena on the scene, everything had changed.

On that thought, I turned to Riena. “Hey Riena, we’re running low on flour, right?”

“Well...” She paused to think. “If I were to make the same pie again, we’d only have enough for two meals.”

I frowned. “I see...”

I had just gotten my hopes up about experiencing the blissful life of a gourmet, but if we didn’t have the ingredients anymore... I stifled a sigh.

Like I’d mentioned earlier, we also had a severe shortage of food. Not in terms of amount, but variety. If we were only aiming to fill our stomachs, we had a whole ocean of fish for the taking. But fish for every meal would get dull quickly.

If possible, I wanted to find other sustainable sources of food on this island. Unfortunately, the chances of that were pretty low—we were on a deserted island with only rocks in sight. No trees, no wheat... And even if we wanted to cultivate some of our own, there was no soil.

The only choice we have is to obtain these resources from an outside source. But ships don’t pass by at all...

Riena saw that I was stumped, and she tried to cheer me up. “U-Um! I shall do my best to make satisfying food for you, even if we only have seafood!”

“Oh, Riena... Thank you. But don’t be too hard on yourself. And don’t worry, you can leave all the mining to us.”

She shook her head fiercely. “No, I shall do everything I can, whether it be mining or cooking!”

Riena was the baby-faced goblin with dull green skin. Erivan and Baris had vibrant green skin and clear-cut features, so when standing next to them, she seemed to blend into the background. However, she was sweet, cheerful, and hardworking, and I found her adorable.

“In that case, I gotta work harder too.” I stood up and stretched. “All right, I’ll go do some light mining while my food digests!”

Erivan reacted immediately. “Chief, I’ll help!”

Riena was only a step behind. “I shall go as well!”

“Please allow me to offer my aid.” Last but not least, Baris started to stand up as well.

I shook my head. “Oh, come on, guys. I know my crest minimizes fatigue from mining, but it’s less effective for all of you. You must be exhausted. The slimes look pretty worn out too, so rest up.”

The three didn’t seem convinced at all, and they voiced their protests. I responded in a joking tone, “Your lord commands you!”

They looked at the slimes flattened out lethargically around the glowstones and finally gave me begrudging nods.

Looking slightly dejected, Erivan said, “Understood, Chief... I’ll make sure to get plenty of rest.”

“Good,” I nodded, purposefully trying to make myself sound a little pompous. “I’m heading off then.”

Armed with my trusty pickaxe, I burrowed into the depths of our cave once more. On my way there, Ciel offered me a ride, and I gladly took him up on that offer. Once I arrived at the end of the shaft, I began mining with undivided attention—or at least, that was what I wanted to do, but I couldn’t. Though my hand brought down my pick, I found my mind drifting.

Continuing my thought process from earlier, if we wanted to live here as a group, having more resources would, of course, be ideal. The shortage of food and lumber was a pressing concern, but in the long run, my clothes would wear out too. *Who would’ve thought? I’ve come full circle. Now I’m tackling the burdens of governance.*

In any case, focusing on mining should help expand my options. I might discover new ores and mana minerals. The latter could open new doors as well. Other than that, though, I knew the chances were slim, so perhaps taking turns looking out for ships might be a good plan. We could probably exchange valuable minerals, like the jewels we’d collected, for food and supplies.

Deep in thought, I continued digging, but that was when I came across something unexpected. The rock itself broke easily, like always, but instead of

more rock, there was a vast cavern behind it. *Hm? What's this?*

I walked through the gap and scanned my surroundings. The first thing that stood out to me were the orange glowing rocks that covered the walls and ceiling like a curtain. As I walked about, I noticed the ground was soft. *Is this...soil?* My eyes widened. *It's soil!*

The priests of Sanphales had claimed that soil was made by the blessing of the sun, and it was only supposed to appear in places where light could reach. *So why is there—*

A black object suddenly appeared from out of nowhere and entered my vision. *Huh?* On reflex, my eyes followed the unknown item, and I craned my neck to get a better look.

But what I discovered...was a black spider many times my size. Its numerous crimson eyes followed my every movement.

I'm done for. I'm dead for sure, I thought numbly. *I never liked spiders to begin with...* Standing still like a fool, however, was not an option. On the spur of the moment, I raised my right arm and pointed it at the spider, ready to channel a spell.

I watched it warily. *Is it going to attack me?*

What happened next took me completely by surprise. The spider *ran away* in a panic, escaping to the depths of the cavern. On closer inspection, it had gone over to a few tiny spiders, though they were only tiny in comparison—they were roughly my height. *I see, it went back to protect its kids. I can't believe it was intimidated by a puny human like me...*

I waited for a little while longer, but the spiders didn't seem intent on attacking first.

"U-Um, sorry about that," I said tentatively. "I didn't know this was your home."

The cowering spiders didn't offer a reply, but I heard the voice of the advisor instead.

"Tameable monster detected. Tame?"

Wait, they are monsters? More importantly, why is it tameable?!

"The monster has lost all will to fight. Taming is possible."

Uh, I haven't done anything yet, you know... But instead of hostile, it seems like the big spider is either shy or just unfamiliar with humans. Hmm, what should I do? Should I just pretend this encounter never happened and move on? Still, since it's possible, maybe...

"Hey, guys. Would you like to join me?"

I placed my pickaxe down onto the ground and walked in front of the spiders. The largest spider was trembling, but it timidly reached out one of its front legs. The leg covered in thick black fur touched me gingerly. The spider's body was surprisingly soft and fluffy.

At first, partly due to my phobia of spiders, the creature had seemed downright terrifying. Now that I took the time to look at it, however, it had white stripes on its legs and torso, and somehow, I found that cute.

"I...guess that's a yes? Okay then..." I paused to think. "How does Taran sound?"

"Naming complete. You have tamed Taran."

I was still struggling to process what had just happened, but it seemed that the spider monster was my new friend. According to the advisor, the little ones were tameable as well. Thus, the other three spiders quickly became my comrades as well. *Hmm, coming up with three names is surprisingly hard, huh?*

"Unlocked Workshop."

The advisor's announcement interrupted my train of thought. Apparently, <Cave King>'s proficiency had reached a new threshold and it had unlocked new

abilities. *Now, as for Workshop's effects...*

"You may refine or fuse minerals stored in the inventory."

Wait, really?! Does that mean you can turn iron ore into pure iron, for example? If I can do that, I'd be able to make bigger pickaxes...or maybe experiment with making lighter pickaxes...I could even create stylish pickaxes!

"Iron ore into pure iron... The closest match is smelted iron. More proficiency is required to unlock smelting skills."

Oh... I thought, my shoulders sagging from disappointment. *What can you do, then?*

The advisor then indicated the list of fusions and refinements at my current level. The applicable materials floated to the surface of my mind. Rocks, sands, marbles...

Huh? That's it? I wasn't very impressed, but after hearing a detailed explanation regarding the rocks, I discovered how incredibly useful this skill was. *That's saying something, considering I haven't heard what it can do with sand and marble yet!*

I could use up raw rocks I mined to refine them into pebbles and smooth stones. During this process, I could freely customize the products' size and shape.

Normally, one unit of stone in my inventory was equivalent to one "kilogram" unit of smooth stone. With this skill, I could combine more than one unit of rock to make larger blocks. As for their shape, I had a lot of options. Cubes, cuboids, spheres, cylinders, and so on. Not only were these basic shapes available to me, but I could also make more complex ones by picturing the design in my mind. In practice, that meant making statues or stylized pillars.

It's a very powerful tool indeed, but uh, with my lack of artistic taste, it's a bit of a waste in my hands... Oh well! At any rate, with this, building won't be a weird balancing game of random rocks anymore.

It seemed that the same freedom extended to marble. As for sand, I could combine it with stone products or other minerals to change its color or texture. In addition, the pebbles I had refined from rock could be fused with sand to make gravel.

At first, when I saw the short list of rocks and sands, I had thought of it as a letdown. However, if I was smart with this skill, I could even expand the overall land territory of this island. More than anything, the skill's biggest advantage was the fact that manual labor was unnecessary for refinement and fusion. Cutting a stone into the form of a cube didn't take that much time, but chiseling away at a gigantic piece of stone to create a pillar would usually take ages.

Next, the advisor introduced another new skill.

"Unlocked Sculpt. You may freely shape the areas you touch while mining."

At the moment, whenever I mined, I left behind a rugged hollow. However, with this, I could flatten the walls and ground neatly. I could likely add an incline or stairs as well. *Wait... On that thought, the rocky terrain of this island makes it really rough to get to shore. Could I smooth that out with this skill?*

"Skills provided by <Cave King> are restricted to the interiors of caves at the current proficiency level. You may unlock more range after gaining proficiency. However, both Workshop and inventory retrieval are not limited by location."

Oh, that's a shame... Still, this skill is already very powerful at its current stage! As for the rocky area, I could just cover it with a layer of sand and smooth it out. *In any case, I've gained some very useful tools. Maybe I should start planning some small construction projects.*

Aside from these two big new skills, the crest had also unlocked Night Vision for my tamed monsters. They could work with better lighting now, and that was great news.

Aaand I gotta stop getting distracted. I nearly forgot about these guys in front of me. The spider monsters, the new additions to my team, were staring at me.

“Oh, sorry about that.” I gave them a small wave. “Hi, I’m Heale. I’m going to head to the surface now. If you’re up to it, I’ll introduce you to the others, so please follow me.”

Oh snap. They don’t understand what I’m saying. Oh well, I’m sure they’ll come out on their own when they get curious.

The taming contract prohibited the follower monsters from harming the tamer. Monsters tamed by the same tamer also couldn’t hurt each other. As for whether the monsters would listen to the tamer’s commands, well, it depended on their relationship with their lord, but the first two were rules enforced by the contract. Therefore, these spiders couldn’t attack the goblins or the slimes.

Ciel, in fact, was currently playing around with the spiders and hopping onto their heads. The spiders’ only reaction was prodding Ciel’s squishy body with their long front legs. *Hmm, it doesn’t seem like they’re behaving this way because of the contract’s constraints. They’re actually curious about each other.*

Okay, all that aside, I should go back and inform the others first. I hadn’t planned on mining for a long time to begin with, and I’ve obtained new skills, so I can call it a day here.

When I reached the opening of the cavern, I turned around and saw the spiders following me with tiny footsteps. They seemed set on going with me. *Hmm...* I frowned a little. The little ones could fit through the inclined shaft I had dug, but Taran would have trouble squeezing in.

“Oh, um...” I scratched my head. “Give me a minute.”

I decided I’d test out my brand-new skill, Sculpt. I dug into the rock walls and widened the shaft as I made my way up. While I was at it, I turned the center of the shaft into stairs while smoothing out its sides into a gradual incline, almost like a slide. *This should be a good size for Taran, and the stairs make it easier for me to walk too.*

When I arrived at the opening of the shaft, I saw the goblins still sitting in a circle around the glowstones.

Erivan turned around with a big grin on his face. “Hey there, Chief! I heard the pleasant sound of yer pickaxe gettin’ closer and closer! I was actually just about

to change my mind and go diggin' again. Wait..." That smile, however, froze and turned into a face of horror. "Wh— Gaaah!"

Riena and Baris seemed just as terrified. *Wh-What's wrong? Oh! It must be the guys behind me.* I turned around and was met with the sight of countless red, glowing eyes. Of course, they belonged to Taran and the little ones.

"Ch-Chief!" Erivan lifted a shaking finger. "Look behind you!!!"

"Everything's under control, Erivan," I reassured him. "These are our new comrades."

There was a note of hysteria in his voice. "C-Comrades?! *Those things*?!"

"Yep. I found them in a cavern I happened to come across while digging."

"O-Oh, I see..." Erivan let out a sigh of relief. "Sorry, spiders just ain't my thing. I overreacted."

After hearing my explanation, this relief extended to Riena and Baris as well. On the other hand, the slimes were all hopping towards the spiders, probably intent on copying Ciel—who was currently sitting on Taran's head.

That was when I heard Baris's mystified voice. "I'm very surprised. I believe they are cave spiders, but I've never heard of specimens this big."

I was intrigued. "Are the ones in Barleon smaller?"

"Indeed. Usually, they are closer to our size."

According to Baris, normal cave spiders would usually be as high as my hips. *Uh, that's still pretty big...*

"Well, this is my first time coming across cave spiders, so I don't know too much about them." I shrugged. "If I remember correctly, they are monsters that lurk in caves and abandoned mines, right?"

"Yes." Baris nodded. "They are extremely ferocious, and their fangs hold a lethal venom. Their silk is stronger than iron, but it is also said to be very elastic. We goblins often choose caves as our hideout as well, and we frequently saw skeletal remains of humans and monsters killed by cave spiders."

"Huh..." *I assumed they were a docile bunch, but it looks like I was completely*

wrong. Although, to be honest, if we're just judging them by their appearance, they're terrifying...and huge!

"Goblins are taught to be wary if we ever find soil in the depths of a cave. That soil is a cave spider's, well..."

Baris was a wise and mild-mannered goblin, and he seemed to be struggling for an appropriate word. *I think I get it. In short, the soil is actually these spiders' excrement...*

"It's okay, you don't have to elaborate. The whole ground was covered with it, so I have an idea."

But, well, it hadn't exactly stunk or anything. It had seemed no different from normal soil. Since they were the products of spiders, I wasn't too bothered by this information.

Baris nodded. "I see... But that's good news for us."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"Their by-product is much more fertile than normal soil on the surface, or so I hear. They are so effective, in fact, that wheat would grow on them even without sunlight. Plus, spider silk is mixed in, so it doesn't dry easily. They say that with this soil, even farming in a desert is possible."

"Interesting. Oh, but why do they make the effort to mix in spider silk?"

"Cave spiders have the habit of cultivating mushrooms, you see. Human and monster meat are in their diet, but their staple food are mushrooms."

Human meat too? Wow...

I snuck a glance at Taran. Riena was in the middle of greeting our new friend, and she offered him a grilled fish, asking, "By the way, are you hungry?"

Taran didn't hold back—she grabbed the grilled fish with a front leg right away. Witnessing this scene, the little ones began crowding around Riena as well, hoping for their own portions of fish. Riena seemed a little intimidated, but she hastily went away to grill more.

I see. They can survive on mushrooms, but they like eating meat and fish when they have the opportunity. Well, they used to live in that isolated cavern, so they

probably didn't get the chance to feast on such things.

That answered one of the questions I had. "That makes sense. So that was how they survived despite being secluded from the rest of the world."

Baris was right that it was good luck; we normally wouldn't be able to find soil on a barren island like ours. Like I'd mentioned before, we were on a big rock. There was no soil, so there were no plants. But now, though it wasn't much, we had come across high-grade soil. As long as we had seeds, we could start cultivating crops.

I sighed. *But the problem is those crucial seeds. We only have fruit seeds available at the moment.* Though I wasn't an expert, I knew that a lot of fruit grew on trees, and those took several years before they would begin bearing fruit. *But I can't cross off the possibility that we might come across other seeds someday. Who knows? Vegetables and grain might wash ashore. At the very least, we know farming is possible now, and I'm feeling very hopeful!*

With that thought, I muttered to myself, "We can't let this go to waste. Maybe I should start a simple farm or something. I need to expand our cramped island too..."

Now that I had new skills and cave spiders as my comrades, the scope of my options had increased dramatically. Not just farming or construction—I was sure that if we processed spider silk properly, we could make fibers, which could be woven into clothes or fishing nets.

To be honest, the only thing I wanted to dedicate my time and energy to was mining, but now that I had cavemates, I ought to be considerate of the other people living with me. *Okay, complicated thoughts aside...*

"Looks like a welcome party is due!" I declared. "We're living on a tiny island, so let's all get along. Oh. Hey, Riena, I'll help!"

I caught fresh fish and grilled them with Riena, and thanks to our little party, we slowly got more familiar with our new spider neighbors.

Chapter 4: Making a Farm!

A few days had passed since Taran and the little ones joined our team.

Right now, I was standing on the coast with my arm raised. In my hand was a brand-new pickaxe. “Wow, you did a great job!” I gushed.

Baris gave me a small bow. “I am honored to receive such praise, Lord Heale.”

This pickaxe was the result of the combined efforts of Baris and Erivan. Baris had given directions while Erivan had done the manual labor.

“But... I’m afraid this is all I can muster with my limited knowledge.” Baris hesitated. “I can’t create pickaxes of the same caliber as the ones you gave us.”

“Don’t say that. Being able to craft iron in this kinda place is already a huge step forward!”

I admired the blast furnace and other facilities Baris had designed. I, personally, was going into things blind as a bat when it came to smelting iron. As far as I knew, goblins weren’t known for advanced technology. Their weapons were crafted for the sole purpose of hunting, and some tribes still used stone tools. Only the more affluent tribes had the bountiful resources to smelt iron.

The Verdan tribe had been a faction so powerful that even a good number of humans would recognize the name. Thus, they had the time and resources to create iron. True to his title as shaman, Baris was very knowledgeable. He was the one who taught me about the facilities required for smelting and the actual smelting process. The only thing I helped out with was putting the facilities together with smooth stones.

If only I studied more... But, well, I never predicted that smelting skills would come in handy in my life, to be honest. This brought one issue into light. We lacked people with specialized knowledge and skills on this island.

“You two did a wonderful job! I wish I had been around to help out with smelting...” I sighed.

“Oh, we could never ask that of ya, Chief!” Erivan slammed his fist into his chest in a “you can count on us” gesture. “We can’t trouble ya with things outside of minin’!”

I was very grateful for that. Though I wanted to offer my help, I was our most efficient miner, and Erivan and Baris were well aware of that. We needed as many turtlestones as we could get to lengthen Riena’s still-too-short life span, and I was key to that.

Riena had already added over five years to her life. However, she was still fifteen years old. The average life expectancy of humans and goblins were apparently the same, so we wanted to make sure she still had many years ahead of her.

And for that, pickaxes were absolutely necessary. The tools I’d handed to the goblins had already reached their limit. On the other hand, though I’d been using mine for longer than them, my pickaxe was still going very strong. Perhaps this was an ability of <Cave King> as well—when I mined, my pickaxe wasn’t subject to any unnecessary recoil.

Basically, we had run out of pickaxes, and we needed to make new ones. While these two worked on pickaxes, our new cave spider comrades were in charge of carrying their soil to a specific area on the island, and Taran led that operation. We would start a small farm there.

That wasn’t their only task—I’d also asked them to spin spider silk. Riena had observed that their spider silk was very robust, and they were the perfect length and thickness for threads. They didn’t need further refinement. At the moment, she was working on her first project of many—making a fishing net.

To be honest, my lightning magic was more than enough for fishing, but the goblins seemed to be in agreement that they should avoid relying on me when possible. They probably wanted me to focus on mining.

“Okay then, I’ll head back to the cave. Those stones seem to be pretty handy, so I’m still working on getting more.”

“Got it, Chief!” Erivan replied. “After we make some progress here, we’ll get back to the shaft as well!”

“I see. I’ll be a step ahead of you all, then.” I smiled.

Leaving behind those words, I headed to the cave and stepped into the inclined shaft. Before I could take a step further, however, Ciel hopped in front of me and changed the shape of his body. After a moment, he’d formed the shape of a small boat.

The shaft that led underground had stairs in the middle and slopes on the sides. Ciel seemed like he wanted to give me a ride down.

“Hi, Ciel. Thanks for helping me down every day.”

In response, Ciel stretched out one little part of his body like a hand and waved it. He couldn’t speak, but he was likely trying to convey, “Don’t sweat it.” *Huh. Did he learn this gesture by watching my interactions with the goblins?*

I grinned. “I’m counting on you!”

I climbed onto Ciel and held on tight. He then slid down the lengthy slope with a whoosh, and I kid you not, in an instant, I’d arrived at the cavern where I had found the cave spiders.

“Phew, thanks. You’re so fast! That...was a bit scary though.”

I gave Ciel a couple of light pats before I advanced into the cavern. *Okay, last time I was here, I’d finished mining half of the stuff.* I surveyed the orange stones left in the area. For the past three days, I’d been taking some time out of my normal mining to collect these stones. They glowed and were warm like sunlight, but they weren’t just decorative.

Sunstone: Accelerates organic growth when used.

The thing is, this “organic growth” apparently includes plants and even animals like humans. The cave spiders living here probably got much bigger than those in Barleon thanks to these stones. I wasn’t sure whether this rapid growth came with negative effects, so I was a little wary about using it on myself or Riena.

However, for growing crops, these would be *very* useful. I wasn’t clear on how effective they were, but once the small farm on the surface was ready, I

planned on sowing some apple seeds and testing them out.

Okay, time to dig! Something caught my eye. *Hm?*

A giant black spider scuttled into the cave. Taran was holding a grand total of four pickaxes. She had eight legs, and the front four held the handles in a pincer grip with her claws.

“What’re you doing here, Taran?” I asked, curious. “I already have a pick, so I don’t need another at the moment.”

Did Erivan ask Taran to carry those here, perhaps? Hm, but the goblins should know that my pickaxe doesn’t wear down that quickly. Does that mean... My eyes widened. “Are you...challenging me?”

She offered no reply, only staring at me with her six red eyes, and that was answer enough. I was torn between joy and trepidation. A shiver ran down my spine. Despite being my follower monster, this lady, armed with four pickaxes, wanted to throw down the gauntlet.

“Fine, bring it on.” I lifted my pick and stood at the ready.

Then...

“Let the battle begin!” I yelled as I swung my pickaxe hard at the sunstone wall.

Not a second later, there was a flurry of crunching sounds echoing out from behind me—four pickaxes had struck the rock wall in succession.

Taran was mining with four picks, and a human with a pitiful count of one couldn’t ever be her match. *Sheesh, she makes it look easy. She must have been observing me closely for the past three days and thought she could do the same... No, maybe she thought she could do even better than me.*

But as the owner of <Cave King>, my pride said that I mustn’t lose to a novice.

I let out a loud, drawn-out battle cry as I swung down my pickaxe even faster than before. “I won’t lose to you!!!”



Seeing that I'd sped up, Taran also bumped up her pace.

At the end of the competition, we had managed to excavate all the remaining sunstones within the span of one day. We hadn't stopped at that, in fact—we even dug into the rock walls behind them.

For the first time since I had arrived at this island, I was totally spent. I barely managed to climb onto Ciel, who carried me to the surface, but my breathing was still erratic even after we arrived.

Between pants, I made sure to praise Taran, who had returned with me. "You're so quick. Taran, you're a star." She had fought bravely, and I had to admire that. "But I'll be claiming victory in regards to tunnel length."

That being said, though it was her first time mining, her speed was already extraordinary. In fact, the slime postal service couldn't keep up with her pace, and sometimes, the debris accumulated so quickly that we had to watch our feet as we went. *If she keeps improving at this rate, she might even surpass me one day...* Taran was a fearsome rival in the making.

The arrival of a small goblin snapped me out of my thoughts. Riena approached me with a white handkerchief in hand, and she gave me a bow. "Lord Heale, thank you for all your hard work today!"

"Hey, Riena! Thanks."

I accepted the pristine white handkerchief she offered and wiped my sweat with it. But after a while, I stilled as my mind finally realized something. *Huh? I don't remember seeing such clean and silky cloth around...*

It felt really nice against my skin, though, and Riena seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm so glad you like it! I finished making the fishing net, so I experimented with spider silk by weaving a handkerchief."

"Ah, I see, I see. I almost mistook it for silkworm silk, because it felt *that* amazing. Wow, you even know how to knit, Riena!"

I tried stretching the handkerchief with my hands, and I could tell that the cloth was both incredibly durable and elastic.

"Yes! I can make all kinds of items." She paused. "Would you like me to make

some bedding as well, perhaps?”

“Bedding!” My eyes lit up at the word. “That sounds great! It’d be unfair for Ciel to be my mattress and blanket forever. Could you do that for me, please?”

“But of course. Leave it to me!”

“I can’t wait! Oh, and before I forget, I need to give you the turtlestones I found today.”

I aimed the palm of my hand at a nearby wooden crate and began summoning the turtlestones—they were tiny, around the size of peas, and they were shaped like turtle shells. They formed a neat pile on top of the crate.

With a conflicted look in her verdant eyes, Riena gazed at the stones.

Once I had finished retrieving them all, I muttered, “That’s around three hundred of them... Yet another day with a good haul.” I nodded to myself in satisfaction.

But then, Riena wore a grave look on her face as she said, “Lord Heale, there’s something I’ve wanted to say for a while...”

“Hm? What is it, Riena?”

“I... You have already given me more than enough of these! These are very precious stones, and it is improper for me to use them.”

“I-Improper?” I repeated dumbly. “Why’s that?”

Riena looked apologetic as she continued, “I can’t contribute in any way... They are wasted on a person like me.”

I frowned. “Riena...”

Can’t contribute in any way, huh? When I was in the palace, I used to think the same way. Born with a useless crest, I myself was just as useless, and everyone had agreed, myself included. Once, I believed I was a waste of space and air.

But things had changed. Now, I was beginning to find meaning in my life. It didn’t have anything to do with other people’s opinion of me—*I* had a new goal, something to work towards. I wanted to live on this island.

It took me a while to form my reply. “Hey, Riena... Is there anything you

want?”

“Something I...want?”

“Yeah. Anything’s fine. It can be an item, or a new ability... A wish, basically.”

“Something I want...” Riena trailed off. After a short moment of silence, she replied resolutely, “I do! I have a wish!” She looked right into my eyes and continued, “I wish that I can be more useful to you in the future, Lord Heale.”

“To me? Uh, you really don’t have to use your wish on someone like me.”

“No.” She was firm. “That is my wish!”

*She wants to help...*me*. But I haven’t done that much for Riena. I don’t deserve that.* I chewed on my lip. *If that’s what she says, though, I have no right to decide for her.*

“I’ll be honest, I think there are better things to wish for, but...” I paused. “You know, Riena, you are actually capable of many things that I can’t do. I think you can have more confidence, don’t you agree?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you’re a brilliant cook, and you can even knit and weave.” I held up the handkerchief she had handed me earlier. “I can’t do any of those. I dunno about Baris, but Erivan probably can’t either, right?”

“Y-Yes, but...”

“We’re on an island in the middle of nowhere.” I smiled wryly. “We need to help each other out. *I* need you, Riena.” I put the handkerchief down and picked up the turtlestones, holding them out before her.

Riena’s eyes grew moist. “Lord Heale... Thank you so much.” She gave me a deep bow before gingerly accepting the turtlestones with her tiny hands. She wiped her tears with one hand, and a smile bloomed on her face. “I’ll work even harder!”

“Same here.”

As we made that vow to each other, we traded determined nods.

Chapter 5: A Ship Arrived!

A night had passed since my fierce battle with Taran, and the sun was hanging high above our heads at noon.

A voice, pleasant like a chime, rang out in the small farm we'd set up in one corner of the island. "A-Amazing! It's already sprouting!"

Riena's awe wasn't unwarranted. We had only just sowed the apple seed, but within a matter of roughly ten or twenty seconds, a sprout had appeared.

We owed it all to the sunstones, a mineral I'd excavated from the cave spider cavern. These could accelerate the growth of all living things. *Still, I didn't expect the sprout to shoot out so quickly that we'd literally be able to watch it do so!*

I nodded encouragingly to Riena. "Yeah, and that only took one sunstone. Let's use a few more."

Saying that, I took out a few sunstones from my inventory and in my mind, I willed it to be used on the sprout. The sunstones emitted a warm, gentle glow before growing dull, transforming into plain, gray rocks.

The next moment, the sprout grew rapidly, as if someone had sped up time. Finally, it turned into a tree taller than me.

I craned my neck to get a good look, and an emerald green canopy dotted with ruby red entered my vision—luscious leaves and fruit as enticing as jewels.

Erivan and Baris, who watched on alongside us, looked just as surprised. They blinked their eyes several times.

"Wh-Whoa..." Erivan's eyes were wide as saucers.

"I-Incredible... I didn't expect it to be so effective," Baris muttered as he broke into a cold sweat.

I wasn't any more composed. I was rendered utterly speechless. *Sure, I may have dug up stones that increase one's lifespan or mana level, but this is still an incredible sight!*

I had already mined all the sunstones in the cavern, and hadn't yet found them anywhere else. I needed to use them mindfully, because I didn't know when I'd come across them again.

There were 678 sunstones left in my inventory, and I had spent eleven to cultivate one apple tree. This meant I could grow roughly sixty more apple trees. As for the small mushrooms I had found in Taran's cavern, one sunstone was enough to develop each one into a bite-sized mushroom. It seemed that the species of plant affected the number of sunstones required.

Analysis of a finite resource aside, seeing green after so long without was a sight for sore eyes. Though it was only a simple tree, I was moved beyond explanation. Until now, the only landscape I could admire on this reef were rocks and the sea.

"The apples look delicious!" Riena exclaimed. "May I pick some? I'm thinking about making grilled apples for dinner tonight."

"Of course, take as many as you want," I replied. "I can never say no to sweet treats."

Very soon, the food I'd carried onto this island would be fully depleted. If I hadn't discovered these sunstones, we would have had to survive on a diet of only seafood. Though I understood it was for survival, I would probably get sick of salty fish if we had them for every meal.

"Understood! I'll pick roughly twenty apples for now!" Riena chirped cheerfully. Humming a tune, she grabbed a wood stick and began poking the apples to make them fall. She was probably more interested in cooking than mining.

In that case... "Hey, Riena, may I have a moment?"

The little goblin was so happy that she might jump for joy at any moment. With an entire armful of apples held at her chest, she turned around and looked at me. "Of course. What is it?"

"From this moment on, I'll leave the sunstone management to you."

I was completely ignorant in the field of cooking. Thus, leaving our farm project to Riena was likely a prudent choice. Furthermore, I'd heard that Riena's

crest was <Farmer>. It was a common crest among, well, the offspring of farmers. One of the crest's gifts was its ability to hasten the growth of crops.

That being said, the difference was said to be miniscule, and it was barely noticeable. However, having it was definitely better than not. That wasn't my only reason—I'd heard that Riena had always been cultivating plants, even before the decline of the Verdan tribe.

I continued, "I'll chuck them into a crate near the cave entrance. Use them as you see fit."

"M-Me? But these are very precious items!"

"Stuff like this is probably best left in the hands of our master chef. Don't you think?"

"But I..." Riena took a deep breath. "If that is your will, Lord Heale, I won't let you down!"

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do!"

I didn't want her to work herself too hard, but I *did* have a lot of faith in her. In the field of food, I was confident that she would meet my expectations or even go beyond them. The problem was that we only had fruit seeds, which limited the types of crops she could rear. If possible, I wanted to obtain seeds for staple foods from an outside source soon, but that wasn't something I could control.

Oh well. Let's start by doing what we can now.

"Okay then, I'll head back to mining now!" I announced.

"Good luck!" the goblins said in unison, their voices marking the beginning of yet another day of mining for me.

When I arrived at the end of the shaft, Taran and the little ones were already there, and they were all swinging their pickaxes diligently. Ciel and the crew of slimes carried over the chunks the spider team had dug out.

Ciel had settled into the position of slime leader, and he took on the role of communicating requests from me and the goblins to the other slimes. The goblins mentioned that during my breaks, he would stretch his body into all

kinds of shapes and do what looked like drills with the other slimes.

I nodded to myself. “Wonderful, you guys are all hard at work,” I said to the monsters, despite knowing they didn’t understand my speech. I then joined them and struck the rock wall. As always, the wall crumbled easily before my eyes.

But this time, there was something different. A white stone was embedded in the gray wall.

“Hm? What’s this?”

Dragon orb: Can resurrect a corpse back to life.

Wha... Wow. This stone is quite something. First I dig up stones that can extend someone's life span, and now I've come across one capable of resurrection. Either way, this is one extra layer of protection. Even if someone died—and I'm going to make sure that doesn't *happen, they would have a second chance. Ideally, I hope I will never have to use it.*

And...that's not all. If I wanted to, I could also revive someone who has long since passed away. I clenched the jar hanging from my neck. Inside it...was the ashes of someone I had failed to rescue. *With this stone, I could...*

I chewed on my lip. *Does he even want to come back to the world of the living? I don't think he wanted to die. But I have no way to know for sure. Would it be his wish, or is that just me selfishly presuming? I...need more time to decide. I should cool my head a little first.*

No matter what I ended up doing with the dragon orb, though, keeping it as a last resort was better than not having it. I could consider using it again once I excavated a whole pile of them.

"Okay." I took a deep breath. "Gotta keep digging!"

Once again, my fingers wrapped around the handle of my pickaxe, and I was ready to get back into action.

However, despite an extended mining session, instead of finding a second dragon orb, I only found myself feeling disappointed. *Maybe it's a rather rare mineral. Well... To be honest, that's not a bad thing. If I had unlimited power over life and death, I would have nothing to fear in this world. I might even start taking absurd risks, thinking that death is only a temporary state.*

I summoned the dragon orb from my inventory. There was the chance that if I died, nobody would be able to retrieve it anymore, making it completely useless. *Okay, let's leave it in a safe place near the entrance, and then it'll be ready for emergencies.*

A distant voice echoed down the shaft, breaking me from my train of thought. "Chief! Chieeef! Ya gotta see this!" It was Erivan, likely yelling from near the

cave entrance. He sounded agitated—it must be urgent.

“Coming!” I yelled back at the top of my lungs as I started to sprint up the stairs.

On the way, Ciel offered to be my vehicle, and thanks to him, I reached the entrance in less than a minute. There, I found Erivan, and he looked overwhelmed with joy.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Ch-Chief, big news! I can see my kin’s ship out there! Please follow me!”

I felt my heart race. “Got it!” I exclaimed. I placed the dragon orb on a crate near the entrance. It’d be a nightmare if I lost it while walking around the island.

However, I was a little too hasty, and the stone fell off and rolled out of the cave. It finally stopped in an area at the side of the entrance. *Oh, oops! Ugh, oh well, it’s out of the way, and it’s not going anywhere. I can deal with it later.*

I took a brief glance to memorize its location before heading out onto the rocky shore. When I arrived, I saw Riena and Baris waving what seemed to be makeshift white flags towards a ship out on the open sea. I squinted my eyes, and I could spot silhouettes on the ship waving back. Their black flags seemed to have axes drawn on them, the symbol of the Verdan clan. *Looks like they noticed us.*

“That’s great, your comrades are alive!” I breathed a sigh of relief.

Riena turned around at the sound of my voice. “Yes, they are! I really thought everyone was long dead... I’m so happy!” She was moved to the point of tears, and upon seeing her, Baris and Erivan shed tears of joy as well.

Erivan sobbed. “I’ve never been so happy in my life... My child’s on that ship too!” He waved his arm back and forth at the ship and called out, “Heeey!”

There was no doubt that he wanted to reunite with his child as soon as possible. *In that case...* “Hey, Erivan. It’d be dangerous for a ship in that state to anchor here. It’d be safer if you used my boat to head over instead.”

“Yes, Chief! But...are you sure?” he asked humbly.

“Yeah. It’s not like I have a use for it anymore. Oh, and here...” I paused, summoning all of the sapphires and other precious stones in my inventory into my hand before offering them to Erivan.

“Chief...?” He blinked in a stupor. “What’s this?”

“Take it as a parting gift. With this much wealth available, you’ll be able to revive the Verdan tribe no matter what continent you end up on.”

“Huh? What...are ya saying?”

I inclined my head quizzically. “I mean... Your comrades’ ship is here, right? Wouldn’t it be the obvious choice to get away from here? This is just the middle of nowhere.”

The goblins stared at me with the same expression of shock on their faces.

Erivan was the first to speak, and he sounded a bit upset. “Leave? Never! We’ve already dedicated our loyalty to ya, Chief. I’m only heading over to make sure they swear fealty to ya as well. We ain’t no ungrateful bastards!”

Not a step behind, Riena voiced her agreement. “That’s right! We’re already your subjects, Lord Heale!”

Baris nodded solemnly. “We have chosen you as our lord, and that is final.”

“W-Wait...” I stammered. “I’m glad to hear that, but think about it. If you go back with all these jewels, the world would be your oyster. You can buy land, weapons...anything! You don’t have to settle down on a barren rock.”

Riena’s gaze met mine. “Then...will you please come with us?”

“Huh? I-I...” I couldn’t finish that sentence.

Oh. That’s right. That was my plan when I’d first arrived. This is my opportunity to escape this reef. But now...I can’t imagine a life elsewhere. I found my purpose in life, and that’s mining here.

Plus...my other monster comrades are here on this island too. Ciel, the slimes, Taran, the cave spiders... We can’t all fit on that small ship, so if I go, I’d have to bid them farewell. I clenched my hands into fists. *What if the people of Sanphales were to visit this island after I’m gone? Who will protect them then? More than anything, I don’t want to part with them. I want to develop this*

island together with everyone.

I shook my head slowly. “No, I’m...”

Riena smiled. There was an unyielding look in her eyes. “In that case, I don’t want to leave either.”

Erivan and Baris nodded.

If I were in their shoes, I would choose a comfortable life over the hardships that this deserted island held. However, my three comrades insisted on staying. On staying here with *me*.

I had never, not even once in my life, expected people to stop in their tracks to wait for me to catch up—to turn around, join me, and walk by my side. Every single member of my family shunned me, and solitude had been my only companion. *But these people want to stay behind with me, with “that useless Heale.”*

“You guys...” My voice was shaky. “Thank you.”

Erivan shook his head with fervor. “Please don’t be such a stranger! All right, I’ll pop over to the boat and tell them to head ashore!”

“Ah, that’s a good idea.” But the next second, color drained from my face. “Oh!”

Right before my eyes, a huge wave crashed into the ship like a malicious hand flipping the vessel over. Upon seeing my expression, the others turned their attention to the ship as well.

They cried out in shock and grief—perhaps “shrieks of horror” was the more accurate description. I could already spot over a dozen goblins poking their heads above the ocean surface near their upturned ship.

“D-Darn...” Erivan cursed. “Most of them can’t swim!”

He was tense—it was clear that he wanted to save them, but he didn’t know how. All he could do was stare at them despairingly from his spot.

Riena was the only one who reacted instantly. She sprinted ahead. “We’ll rescue them with the boat!” she yelled.

The other two snapped out of their panic and ran as fast as they could to join her.

That small boat can only carry a handful of people. Can we really save all the goblins there? My mind whirred. *But I can't just stand here. Can a <Cave King> skill help me out here...? No, none of them are of any use in a rescue operation. Wait. In that case...*

I scrolled through my inventory, sensing a glimmer of hope. *There it is—Mana Mineral x8879. I'll use all of these at once. I've been so busy lately that I've forgotten to use them as I go, so I have a pretty big collection.*

"Consuming Mana Mineral x8879."

Magic was our only way to overcome this crisis. I lifted my right hand and thrust forward, aiming at an area near the ship.

Erivan saw my pose, and with a tense expression, he exclaimed, "Ch-Chief! What're ya—"

"You said they can't swim, so our boat won't make it in time." I clenched my jaw. "But I have a chance with magic." *Which spell would help us...? Yeah. That's the one. "Freeze!"* I hollered.

The next moment, my breath hitched, and the sudden impact made me flinch. White, chilly smoke blasted out of my hand almost like a broken water pump—it was an ice spell. It shot straight at the ocean and coated it with a patch of ice like a layer of frost upon grass. The patch extended further and further, creating a path that led to the capsized ship.

"N-No way!" Baris exclaimed. His voice was followed by two gasps of wonder—the other goblins.

However, *I* was actually the one who was most surprised. My mind blanked, and I stared at my right hand. *Did I really do that?* I still had plenty of mana reserves to work with. Though I had stopped the ice from expanding further, I felt that I could have frozen even more of the ocean's surface. *So that's the power of all those mana minerals... It's staggering...and a little terrifying.*

But I didn’t have the luxury of time to dawdle. “Let’s go!” I leaped onto the ice bridge and started running. “Taran, Ciel, guys, follow me!” The goblins, slimes, and cave spiders all rushed in with me. “Hurry!”

I let out a yelp as I slipped and fell over. The ice bridge wasn’t an easy path for us two-legged beings, so I climbed onto Taran, whose many feet gave her better balance. She rapidly scuttled over to the capsized ship.

When we arrived, I saw a few goblins climbing onto the ice and getting to safety. However, there were still countless of their comrades struggling to stay afloat. I couldn’t afford to waste any time—I immediately gave out instructions. “Taran, aim your spider silk at the goblins in the sea!”

The cave spiders spun silk from their abdomens and fired them at the ocean surface. The drifting goblins desperately swam towards the threads and made a grab for them, but some didn’t have enough strength to do that much. *They must be hurt or sick.*

I clenched my jaw. “Ciel, can you do your usual trick?! Ask the other slimes to do the same thing!”

At my command, Ciel warped into the shape of a tiny boat. The other slimes followed his example.

“Riena, Erivan, Baris!” I yelled. “Help me save the people who can’t move!”

“Right away!” they shouted in return.

We pushed the slime boats onto the water and jumped aboard. Our rescue mission was far from over.

After the drawn-out, nerve-racking ordeal...

I breathed a long sigh of relief. “At first, it all seemed so hopeless, but I’m glad it worked out...”

We had returned to shore after hauling out as many goblins as we could. I was busy casting healing spells on the sick and injured while Riena had assembled a group of healthy goblins and was grilling fish together with them. As for Erivan, he was greeting each of the survivors, stopping to have brief

conversations. He seemed to be asking after people he knew, but from time to time, his eyes would grow moist—some of his tribe must have passed away during the harsh voyage.

Now, tears were streaming down from his face as he threw his arms around a petite goblin, likely the child he had mentioned earlier. “Fu! Yer alive, yer alive! I knew we would be reunited one day!” he bawled, face scrunched up in emotion.

“U-Uh, dad...” The smaller goblin looked a little restless. “Could you let me go already?”

As the family reunion went on in the background, I finished healing my last patient. At that point, Baris approached me at that moment with a request—it was great timing on his part. I nodded and began dishing out commands to the cave spiders, who were currently unoccupied. They began spinning spider silk and started dragging the capsized ship onto shore.

Once they were done, Baris went to check all the supplies we’d managed to salvage from the wreck. While he was at it, he asked around to find out if the shipwreck had resulted in any casualties.

“Lord Heale, thanks to you, none of my kin have become victims of the ocean. All 205 passengers are safe and sound.” There was an elated smile on his lips. “We could never thank you enough.”

“Don’t worry about that! I’m so glad that everyone made it out alive.”

“Indeed. Not only that, but thanks to your healing spells, even the gravely ill have made a full recovery. They couldn’t even muster the strength to stand moments ago. How in the world did you manage such a miracle?”

“Uh, I only used basic spells like *Recover* and *Cure*...” I hummed in thought. “It’s probably the work of my boosted mana pool.”

Recover was a healing spell that replenished stamina and healed internal and external wounds. *Cure*, a spell from the same magic branch, treated poisons and illnesses. Their effectiveness was dependent on the caster’s mana levels.

I had been taken by surprise as well. I hadn’t expected *Recover* to work such wonders on the gravely ill. It was a basic spell, after all. Most would use mid-tier

or more advanced spells on patients in that kind of condition. But my *Recover* had managed to produce similar results, and I had an inkling about the reason—the over ten thousand mana minerals I had consumed, which had granted me a significant mana pool. Without them, I wouldn't have been able to freeze such a large area of the sea to begin with.

A thought occurred to me. "Hey Baris, did you manage to salvage anything from the ship?"

"Though I'm ashamed to admit it, we were rather impoverished to begin with. We gathered what little assets we had to build that ship, so we only carried the bare minimum of rations and tools on board."

"Ah, I see... Well, it *was* pretty battered when it first arrived here."

When we had pulled the capsized ship onto shore, it had broken cleanly into two. We didn't have the facilities or tools to fix it, so it was most likely going to lay there in ruins. However, considering the amount of lumber and supplies we had gained, it was a big step forward.

I continued, "All that aside, I'm really happy that this island is so lively now."

"I shall keep an eye on them and ask that they avoid causing you any unnecessary trouble, my lord. And...if you are willing, please allow them to be your humble followers as well."

"I mean, I don't mind, but some people probably wouldn't like that, so please don't coerce them into the contract. As for those who want off this island, I'll try coming up with a few plans."

Baris shook his head sternly. "I cannot let that happen. I promise that I *will* persuade them all to serve you." He hesitated. "That aside, I have been wondering... Who is that person behind you?"

Behind me? Uh, I'm pretty sure that's just Ciel. I turned around. "Wha—"

There was a middle-aged dude standing right there. A stout, middle-aged dude who was roughly as tall as my waist. He had a magnificent mustache and beard...and he was *stark naked.*



Huh? Who the heck is he?

I shook my head fiercely. “I have no idea! Wait, he wasn’t aboard your ship?”

“Not as far as I know. He was staring while you healed the others, so I assumed he was a comrade you met inside the cave...”

“O-Oh, I see...” I racked my brain for any memory of this new guy. “Well, Taran and the little ones mine as well, so they might have met him along the way.” *No, wait. That’s absurd. How could anyone dig up a dude while they’re mining?* “Uhhh... There’s a chance that he hid inside one of the crates on the ship, isn’t there?”

“That’s, well... Yes, that’s possible.”

“That *must* be it,” I declared. “He was a stowaway.”

Also, dude, don’t just stare at us. Say something. And, once again, why are you naked?!

I tried greeting the silent, staring guy. “H-Hey there, I’m Heale. What’s your name?”

But the moment he heard my voice, the dude abruptly turned around and walked over to the kitchen. Then, without a moment of hesitation, he began wolfing down the grilled fish Riena and her companions had prepared.

Uh, well, we have a whole ocean of fish available, so that’s fine, I guess. If he wants to live on this island, though... He needs some clothes.

On that day, Sheol Reef gained a whole lot of new residents. And...on that night, I realized that the dragon orb had gone missing.

Chapter 6: He Turned Out to Be Pretty Epic!

A day had passed since the big rescue operation, and I was currently sitting down at the cave entrance.

“Phew, I’m finally done,” I muttered.

My day had been a busy one. My first task was to prepare rooms for the newcomers. We had saved over two hundred goblins yesterday, which meant I had welcomed over two hundred people into my domain. Naturally, there wasn’t enough space for everyone to lie down in the cave entrance hall, so I needed to prepare new dwellings.

To achieve this, I dug new branching tunnels from the main shaft and made cuboid chambers at the end of each of them. With smooth stones, I crafted simple desks and beds. In the end, it honestly hadn’t been that different from a normal day of mining.

While I took care of that, I assigned a different job to each of the goblins. With Riena as their instructor, they were cooperating with the cave spiders to make bedding, clothes, fishing nets, and other essentials. Another group of goblins was dismantling the shipwreck and salvaging resources.

Personally in order to trade, I had plans to build a new ship from what we had available. However, according to Baris, we had too few tools to make that possible, so there hadn’t been much progress. Therefore, I had decided we should shift priorities. Instead of building a new ship, those goblins would use the ship’s lumber to make tools first—axes, pickaxes, or anything else that would come in handy.

From what I could see, everyone seemed to be working diligently. I spaced out, deep in thought. *I can’t sit back and relax. Once I catch my breath, I should catch some fish and then get back to mining.*

That was when Riena came over. “Thanks for your hard work, Lord Heale!” She was half-jogging, and she held a small wooden cup in her hands.

“Thanks for your hard work too.” I smiled. “How’re things going with the

farm?”

“Great! I actually wanted your opinion on this drink.” She held out the cup to me.

It was filled with a purple liquid, and a sweet fragrance tickled my nose. “Oh... It’s grape!”

“Yes! I planted a grape seed from the ship in the soil, and as a trial, I used sunstones to help it grow.”

“Ah, I see.” I took a sip. “This tastes great!”

“That’s wonderful! We still have more!”

“That sounds fantastic, but this is enough for me. You guys should have the rest. We don’t have that many grapes available, do we?”

“Thank you. Everyone will be elated to hear that! I’m sure that in a few years, we will have plenty of grapes to go around.”

A few years, huh? When I first came to this island, surviving long enough to see the light of dawn already seemed hopeless, much less having the time to grow seeds, squeeze fresh fruit, and drink their juice.

But that has changed. I have comrades I can trust and a full inventory of marvelous minerals. I have full confidence that I’ll live long enough on this island to witness a year pass by—no, much more than a year. A few years from now, I’ll eat my fill of grapes freshly plucked from the vines... I’m sure that’s possible, and I can’t wait for that day.

I slowly savored the grape juice as I pondered upon the future. Soon, the cup was empty. “I’m looking forward to it.” Suddenly, a single thought jumped to the front of my mind. “A change of topic, but...” *Where in the world did that dragon orb go?*

After I came to this island, I stopped being attached to specific items, so it had completely slipped my mind. *If I remember correctly... I left it on a crate near the entrance, but it rolled onto the ground. It stopped nearby in the area outside the cave.*

I surveyed my surroundings, but I still couldn’t find it. Looking a little further

out didn't help either. *Hold on, let me think.* The area I thought the stone had ended up was my makeshift cemetery where I'd buried all the bones that were scattered inside the cave. I'd used stone pillars in place of gravestones.

Skeletal remains of a variety of creatures had crowded the cave back then, but the entrance was a high-traffic area, so I had cleaned the place out and given them a burial. Because of that there was nothing blocking the entrance, which was why the stone had rolled so far away in the first place.

I headed over to the cemetery. The gravestone that should have been the stone's final resting point was dedicated to a skull that was exceptionally large, so I still remembered it. *Did someone pick the orb up and put it away in a safe place? Or did they wipe it clean and keep it, thinking it was a random but pretty stone?*

My frown deepened as I scoured the area. *More importantly, why in the world is there a big pit in front of the gravestone? Did something or someone dig the skeleton up? Wait. It can't be...* I peered into the pit. The large skull that was supposed to be there was *missing*.

Suddenly, I was struck out of my bewilderment by an angry roar. "What's all the staring for, huh?! Ya got a problem with my work or somethin'?!"

Looking over at the source of the commotion, I spotted a furious, newcomer goblin. He seemed to be in the middle of working metal at the forge Baris had designed, and he was yelling at the short dude that had appeared out of thin air yesterday.

After the guy had shown up, he'd been wandering around and munching on fish without a care in the world. When he had seen me mining, he had looked a little surprised. And of course, he had been naked the *entire time.*

"Hey, ya naked old chap! Don't just stand there with yer nose in the air, work!" the goblin hollered. "Who gave ya the right to laze around, huh?!"

I couldn't fault the goblin for being angry. The naked guy was standing there, watching with his arms folded. In the eyes of a tired worker, that was out of the question.

The goblin stomped up to the guy and shoved his hammer towards the idling

man. “If ya have nothin’ better to do, help out! We need way more pickaxes and axes!” The goblin held out the two types of tools as samples.

Then, with confident and prideful strides, the short guy walked over to the furnace, which was currently snuffed out. Without warning, he began rearranging its stone blocks.

“What the hell are ya doin’?!” the goblin yelled in a panic.

The naked guy, however, didn’t listen. He finished moving the blocks around and, with a hint of satisfaction on his face, lit a fire. He reached out to the nearby lumps of iron and tossed them into the blazing furnace. When the metal reached a scalding heat, he promptly took them back out.

Holding up the hammer, the man looked at the iron and smirked. The next moment, he started hammering away. He was so fast that my eyes couldn’t keep up with his strikes. Along with the other goblins, I looked on in shock. Even more surprising was that in just twenty to thirty seconds, he’d transformed those lumps of hot metal into a pickaxe head.

The corners of his lips were pulled up as he continued to work. He seemed to be making an axe head now. By the time I’d snapped out of my daze, I realized I had walked up to the man.

“Wh-What *is* this...?” the newcomer goblin muttered in disbelief as he picked up the pickaxe head.

The item was intricate and elegant—even the arcs of its thin blade were works of art.

The goblin shook his head and spat, “Ugh, ya can’t dig into rock with such a thin blade! It’ll snap with one hit! Fix this right now!” He stepped forward, ready to interrupt the dude’s work.

I quickly stopped the goblin. “Wait! Let me test it out first. Leave him to his own devices for now.”

“Huh?” The goblin blinked at me, startled. “Yes, sir!” He swiftly attached the pickaxe head to a pole and handed it to me.

Okay, let’s try this right away. Now, here comes the question... Is speed the

only extraordinary thing about that man, or is there more to his skills?

With this new pick in hand, I headed down to the mining shaft. I was accompanied by Baris, Erivan, Riena, and the goblin from earlier. Like I usually did, I tried tapping the rock wall slightly with the pickaxe.

What happened next, however, made me doubt my own eyes. “Wha—”

The rocks crumbled and gave way. That much was normal. But the area of rock I had hollowed out was many times larger than what I could achieve with my usual pickaxe. Just to compare, I also tried out my trusty old pickaxe. However, it seemed it was only half as effective as my new tool.

“They’re both iron picks, but this one’s...” I muttered in disbelief. “Who in the world *is* that dude?”

I made a swift return to the forge. When I arrived, there was a whole pile of pickaxes and axes ready for action. I turned to stare at the naked dude, and he wore a smug look as he looked at me triumphantly. I could almost hear the unspoken question: *Surprised?*

Uh, yeah. I’m blown away, to be honest. You’re amazing. But...could you please *put on some clothes?* I fought the urge to sigh. *His nudity aside, it’s clear that he’s a smithing god.*

I approached him and retrieved a whole load of minerals from my inventory. Copper, iron, silver, gold, tin, coal, and so on. “Hey, can you make other things with these materials?”

The man’s eyes bore into the ores, and he grinned wide. His gaze was, well, a little perverse. *I mean, he’s stark naked, so... But either way, he seems to be harmless.*

As I watched him work, I felt my eyes widen. “Wait, hold on...”

The size of his head stood out to me—it was very large, probably around twice the size of mine. And what a coincidence, because that was roughly the size of the giant skull that had mysteriously disappeared along with the dragon orb. *Don’t tell me... Did that stone go missing because it revived this dude? That seems like the most logical conclusion.*

But...how did he end up dead on this island? I want to ask him that, but I'm unlikely to get anywhere with him not talking at all. That being said, it seems like we can still understand each other somewhat. I might as well try asking a few questions later. He might know something about the other skeletons.

Either way, I probably didn't have any hope of getting that dragon orb back. *A part of me wanted to revive this little guy, but...* I clasped the jar I hung around my neck. *I'll keep digging, and I* will *find another dragon orb one day. For now, I should be happy that I have a trusty new comrade.*

Deciding to put those thoughts behind me, I held the pickaxe and returned to the cave.

When the sun began to set, I asked the goblins about the naked blacksmith, and they told me that after I'd left, he'd kept working and had crafted a whole assortment of tools. However, we couldn't just let him stay in his birthday suit, so a few days later, I half forced him into wearing a loincloth weaved from spider silk. Alas, by then, everyone had already grown used to calling him "Starkers."

Chapter 7: Evolution!

“Ahhh!” I let out a battle cry as I mined with Starkers’s pickaxe.

Alongside me were goblins and cave spiders, also armed with Starkers’s tools, and they were digging away.

During these past few days, I had tamed even more slimes—we now had a total of eighty-eight in our roster. I had found them all while mining, just like how I had met Ciel. It seemed there were many slimes hiding underground in Sheol Reef. All of them, under the guidance of Ciel, had taken up the role of carrying everyone else’s mined materials to me.

Meanwhile, on the surface, we had started modifying the rocky terrain to make anchoring a ship easier. I had steadily covered the shore with sand and stones which I had crafted with <Cave King>, and I had even begun reclaiming land to form a sandy beach.

I would like to say that it had all been smooth sailing, but when I looked at my inventory, I realized something dreadful. As one would expect, nearly all the minerals had increased at a steady rate. However, there was one key item that I was lacking.

I hadn’t excavated any new dragon orbs. But that was fine, actually. I would be spooked if I had an endless supply of them.

No, the real problem was that I had been coming across fewer and fewer turtlestones—and that meant Riena’s life span would eventually stop increasing. According to my calculations, she should have gained an accumulated life span of barely over a decade so far. However, she was only fifteen years old. That was nothing compared to the life span she should have.

I wanted to go back to the area where I had found the most turtlestones, but for some reason, <Cave King> wouldn’t light up much of the areas there in white. It was perhaps because I might cause a cave-in if I dug around.

Of course, I had been upfront about the current situation with Riena, but her only reaction had been to smile and say, “You’ve already given me plenty of

time.” Her smile had been so bright, so earnest, that I felt heartbroken.

Anyone would want a long life, I think. Actually... No, I don’t know whether everyone shares that opinion. Wanting to help Riena out because it’s morally right is just an excuse. In truth, I just want to spend more time with her. I want to dig up more strange marvels and share them with her so that we can develop the island together... There are so many things I want to do, and I want Riena to accomplish them with me.

Before I knew it, my mind had become transfixed on that single idea as I dug on. But then...

Instead of gray rock, what I found was a chamber with white walls. According to my crest, this room was about three meters tall, and it was spacious enough to fit five or six people lying down.

Nervously, I walked further into the chamber. The room was a perfect cube. The walls and the floor were made of white marble. In its center were rocks scattered chaotically across the ground and a small stone that was shimmering with a blue glow.

I scanned the far side of the room, and there was some sort of altar made from the same white marble. Upon it rested a golden stone. *This place doesn’t feel like a tomb... I don’t see any coffins, statues, or portraits. Is this a shrine of some sort?*

The first thing I did was store the rocks scattered around the center of the room. Most of them were common materials—nothing new about that. But when I stored the small blue stone into my inventory, an unfamiliar term popped up.

“A...heartstone?”

Heartstone: May be used as a core for artificial life.

“Gained Heartstone. Unlocked Automaton Creation.”

Huh? “Automaton”?

“<Cave King> can create automata with heartstones. You can combine materials in your inventory to create or modify automata.”

So... I guess that means I can make new comrades. Considering all the rock debris around, there might have been a rock automaton in this chamber in the past. It must have fallen apart for some reason.

In any case, this meant I could gain yet another priceless worker. *I’m not sure what kind of “automata” I can craft, but I’ll think about how I should use it later.*

I walked further into the chamber and collected the golden stone. *It’s labeled as “risestone,” huh. Hm, I wonder what it can do. The broken automaton must’ve been stationed here as a guardian, so it’s probably quite important.*

As if to answer my unsaid question, the assistant shed some light on the effects of this stone.

Risestone: Evolves monsters when used.

Evolve? Here we go again. Another word that I don’t get.

“Evolution will change the race of the monster. Their age and personality will carry over, but their body will be replaced.”

Okaaay... By the way, would their life span change as well?

“Evolving into a healthy body can further increase the monster’s life span.”

It does? Wait, then Riena wouldn’t have to worry about her life span. I couldn’t celebrate too soon, however. *Replacing bodies sounds so unnerving, though. I know nothing about it—is this really the right thing to do?*

I shook my head to clear my mind. *For now, let’s just leave this room as is. I need to make a trip back to the entrance. It’s already getting late, and I want to report these discoveries to everyone.*

When I arrived back at the entrance, I summoned Baris, Erivan, and Riena. We sat in a circle around some glowstones, and we were ready to begin the discussion at any time. Ciel was sitting on my lap, and even Starkers was here—*I don't remember calling him over*—with a grilled fish in one hand.

"Hm, 'automaton'..." Baris mulled over the word. "My apologies, but I have never heard of that word either."

"I see, even *you* don't know about it..." I frowned.

Erivan and Riena, as expected, didn't have a clue when asked. Meanwhile, Starkers wasn't participating in the conversation—he only munched ravenously on his grilled fish.

I shrugged. "That's okay, I'll just do a few trials with it and figure things out. There's something more important I want to talk about."

I retrieved the golden stone, the risestone, from my inventory and explained that it helped monsters evolve.

At the end of my speech, I summarized, "So basically, replacing your body can increase your life span as well, but... The thing is, I don't really know what this 'evolution' involves."

However, the word seemed to ring a bell to Baris. "Evolution, you say?!" he exclaimed. "Are you implying that *this* stone makes that possible?!"

"Hm?" I leaned forward, intrigued. "Have you heard of it, Baris?"

"But of course! The princess and the general should know as well. After all, it appears in our race's mythologies."

Riena nodded, but Erivan tilted his head quizzically and said, "Uh, it does?"

"General..." Baris sounded appalled. "I distinctly remember telling you the tale over and over in the past."

"S-Sorry. Stuff like myths just don't stay in my head, haha..." Erivan muttered sheepishly.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Baris continued, "Well, that aside..." He turned to me. "Lord Heale, do you know of the other goblin races?"

Hm, subspecies of goblins... I've only seen them in illustrated encyclopediae, but I remember there was quite a lot of varieties "Hmm, like the hobgoblins or the leafgoblins? Those are the most famous."

"Yes, precisely. Hobgoblins who have physiques similar to orcs, for instance, began as ordinary goblins like us. However, it was said that once upon a time, a group of goblins faced humans in battle and felt powerless. Determined to change their fate, they sought strength to overwhelm their enemy. That was when they came across such stones, and..."

"And they evolved into muscular hobgoblins." I finished his sentence for him. "Is that the case for leafgoblins as well?"

"Yes. To adapt to life deep in the forests, goblins sought camouflage in the form of a body covered with leaf-like hair, thus evolving into leafgoblins."

"Interesting. So evolution was what gave birth to new species." *For example, gaining strength or changing to adapt to a harsh environment.* Without thinking, I glanced at Erivan's towering figure. "Hey, Erivan. You're not a hobgoblin, are you?"

"No way!" he yelped. "I've never used one of those things! I was large even as a babe!"

Baris nodded. "He was born with his burly stature, you see. Hobgoblins have robust and muscular bodies as well, but their heads are proportionally bigger."

"Huuuh..." I muttered.

"I must say, we used to think of this stone as a mere myth..." Baris trailed off with wonder. "I never thought I would get to see one in person."

On a whim, I asked, "Does...anyone want to test it out?"

The first to shake his head was Baris. "I admit, I'm intrigued, but I could never use such a precious item. I'm also very attached to my current body, you see."

Erivan echoed Baris's refusal. "Same here, my body's so handsome that I'd never want to evolve. I don't have any complaints about these lads." He flexed his biceps pridefully. He had an impressive physique for a goblin to begin with, and even in the eyes of a human like me, he was the ideal form of masculinity.

However, deep down inside, Baris and Erivan were likely still a little interested. They were only claiming otherwise because they wanted Riena to use it. After all, it could change her body—her life span.

Luckily, Riena seemed rather intrigued. “I-If I...” She swallowed. “If possible, I want to help you more, Lord Heale. Um, with magic, and um...many things.”

I had heard that goblins lacked innate arcane talent. In other words, her current body wasn’t built for manipulating mana. She seemed invested in magic, and wanted to gain the ability to wield it by evolving.

A moment later, Riena immediately shook her head, as if to wake up from a dream. “B-But I’m not worthy of such a treasure!”

“Well...” I paused. “If you could use magic, we would have a lot more options, which means the stone would be put to good use. If you’re feeling up to it, I think trying it out wouldn’t be a bad plan, don’t you think?”

“B-But...!” She continued to protest.

And I continued to try and convince her. “Plus, if you wish for a longer life span as you use this stone, you should end up with a healthier body.” I gave her a small smile. “*I* want you to live a long life, Riena.”

Baris and Erivan nodded vigorously.

“Lord Heale... You two...” Riena whispered before she cast her eyes down, deep in thought. After taking a deep breath, she looked me square in the eyes with a determined look. “I... I want to evolve.”

“That settles it.” I nodded, satisfied, before offering the risestone to her. “Here.”

“Thank you.” She gingerly took the stone into her tiny hands, held it in a tight grip, and made a resolute vow. “I swear, I will become more useful to you, my lord!”

The next moment, Riena’s body was engulfed in light. The glow expanded outward, and when it reached a certain size, it exploded in a blinding flash. When the effect finally subsided, I saw...

“A-A human?!” Erivan raised his voice on reflex.

I could see how he had come to that conclusion. What stood in Riena's place was a beautiful young woman with skin as fair as snow and waist-length hair the color of night. Her limbs were long and slender, and the feminine curves of her chest and hips belonged to a girl coming into full bloom. She was nothing like the baby-faced Riena from before—she looked delicate and slender.

When she turned to look at me, my heart thumped audibly in my chest. Her big round eyes were of a color that wasn't part of the nature on this island—a stunning shade of emerald that reminded me of a dense, verdant forest with a few rays of gentle sunlight sneaking in.

I was in awe. I had encountered countless jewels after I came to this cave, but all of them paled in comparison before the brilliance of her eyes.

The young woman standing there didn't seem anything like Riena— *I should rephrase that*. To be more accurate, she looked just like a human.



Erivan, Baris, and I were dumbfounded. As for the other onlooker, Starkers, he collapsed onto the ground with blood streaming down his nostrils.

I hurriedly crouched down and shook his shoulders. “St-Starkeeers!!!” I cast a healing spell on him immediately.

After a slight pause, Erivan muttered to me, “Chief, that dude only fainted, he’s fine. He did the same thing earlier when he saw our goblin women...”

“It *is* a big deal, Erivan!” I exclaimed. “Do you know how dangerous blood loss can be for a human?!”

“O-Oh, I see... Wait, he’s a human?”

What else could he be? I sized Starkers up. *I mean, I guess he’s pretty short and stout for a human. I assumed he was a middle-aged guy because of his bushy mustache, but hmm... His skin doesn’t match that age group. It looks supple and smooth. I can’t spot any wrinkles on his face either, and before he wore that loincloth... I probably shouldn’t be saying this, but his buttcheeks looked, well...bouncy and youthful as well.*

Ack, whatever! Erivan was right. I didn’t have to make such a big fuss. I probably just overreacted as an excuse to take my eyes off Riena’s current form—off the lovely young woman standing there.

Since settling down on this island, I hadn’t seen any humans other than in my reflection in the water. Then, out of the blue, someone who took on the appearance of a human woman had appeared. My emotions were a jumbled mix of bashfulness and restlessness.

I was a little stilted as I yelled out, “Hey, wake up, Starkers!”

In the corner of my vision, Erivan and Baris seemed to be sweating nervously.

“Your Highness...?” Baris whispered slowly. “Are you really the princess?”

I heard Riena’s startled “Huh?”

As if to explain Baris’s reaction, Erivan clarified politely, “You look just like a human right now, Your Highness.”

“I-I do?!” Riena exclaimed.

I snuck a sidelong glance at Riena. She stared at her own hands and then touched her new slender limbs and body, as if to determine what she now looked like. That was when Ciel hopped in front of Riena and stretched his body vertically. He had sensed her plight and had turned himself into a makeshift mirror.

Riena stared at her new appearance reflected on Ciel's body. "This...is *me*?" She stroked her cheek, which was dusted in the pink of flower petals. She seemed to be having trouble coming to terms with her new look.

Baris seemed just as overwhelmed, and he turned to me and asked, "Is it possible for goblins to evolve into humans?"

"U-Uh, I don't know either..." I stammered. *I'm just as lost as you are!*

However, there was one thing I knew for sure—Riena was still under the taming contract with me. I could detect the taming status of my follower monsters at any time. Normally, humans couldn't tame other humans, which meant that Riena must still count as a monster.

W-Wait, Riena had been tamed by me... I know that she's still the same on the inside, but with her new appearance, that sounds so, ack, immoral! Based on her figure alone, she was a young human woman. I couldn't stop myself from thinking that way.

Baris crossed his arms and hummed in thought before he turned to Riena. "Depending on the appearance the evolving monster wishes for, this might be possible. In other words... Did you wish to become a human, Your Highness?"

"Huh...? N-No, I only, um..." Riena stammered. "I only wished to be more useful to Lord Heale, of course!"

Baris raised an eyebrow. "Would a wish like that really grant you a humanlike form? Hmm... Oh, perhaps it was your wish to use magic that was the cause. Humans can use magic. I see, you must have been thinking about Lord Heale when you evolved."

"Y-Yes, I'm sure that was what happened." Riena looked away and cleared her throat before saying shyly, "Lord Heale... What do you think of this new me?"

Um. Uh. I mean. The only answer I can think of is... You look pretty, or

something along those lines? No. Stop. I need to act in the same way I always have!

I took a deep breath. “Well, if you can use magic now, it would help me out a lot. You can heal people just like I am doing.” Though my mouth gave her a sensible answer, my hand was shaking Starkers harder, and my eyes were darting around to avoid hers.

Ugh, what’s wrong with me? Why am I so flustered when I look at Riena? I mean, I don’t dislike her at all, of course. I like how she’s always full of smiles and kindness. Even if her appearance changed, the parts I like about her haven’t. So why am I like this?!

Maybe I shook Starkers too hard. His eyes snapped open suddenly and he sat up. But when he saw Riena, blood shot out of his nose and splashed right onto my face as he collapsed. Again.

“L-Lord Heale!” Riena gasped. “I’ll wipe that off right now!” She quickly stood up and grabbed a nearby handkerchief before approaching me.

She leaned in to get a proper look at my face. My heart wouldn’t listen to me as it jumped around like a baby deer in my chest at Riena’s fatal beauty. As it raced faster and faster, I felt the world fade to black.

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“Nnn...” I slowly blinked my eyes open. The first thing to appear in my vision was the oversized face of the bearded middle-aged dude lying right in front of me. *Ah, even up close, he doesn’t have any wrinkles. I reckon if he shaved all his facial hair, he’d look much younger.*

As I came to, I realized that I had been sleeping right next to Starkers on Ciel’s body. Starkers was snoring, and he stretched out his arms to hug me like a pillow. I hurriedly climbed to my feet.

“Ahhh, that was a good night’s sleep...” I glanced at the sky, which was already starting to grow bright. “Oh, it’s already dawn.”

The early risers among the goblins were grilling fish and attending to other duties. I spotted Riena drawing water with a bucket at the water reservoir. By now, I was a little more composed compared to my initial panic, but her beauty was nonetheless dazzling no matter how many times I looked at her.

I was yawning when Riena noticed me. She placed the bucket on the ground and came up to me with a cheerful “Lord Heale!”

“Morning, Riena. You’re working hard as always, huh?”

“Of course, I am!” She gave me a brilliant smile. “I had the honor of evolving, so I need to work even harder than before.”

Though her appearance compared to her previous form was like night and day, her earnest and energetic vibe hadn’t changed one bit. Then, with worry evident on her face, she asked, “More importantly, are you feeling all right? You suddenly fell asleep yesterday.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m okay. I was probably just a little tired.”

I can’t just admit that I got lightheaded because I was a little too excited. I don’t want people thinking I’m the same kind of guy as Starkers.

Riena breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad it wasn’t anything major.”

“That aside...” I hesitated. “Are you happy with your evolution, Riena? I didn’t think you’d end up looking like a human.”

“Please don’t worry, Lord Heale. I like this new me.” She placed a hand on her chest. “I... Well, I didn’t exactly wish to become a human, but to tell you the

truth, I didn't really like my previous form. When I used the stone, I think a part of me must have wished to become pretty." Abruptly, her cheeks flushed a cherry red. "A-Ah, I'm so sorry! I wasted such a priceless stone on a selfish wish!"

"Don't say that," I said gently. "You don't get to evolve every day. I think it's great that you ended up with an appearance you like."

I see, so that was her opinion of herself. I did notice that Riena was smaller than all the other goblins. Her form was also slightly chubby, and her skin wasn't bright green—more of a dull, blackish green. In the eyes of goblins, she probably didn't align with their standards of beauty.

Riena bowed before letting out a small chuckle. "Thank you. You... You are too kind, Lord Heale. No one has ever been this nice to me before." Melancholy cast a shadow over her face. "I had many siblings in the past. Unlike me, my sisters were all beautiful. And because of that curse cast on me as a child by our neighboring tribe, I was frail. As long as I can remember, I was an object of ridicule."

I fell silent, absorbed in Riena's tale. She...reminded me of myself. Born with a useless crest and an abysmal mana pool, my family had shunned me as a failure of a prince. Riena was even fifteen—the same age as myself—yet another curious coincidence.

She continued, "But somehow, in a twist of fate, I ended up as the only surviving member of the Verdan tribe's royal family. And now, I have been reborn." Once again, she placed both her hands on her chest solemnly. "My body, my life, my name... These were all gifts from you. So, I swear—I will dedicate everything I have to you, Lord Heale."

She reached her hand out towards mine.

I was elated. She thought so highly of me that she was willing to make a vow like that. At the same time, I felt a little embarrassed. *How should I respond? "Do your best"? Or maybe, "I'm counting on you"? Ack, this is hard.*

Above all, I don't see Riena, the goblins, or any of the other monsters as my subordinates. To me, they're my comrades in striving for a better future on the same island. I want everyone to make use of their unique talents to make life

better, and I want us to live as a big, close-knit family.

Before her hand reached mine, I took the initiative by holding her hand instead. “I... As long as I get to eat your wonderful cooking, Riena, that’s enough for me. If it’s not too much to ask, may I continue to have that honor from now on?”

“Lord Heale!” she gasped, her cheeks flushing like rose petals. Her eyes started to grow moist, but there was a radiant smile upon her face. “Of course you may! I will make tasty meals for you forever and ever! All right then, I shall prepare breakfast right away!”

“Gotcha, I’m looking forward to it.”

“I will try my hardest!” she promised, smiling ear to ear.

For a while after that, Riena worked diligently to improve the new abilities she had gained after her evolution. She eagerly soaked up all of my lessons on magic from me and studied martial arts under Erivan’s tutelage.

We were all completely convinced that Riena’s evolution had only affected her appearance and brought about her new arcane talent. It was only later on that we learned that things were a little bit more complicated...

Chapter 8: Reclaiming Land!

“Lord Heale, please have some water!”

“Thanks, Riena.”

I had just polished off a roasted apple at the cave entrance when Riena offered me a cup of water. A snowy white dress was tied around her frame—she had woven it with spider silk. Her ebony hair formed a beautiful contrast against the white cloth. Though it wasn’t adorned with any elaborate decorations, she had added little details like a white ribbon near the collar, making it as fashionable as possible with our limited resources.

I didn’t get embarrassed looking at her anymore, but when she held out her petite, fair hand with a big smile, I couldn’t stop my heart from skipping a beat. *Back in the palace, I barely ever came into contact with ladies...*

Riena, the young woman beaming at me, was a great cook and a gentle soul. *To be honest, I’ve fallen fo— I mean, I respect her a lot.*I corrected my thoughts and tried to convince myself that it really was just “respect” as I gulped down the glass of water.

That was when Baris approached me. “Lord Heale, I have an update about the project I proposed yesterday.”

“Ah, I remember. You were thinking about reclaiming land, right?”

“Yes. I would like to ask for your permission to expand the land area of this island.”

I paused. “In other words, you want more farmland, is that right?”

He nodded. “If we had an unlimited supply of sunstones, we could make do with our current farm and orchard. However, since that isn’t the case, I think we need a larger farm to prepare for the next few years.”

To prepare for the future... Yeah, he makes a good point. I haven’t found any new sunstones since my encounter with the cave spiders, so it must be a scarce resource. We should cultivate crops on a large scale so that we can stockpile

enough food in case we ever need it.

After Baris, Riena spoke up. “Of course, that small farm can already produce a sufficient amount of food for you, Lord Heale. Having fish is more than enough for us goblins.”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve said this before, but I want everyone to have a fair share. We should start that project as soon as possible.”

Coincidentally, it was going to be planting season very soon. *We should finish expanding our farmland before that. And I’m also a little concerned about the goblin kids.* The children played tag or ball games to entertain themselves, but I had often witnessed adult goblins scolding them because they were getting in the way of work. Now, they usually huddled in one corner and played board games by turning a rock into a board and little pebbles into tokens.

I was sure that some of them preferred to be more active. But our island was small, and the cave itself was cramped as well, making such activities difficult. *While we’re at it, we should make an open area for kids to play in!*

I gave Baris a firm nod. “All right, let’s do this.”

“Thank you, Lord Heale! Ah, but please be at ease. If you supply the materials, we can take care of the rest.”

“That’ll take way too long.” I shook my head. “There’s something I want to test out, so leave the construction to me.”

Baris had already detailed out his plans yesterday. First, we would section off the area we wanted to reclaim with slabs of rocks. Then, we’d remove the water and fill it with sand, and pile on the soil.

However, we only had one dingy boat available, and doing things manually would take a tremendous amount of time. More than anything, it would be impossible to reclaim a large piece of land with this method.

Baris thinned his lips. It looked like he was against the idea of troubling me with the work. “B-But we can’t make you take care of our rations on top of everything you have already done for us.”

“I’m the governor of this island, and as governor, it is my responsibility to take

the initiative in tackling all of our problems," I said. "It's no trouble at all, and don't forget that I also want to eat tasty meals."

After a moment of thought, Baris finally nodded. "In that case, Lord Heale... Please lend us your aid. I promise that we will cultivate crops to your liking!"

"I can't wait! All right then..." With a grunt, I stood up. "Time to get to work."

Riena, Baris, and Ciel followed as I headed towards the construction site. On our way, Erivan noticed us. He had been at the forge crafting axes and pickaxes with Starkers from the looks of it.

"Chief! What are ya up to?" Erivan asked.

"I'm going to reclaim some land. I might rock the waters a little in the process, so could you ask the goblins along the coast to come back?"

"Reclaim...land?" Erivan sounded puzzled. "I dunno what ya mean, but understood! Y'all! Assemble!"

Once Erivan had finished calling back the goblins on the coast, I also made all the necessary preparations. I thrust out one hand towards the sea and opened my inventory.

Of course, I didn't have a clue when it came to land reclamation. This was all Baris's knowledge at work. Although, to be frank, he didn't have any hands-on experience either—he had only read about the theory in books.

According to Baris, a project of this scale required immense ships, machinery, and a huge construction team. *But I guess there's no harm in trying. I have plenty of rock in my inventory. I can make this happen.*

Using my Workshop skill, I crafted smooth stones and sand in my inventory. I made sure to craft relatively large slabs of stone. Next, I directed the inventory to drop the stones into the ocean. From a bystander's point of view, I probably looked a little silly as stones poured out of my right hand in an endless stream.

The stones sunk into the sea with loud splashes. I piled up the stones until they'd formed walls roughly three meters above the ocean surface. It was almost as if I'd drawn a line in the sea separating my new land and the rest of the boundless body of water.

Though I was only getting started, the goblins behind me let out shouts of surprise. *Actually, now that I think about it from their perspective, I'm also downright mystified about my own abilities. On top of that, my inventory is just as otherworldly—how in the world did it store this much rock? And, uh...where?*

By the time I had finished my train of thought, the frame was done. Next, I used *Flow*, a water spell, to manipulate the water and pump it out of the site. The area was empty in the blink of an eye—it left even me in shock. *I knew I had a larger mana pool thanks to all those mana minerals, but I didn't expect my spells to be* this *powerful...*

If I had to describe the area of the reclaimed land, imagine two people standing on the opposite sides of a lake that was large enough that you could barely make out each other's silhouette—it was around the size of that. However, I had drained all that water in one go.

At the moment, there wasn't any leakage—evidence that there weren't any gaps in my stone wall. Next, I poured sand and gravel in and covered it with a layer of cave spider soil. As I was pouring, I ran out of cave spider soil before I could cover the entire area, something I had suspected. Instead, I covered the rest with stones that formed a plaza-like area for the kids to play in.

"Okay..." I wiped the sweat on my forehead with the back of my hand and exhaled deeply. "I'm done."

I was immediately surrounded by cheers and shouts of joy. There was land as far as the eye could see—*ha ha, okay, not really, but it's enough for people to run around freely. Hmm, it'd probably take at least five minutes to walk to the far side.*

The kids jumped onto the land right away and started sprinting about.

"Hey, wait!" I yelped. "I dunno whether it's safe enou— Oh well, just running around should be okay."

There was a risk of the land collapsing. To be on the safe side, we should observe it for a while before starting farm work. However, racing about on it was probably fine.

After a little while, the children called out to me. "Thanks, Lord Heale!"

I waved back. “Sure! You’re welcome!”

Though I hadn’t intended it, I felt as if I was becoming more like a proper governor by the day. *A governor respected by his people, huh? You know, that sounds neat.* Seeing the kids bouncing around happily was a wonderful sight...though I did do a double-take when I saw Starkers among them.

I heard Riena’s voice from behind me. “Lord Heale, please allow me to thank you as well! I promise I’ll make a splendid farm here.”

Turning around, I gave her a smile. “I’m sure you can.”

At that moment, something shattered this moment of peace.

A blurry figure rushed into my vision, and Starkers vanished so quickly that he only left an afterimage. I swung my head around, looking for the naked blacksmith—and spotted him above us, his butt stuck in the beak of a bird larger than an average human.

“Starkers!!!” I shrieked in horror.

By the time I had yelled out, a swarm of giant black birds had blocked out the sky above us. One of the goblins exclaimed, “Murder birds!”

Murder birds were bird-like monsters with enormous crowns, feathers and fur as dark as night, and magnificent sharp beaks. This was my first encounter with them, and the stories I had heard weren’t exaggerated—they were huge.

I knew of them as well, since they’d also terrorized Sanphales. During planting season, when the temperature rose to a pleasant warmth, murder birds would migrate north across the ocean from the southern continent. They were infamous for their tendency to devour all the livestock in the villages along the coast of Barleon. But their appetite didn’t stop at livestock—they also preyed on human children and small monsters. In other words, goblins were also food to them.

Everyone had frozen in shock, staring up at the sky. I yelled out, “Back to the cave!”

Some of the goblins had already started running before I finished my sentence. The cave was within a stone’s throw from the reclaimed land.

However, for the children, that distance was significant.

"Y'all, over here!" Erivan held an axe in each hand as he rushed over to protect the children.

But he wouldn't make it in time. One after another, the murder birds swooped down towards the kids.

I gritted my teeth. *"Fire!"*

I burned the attacking birds into a crisp. I didn't manage to get all of them, and a handful started to open beaks.

The moment those slippery birds approached the ground, however, they were all cut down by axes—Erivan had come to the rescue, killing one murder bird after another. Then, he ran to the middle of the reclaimed land to make himself the biggest target. "Arrrgh! Everyone, hurry!" he roared.

"General, stop! That's dangerous!" Riena yelled.

Erivan, however, didn't halt nor turn back. Baris tugged on the princess's hand. "Your Highness, the general is the greatest warrior of our tribe! Murder birds are as helpless as infants before him! We should leave the birds to him and evacuate!"

"No, I can use magic! I can fight!" Riena argued.

Surprise flashed across Baris's face. He probably thought it out of character for Riena. However, he immediately shook his head to snap out of it, knowing that time was of the essence. "Understood, Your Highness! Both of you, please help the general!"

"We will!" I promised. "Take care of the others, Baris!" I turned to Riena. "Let's go!"

"Yes, Lord Heale!"

I was on the offense, striking down murder birds with my spells. Riena, meanwhile, made use of *Shield*, a spell I had only taught her recently, to protect Erivan.



Behind us, Baris herded the children into the cave. It seemed that everyone had made it back safely. There was the risk of murder birds flying right into the cave, however. We needed someone or some*thing* to protect the entrance.

I should test out Automaton Creation. Hopefully, that should do the trick. I brought up my inventory and activated the skill. If I consumed some of my nearly endless supply of stone, I could apparently make an automaton called a "golem." Other minerals and ores—such as iron—could also be used as materials, but for now, I only needed it to be a sturdy shield. On top of that, murder birds only attacked creatures smaller than them. This "golem" should be enough to serve as a scare-murder bird, so to speak.

Wasting no time, I crafted a golem that was around three meters tall. There was an explosion of light, and the stone automaton appeared next to me.

"Golem, protect the cave!" I commanded.

Heeding my order, the golem walked over to the cave entrance and stood there like a menacing statue, blocking the cave from sight. *Good, it understands what I say. The cave should be safe now.*

With that weight off my mind, I focused on attacking the murder birds. *Actually, where did Starkers go— Oh.*

One bird started to vomit from up in the sky with a loud groan. Along with half-digested food, a man covered with sticky fluid also fell down—it was Starkers. *I can't let him slam into the stone floor of the reclaimed land like that; he'll get hurt.* Luckily, Ciel came to the rescue—he slid over to Starkers's landing spot to cushion the blow.

The slimy blacksmith had gotten the contents of the murder bird's stomach all over Ciel, and I couldn't just stand by and watch. I washed the two of them down with a water spell, making them squeaky clean. *Okay, we're out of the woods now. With this, I can cast my spells without worrying about hitting Starkers.*

"Erivan!" I raised my voice. "I'll defeat them with magic! Get down!"

"Aye aye, Chief!" The general, who was stained crimson with the blood of the birds, dived to the ground.

I'll use a fire spell— Wait, these birds might be edible. I'll freeze them with an ice spell instead.

I lifted both arms into the air, as I chanted, *"Blizzard!"*

Blizzard was a mid-tier ice spell, and it was the upgraded version of *Freeze*. Frosty air shot out of my hands and expanded spherically, eventually transforming into a storm of snow. In the blink of an eye, the murder birds had turned into frozen displays. Large chunks of ice encasing murder birds fell down one after another.

To protect myself, Riena, and Erivan from the impact, I used *Wind* to summon up a gust above our heads. The ice was hard and sturdy—even when the birds slammed onto the ground, it didn't shatter. The few murder birds that had escaped my spell frantically flew away. *Phew, they ran off.*

A chorus of delighted cheering rang out from the cave. Erivan stood up and ran over to me. His face was stained red with blood, and as they left crimson trails on his cheeks, he grinned at me with his two axes in hand. *Um. I've got to be honest, he's scary.*

"Yer amazing, Chief!" He lauded. "Bravo!"

"U-Uh, that's what I should say to you, Erivan," I stammered.

He was truly worthy of his title as a general—he was a formidable warrior. He had managed to slay over a dozen murder birds with his tiny axes.

"My crest's <Great Warrior>, ya know!" He smacked his chest with his fist proudly. "This is a piece of cake!"

<Great Warrior> was a crest that gave a significant boost to the owner's physical strength, and it also bestowed mastery over a number of weapons. Some of those in the Sanphales royal family and aristocracy had this crest as well—in fact, it was so prestigious that simply owning it could double one's number of admirers and suitors. It was one of the most envied crests around.

"Lord Heale, are you hurt?!" A familiar voice asked me worriedly.

I turned around and saw Riena. Behind her, I could see all the evacuated goblins heading over from the cave, and Baris was among them.

“Yeah, I’m fine. How about you?”

“I’m unharmed as well! But...” Her shoulders drooped. “I’m so sorry... I wasn’t able to help much.”

“That’s not the case at all! You managed to disperse the birds even further. You did a great job. Not to mention that you mastered a new spell so quickly! I’m impressed.”

“Th-Thank you! I shall work even harder!”

“I’m sure you will. I need to work hard so you don’t leave me in the dust.” I gave her an encouraging nod. “Ah. That reminds me, is Starkers all right?” I turned around and saw the dude in question sneezing, snot trickling down his nostrils. “Uh. Yeah, I guess he’s doing mostly okay.”

He was surrounded by ice murder bird specimens, and he was nearly naked. *He must be freezing. That’s why he should’ve put on some clothes a long time ago...* I sighed.

I turned back to face Riena. “Well, a bunch of very rude birds interrupted us, but— Oh, maybe it would be more accurate to call them ‘very delightful meat.’ Hey Riena, murder birds are edible, right?”

“But of course! Their wings and thighs taste like chicken, their abdomens taste like beef, and their shoulders taste like pork!” she grinned. “They bring together the tastiest cuts of those three livestock!”

“Huuuh...” I muttered in wonder. “So that’s what they taste like!”

In other words, all the major livestock, wrapped in one bundle, flew right onto our plates! Meat... I had to stop myself from drooling at the thought. *I’ve only had meat jerky since I came here.*

I clapped my hands together. “In that case, let’s have a barbecue tonight!”

The goblins probably hadn’t dined on monster meat for a while either, because their shouts of “All right!” were much more enthusiastic than usual.

That night, we savored a delectable meat feast. We grilled the thighs on the bone, and used the flank and shoulder meat for stew—while also saving some

cuts for the barbecue, of course. As for the flanks and shoulders, we didn't just grill them, we also made some stew. While our dinner was cooking, Starkers snuck in a few bites, and I saw the goblins telling him off. I could empathize with him—the aroma was mouthwatering.

Once the food was ready, everyone sat in circles around bonfires. Erivan stood up and raised a freshly-grilled drumstick into the air. "All right then! Let's thank our great chief and dig in!"

"Thanks, Chief!" all the goblins echoed.

Erivan took eager big bites of his meal, and the other goblins followed in his example.

"This stuff's great!" Erivan grinned broadly. He must have missed the taste of monster meat.

The goblins weren't the only ones enjoying the fest—Starkers and Taran were also taking bite after bite. The way they were wolfing down their food meant that it must have tasted heavenly. *I already knew it was going to be good when I smelled the aroma.* I swallowed, trying to stop myself from drooling.

From beside me, Riena offered a drumstick. "Here! Please have some, Lord Heale!"

"Ah, thanks. I'll start eating too."

Riena watched my reaction nervously. *She must be anxious over whether she had cooked it properly.* She honestly had nothing to worry about—the aroma and color were downright fantastic. I didn't even have to taste it to know that she had done a great job.

I took one bite right away. The flavorful meat juices delighted my taste buds, and there was a hint of sweetness hidden within. "Yuuum."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it!" She smiled. "I cooked it with fish stock to add flavor, but I didn't know whether it would be to your liking!"

"Ah, so that's why I can taste salt in it..." I took another bite. "Yeah, this is wonderful."

"I also made some soup with meat, so please help yourself to this as well!"

Joy lit up her features as she offered me a bowl of soup.

“I see. This aroma is delightful too.” I sighed, content.

I sipped the soup, it was indisputably perfect. I expected nothing less from Riena. Though the broth was clear, it was full of rich flavors, and a pleasant warmth spread through my body. More than anything, the chunks of meat floating in the soup left me wanting more.

According to Riena, since murder birds would sometimes fly for extended periods of time, they had a perfect ratio of fat to lean meat. Because of this, they tasted better than normal livestock. I was both very happy and very grateful that we had enough murder bird meat to last us a while. It would be dangerous if they attacked us again, but if I looked at it from another angle, they were also a good source of food.

However, if I spent all my time hunting down murder birds, I wouldn’t have time for mining. *Hmm...* I couldn’t be on the lookout for days on end. *Ah, I should make the automaton stand by on the reclaimed land like a scarecrow.* I could use the murder birds’ habit of avoiding larger animals to my advantage.

From what I had observed, it seemed I could make alterations to the large golem, so I should equip it with some projectile weapons to snipe those birds down. On that note, Baris had mentioned he was going to organize a guard system with day and night shifts and had asked goblins to manufacture bows for them to wield.

Furthermore, he was going to start building some fortifications for Sheol Reef. First, he was going to erect several watchtowers. Then he was also going to build defensive walls which would offer us cover. These walls wouldn’t just protect us—they were also necessary for shielding our fields from saltwater damage.

Luckily, we had an abundant supply of stone on this island, and I could form them into regular stone blocks again. A part of me felt that he was being slightly overkill, but murder birds might not be the only invaders we had to worry about. Though few ships passed by, pirates were still a presence on these waters. It was better to be safe than sorry.

I had expressed my support for his plans, and I asked Baris and Erivan to be

the leaders of our guard system and fortification projects. If push came to shove, Riena had also said that she could fight back enemies with her spells, so I could rest easy for now and focus on mining again.

All that thinking aside, the food is great. I had already polished off one bowl of soup and a whole pile of drumsticks. I surveyed our surroundings, and everyone else was munching away with gusto.

Riena held out a plate full of drumsticks to me. “Lord Heale, you can have as many helpings as you want!”

“Th-Thanks, but uh, I don’t think I can stomach that much...”

Ah, that reminds me. We’re going to have a hard time trying to finish all this murder bird meat in the next few days. But if we don’t, it’s going to go bad. The ideal thing to do is to leave them frozen, but it’d be a pain for Riena and I to have to constantly apply ice magic on them...

“Hm? Is something the matter?” Riena asked.

“Huh? Oh, I was just thinking that we need to finish the meat before it spoils.”

“Ah, I see! In that case, how about we make a cold room inside the cave?”

“A cold room? Ah, a room where we store frozen goods. That’s a good idea—the insides of the cave and tunnels are much cooler than on the surface.”

Which meant that we could keep things frozen for longer. We wouldn’t have to constantly cast ice spells—we only had to reapply the ice whenever they started melting a little.

Riena nodded. “When we still lived in Barleon, we found a cave with icy walls, and we preserved our tribe’s food rations in there. The meat was safe to eat for over half a year. If we freeze the walls and ceiling of the cold room, it would be even more effective!”

“Interesting. Let’s try that, then. I’m considering going down tomorrow morning to dig out a chamber for the cold room.”

“Understood. I also have a few other pointers, so please allow me to accompany you.”

“Thanks, Riena. That’d help me a lot. And...” I paused, looking at the small

goblin sitting in front of me. They had plopped down while I was conversing with Riena, and they had been staring at me for a while. “Uh... Hi?”

I was thinking hard for a name when Riena provided the answer. “She’s General Erivan’s daughter, Fu. Now, her name is Furay.”

Oh, right, Furay. When I tamed her, I had given her a new name. I wasn’t very good at discerning the gender of the younger goblins, but she was a girl from what I had heard.

“Ah, sorry about that. Can I help you, Furay?”

She sized me up. “Hey. How did you get so strong? You’re even stronger than my dad.”

She must have come to that conclusion after seeing my spells. Before I came to this island, my mana pool had been so pitiful that I could only conjure up a droplet of water or so. That had changed after I’d excavated a ton of mana minerals here. Before my banishment, I saw the power of my siblings’ spells in the palace, and if we only considered pure mana levels, I had long since surpassed them. All of this was possible because...

I hummed. “Well, I owe it all to mining.”

“Mining? You mean, you dug around inside a mine?” She frowned. “I’ve done that all my life, but I didn’t get stronger at all.”

“Yeah, that’s what I did.” I paused. “Wait, that was too vague. When I was mining, I dug up minerals that increase my mana pool, and those made me stronger.”

“You got that kinda stuff here?! Let me mine some too!” Her eyes sparkled.

“Oh, definitely. But the thing is...” I hesitated. “If goblins want to use magic, you need to evolve your body into one with arcane talent first, and you’ll need a risestone. If you do that, though, you would have to bid farewell to your current body.”

Goblins lacked the innate ability to manipulate mana. Even if they learned the incantations, they wouldn’t be able to cast magic, which was why they needed a risestone. Riena was a good example. However, the decision to replace one’s

body wasn't an easy one to ma—

"Then I'll evolve too!" Furay declared without hesitation.

"Y-You're raring to go, huh." I was taken aback. "The thing is, we're all out of risestones right now..." I trailed off, noticing the man standing behind Furay. "Ah."

"Hm?" Furay tilted her head in question before letting out a yelp of pain. Erivan had given her a gentle smack on the head.

"Stop right there, Furay! Don't bother the chief!" Erivan's voice boomed. "And mind yer manners, will ya? Don't be rude!" He bowed his head to me and made Furay do the same. "Sorry. My girl really wants to get stronger, and she won't stop naggin' me about it. Please excuse her."

"Nah, that's a good thing," I said. "Makes sense that she wants to grow up like her dad, a fearsome warrior."

With a grin growing on his face, Erivan turned to Furay. "Yeah? You think so?"

His daughter, however, turned away and remained stubbornly silent.

"Hey, Furay," I started. "If you want a risestone, dig around in the cave. You can try using it if you find one."

"Y-You sure, my lord?!" she exclaimed, trying to sound as polite as she could.

"Yeah. You have mining experience, right? I'm honestly clueless about mines. The only thing I know is how to dig. It'd help me out a lot if you could teach me."

"Of course! I'm a great miner, so I'll definitely be useful!"

It seemed as if she couldn't wait any longer. She turned her back to me and ran over to Starkers. He was lying down contently after having eaten his fill, but the young goblin girl shook him awake and dragged him to the forge—she likely wanted him to craft a pickaxe for her.

With a hint of unease in his voice, Erivan asked, "I-Is that really okay, Chief? Risestones are very precious!"

"I was thinking about making those who wanted to evolve draw lots for

risestones if we came across more, but if she finds one on her own, that should be fine."

Erivan stared at me, dumbfounded, before he let out a sigh. "Do ya have no worldly desires or somethin'? Ya even gave us all 'em jewels last time."

Huh. He's right, I stopped being attached to valuable items after I came to this island. Well, to be more accurate, I don't mine because I want precious stones—I just mine because I love doing it.

I shrugged. "Either way, if Furay becomes a mage, we'd have more options. Ah, speaking of magic..."

I selected eight hundred mana minerals in my inventory and used them on Riena. She inclined her head quizzically at me.

"Yes, Lord Heale?"

"I just increased your mana levels with mana minerals," I explained.

Surprised and a little anxious, Riena asked, "Y-You used those precious items on *me*?!"

"Yeah. Like I said earlier, having more mages around would be a great help. And those mages having more powerful magic would be useful if we get attacked again too, don't you think?"

"My lord... Understood! I will practice even harder to master spells and aid you more in battle!" Riena placed a hand over her chest as she made that declaration.

She had been a very diligent pupil to begin with. Though her spells during the incident earlier hadn't been too spectacular, she had made use of all the offensive spells I had taught her so far. If she had more mana to work with, I was sure she could shine even brighter.

"Mmhmm, I'm counting on you."

Alone, I was rather powerless. I couldn't deal with every problem that came our way. Most of all, I just wanted to focus on mining. Of course, feasting on delectable meat like this was a highlight as well.

Riena should continue to use more mana minerals. My mana reserves were

already vast, but I planned to use more down the line as well.

Later on, after an all-hands discussion, we decided to commemorate this wonderful day—the day we reclaimed land and obtained tasty murder bird meat—and celebrate it as our own Thanksgiving Day starting next year.

Chapter 9: Discovering Ruins!

Three days after the slaughter of the murder birds, we had finished constructing our cold room.

“Okay, this looks good to me!” I declared. “Ah... Achoo!”

“Are you all right, Lord Heale? Please use this.”

“Th-Thanks, Riena.” I accepted the white handkerchief Riena offered me and wiped my nose. “That aside, this place is freezing cold. That’s good; it means the ice will probably stay frozen for a long time.”

I’d dug out a new chamber for the cold room and partitioned it from the cave interior with a metal door. The floor and ceiling were covered in thick layers of ice. A rope stretched from one wall to another, almost like a line that divided the room. We had made it with cave spider silk, and we planned on hanging fish and large hunks of meat on it.

We had also built shelves to store smaller fish and cut-up meat, making it easier to manage our food inventory. I had dug a tunnel that branched from the stairs that connected the cave entrance and the underground shaft, and it went all the way into the cold room we were in. This made transporting food from the surface rather convenient.

All of this had been Riena’s idea—she had made all the design choices. *I think she did a great job!*

“Thanks for all those directions, Riena.” I smiled at her. “And thanks to everyone who helped.”

The cave spiders and the goblins bowed humbly. The slimes also jiggled their bodies in response.

This cold room had been a combined effort between two expert miners—Taran and myself—and a bunch of helpful workers, including goblins and the other cave spiders, as well as the slimes. It was a big construction project that took us a grand total of two entire days to complete.

Taran's mining speed had increased compared to her already astounding performance when she'd first used pickaxes. *I have to work hard too!*

"No, thank *you*!" Riena beamed. "I'll go tell everyone to carry the food here!"

The murder birds were already frozen, and they were still left out in the open. While we were building the room, I had been regularly casting ice spells on them to keep them that way, but once we finished transporting them here, I wouldn't have to worry about that anymore.

"Okay." I nodded. "In that case, I'll freeze the food again once you finish."

"Ah, please leave that to me!" Riena placed her hand over her chest for emphasis. "That will serve as good magic practice!" After her evolution, she seemed to be slowly gaining self-confidence.

"I see. I'm counting on you, then. As for me... I'll go check up on my fellow miner."

I was referring to Furay, who was an experienced miner. According to Erivan, Furay was fifteen, just like Riena and me. She had apparently started mining the caves and abandoned mines in the vicinity of their settlement ever since she could walk. Mining was one of the daily tasks of the Verdan tribe, and she had been the one in charge of it all.

In other words, her knowledge in this field was much more plentiful than mine, and I was honestly a little curious about her skill. Ever since she had come to this island, Furay's job had been fishing. However, she had made an appeal to Baris and her father, and she was going to join me in mining starting today.

After I had parted with Riena and the others, I went down the stairs into the underground shaft. As I approached the end of the tunnel, I could hear the pleasant metallic clangs of a pickaxe.

A shrill "Hurgh!" echoed inside the walls. Postmen slimes hopped over to me from the direction of the voice with rocks on their backs. After I walked a little further into the shaft, I saw Furay swinging a pickaxe skillfully. *She truly* is *an expert miner, huh.*

"Morning, Furay," I called out. "Have you already been mining for quite a while?"

“Yeah.” She paused to think. “I started mining before dawn, so it’s probably been around four hours.”

That’s a long time! “You mined for that long? I know you’re experienced, but...aren’t you tired?”

“Nope. Thanks to your crest, I’m not tired at all.”

Since she was under the taming contract, Furay automatically shared some of the skills provided by <Cave King>. She could mine safely and efficiently, and as a result, she was a lot less fatigued.

I frowned slightly. “Even so, you need to get proper rest, okay?”

“I will, but I really want that risestone.”

Considering where I had found the risestone last time, she wouldn’t be able to excavate it like most minerals. It had been enshrined in a small shrine-like chamber that I had come across. Therefore, the fastest way to gain a risestone would be to find such ruins. *There’s no guarantee that there are more of those chambers lying around, though... What in the world was that place anyway? Hmm, maybe there’s an ancient building or something buried underground here, and that room was but one small part of it.*

Oh well, the only direction we can go is forward. I’m sure we’ll find something again eventually.

Nodding to myself, I said, “I understand that you really want it, but don’t work yourself to the point that you get sick. That would defeat the purpose. Please be careful.”

“Okay. But thanks to your, um...<Cave King> thing, I really don’t get tired at all. Plus, I can’t believe that one swing is able to crumble so much rock...” She stared in disbelief at the debris she left in her wake. “I have <Miner>, so I was pretty efficient at digging to begin with, but I think I’m even faster now!”

With those words, Furay went silent and started swinging her pick rhythmically again. *Well, I know her level of skill now, so I should get started myself.* With that in mind, I chose a nearby wall as my starting point.

After a while, I felt someone’s gaze on me when I brought down my pick. I

turned around—it was Furay. She'd paused to take a break and was wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

"I-Is that because of your crest too?" She looked at me curiously. "The wall practically fell apart! Are you *really* a human, Lord Heale?"

"Yeah, I'm a human. An average human, at your service." I hesitated. "Actually, an incompetent human would be more accurate."

"Huh. After seeing your magic and...this, you don't feel like a human at all."

"You know, now that I think about it, you make a good point..." With every swing, I could destroy a rock wall around three meters tall. That was impossible for a normal human.

"But well, you're a little careless."

I blinked. "Careless?"

"Yeah. If you keep mining like this, you'll start feeling short of breath. We need to find a way to pump fresh air in."

She had my full attention. "Oh, I didn't know that." As a seasoned miner, she must know the hazards of mining as well. "Do you know how to solve that?"

"Yep. There are specific devices that can pump air... Hey, how about we ask that Starkers guy to make 'em?"

"Ah, that would be a great help! I'm an amateur when it comes to this, so if you notice anything else, please tell me."

"Got it. But well, I don't think there's much to say. With your crest's skill, we don't have to worry about cave-ins, and so as long as we solve the ventilation problem, we should be good. Something might catch my attention while I'm mining though."

"Okay, thanks for telling me. Let's work together for a while!"

"Sure thing!"

For a while after that, we mined together in silence until Furay asked me a question, seemingly on a whim. "Oh, just wondering... You got a dad too, Lord Heale?"

“Me? Yeah, I did.”

“Ah... He must be pretty cool.”

“Cool...? Yeah, you could say that. My father’s crest, <High King>, is extraordinary. Not only does it give a great boost to his own abilities in melee combat and magic, it also raises the power of his nearby allies to another level entirely, so he has never suffered defeat in war.”

My father wasn’t the only one with an otherworldly crest. All of my siblings had crests with abilities that sounded more like myth than reality. Surrounded by such awe-inspiring people, I was the only exception with an obscure, seemingly useless crest like <Cave King>, and I had felt like I had brought shame upon my family.

“Wooow... He sounds kind of scary.” Furay frowned.

In her mind, my father must be much stronger than me. However, that was difficult to say. If I only considered my mana pool, which had been elevated enormously by thousands of mana minerals, my father couldn’t hold a candle to me. *If it’s anything else, though, I’d lose in a heartbeat.*

Furay had probably instinctively assumed that parents were stronger than their offspring because of her father. Though Erivan was approachable and friendly, he was a fearsome warrior. If my only method of attack was a sword or some other melee weapon, I would barely last a second against him. Even if ten of me teamed up, we wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Hey, Furay. Do you want to become stronger than your dad?”

“Huh? N-Not really...”

She suddenly fell silent and started swinging her pickaxe even faster. *She’s so easy to read. But, hmm... Is it really just her ambition to surpass her father? Would anyone be this desperate for strength for a reason like that?*

In my case, for example, it had never been my intention to defeat my siblings or father, no matter how outstanding they were. I had only wished to be comparable to a normal person—someone who wouldn’t get laughed at.

It was pretty ironic. If I returned to Sanphales now, people likely wouldn’t

consider me normal—they'd think I was a freak. *Actually, that's one of the better scenarios. I might be confined as a security risk.*

Whatever. I don't have to worry about that. I'm already determined to live on this island for the rest of my life.

We talked on and off as we continued mining away until I heard the odd sound of crumbling rock echoing in the distance behind me. I turned around and saw Furay wearing a startled expression on her face. She seemed to have discovered a large hollow.

“Yay! I think we’ve found something!” Furay’s face lit up as she ran inside, and I was hot on her heels.

The chamber was extensive—around ten times the size of the previous ruins I had unearthed. Giant humanoid statues lined the walls of the chamber. I was already feeling apprehensive at this point, but then I sensed a flow of mana within the stone statues.

As one’s mana levels increased, they would automatically become more attuned to the flow of mana around them and could sense the location and magnitude of these mana streams. Mages called this skill “mana sensitivity,” and it was generally agreed upon that this was what determined whether someone had arcane talent.

When I had obtained an overwhelming mana pool, I had been rather oblivious to ambient mana at first. However, after I had recalled the existence of the skill, I’d honed my senses and learned how to sense the shape and flow of mana.

Unease crept up within my heart. “Furay, wait!”

She turned around. “Huh?”

Without a moment of doubt, I cast *Shield* and encased Furay and myself within. *Shield* was a non-elemental spell that protected the area surrounding the caster from both magic and physical attacks. However, it wasn’t invincible, nor was it perpetual. The caster’s mana levels determined its strength.

My spell wasn’t a moment too soon—one of the statues hurled a torrent of fire in our direction. At the sight of the fierce inferno that threatened to swallow her up whole, Furay fell to her knees.

Though the fire made contact with *Shield*, my spell held steady. My current mana levels meant that my spell was very durable, and the attack barely made a scratch.

“You all right, Furay?!” I yelled.

“I-I’m fine... This is nothing!” Furay yelled back, clearly trying to put on a brave front despite the fact her legs were trembling.

In truth, I was scared too. I may have all the mana in the world to cast magnificent spells in battle, but being surrounded by titanic humanoid statues made my heart leap into my throat.

These things...are golems, aren’t they? But hold on, the golem I crafted couldn’t use magic. Not only that, but there were a select few of the statues wearing gold-colored armor and holding shiny golden swords. Each sword was around the height of a human.

The armored golems closed in, brandishing their swords menacingly. Knowing the strength of my *Shield*, it should withstand the strikes of these weapons, but just standing here and letting them hit me wasn’t going to get me anywhere. *I should go on the offensive.*

The spell I chose to counterattack was *Cyclone*, a mid-tier wind spell—the upgraded version of *Wind.* Powerful gusts howled in the chamber, slamming all the golems into the wall like an invisible hand, shattering them into rubble.

“Wh-What were those things?” Furay stammered.

“Golems, probably. Do you need a hand?” I helped her climb to her feet.

“Th-Thanks, Lord Heale...” She drooped her head, looking frustrated at herself. She chewed hard on her lip. That feeling of powerlessness hurts. “And...sorry. I ran off on my own.”

“No, I share the blame too.” I shook my head. “I should’ve been more careful.”

It would be unreasonable to blame Furay. Who could’ve predicted that such fierce golems were lurking underground? Part of it was my responsibility—I had been negligent about the possible risks. *It might be dangerous if I let everyone mine on their own. There might be more places like this under the reef.*

I turned around and instructed Ciel to notify everyone to suspend all mining. I had actually taught Ciel a few signals, and when the slimes transformed their

bodies into a cross mark, that was the cue to stop mining.

Ciel hopped off towards the goblins, who were hard at work. *Good. Later on, I'll explain why and come up with a few security measures. For now, I should take a good look around this chamber.*

I surveyed my surroundings. The chamber itself was spacious, but it was surprisingly barren—I could only see the remains of the golems and their equipment. The last ruin I had come across housed an altar-like object, but there wasn't one here. *Well darn. Guess it's time to inspect the golem remnants, then.*

I did a quick count, and there had been over a dozen golems. Each of them had heartstones. When I took one into my palm, I heard Furay's voice ring out.

"Lord Heale! Is this the risestone?" The young goblin picked up a golden stone from the wreck of a golem and walked over to me. I'd told Furay to be on the lookout for a stone that matches that description, and I could see it glow in her hand.

The color definitely matches up with the one I found before.

"Oh?" I perked up. "Let's take a look."

I asked the assistant to identify the item.

Arcanestone: May be infused with a spell. Suitable material for Automaton Creation.

Ah, these must have been embedded inside the golems that could use magic. Which means someone deliberately crafted them that way...

"Hmm... Doesn't look like it." I gave her an apologetic look.

"Darn it..." Her shoulders slumped.

Not a moment later, color drained from her face as she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Alarmed, I followed her gaze. "Wh-What's wrong? Another gol— Ahhh!" I yelped, eyes wide. But soon, I let out a breath of relief. "Oh, it's just you, Starkers."

What I saw was a bearded man who was only wearing a loincloth—our good old Starkers. Seeing him around here wasn't that unusual. He had a habit of wandering around the underground shafts without bringing any light with him, and he was the culprit behind the countless screams of goblins and cave spiders that echoed inside the cave. *When in the world did he come in?*

Starkers hoisted up one of the golem's gold-colored swords effortlessly. It looked to be around three meters long, and he seemed overjoyed.

I blinked. "What's that dude doing?"

Though the squat man offered no words as usual, joy was practically radiating across his face. In fact, it had escalated to the point that he was rubbing his cheeks against the sword and kissing it. He seemed to be interested in the armor as well, giving the plates a lick and knocking them to hear what they sounded like.

Furay watched the guy with an appalled expression on her face. Then, under our gazes, Starkers left the stone chamber with one of the swords.

After a moment of silence, Furay muttered, "When'll that guy put on some clothes for once? Are all humans like that?"

"No, he's in the minority. But, well...it's probably the most comfortable attire for him." I paused. "That aside, why was he so excited?"

I had often seen Starkers grabbing ores in the mining shafts without asking first and leaving with them. However, I had never seen him *this* worked up before. Perhaps there was something special about the swords and armor.

Turning my attention to the remaining swords, I gripped the handle of one and tried lifting it. Despite my best efforts...

"Wh-What the..." My eyes widened. "I can't even lift it!"

With a grunt of effort, I tried to hoist it up with both hands, using everything I had, but it wouldn't budge.

"I'll help!" Furay exclaimed as she joined me, but that didn't make a difference.

The sword was roughly three-meters long, as I had estimated earlier.

However, the blade was paper-thin in comparison, and I had thought it wouldn't be that bulky.

"Ugh, guess I'll store it for now." I sighed.

That, unfortunately, also ended in failure.

"Currently, <Cave King> can only store minerals and mined material. You will unlock the ability to store other items at higher proficiency levels."

That was the explanation I got from the assistant. *I see. True, this thing doesn't fit into either category. But looking at it from another angle, I can turn it into "mined material."*

I took out my pickaxe and slammed it against one sword and a suit of armor. When they crumbled, they were automatically stored in my inventory. Though breaking them was a bit of a waste, there were still around a half dozen sets of sword and armor. Taking one set apart to figure out its materials was probably worth it.

Both the sword and armor were made of a mineral called..."orichalcum"? *I've heard of that term before. Wasn't it an ore that the legendary race, dwarfs, loved to craft with? Wait. Dwarf...* Suddenly, dots seemed to connect in my mind. *If I remember correctly, weren't dwarfs characterized by their squat stature and their magnificent facial hair? Is there a chance that Starkers isn't a human, but a dwarf?*

But the next moment, I shook my head. *Hold on. The dwarfs I know are renowned for their noble dispositions and their stubborn nature. They boast otherworldly technology and an astounding physical strength that's many times greater than a human's—I consider them to be a very distinguished race.*

Huh, now that I list them out... His disposition aside, Starkers does *check the boxes for strength and technology. But, uh, surely the legendary dwarfs don't like to go around in their birthday suits, right? ...Please tell me I'm right.*

The assistant summoned up information about the "orichalcum," dragging me out of my thoughts.

Orichalcum: Lighter and more robust than steel. May be enchanted with magical improvements.

Wow. The arcanestone was already a big surprise, but this thing is ridiculous! I furrowed my eyebrows a little. *I haven't discovered any other orichalcum inside this cave so far. Maybe it's not a naturally occurring mineral here. Someone might have unearthed it in a faraway land and melted it down into a sword. Either way, it's likely quite rare.*

That aside, if it's lighter than steel, why didn't it budge? When I looked at the orichalcum units in my inventory, however, I got my answer. "Orichalcum x900." In other words, a grand total of nine hundred orichalcum ingots had been melted down to make one sword and a suit of armor. *One ingot in my inventory weighs one kilogram, so that makes nine hundred kilograms...*

I didn't know the weight of the sword, but taking the size of the suit of armor into consideration, the sword was likely at least a hundred kilograms. However, it seemed appearances could indeed be deceiving—it was hard to believe that so many ingots made up a sword of that size. *Maybe they were compressed by some kind of mysterious ancient technology? More importantly... When Starkers lifted it, he made it look easy!*

Shaking that thought out of my mind, I addressed Furay. "Hey, how about we go check up on Starkers? All mining is suspended, so let's head elsewhere."

"Sure! I'll take a break too."

Before we left, with Furay's assistance, I collected all the heartstones and arcanestones from the remains of the golems. As for the armor and swords which we weren't able to carry, I decided to leave them be for now.

Once we were done, we climbed back onto the surface and walked out of the cave entrance to see a huge crowd of goblins clustered in one place. They seemed to be making a big fuss over something.

I spotted Riena, who was watching the commotion with a worried look on her face, and asked, "What's all the noise about?"

"Oh, Lord Heale! Well..." Riena hesitated. "Mister Starkers carried a sword back with him, and everyone got worked up over it."

“I see... They’re trying to lift it, am I right?”

“Yes. It looks remarkably hefty, but since Mister Starkers was able to carry it around effortlessly, it fanned everyone’s competitive spirits...” Riena chewed on her lip. “I feel like this might get out of hand.”

I frowned. “You’re right, it might be dangerous. But honestly, I doubt anyone can lift it in the first place.”

I approached the crowd and looked at the center of the circle. Taran was there trying to lift the orichalcum sword with her four front “arms.” Starkers, meanwhile, was humming a tune as he adjusted the furnace’s fire.

Taran planted her feet into the ground and pulled with all her might, but it was like trying to move a mountain—it didn’t shift even a bit. The moment her hands released the sword, she lost balance and her large body flopped over.

There was a circle of goblins and cave spiders sprawled out on the ground around the sword. *Looks like none of the challengers have found success so far. I mean, I knew the goblins didn’t have much of a chance, but if anyone could, I’d have bet on Taran...*

Erivan rolled his burly right shoulder. He seemed to be warming up. “Heh, y’all are wimps! If Starkers can do it, then so can I! Bear witness to me lifting this thing!”

With that declaration, Erivan wound his hands around the orichalcum sword. “Guuurgh! Huh? Weird... Guuuuuurgh!”

His battlecry rang hollow, however, and the sword remained motionless.

Panting, he muttered, “Darn it, then how come that Starkers dude could lift it?”

Baris exclaimed, “General, please stop! Even if you could lift it, it would be difficult for you to hold on to. Cease such hazardous activity!”

Erivan’s attention seemed to be elsewhere. His eyes were trained on Furay, who was standing next to me. Once again, he gripped the sword, his face flushing red with effort. He probably wanted to be the strong, undefeated father in front of his daughter.

“Huuuurgh!” he cried, hoisting the sword high above his head with vigor.

“Whoo!” Everyone watching cheered, myself included.

Wow, he actually managed it without help!

One goblin yelled, “That’s our general! Our <Great Warrior> is no joke!”

Erivan’s <Great Warrior> blessed him with tremendous strength. Triumphantly, he yelled, “All right! How about that?!” But that was when Erivan lost control of his grip, and the sword slipped out from his hands. “Oh!”

My eyes widened in horror. “Watch out! *Wind*!”

My wind spell rushed forth to slow the sword’s descent. Unfortunately, things didn’t go as planned—the sword grip smacked Erivan’s head in slow motion. The only silver lining was that he managed to narrowly escape the blade before it clattered onto the ground.

“General!” the onlookers yelled, and Baris was the first among many to run over to Erivan.

The fastest one, however, was Furay. “Dad! Dad!” she yelled, her voice shaking as she shook Erivan’s prone form.

There was no response.

Though I had cushioned the blow somewhat with my *Wind*, the sword was still ridiculously heavy. I wouldn’t be surprised if it had cracked his skull. I approached Erivan and cast a healing spell on him without delay.

Luckily, the nightmare scenario hadn’t come to pass. He had only sustained a minor injury, and with a groan, he blinked open his eyes. “Ah... Chief. Did ya save me again? I’m...sorry.”

“Don’t mind it, I should have stopped you from the get-go.” I shook my head. “But you shouldn’t be so careless next ti—”

“You idiot!” Furay sobbed. Tears ran down her face as she clung on to Erivan. “Dad, you *idiot*! Why are you always so reckless?! If I ever lose you, I...!”

Looking lost, Erivan gathered Furay into his arms and gave her a big hug. “S-Sorry, Furay... I’m so sorry. Please don’t cry...”

I felt like I now knew why Furay was so passionate about getting stronger. I didn't want to pry into their past, but considering the absence of Erivan's wife, the two goblins likely only had each other. She probably wanted to grow strong and protect her only remaining family.

From the looks of it, Furay's words had already made Erivan reflect on his actions, so I didn't need to admonish him any further. *Now that he's safe, I can focus on the bigger problem at hand... That dude who carried the sword here without breaking a sweat.*

I looked over to where Starkers was. He was actually in the process of chucking the orichalcum sword into the furnace to melt it down. From time to time, he'd take it out and beat it with a hammer, slowly changing it to a block of metal.

Starkers then took off a chunk and began hammering it into a rectangular shape. He repeated the cycle of lengthening it, cooling it with water, then hammering it again. Finally, when he was done, he kissed the finished product as if it was his beloved masterpiece. However, with a startled look, he immediately shrunk away, probably since it was still a little hot.

He was a sight to behold...until he burned his lips, which kind of ruined the moment. But putting that aside...

I stared at Starkers' newest creation. "Is that...a pickaxe?"

The entire pickaxe was the color of shimmering gold—both the pickaxe head and handle. It seemed to be entirely crafted with orichalcum. Starkers thrust it out towards me with one hand, as if ushering me to accept it.

Can I even lift it? Nervously, I took the pickaxe into my hands. But soon, my eyes grew big with surprise. "Wh-What the..."

It's so light*. No, "light" doesn't even cut it. It's as if I'm holding up a twig.* I glanced over at the block of orichalcum next to Starkers, and it had barely changed in size. He only used a tiny amount for this pick, it seemed.

The blacksmith gave me a smug look and wriggled his eyebrows. *You know, I kinda hate to admit it, but this guy must be the real deal. He matches the description of the dwarfs in the myths perfectly. Except the naked part. I don't*

think I've ever heard that legend before.

Starkers wasn't done. He made a whole set of orichalcum tools after that. Pickaxes, axes, knives, and so on. They bumped up our efficiency even further, and work took much less effort.

Until this day, nobody had really taken Starkers that seriously. People still kind of kept him at an arm's length and thought of him as an eccentric guy, but he had earned the respect and awe of the Sheol Reef denizens.

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"Okay, that should be it." I nodded to myself. "Ciel, thanks for your hard work! Tell everyone else to take a break too!"

At the sound of my voice, all the slimes jiggled their bodies. They had taken up the task of transporting the remaining orichalcum swords and armor to the surface in Starker's stead, since the dude was concentrating on smithing. The goblins and I hadn't been strong enough, but the slimes were able to slip the weapons underneath their smooth bodies and slide them up to the surface. *Okay, we have plenty of material for both tools and arms for a while.*

Now I had to think about how I wanted to use the other type of stone—no, *types* of *stones* that I had scavenged from the destroyed golems. There were fourteen heartstones, which I could use to make automata and ten arcanestones that I could use to enhance them. *Actually, how about I go ahead and craft some automata right away?*

I wasn't doing this on a whim. My encounter with the golems made me keenly aware of the risk to our miners. The threats could be dealt with if a mage was nearby, but at the moment, the only magic-users on Sheol Reef were Riena and I, and Riena worked on the surface.

Thus, I had been thinking about crafting powerful magic-wielding automata that would stand by inside the cave. I would embed arcanestones into them and grant the ability to use *Shield*.

"Teaching" golems spells wasn't hard at all. I only had to chant the spell I wanted within my mind and get the arcanestone to record it. If I infused the stone with my mana, the golems should be able to erect a sturdy *Shield*. There

was one thing I was curious about—would golems also gain mana sensitivity after being given a respectable mana pool?

"Automata with heartstones as cores can acquire different skills depending on their components."

Oh? So I can give them skills too? That means my suspicion was right—I can *make them mana sensitive. Therefore, the next problem is signaling. How do I make them communicate when they sense the flow of mana?*

Golems, naturally, couldn't speak. However, the golem I had crafted during the murder bird attack had understood and carried out my orders dutifully. If I commanded them to signal nearby people when they sensed mana, then they'd probably work out some way to communicate that.

Next, if I equipped them with orichalcum swords and armor, they would make for great meat shields. *Oh, I could even craft actual shields!*

Now with a plan in my head, I decided to get to work—but soon, a thought stopped me in my tracks. *Wait. If these massive golems are going to walk around the cave tunnels, they'll get in everyone's way. That would affect both the foot traffic and mining. Hmm... What to do...*

A gentle voice called out from behind me. "Lord Heale? Are you perhaps feeling unwell?"

I turned around and saw Riena looking at me with concern. "Ah, no, I'm fine. I was just thinking about something."

"I see... Please tell me if there's anything I can help with! Oh, and please have this." Riena held out a wooden cup of water to me.

"Thanks, Riena." I flashed her a small smile before accepting the cup and taking a sip. "Hey, this tastes really good." *Can plain water really be this tasty? There isn't any ice in it, but I feel refreshed. There's also a hint of sweetness.* "Did you mix something in?"

"I certainly did! It's a watered down concoction of lemon and coconut juice! If I made pure juice, we would run out pretty quickly, so I'm diluting it. This way, we can be economical about it!"

“Economical, hmm?” I stroked my chin in thought. “But to be honest, it’s just the right amount of sour, and it’s really refreshing. I might like it even more than juice.”

“Really?! Hee hee, yay!” Riena pumped both fists in the air, a bright smile blooming on her face like a bud in spring. “I’ll go make more so everyone can have a taste, then!”

“Go ahead. I’m rooting for you.”

“I’ll do my best, Lord Heale!”

Humming, Riena headed towards the kitchen. She took out a deep wooden plate and settled it on a rock table before retrieving a lemon and a coconut. When she was ready, she inhaled deeply.

“Hurgh!” With what sounded like a battle cry, Riena crushed the lemon with her bare hand. Then, with a hand chop, she split the coconut cleanly into halves.

My eyes were as round as saucers. *Huh? Wh-When did she grow that strong? I mean, I’ve seen her learning martial arts from Erivan a few times, but still!*

Ever the diligent student, Riena even made use of what I had taught her. She cast *Freeze* on water to make uniform and perfectly shaped ice. *Wow, looks like she has gained more mastery over* Freeze*.*

After being reborn, Riena never seemed to get complacent—she was always setting herself new challenges to overcome. I stared long and hard at her current form. *Just putting it out there, but I’m not being a perv. I’m just marveling at the fact that she looks completely different from the tiny goblin she once was.*

Actually, on that thought... I see! The golems don’t have to be big either! My brain just automatically assumed that golems must be large automata, but there shouldn’t be a size restriction. If I make ones around the size of a human, they should have plenty of mobility, even inside the tunnels. For the ones that will use magic, I can give them a humanoid shape.

“Okay, that sounds like a plan!” I nodded to myself.

I had a total of fourteen heartstones and ten arcanestones in my inventory. The ten golems with arcanestones would stand by inside the tunnels like I had initially planned. As for the four remaining golems, I could assign them to the surface like my first golem. They could probably help with transporting large baggage. *I can make all the alterations I want afterwards, so I think this is a good start.*

I started by crafting the large golems that wouldn't use arcanestones. If I designated the codename "Unit One" to my first golem, these would be Units Two to Five. Then, I worked on the magic golems, Units Six to Fifteen.

One after another, golems appeared out of thin air around me. *I should ask them to line up both to make things easier and to check whether they understand my orders.* "Get in line! Start with Unit One on the left and end with Unit Fifteen on the right!"

The golems lined up in a neat row. Their difference in size helped me identify the two types, but trying to identify the exact number was difficult at a glance. When I crafted them, I had written their assigned numbers onto their torsos and their backs for reference, but maybe I should consider adding more distinct traits.

"All right, glad to have you all on the team, guys. Ah... I should decide on a point of contact, or well, a leader, huh? Okay then. Unit Fifteen, I assign you as the golem leader."

Unit Fifteen stepped forward from the line and gave me a bow. *Good, they understand my words.* The other golems also carried out my instructions without problem.

A little later, Starkers ended up crafting a needlessly lavish jewel-studded crown and placed it on Unit Fifteen's head, making it easier to identify our golem squad leader.

Chapter 10: Fighting Enemies Together!

“Pheeew... Guess I’ll take a break.” I stopped swinging my pick and called out to Furay. “Do you want to join me?”

She shook her head before bringing her pickaxe down on the rock wall before her. “I think I’ll keep going.”

She seemed intent on finding a risestone and evolving. For the past few days, she had been mining without rest. I was happy to gain a fellow mining enthusiast, but I was also worried about her health.

“Okay, but make sure you come back up for lunch. If you don’t, your dad will be concerned.”

“...I know. I’ll head up in an hour.”

“Don’t forget, okay?”

“I really won’t. I can’t miss the princess’s wonderful cooking.”

“Ah, good point. I’ll head up first, then.”

With those words, I returned to the cave entrance with Ciel. Along the way, I heard the sound of picks against rocks everywhere—Furay wasn’t the only one mining; the other monsters were busy at work too. Everyone was free to decide their own breaks. Even when I wasn’t around, golems with mana sensitivity stood by in the tunnels, so the miners were safe. If there were any incidents, the golems would ring bells as a “stop” signal.

The bells had been crafted by our resident blacksmith, Starkers. Since they were made with orichalcum, they were remarkably loud and could be heard from far away. Thus, I could rest easy and enjoy my break.

When I arrived at the entrance, Baris and the mostly-naked Starkers were there. Baris was tipping a giant clam-like thing and pouring some sort of viscous fluid from it into a deep plate. He turned to face me. “Why, hello there, Lord Heale. Thanks for your hard work.”

“Same to you, Baris. What is that you’re making?” I leaned in with intrigue.

He chuckled. “Oh? Curious, are we?” He held up the plate for me to get a better look.

What is *this? Baris is a shaman, right? A shaman is someone who’s knowledgeable about medicine, but uh...* “W-Wait, is that...” I gulped. “Poison?”

He hummed. “I’m afraid that’s incorrect. Do I look like someone who would make such deadly concoctions?”

“S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to insinuate...” I stammered.

“That’s all right, I can understand. The color does look rather wicked indeed. This is satan clam fluid, or what we usually call mollusca purple. We can only harvest a miniscule amount from normal clams, but since satan clams are monsters, we can squeeze out a lot more.”

Mollusca purple... That’s a type of fabric dye. It’s pretty pricey and was used on royal garments back in Sanphales. “Huh, that’s great. Are you going to add some color to our clothing here?”

Baris gave me a nod. “Everything we wear is a uniform shade of white, and I was finding that rather dull. More importantly, do I seem *that* unscrupulous?”

“I really didn’t mean it that way!”

“Ha ha, a small jest.” He grinned. “And you aren’t exactly incorrect. I have dabbled in the art of poison-making.”

Surprisingly, Baris had a mischievous streak to him. While we were talking, I watched Starkers dip his finger in the fluid while Baris was distracted, stare at it curiously for a moment, and then lick it.

Baris continued, “In fact, with the proper processing, we can transform the satan clam fluid into poison.” That was when Baris noticed what Starkers was up to. “Oh!”

But it was already too late. Starkers fell to the ground with a thud.

“That’s really interesting...” I marveled. “Ah, don’t worry about him.”

A quick healing spell did the trick.

That aside, I knew Baris was a walking encyclopedia, but hmm... If he knows

how to make poison, he must know how to make medicine as well. Ah, while I'm here, I should ask him that question I've been wondering about.

I turned to face Baris. "Hey Baris, you're a shaman, right? Do you have a crest?"

I'd had the opportunity to ask Riena and Erivan about their crests before, but I hadn't asked Baris.

"Me? My crest..." He paused. "...is <Sorcerer King>."

"<Sorcerer King>?!" I raised my voice in shock.

<Sorcerer King> was a powerful crest that granted its wielder an immense mana pool. Its wielders would easily gain mastery over advanced spells, which were usually grueling to learn, and they could also combine them to create even more sophisticated spells. From what I had heard, there were only seven people with this crest in Sanphales, and only one of my siblings owned it.

"Oh? You know of it."

"How can I *not* know of it? Our crest cleric—oh, that's our priest who identifies crests—would make a big fuss whenever it was discovered! I even heard that people with this crest can skip straight to mage university despite being a child."

"That may be the case for humans. But as you can see, I'm a goblin who cannot use magic. To me, it was a meaningless ornament."

I honestly didn't know how to respond. Until I arrived at Sheol Reef, my <Cave King> had been deemed meaningless as well. In Baris's case, however, it was more tragic. He was born with a treasure that his body couldn't use. He needed to evolve like Riena if he wanted to change that fact.

His tone was almost self-deprecating as he continued, "At first, I felt it was a cruel twist of fate, and I wanted to curse the gods for turning me into their toy. However, when I was young, I thought diligence could overcome any barrier. I invested every effort into magic, thinking that perhaps one day, I would find a way. Looking back...I was quite the clown."

He let out a small chuckle, but there was a touch of melancholy in it. *If... If*

Riena didn't have her life span looming over her, Baris might have had asked to evolve with that risestone...

Baris shook his head slightly. "But then again, I was only able to fulfill the 'knowledge' requirement for a shaman because of all the time I spent researching back then. It wasn't a waste at all."

"I see... But you know, if we find another risestone, you could gain a body that can use magic."

"Thank you for your kind words, but I am content as I am. I would be lying if I said I don't want to use one, but I have led a long life and have seen more than enough of this world."

"...What if we find a lot of risestones, then?"

"If that day ever comes to pass..." Baris smiled. "I would be very eager to take you up on your offer."

He didn't seem too serious about it. He truly wasn't hoping for much.

It was then that Baris changed the topic. "That aside, the general and the princess have been making full use of their crests, haven't they?"

"Yep. Erivan has been hunting murder birds with his <Great Warrior>, and Riena has been taking care of the fields with her <Farmer>." I glanced at Riena, who was merrily watering plants in the farm. She was humming a small tune, and I found her downright adorable.

"In the past, Princess Riena was also mocked for her crest. The other princesses said that it wasn't suited for a member of the royal family." Baris sighed. "Though she is a princess, she was forced to work in the fields all her life."

So Riena shared that same experience as well? I don't understand why her siblings did that. First and foremost, mocking someone for something out of their control is unacceptable. Second, a country cannot flourish without agriculture.

Baris continued, this time with a small smile. "But that experience has turned out to be useful now. Maybe her crest was a blessing in disguise."

“You might be right.”

I didn’t believe in the divine. However, if we only considered the outcome, <Cave King> had saved me. No matter what happened in the past, Riena’s crest was also now a great help. *But...that’s way too unfair to Baris.*

The shaman resumed his work of extracting fluid from the clam. Unfortunately, he didn’t get too far before there was another interruption.

A small goblin sprinted towards us, and panic was clear on his face. “Lord Baris! I have a report!”

Baris inclined his head. “Hm? Did something happen?”

“Yes! There’s a swarm of satan clams near the coast!”

“What? How many?”

“Th-There’s at least fifty of them, I believe!” the goblin stammered.

For once, Baris lost his composure. “Fifty?!”

I frowned. “Are satan clams that much of a problem?”

“Yes,” Baris answered in a grave voice. “It takes a group of at least ten goblins to defeat just one of them. We were only able to defeat this clam down because the golems and the general were there. That’s most unusual, though. Generally, satan clams don’t form packs...”

“Okay, so they’re dangerous.” I summed it up. “I guess we should exterminate them as soon as possible.”

“That would be best, yes. The flesh of satan clams is a delight, and their fluids can be used for a dye, as you know.”

“In that case, they’re our top priority. I’ll head off and deal with them.”

“Thank you, my lord. But please beware—satan clams are powerful. Weapons can’t pierce their shells, so you have to attack their bodies hidden inside. But if they see you coming, they will make use of the sharp spikes on their shells and slam into you.”

“Got it. Melee range is risky.”

“I would suggest attacking them with magic. And as I have mentioned earlier,

their fluid is slightly poisonous. That said, it doesn't take effect immediately, and you won't end up like Starkers unless you ingest some, so it's not that much of a concern."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll be careful."

When I stood up, Riena came over—she probably overheard our conversation. "Lord Heale! I shall help as well! I have participated in satan clam hunts before!"

"Ah, that's great news! Would you like to accompany me, then?"

"Yes, my lord!"

Together, we headed towards the furthermost point of the reclaimed land. As we got closer, I saw numerous black objects floating upon the ocean ahead of us. Their name was rather fitting—though their shape was the same as ordinary clams, they were many times bigger. Even though she'd seen satan clams before, Riena was also startled by the sight of them.

"Wow, that's a lot..." My eyes grew wide.

"There are so many of them..." Riena agreed. "And they are much larger than the ones I know."

"Are the ones in Barleon smaller?"

"Yes. Usually, they're only the size of my head."

"Whoa, the ones here are at least five times bigger!"

"Lord Heale, let's head in with caution. If we get too close, they will fire their fluid at us."

"Gotta keep our distance, got it. I'll attack with magic th— Ah!" I exclaimed. Some of the satan clams were doing exactly what Riena had warned about.

They're fast! But with my current mana levels...this is nothing!

"Wind!" I chanted, reacting instantly and sweeping away all the fluid with a gust. "Riena, I want to keep them mostly intact so that we can harvest their meat and dye. Let's use ice and lightning spells!"

"Understood!"

Thus began our onslaught of spells. In truth, with my current power, it was possible for me to defeat them in an instant. However, I wanted to see Riena's growth as a mage for myself.

Riena's crisp voice rang out. *"Spark!"*

Spark, a basic lightning spell made up the core of her offensive strategy. It wasn't as destructive as *Thunder,* a mid-tier lightning spell I had used before, but even though it wasn't powerful, it was far better at inflicting paralysis.

Riena had mastered this spell to the point that she could stun several satan clams in one go. Part of it was probably due to the mana minerals she had consumed, but her accuracy wasn't poor in the least. It seemed I had a trusty comrade in battle.

The extermination of satan clams went smoothly—it only took us a few minutes to hunt them all down. In total, we had defeated fifty satan clams. All of their shells were wide open, exposing their fleshy insides.

"Wow, they're packed to the brim," I observed. "This is edible, right?"

"Yes. In fact, satan clams are packed with richer flavor than normal clams!"

"Ah, that's good to hear. With this many...it'll take a while before we can polish them off."

I knelt down near one clam and peered at the shell-end of its meat. They seemed to have plenty of fluid, which meant we had landed ourselves a whole lot of dye.

"Right, what a bountiful harvest!" Riena cheered. However, the next moment, she gasped and pushed me down onto the ground. "Lord Heale! Watch out!"

I fell down on my back, and Riena fell on top of me. I quickly scanned the surroundings—it seemed that one of the satan clams was actually still alive. It'd sprayed its fluid in my direction. It was far enough away for me to be able to dodge it, but Riena had dived in front of the shot anyway.

Still on the ground, I dealt the last blow to the clam with a *Spark*. Luckily, neither of us were injured, though Riena was covered with the sticky fluid. *But. Um. Riena is. Um.*

I tried to keep my voice steady. “Riena, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Are you hurt anywhere?!”

“N-No, I’m all right,” I stammered.

No. All was *not* right with the world. I had never even touched a lady before, but right now, Riena’s soft body was pressing down on mine. Her drenched chest, her legs, and even her toes were against me as if we were engaged in an intimate dance. I wasn’t okay.

I swallowed. “Th-Thanks, Riena... Let me cast a healing spell on you.”

Gently, I helped Riena sit up before casting a *Cure* to remove the poisonous effects of the fluid.

“Thank you...” Riena muttered in a small voice, her face cherry-red. Maybe she was embarrassed.

I wasn’t doing much better. It felt as if my head was going to explode. We climbed to our feet, both avoiding each other’s gaze.

“A-Anyway...” I started, “let’s ask Ciel and the other slimes to carry these back for us.”

Something caught my eye—deep inside the shell of the satan clam I had just defeated was something that shone under the light. I looked around, but there wasn’t anything remotely similar inside the other clams. *Did this creature eat something shiny?*

I reached in and clasped what turned out to be a spherical object around the size of a small piece of hard candy. “Hm? What’s this?” I muttered, puzzled.

“Ah... That’s a pearl!”

“A pearl... Oh, so these things come from clams, huh.” Members of the royal family and aristocrats often wore pearl necklaces and accessories inside the palace, so I had seen them before.

“Yes! But satan clam pearls are far and few between. Furthermore, they’re considered to be more beautiful than normal pearls. That being said...most are tiny. I’ve never seen one that large before.”

“Huh...” I inspected it. “Now that you mention it, its color *is* prettier than normal, and it’s much more dazzling... Hey, Riena, you should take it.”

“Y-You’re giving it to me?!” She almost jumped out of her skin.

“Y-Yeah...” *Is it that shocking? I mean, we have piles and piles of precious gems at the forge, and those aren’t exactly all that rare...*

Riena’s cheeks flushed a rosy red and she stammered, “I-I’m very happy to hear that. But, um, it’s still too, um... S-Sorry, Lord Heale!” As soon as she finished her sentence, Riena darted towards the cave entrance as fast as her legs could carry her.

Oh... Is she feeling unwell? Ack, I get it. Anyone would be at a loss if they received a plain pearl. I should ask Starkers to turn it into an accessory later. My gut was telling me that this pearl would look great on Riena.

That marked the end of our satan clam hunt. Though we hadn’t found any other pearls, we gained a tremendous amount of clam meat, fluid, and shells. The meat went into the cold room, the fluid was turned into dye, and we repurposed the shells into shields and helmets. There was more good news—even after their first invasion, the clams would still wash up from time to time, giving us a reliable source of all those precious resources.

Chapter 11: Finding Washed-Up Things on the Shore!

“How does it look, Lord Heale?” Baris said as he held out a purple handkerchief to me. “I tested out the dye.”

He had used the dye we’d extracted from the satan clams yesterday. The elegant purple hue further enhanced the beauty of the cloth weaved from fine cave spider silk.

My eyes lit up. “Wow! It’s gorgeous. It looks even more luxurious than the cloth the Sanphales aristocrats use.”

“Oh? I’m honored to hear that. In that case, let’s use the dye to make apparel.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

Sometimes, it was easy to forget the fact that we were on a remote island far away from the mainland. Only wealthy governors of powerful domains had the riches to produce dye, much less the scarce and invaluable mollusca purple. Our food and clothing on this island had slowly but surely grown more bountiful over time. *When I first came to this island, I never even dreamed of such a day...*

However, a loud shout shattered my sentimental moment. “Chief!!! Chief, ya gotta see this!”

I turned to the source of the voice and found Erivan with a fierce look on his face. He was running over from the far side of the reclaimed land.

“What’s wrong, Erivan?!” I yelled back at the top of my lungs, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

He shouted, “Just c’mere, please!”

With Baris and Ciel by my side, I headed to the reclaimed land. Golems and security squad goblins were crowding around its shoreline. It seemed that something had washed ashore.

I ran over to take a look, and Erivan waved at me.

“Chief!” he yelled. “Look!”

“Did something wash up?” When I got a better look, my breath hitched. “That’s a...!”

That “something,” or rather, *someone* that had been drifting along the bank was the corpse of a giant with olive green skin. He was even more buff than Erivan, and his eyes were wide open. One arm was missing, and there was a large crack in his leather chest armor.

One of the goblins trembled with fear. “Wh-Why is an orc in a place like this?”

It must be an orc, then. His muscular build, the fangs protruding from his mouth that reminded me of a boar, and his large nose all matched the description. I only knew of them through books, but the orcs were renowned for their fearless and determined nature. Lately, there were even tribes expanding their influence along the national border of Sanphales.

Ah, wait... Wasn’t the Verdan tribe’s homeland burned down by orcs? That explains why they seem so shaken.

Erivan yelled to his kin, “Ya cowards! What’s so scary about a corpse, huh?!”

“Y-Yes, sir...” The goblins seemed to regain some of their composure.

Then, one shouted, “Hah, serves the guy right! Let’s all give him a good kick or two!”

Another goblin immediately stepped forward. “Y-Yeah! We gotta take revenge! They razed our homeland!”

Almost like wildfire, rage spread across the crowd, and the goblins rushed over to the orc. Erivan and Baris looked conflicted, but they didn’t stop the others. *The goblins’ hatred for orcs runs deep, and I can sympathize. But...no matter whose corpse it is, I can’t bear to watch other people kicking it like it’s an inconveniently-placed bag of trash...*

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “Dishonoring the dead is going a little too far!”

To back me up, a dignified, authoritative voice rang out from behind me. “Stop! Who gave you permission to commit such atrocious acts?!”

Everyone present, myself included, turned around.

Riena was there, and I was a little taken aback at her expression. I had never seen her so mad before.

She continued, “Desecrating the body of the passed will not accomplish anything! Do you feel no shame?!”

One of the goblins argued, “B-But my princess! They... They put our king’s body on display like some kind of trophy! Not to mention the rest of our fallen tribesmen!”

For a while, Riena was silent. Then, she finally spoke. “That may be the case, but why must we follow their example? More than anything, Lord Heale is our governor, and he is the one who should decide the fate of those who wash up on this island.”

“S-Still...!”

“We’ve managed to survive on this island to this day, and we owe it all to one person. Have you already forgotten that?! If not for Lord Heale, we would be fish food right around now!”

Hearing Riena’s voice, the goblins slowly unclenched their fists. Though they looked bitter, gradually, they began to nod one by one.

Riena knelt before me. “Lord Heale, I beg your pardon for our unruly behavior.”

“I should be the one thanking you, Riena,” I said. *I don’t have a regal, lord-like aura at all... As a princess, Riena is the actual leader of the goblins, and her opinion must be the most influential.* “Everyone, I agree with Riena. What do you think?”

At that, all the goblins nodded.

“Thank you, all of you,” I said sincerely before turning to Baris. “Can you offer him some prayers, Baris?”

The shaman nodded firmly. “Your wish is my command. I shall pray to the divine wholeheartedly for peace in his afterlife.”

“Thanks, I’ll join you.” Something caught my eye. “Hm?”

A few—no, *many* objects were floating on the surface of the ocean. I heard a shout from a different part of the shore. “There’re more corpses ’round here!”

We rushed over to the flustered goblin and saw a whole new creature. *Well, to be more accurate, a* dead *creature.* Its canine head reminded me of a dog or a wolf, but its limbs and body were human-like. There was a deep wound on their chest, which had likely been fatal. White fur coated their entire body, and like the orc we had found, their leather armor was damaged.

Erivan wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “These are kobolds... They’re the sworn enemies of us goblins and fought against them orcs too.”

I frowned. “Was there a sea battle between the two races nearby?” I glanced over at the ocean again. When I squinted, I could see something that resembled smoke in the distance.

For a while after our first discovery, things kept washing up on our bank. Corpses, equipment, and even debris from a ship. As they came in, I was attempting to cast healing spells on the victims.

“This one’s a goner too...” I muttered. I let go of the kobold and shook my head. “Ciel, can you carry them away?”

Hearing my command, Ciel transported the legless kobold corpse away. I glanced over at the area he was headed to and saw the previous corpses there. “That makes a total of twenty-four so far...” I whispered to myself.

All the orcs and kobolds who had washed ashore had external wounds that had rendered them dead as doornails. Baris was stationed near the corpses. He seemed to be chanting something that would soothe the spirits of the dead.

Looking a little conflicted, Riena nodded at me. “There are so many...and they all have wounds. I can’t believe there was a battle so close to this island.”

“That’s probably what happened, though, considering all the wooden debris that washed up. A naval battle between two ships. But why...?”

The monsters couldn’t have fought without good reason. However, ships barely ever came to these waters. Orcs and kobolds were both races that lived on land, and I just didn’t understand how they could have ended up fighting on

the ocean in the middle of nowhere. *If one of them were alive, it'd be so much easier. I could just ask. What a pity...*

I shook my head slowly. "Either way, we know that there are armed groups lingering around. We need to strengthen our security..."

On that thought, I'm glad I made those golems. Even if an armed vessel attacks the island, I can fight back immediately. In addition, Unit One, being a giant golem, is quite a scary sight. It might work as a deterrent.

"I agree!" Riena replied. "The general is actually in the process of selecting capable goblins to form more security squads."

"I see... I'll do what I can by patrolling the shore during my breaks. There's a chance that someone alive might wash up."

"Please allow me to keep you company when you do."

"Thanks, Riena. Okay then, let's go give everyone a hand."

I scanned the sea, but I didn't spot any more corpses. Most of the drifting debris had already washed up, it seemed. The goblins and cave spiders were already starting to gather the stuff they had fished out of the ocean into one place. Riena and I helped them out, and, while we were at it, looked for resources we could salvage.

Some pieces of lumber looked like they could be repurposed, but most of the wreckage was small wooden scraps that served little purpose. *I suppose they can fuel a fire for a bit along with some coal.* Not one to give up too quickly, I continued to scour around, but I only found more lumber and scraps.

Riena, who was walking beside me, looked around with a frown. "There doesn't seem to be much we can use..."

"Yeah. I mean, the heavy stuff is probably already at the bottom of the ocean, so there wasn't much hope in the first place. Still..." I sighed.

"I was hoping we would find crop seeds. It's a pity..."

We were about to give up on our mission when I suddenly heard a soft whine. It sounded cute, but that wasn't what was important—what *was* important was that it sounded feeble.

Riena and I looked at each other.

“Did you say something, Riena?” I asked just in case.

“No, I didn’t. I actually wanted to ask you the same thing.”

“It wasn’t me either...”

To be honest, the whine hadn’t sounded like a human or a goblin. The closest animal I could think of was a dog. *But there aren’t any dogs around here.* I surveyed our surroundings, but I didn’t spot anyone else nearby.

There was another soft whimper.

Okay, so it wasn’t a trick of the wind... I focused on listening and tried to locate the direction which the sound came from. When I found its source, I inclined my head slightly, puzzled. “A...wooden chest?”

In the direction I had pinpointed, there was a wooden treasure chest with intricate gold fittings. It was around the size where I could comfortably wrap both of my arms around it. I was certain that *this* was the source of the noise, because it was shaking slightly.

“It’s that thing!” I exclaimed before running up to the chest with Riena. I tried to pry it open, but no matter how much I strained, it wouldn’t budge.

Riena asked, “Lord Heale, is it hard to open?”

“Y-Yeah, very.”

“Shall I call the general over? Or maybe Mister Starkers?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure they’d have much luck either. There might be a special mechanism on this thing.”

“Ah... A spell, perhaps?”

I nodded. “Mmhmm. It’s probably locked with *Lock*, a non-element spell. Only *Pick*, another spell, can dissolve it.”

Facing my palm to the chest, I cast *Pick.* Only moments earlier, the box had stayed stubbornly shut, but it now opened without a fuss. At the same time, something leaped out with a “Woof!”

“Whoa!” I yelped, gathering the little one into my arms on reflex. The

creature had white fluffy fur like snow and moist black eyes that stared up at me—it looked like a puppy. It was round, and its fur was soft, almost as if it were a ball of cotton.



The pup patted my chest with its little paws and began to lick my face with its tiny tongue. It let out small, slightly lonely, whines and looked up at me with pleading eyes, as if it were begging for attention. The next thing I knew, I was stroking the pup's head.

Like me, Riena had also been startled by its sudden appearance, but she slowly regained her composure and whispered, "A-A puppy?"

"Looks like it. But...why was it in there?"

I peered into the wooden chest. There was a white piece of cloth, which had probably been wrapped around the pup like a blanket, and fruits that still hadn't been eaten yet. However, there wasn't anything else inside.

When my attention turned towards the chest, the puppy whined loudly, sounding dejected.

"Oh, sorry!" Frantically, I tried to comfort the pup in my arms. "There, there..."

The puppy seemed to have calmed down, but it was still shivering—it was still anxious.

"Lord Heale, would you like me to take care of that child?" Riena offered.

"Ah, that'd be great." I breathed a sigh of relief as I handed her the puppy.

Then, with practiced ease, Riena began rocking it. "There, there... Everything's fine now."

The puppy barked happily before letting out a half-yawn, half-bark. Slowly, its face turned peaceful before it fell asleep.

"You really saved me there, Riena. I've, well, never hugged dogs or babies..." I muttered sheepishly.

"I think you did great for your first time." She beamed at me. "That aside, this puppy is..."

I chewed on my lip. "Yeah." It looked like a puppy, but it probably wasn't a normal one. Considering all the kobold corpses that had washed up, it must be a kobold baby. "For now, our only choice is to look after it. But..."

The goblins here were all from the Verdan tribe, which had a hostile relationship with kobolds. *I don't know how they're going to react when they see the infant of an enemy.*

"Don't worry. No matter what happened in the past, babies are innocent. I will make sure to drill that into the heads of the other goblins."

"Got it. I'm counting on you, Riena."

"Please leave it to me! I'm also very used to taking care of little kids." With a smile, Riena gently stroked the puppy's stomach. She radiated with so much compassion that she almost looked like the statue of a goddess.

With that, we had a new citizen on this island. And eventually, this little puppy ended up summoning new guests to Sheol Reef...

***

The white puppy was fast asleep at the cave's entrance hall. Perhaps calling them a puppy was a little inaccurate, since they were likely a baby kobold.

After ravenously wolfing down food yesterday, the infant had fallen into a deep sleep that they still hadn't woken from. Ciel was acting as a mattress below, and the kobold seemed to be enjoying his service.

I was sitting next to Riena during my break from mining, and I muttered, "Baby kobolds look identical to puppies..."

Riena nodded. "I've never seen a baby kobold before, either. According to Baris, the kobolds will grow as tall as an average goblin when they're one year old. Most of them will know how to stand on two feet before that."

"Huh. I heard their life span is pretty much identical to humans, but they mature much faster."

While we were chatting, the baby kobold opened their eyes.

"Oh, oops..." I hushed my voice. "I think we woke them."

Blinking their sleepy eyes open, the baby looked at their surroundings curiously. That was when Starkers, who had been tinkering with something nearby, stood up and showed his crafts to the kobold. He held two identical items—each one was a wooden stick with a round ball on the end. *I think those*

are a type of instrument called a maraca.

Starkers began shaking the sticks in front of the baby while performing a mysterious dance. The baby didn't even spare a glance to his jovial jig, but they seemed very intrigued by the rattling sound of the maracas. *Wow, Starkers even knows how to make instruments?*

This was the moment when Erivan returned from the depths of the cave with his child, Furay. They seemed to be on break as well.

"Oh? The pipsqueak woke up!" Erivan approached the baby and began making funny faces and noises by sticking out his tongue. "Bleugh bleugh bleh!"

He was probably trying to make the kobold laugh. However, the moment the baby saw his face, they started bawling. Probably a little panicked, Erivan opened his eyes wide, trying to make yet another funny face.

Um. Sorry, but Erivan, that will backfire. And just like I had expected, the baby started crying even louder.

Furay quickly dragged her father away. "Hey, Dad! What the heck are you doing?!"

"S-Sorry. I mean, this was how I made ya laugh when ya— Oh. Wait, I made ya cry back then."

"Obviously! Your face is already scary enough as it is!" she huffed.

Hearing that, Erivan's shoulders slumped as he muttered, "O-Oh..."

Then, Taran, who had been watching from behind the pair, leaned her face close to the baby and opened her mouth wide. She probably assumed that her own "funny" face would make the baby laugh. However, as if like déjà vu, contestant number two caused the baby to turn away while wailing. Taran seemed crushed, and she froze on the spot. *She might have humored her own kids that way, but uh...might not be very effective for a baby kobold.*

Shaking her head in exasperation, Riena went over and gathered the infant into her arms. "That's how a baby *would* react if you try to force them to laugh. Now now, you're fine, you're safe."

When the baby saw Riena's face, they finally stopped crying. With a big smile,

they shut their eyes slowly again.

Faced with such a sight, Erivan placed a hand over the shoulder of the dejected Taran, who was slumping her body forward. “Taran, let’s leave the pipsqueak to the princess.”

Taran didn’t make any noises in reply, probably because she was too depressed. She trudged away with Erivan, both of them looking defeated.

Erivan muttered, “Are our faces *that* scary...?”

The two gave each other consoling pats in the back as they headed towards the reclaimed land. I felt a little sorry for them, but then again, trying to entertain a baby seemed to be a trial and a half to begin with. Riena, meanwhile, made it look easy. *I shouldn’t be that surprised though, considering her many talents.*

“Hey, Riena. Sorry, but I’m heading back to the mine. Could you take care of the surface and the baby?”

“Yes, my lord! I’ll try feeding the baby when they wake up again.”

“Gotcha, good luck. Call me over if anything unexpected happens.”

With my trusty pickaxe in hand, I descended into the depths of the cave.

Considering the battered corpses of kobolds and orcs that had washed up yesterday, it was likely that a naval battle had occurred in nearby waters. Heading into the mining shafts in this moment of unrest made me feel uneasy, but mining was the best way to make the island flourish. On top of that, Riena, the golems, and the security squads were on the surface. I should trust them with their duties and focus on what I did best.

After roughly ten minutes of walking down the shafts, I resumed swinging my pickaxe. The orichalcum pickaxe Starkers had crafted was simply astonishing. It sped up my pace at an incredible rate.

I frowned. “Hmm, I’ve been finding fewer mana minerals...”

When I checked my inventory, I confirmed that it had indeed been a trend. Though I had more than enough to spare, I wanted Riena to use more. Furthermore, Furay and Baris might gain arcane talent one day, and I wanted to

have more for them as well.

Oh well, it's not like I can do anything. Who knows? I might come across something else useful eventually...

I swung down my pick in silence. After making some progress, I would wipe sweat off my forehead and check my inventory. Rinse and repeat.

But during one of these cycles, I found something I had never seen or heard of before. "An Yggdrasil seed...?"

Looks like I found something new. I didn't know what this "Yggdrasil" thing was, but since it was a seed, it must be some kind of plant. I asked the assistant to provide more details, but the answer I got was completely unexpected.

"Invalid question. The Mineral Encyclopedia does not have the corresponding information. I cannot provide an answer."

Okay. I guess that means plants are outside of my crest's expertise. Well, it's not a mineral, after all—it's a seed! I'll bet it'd grow into something if I plant it. Baris might have heard of it. I should ask him when I get back to the surface.

For now, I was in high spirits over my new discovery, and I raised my pickaxe again, ready to get back into action. But that was when someone called me from behind.

"Heeey, Lord Heale!"

When I turned around, I saw Furay. "Ah, hey there." I spotted a ball of white fluff in her arms—the baby kobold. "Oh..."

When the baby saw me, they hopped right into my arms and began rubbing their face on my chest. In a voice of relief, Furay muttered, "I knew it. The pup was looking for you."

"For...*me*?"

"Yep. When the baby woke up, they were swishing their head around, looking anxious. The princess comforted them, so they didn't cry or anything, but they were really fidgety. That was when the princess said that maybe they were looking for you, Lord Heale."

“I see...”

They’re very attached to me. Do they think I’m their parent because I was the first person they saw when they left the chest? Baris had said that this kobold was a newborn—they had only been born a few days ago. Perhaps the baby never got to see their parents and had imprinted on me instead.

I mean, the baby is adorable, and when I see them, all my fatigue is blown away, but if possible...I want their real parents to embrace them. But considering how the baby was placed in a box and left to drift out in the ocean, their parents are probably already... At that thought, I gave the young kobold a tight hug on reflex.

“There, there, you’re such a good baby... That reminds me, we didn’t give you a name yet.” When I whispered that out aloud, the assistant’s voice echoed in my head.

“Tameable monster detected. Tame?”

Ah. I nearly forgot, but kobolds were monsters too, huh. If I tame them, then they would gain the blessings of <Cave King>. But since a baby can’t mine, I don’t have to tame them right now. I’ll just come up with a name and skip the taming contract.

Stroking the kobold, I turned to Furay. “Well, I can’t mine like this. I’ll head off and put the infant to sleep.”

“Okay. Can I start mining though?”

“Of course. You want that risestone, right? Good luck.”

“Thanks!”

After parting with Furay, I returned to the cave entrance with the baby kobold. There, I found Riena, Baris, and Erivan. Erivan was in the middle of polishing a pick, but he noticed me as I approached. “Ah, Chief! Yer back!”

Baris also stopped fiddling with a box and turned to me. “Welcome back, Lord Heale.”

I recognize that chest... The baby was in it. “Hi guys. I couldn’t exactly mine with a baby in my arms, so I made a return trip.”

Riena looked apologetic. “My apologies, my lord. The baby really wanted to see you, and I couldn’t bear to watch.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I wanted to see the little one awake and full of energy, so it was perfect.” I started rubbing the baby’s stomach. “Right, little one?”

The kobold closed their eyes slightly and smiled in joy. *They’re so cute that it warms my heart.* I felt a smile tugging on my lips as well.

Riena beamed at me with a chuckle. It seemed my joy had spread. “I’ve never seen you so happy before, Lord Heale.”

“O-Oh, really? Well, I can’t put on a menacing face in front of a baby... By the way, Baris, does something about that chest bother you?”

Baris shifted his gaze to look back at the chest he had been holding. “You could say that. It is magnificent work, and I was thinking that we could repurpose it. However...”

I tilted my head quizzically. “Was there something strange inside?”

“No, but the interior feels too shallow compared to its overall size.”

My eyes widened. “Really? Huh... Now that you mention it, it does look like it could have a false bottom.”

“That was my exact suspicion, and I have been trying to cut out the bottom with an orichalcum knife. Unfortunately...” Baris stabbed the bottom panel of the chest hard, but the knife couldn’t even scratch it. “I haven’t had any success. I tried to stab it from the outside, but that didn’t work either.”

“That’s odd, I’ve already lifted the spell from it...” Though the chest was decorated with intricate gold fittings, it was largely just made of wood. It didn’t make sense, especially considering the fact that Baris was using an orichalcum knife. “Wait, I have an idea. Riena, please hold the baby.”

“Of course,” Riena replied.

“Thanks.” Once the kobold was safely in her arms, I said, “Baris, can you lend

me that chest for a moment?”

“Yes, my lord.”

I accepted the offered chest and applied *Pick*, the spell that I had used to open the chest yesterday, on the bottom panel. And surprise, surprise, there was a clicking sound. The panel had also been enchanted with a *Lock*, and it automatically flapped open.

Baris widened his eyes. “Ohhh! I knew you could do it, Lord Heale.”

“I should be the one praising you. You were the one who noticed the false bottom.”

“I am very honored to receive such words...” Baris bowed. “Now then, what’s inside?” He approached me and peered into the chest. Riena and Erivan also shuffled over curiously.

“Let’s see...” I scanned the items in question. “A white stone and three books, huh...”

The text on the books’ covers were written in the language we used in Barleon. Likely, their contents were in the same script, which I could read. They were titled *History of the Tiberis Tribe*, *Tiberis Techniques*, and *Scripture of Tiberis*.

At this point, I realized that the baby likely belonged to the “Tiberis” tribe. The one who had put them in the chest had applied layer upon layer of protection, so the baby’s parents likely held a high status within their tribe.

In the corner of my eye, I saw a torn expression on Baris’s face as he looked at the books, and while I filed that sight away for later in my mind, I looked at the white stone. *What’s this?*

Logstone: May be used to record thoughts.

Since it was a stone, my handy assistant and encyclopedia were here to help. *Record thoughts... The person who left the chest to drift in the ocean probably left a message in it. But how?*

Without warning, the stone began to shine. *Huh?* Then, a voice echoed out from within.

"To you, the one listening to this message. I believe you have now seen my baby, whom I gave birth to this very morning."

Judging from that, she must be the baby's mother.

The voice continued, *"I am the queen of the Tiberis tribe, Arphemina, and the kobold mother who placed my child into this chest."*

Riena and Erivan whipped their heads around and looked at each other. Baris only listened with a noncommittal look on his face, probably because he'd been able to read the titles on those books.

"I do not have much time left. Though it might be hard to believe, we are beset by a beast of myth. A leviathan is pursuing my tribe's ship."

I frowned. A *leviathan?*

"My people barely escaped with our lives when we battled the orcs, and we are already weary... We have no chance of victory against a mythical beast that is invulnerable to both arrows and magic. My people and I will likely be dead before the sun rises."

Her voice was shaking, and I couldn't help but cling to every word she spoke. The baby kobold only tilted their head quizzically—they probably didn't understand her words.

"I understand this is an impudent request, but...please. I ask that you raise my child in my stead. I do not ask for anything more than that. As long as my child can grow up healthy, it is more than enough..."

Her voice was shaky with sobs, but she took a breath to push all of her sorrow down. *"Of course, I know that this is a sudden and selfish wish. As compensation, I shall offer two of our strongest warriors, whom you will find with the chest."*

That means two kobold warriors should be protecting the chest, but they weren't with it... It washed ashore alone. They probably either perished along the way or were forced to let go of the chest for some reason.

She continued, *“Please do as you see fit with them and the kobolds and treasures I have left in their care. I shall also offer this logstone, which recorded my voice, along with three books from our treasury that have never seen the light of day. If you will allow me to make one more selfish request, I would be very grateful if you would read these three books to my child.”*

Background noise interrupted her speech.

“It’s here!” one voice yelled.

“Prepare to fight!” another roared.

With a small sigh, the queen continued, *“It seems that I must take my leave. Please look after my child, I beg of you. And, if it’s not too much to ask, could you please let my child hear my last words one day?”* She paused. Then, finally, she said, *“Your mother, Arphemina, loves you.”*

And then there was silence.

I was at a loss for words. Riena had tears in her eyes, and she had a hand over her mouth, probably to stop herself from sobbing.

Erivan, however, reacted differently. With a conflicted expression on his face, he clicked his tongue before he spat, “Hmph, shouldn’t have expected anythin’ better from those Tiberis bastards. She gave her child to a stranger, and those guards went missin’ too.”

Riena whipped her head around and yelled at him. “General! Don’t say that!”

“...Am I wrong? Lord Heale, please excuse me.”

With a pickaxe in hand, Erivan promptly went inside the cave. Riena shouted, “Wait!” However, he didn’t falter nor turn around.

Judging by what he had said, he knew of the Tiberis tribe and certainly didn’t consider them friends.

Riena turned to face me. “I am so sorry, Lord Heale.”

“Why are *you* apologizing?” I asked gently. “Plus, Erivan hasn’t done anything *that* offensive. But anyway, you all seem to know the Tiberis tribe.”

She nodded. “Yes. They were a neighboring kobold tribe that lived close to

our tribe's homeland since the distant past. We fought over territory for the longest time. In short, we are bitter enemies, for lack of a better word."

"I see... That's why Erivan dislikes the Tiberis tribe so much."

Riena cast her eyes down. "Also, he lost one of his sons during a battle with them."

The Tiberis tribe had been responsible for his son's death, and their queen's child was the baby kobold we had taken under our wing. *He must have mixed feelings about this...*

Then, Riena shook her head. "However, that has nothing to do with this baby!"

I nodded. "I agree, Riena. But you know, Erivan isn't a man who'd hate people blindly. Even after hearing all that, he didn't glare at this baby, not even once."

Baris nodded as well. "Indeed. His reaction was likely just due to the shock of hearing the name 'Tiberis' all the way out here. Like the princess says, he will not blame the child. He will only continue to blame himself for failing to protect his son."

Then, Baris added, "I...also lost my younger brother at the hands of their tribe, but that child, at least, is innocent." He almost sounded like he was reminding himself, not us. Then, with a smile, he watched over the tiny kobold, who seemed a little puzzled.

"Baris... Yeah, you're right." I clenched one hand into a fist, hardening my resolve. "I want us to raise this child."

Riena and Baris nodded in agreement. "In that case, this baby needs a name," Riena pointed out. "What should we call them?"

"Oh, that's a good question. Hmm... Uh, do you have any good ideas, Riena?"

"Well... Ah, how does 'Riale' sound?"

"Riale... That's a good name. Okay, Riale it is."

Baris seemed to agree. "I see, that's a combination of Lord Heale's name and the princess's. I like it as well."

Oh! She took “Ri” from Riena and “ale” from Heale. Maybe we should put more thought into this, but well, I like the sound of it.

“Th-That’s not the case at all!” Riena protested, looking a little shy.

Either way, I think it’s cute. Okay, we’ve got a name. I took the baby kobold into my arms and declared, “All right! From this moment on, you’re Riale.”

The baby kobold—Riale—gave me a big grin. That was when the assistant’s voice rang out in my mind.

“Naming complete. You have tamed Riale.”

What? Tame? I didn’t mean to do that... Then again, without night vision, this cave would be pretty scary, so I guess it’s fine for now.

And just like that, all the residents of this island became Riale’s surrogate parents.

With Riale in her arms, Riena went on a walk outside the cave. Seeing her, Baris muttered wistfully, “What a surprise... I’d have never thought that even the Tiberis tribe would be forced to wander on the ocean. To think that they ended up facing the orcs...”

“She implied that she was being chased by something, right? But she wasn’t fighting the orcs when she recorded that message... A leviathan, right?”

Yeah, I think I remember that correctly. Wait... Leviathan... I think I’ve heard of them somewhere... Ah, in myths, that’s right. They’re giant snake-like creatures with bodies that tower over mountains. Weapons and magic can’t even dent their scales, and they are one of the mightiest creatures in the world. They can even emit enormous blazing infernos from their jaws, capable of turning even a giant ship into ashes. They are said to be divine messengers, and they govern the sea as agents of the gods. That’s how the myths described them.

“A leviathan, huh...” I muttered. “Did they see a giant squid or something that gave them such an impression?”

“I believe so. It probably wasn’t a real leviathan.” Baris seemed to think that

the creatures were mere legends as well. “However, what bothers me is how she described the creature as ‘invincible to arrows and magic.’ Powerful arcane talent runs in the royal blood of the Tiberis tribe, and their warriors are some of the most valiant soldiers in all of Barleon. However, even their attacks weren’t enough to fend off this creature...”

“I see... Either way, the conflict definitely happened nearby, so we need to strengthen our defenses here.”

Baris nodded. “Precisely. In that case, we should further expand the roster of the goblin security squads. I shall arrange for goblins to build watchtowers to improve our surveillance of nearby waters. I shall also ask the builders to stack our defensive wall even higher.”

“Got it, thanks. I’ll look over our golems and see whether I can make any adjustments. But say, Baris...” I hesitated. “If a real leviathan shows up, do you have any strategies that could be used to defeat it?”

The shaman laughed as if it was an impossible scenario. “Well, if I *do* have to think of one... Leviathans can only exercise their full powers in the ocean. I hear that on land, their scales and fiery breath would lose their might.”

“Huh... That means they’d be manageable if we could lure them onto dry land.”

Unfortunately, our island was rather limited in space. *Okay, where would I lead it, then?*

As I racked my brain for a suitable location, Baris continued, “And do not fear. I have a plan for such a devastating scenario. Even if we cannot defeat it, we can protect everyone from the clutches of death, at least.”

“You do? Go on.”

“It’s nothing too grand. A simple charm, you could say.” With a small grin, he added, “Of course, I’m talking about praying for our survival. After all, only an unrealistic charm can work against an unrealistic creature, don’t you think?”

Ah, so Baris is trying to say that leviathans only exist in the myths, hm?

Baris cleared his throat. “In any case, I shall make preparations for a battle

against large sea creatures of a similar size, like a kraken, for example. No matter how big they may be, once we drag them out of the sea, they are nothing but fish at our mercy."

"Okay. I'll also come up with a few contingency plans in case the unexpected happens."

"It's always better to be safe than sorry, after all. Now, with that out of the way, I have a personal request I would like to make. Um..."

For once, Baris seemed to slur his words. I tilted my head in question and asked, "What is it? You can ask me anything."

"Thank you. Um, well... We found three books in the chest, didn't we?"

"Ah, those." I gestured. "That reminds me, you can read Barleon script as well, huh?"

Baris had looked conflicted even before hearing the queen's voice, likely because he could read the titles on the books. He had mentioned that he used to read spell tomes, so I wasn't too surprised, but usually, goblins didn't know how to read. Riena and Erivan, for example, hadn't realized the books' origins until they had heard Arphemina's voice.

"*History of the Tiberis Tribe*, *Tiberis Techniques*, and *Scripture of Tiberis*..." I read them out aloud. "The history book and scripture aside, the book of techniques will likely have useful information. I'll leave these here, so feel free to read them whenever you feel like it. I'll do the same when I have free time."

"Thank you very much for your generosity, Lord Heale!"

"You really don't have to thank me for something so minor." I scratched my cheek sheepishly. "Ah, speaking of reading... Baris, there's something I want you to do."

"Yes, my lord. What might it be?"

"Can you teach the Barleon script to other goblins? If possible, I want you to teach the cave spiders, the slimes, and...Starkers as well. I can communicate with the other goblins through speech, but we can only communicate with the others through gestures and vague concepts."

“Ah... Now that you mention it. Understood. I believe the princess also knows some basic reading, and there are a few other goblins who know how to read and write. I shall focus on teaching them first before expanding my students to the rest of our people.”

“Please do.” I gave him a small smile. “You know, whenever I have a problem, you always seem to know a way out.”

“Oh, not at all. Like I have mentioned before, I was born with a useless crest. I’m rather powerless.”

I shook my head fiercely. “I don’t think so. You’re not powerless, nothing close to it.”

Though he couldn’t use magic, his wealth of knowledge was immeasurable, and I couldn’t even hold a candle to him. His long life of learning had granted him knowledge and experience that was as invaluable as it was unparalleled, especially on this island. He had mentioned studying like crazy before he had gained the title of shaman, so he was likely born with his quick wits.

On the other hand, I was like a bumbling toddler in comparison. *It’d be nice if I find stones that make me smarter when I consume them... Ah, speaking of mining.* “I dug up this thing in the morning. Do you recognize it, Baris?”

I retrieved the Yggdrasil seed from my inventory. It was around the size of a potato, and Baris inspected it curiously.

“Hm? Is this some kind of seed, perhaps? It’s very large for a seed, though...”

“It’s apparently an ‘Yggdrasil seed,’ but I’ve never heard of it.”

“Yggdrasil... Hmm, I haven— Wait. No, I have, but only once.”

“Really?”

“Yes, the shaman from two generations ago mentioned it in passing when he told me about old legends. It *is* only a legend, so I do not know too many details, I’m afraid... I heard it was a prodigious tree, and its leaves granted blessings to all living beings.”

“Interesting. In summary, it’s a useful tree.”

“That should be right, yes. Legends say that many nations and races met their

end when Yggdrasil was burned down, and that story has been passed down from generation to generation."

"Wow, it's that impressive? Huh... Maybe I should try growing it."

It sounds pretty cool, I thought. I hadn't been taking it too seriously when I first decided to plant the seed, but later on, I was in for a surprise...

Chapter 12: A Giant Tree!

The next day, I spent my time lingering around the cave entrance after breakfast. Erivan was here with me, and never one to give up without a fight, he was pouring all his effort into making funny faces at Riale.

“Look at me! Yer a good little baby, ain’t ya?” he crooned.

However, it was a fruitless endeavor. Riale gave him the cold shoulder and hopped onto Furay’s knees.

“Daaad!” Furay’s exasperated voice echoed inside the cave walls.

Erivan’s shoulders slumped. “Why *me*?”

When he had heard the name “Tiberis” yesterday, Erivan had been infuriated. However, my trust in him wasn’t misplaced—he didn’t treat Riale any differently. Once again, he was desperately trying to make the kobold laugh.

With a sigh, Furay stroked Riale’s head. “Sorry about my dad. There, there...” While the kobold wasn’t a fan of her father, they gave a wide grin in response to Furay.

Seeing that, Erivan’s shoulders fell even more dramatically. “What’s Furay doing differently?”

Furay shook her head. “Where on earth did you get that kind of confidence?” She turned toward Riena. “Hey, may I leave Riale in your care, Your Highness?”

Riena nodded and took Riale into her arms. “Of course. Good luck in the mine, Furay.”

“Thanks! All righty then, Dad, you’re heading into the mining shafts for once, right? Let’s go!” Furay grabbed Erivan’s arm and began dragging him to the far side of the cave.

“A-Ah, right...”

We had officially decided to raise Riale as one of our own yesterday, and the kobold’s growth had been a sight to behold. They could already run around and eat fish without any help.

Baris had explained that kobolds matured very quickly, and kobold infants could already walk on all fours from the day they were born. It wouldn't take long before Riale could stand on two feet. This was unthinkable for a human baby, but that kind of haste was likely necessary for monsters born in challenging environments.

I'd like to go mining as well, but there's something I want to do first today.

"Riena, do you have some spare time right now?" I asked.

"Ah, me? Of course. I shall go wherever you need me, my lord."

"Thank you. Well, I have a slight request..." I hesitated. "I want to nurture something together with you, Riena."

Red crept up Riena's cheeks. *Huh? Uh, I didn't say anything that would embarrass her, right?*

"W-With *me*?! I-I would like to nurture life with you as well, Lord Heale! We have Riale, of course, but I wouldn't mind a few more... I-I'm still very inexperienced, but I will do my best!"

"Oh, you were thinking about Riale! Yeah, please do take care of them as well. Actually, I was talking about this thing." I took out the oversized plant seed from my pants pocket.

Almost immediately, calm returned to Riena's face when she saw what I'd brought. "What might this be?"

"It's a seed for a tree called Yggdrasil. I want you to nurture this tree with me, Riena. I left the sunstones in your care, remember?"

We only had a limited stock of sunstones—which accelerated organic growth—so I only planned to use one.

And, uh... Huh? For a moment, Riena seemed to freeze. However, the next second, she lightly slapped her cheeks and schooled her expression to her usual dignified one.

She cleared her throat. "Yggdrasil, was it? I have never heard of it before."

"I asked Baris, and he said that it's a gigantic tree which apparently grants some kind of blessing to living things around it. Basically, I have no idea either,"

I admitted.

"I see... So the tree won't harm us in any way, right? In that case, perhaps we should try covering it with soil and letting it grow a little to see what the sapling is like. Hmm, but all the fields are in use at the moment..." Riena swished her head back and forth, scanning our farm on the reclaimed land nearby. "Well, we have soil available, so how about we plant it somewhere where we can admire it?"

"I see..." *Hmm, where should I plant it then? Ah, building a town around a big tree sounds nice. It'd look very picturesque.* "In that case, I'll make a space for it at the center of the reclaimed lan— No, hold on."

In Baris's words, it's a "prodigious" tree. How big, exactly, is prodigious? If it's too large, it'd block the ocean view we have at the cave entrance. I want to have a clear line of sight so that we can instantly spot ships on the horizon, so I should avoid planting it there.

Finally, I made a decision. "For now, this is what I'll do. I'll go make new land on the opposite side of the island. We'll be able to watch it grow over there."

"Understood!"

I entered the cave and dug a tunnel to the other side of the island. There, I repeated the process of reclaiming land: refining rocks in my inventory and sectioning off a part of the ocean. The new piece of reclaimed land was around the same size as the first one I had built near the cave entrance—roughly the length and width of a small lake.

However, this time, I elevated the base around ten meters higher above sea level so that it could withstand the destructive force of large tidal waves. Naturally, it took double or perhaps even triple the time to construct, and it was nearly evening when I was finally done.

Unlike mining, "construction" through my inventory didn't require much energy, so I wasn't too tired. *I guess that's a good thing.* The only downside was the tremendous amount of rock I had used. Rocks came in pretty useful for many things, such as reclaiming land or building facilities, so I needed to replenish my supply as soon as possible. *Looks like I should focus on mining again for a while, huh?*

“Okay, we’re ready.” I nodded to myself. “Let’s plant it right away. How about right in the middle?”

“Certainly! After you, Lord Heale.”

We walked towards the center of the new reclaimed land. There, I poured a layer of soil, and as I worked, I noticed that Riena seemed to be sowing some seeds about the place.

“Hm? What’s that you’re planting, Riena?”

“These are flower seeds from my homeland, which I scavenged from our ship. Since we’re going to plant a tree here, I was hoping they’d help brighten up the area!”

“Huuuh. Good thinking, a single tree standing here on its own would look pretty sad. All right then, the Yggdrasil seed goes in the center—” Suddenly, I sensed a presence behind me. “Hm?”

I turned around and saw a half-naked guy—Starkers—staring at the place I had been eyeing. As usual, there was a nonchalant look on his face. *Whenever I test out something new, he always shows up out of thin air... Oh well, I mean, to each their own, I suppose. But it’d be nice if he could speak up before giving us a fright.*

“Okay, let’s try this again,” I muttered. “Here I go.”

I immediately covered the Yggdrasil seed with soil. *Now, we’ll just test things out with one sunstone.*

However, something took us by surprise.

“Huh?” Riena tilted her head quizzically. “It’s tiny, but it’s already sprouting. Have you already used a sunstone?”

“No, I haven’t.” I shook my head. “I gave all my sunstones to you. I actually wanted to ask you the same question.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t either...” She held out a glowing orange stone to me. “I only brought this one.”

It’s still glowing orange—that means it hasn’t been used yet. If that’s the case... I turned around to look at Starkers. Starkers waved both hands in front

of his chest, gesturing that he hadn't done anything.

I stared at him with suspicion. "Really? You're always stealing stones without asking, so I wouldn't be surprised if..." I looked him over. *Hmm, he might be telling the truth. He doesn't have anything in his hands, and the only other hiding place he has is the short loincloth he's wearing. Nah...*

With a shrug, I muttered, "Oh well. Hey, Riena, can you use that sunstone, then?"

"Yes, my lord! Right away." Riena lifted the sunstone high above her head and activated it.

The next moment, the sprout grew vigorously. Soon, Yggdrasil was taller than Starkers, then me, and then it just kept going.

Um. Wait. This isn't normal... Even when it was several times my height, the tree seemed far from done.. Its trunk also grew thicker and thicker by the second. On instinct, all of us took a step back.

"Uh, R-Riena?" I asked nervously. "Are you sure you only used one sunstone?"

"Y-Yes. I only have one in my hand," Riena stammered.

While we exchanged a conversation in shaky voices, the tree continued to shoot up rapidly.

"This looks bad!" I shouted, alarmed. "Run back to the cave!"

I pulled on Riena's hand and turned away from the ridiculous tree. Starkers was a step ahead of us, and we sprinted at full speed alongside him. But when I turned around, what I saw could only be described as horrifying. The tree was expanding quicker than we could run, and it was hot on our heels.

We were running for our lives, but Starkers slipped and stumbled over. The swelling tree trunk quickly swallowed his body. He reached out his hand in a silent cry for help, but I couldn't save him.

"Starkers!!!" I screamed.

I could only watch helplessly. Through a seam in the trunk, I could see Starkers's strangely *euphoric* face as he rose high into the sky with the tree. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his mouth was slovenly agape. It was as if he

was literally and figuratively ascending into heaven through the tree.

The next time I turned around, the tree had abruptly stopped growing. By now, Yggdrasil was the height of a small mountain. *That was...quick.*

Compared to its highest point, Starkers was relatively low down on the tree trunk. His face was flushed bright red and his breathing was erratic, but for now, he seemed safe and unharmed. *Actually, he seems...happy? Either way, I've got to save him right now.*

"Starkers, we'll get you down right away!" I yelled. "That aside, this tree is enormous..." I added quietly.

My first instinct was to look up at the sky. For the first time, a canopy of emerald green obstructed the boundless azure blue. The tree was roughly three times the height of the rock mountain on Sheol Reef, and luscious greens expanded out from the tips of its branches. For reference, it was just a tad taller than the highest tower of the castle I'd lived in.

The trunk's width was just as impressive—it gradually sloped down to the ground, taking up the majority of the reclaimed land just by itself. From up close, it looked more like a mountain than a tree.

Who would've expected that one single sunstone was enough to make it grow so large? *If I use even more... I can't even imagine how big it would get.*

Riena blinked several times, stunned. "I-It's huge. And from such a small seed too..."

"I can't believe it either." I scrutinized the roots and trunk. "Luckily, the incline is quite gentle. I think we can probably walk up to the very top."

"In that case, let's go save Mister Starkers!"

"Right." I turned around to Ciel, who was behind us. "Ciel, can you go find Baris and show him the tree?"

At my command, he began hopping towards the cave.

Nodding to myself, I faced Riena. "Okay. Let's climb this thing."

The moment I spoke, Riale showed up and jumped into my arms with an energetic "Woof!"

I gave them a small smile. “Ah, I didn’t know you were here, Riale. Care to join me in our mountaineering rescue mission?”

Together, we began climbing up the giant tree that had unexpectedly occupied a large part of Sheol Reef. Thankfully, the trunk felt soft against my feet and the slope wasn’t steep at all. All in all, the climb was surprisingly undemanding.

Riena took a deep breath. “It...smells lovely.”

“Right. I haven’t smelled the forest air in a long time.”

I had only been to one forest before—a small forest within the grounds of the palace which we had used for hunting—and the scent of Yggdrasil reminded me of that place. *But this is a little different. Something about it smells more relaxing, like a balm or perfume. Not only that, but my body feels light and warm. Just being here feels comforting.*

With a spellbound look on her face, Riena looked up at the luscious green leaves. “Yes, this is indeed the scent of a forest... And there aren’t any unpleasant odors mixed in, either.”

She and her fellow goblin tribesmen had lived in the woods since the moment of their births. Yggdrasil’s nostalgic scent probably made her mind wander back to her homeland.

Being a big rock, Sheol Reef didn’t have any forests. There were some fruit trees in the farm, but the scent they emitted was distinctly different. Yggdrasil didn’t just smell like a forest—its leaves rustled in the wind and fell down like snowflakes. Faced with this scenery, it was easy to forget that we were still on Sheol Reef.

After we had walked for three minutes, I turned around and glanced at the tunnel entrance I had dug today. Other goblins and monsters were trickling out of it, headed towards the tree as well.

I hummed. “Looks like everyone else has seen it too. Now then, Starkers should be around here somewhere...”

And I had indeed remembered correctly. I spotted Starkers, whose body was

completely buried inside the trunk with only his head jutting out. *Is he okay?* As I walked closer, I saw the look on his face. *Hm. His mouth is wide open and his face is flushed, but he doesn't look like he's in agony at all. He actually looks like he's in bliss.*

"I'll get you out of there, Starkers," I reassured him. I prepared to cast a fire spell, targeting just the part of the trunk holding him in place.

However, Starkers shook his head.

"Umm... You want to stay there?"

This time, he nodded. *He really likes this spot, huh?* In fact, upon further inspection, the hole his head was poking out of was actually quite large. He could likely climb out without help. There weren't any signs of danger, either. The only thing I was wary of was his loopy grin.

I shrugged. "If you say so. Huh. It's *that* comfy?"

"Lord Heale..." Riena hesitated. "I have actually been sensing something. Can you feel the mana within the tree?"

"I feel it. Mana is flowing up from the roots to the top. I don't know where it's getting it all from, though..."

It wasn't just the trunk—the leaves were infused with mana too. The tree seemed to be casting a holy spell on the nearby area.

"What a mysterious tree..." I muttered. "So *this* is Yggdrasil."

Riena nodded. "It certainly lives up to its grand name. What should we do now?"

"Hmm... We could go back down, but since we're here, how about we climb all the way to the top?" I suggested.

Riale barked enthusiastically from atop my shoulder.

"Looks like one of us is pretty eager." I flashed Riale a small grin. "Let's go."

"Sounds great! I'm sure the view will be wonderful up there!"

"I think so too. Okay then, Starkers, we're heading up."

Starkers stretched out his right arm from the hole and waved at us. Seeing

that he truly didn't need help, we resumed our climb. From time to time, Riale would hop down from my shoulder and walk at the front of our little group as if they were our leader.

"We've gotten pretty high up..." I noted.

Though we hadn't yet reached the summit, we were already higher than the rock mountain and the watchtowers. The ocean breeze was rather mild today, and since the sky was clear, we had a good view of the distant waters.

"Okay... No ships in sight," I muttered to myself. "I'd be in hot water if a Sanphales ship passed by..."

Riena must have overheard me, because she then asked, "Um, out of curiosity, how did you end up alone on this island?"

Oh... That reminds me. Thinking back, I haven't told anyone here much about my past, huh? No wonder she's curious. I think the only things I've said was that I'm a Sanphales prince and the governor of this island.

"Well..." I paused. "I'm not really sure how to explain it, but..." I looked over at Riale, who had their tongue out, panting. "How about we take a slight break here while I talk?"

I sat down with Riena and placed Riale on my lap. Combing through my memories, I muttered, "I was, well...banished from my kingdom."

Riena's eyes grew wide. "What?"

"As for *why* I was banished... When I was in Sanphales, I was so worthless that I was even ridiculed by my own family."

"Th-That can't be! You aren't worthless at all, Lord Heale! You can do practically anything!" Riena argued. "I mean... There are times when you're a little dorky, but still!"

Ah. So I really am *an airhead. Um. Okay, moving on.* "You only met me after I gained some decent ability in magic, Riena. You'd think differently if you knew me in the past. Once, I was a powerless guy who could barely even manifest a droplet of water..."

I had always hated how incompetent I was. But what I grieved about more

than anything else was...

I cast my eyes down. “And one day, that guy forgot his place and rebelled against those more powerful than himself. But since he was just playing hero, he failed to protect what was important to him.”

...how I couldn’t save you. Without thinking, my hand gripped the small jar hanging from my neck. Memories floated to the surface of my mind. Memories of the last moments of the small monster sleeping inside the jar.

***

When I was still in Sanphales, I would visit a monster every day—the monster tormented by my siblings. During my visits, I would cast healing spells on him and give him food.

But my efforts were futile. Day by day, the monster grew more feeble. Part of it was my insignificant mana pool’s fault—my healing spells barely did anything. However, the biggest reason was the abuse inflicted by my siblings.

At this rate...he’ll die. I chewed my lip at the thought. But fear wasn’t the only emotion tearing my heart apart—there was guilt there too. *Are my healing spells just prolonging his suffering?*

I couldn’t just sit back and watch. I headed directly to my father, fully determined to ask him to stop the violent treatment of this monster. In the end, though, the guards wouldn’t even let me past the front door. I may have been disappointed, but I wasn’t surprised—my father had always refused to lend me his ear.

Unwilling to give up, I switched to another tactic. On the next day, under broad daylight, I stood in front of the monster in the courtyard. Of course, when my siblings arrived, they glared at me in annoyance.

“What do you want, Heale?” one of my brothers spat.

I steadied my breathing. “I have a request to make. All of you. Can you please stop throwing rocks at this guy?”

“You little...” My brother rushed forward with an outstretched hand reaching for my collar. “You dare get in our way?!”

However, before he reached me, another one of my younger brothers stopped him. “Why not indulge him?” He looked at me. “You came at a good time—I was actually getting bored of this thing. Today’s as good as any to stop playing around with it.”

His voice felt like a light of salvation, and I stared at him, stunned. “RReally?”

“Yeah. That thing’s going in the garbage either way, so you can do what you want with it. Here, I’ll unlock the cage for you.”

My younger brother faced his palm to the cage and the lock, which hadn’t budged at all under my magic, opened instantly.

I bowed to him. “Thank you, thank you!”

I hurriedly opened the cage door. The monster’s face lit up like the sun rising at dawn, and he leaped towards me. I reached out my hands to gather him into my arms—to give him a big hug. My fingers brushed against his tiny hands.

But that was when a cold voice rang out from behind me. *“Fire.”*

Not a moment later, scorching heat grazed my cheek. A roaring column of fire flared into existence before my eyes.

“Hu...h?”

The world changed in an instant. The pillar of fire died down quickly, leaving only a few white bones behind.

...Huh?

I blinked my eyes several times. I looked down at the bones several times. The monster wasn’t there.

My siblings’ faces entered my vision. They had big grins as they leaned forward to look up my expression.

“Pfft... Did you see his face just now?”

“Sure did, it was a masterpiece!”

Their roaring laughter pierced my ears. Then, I heard my own voice echo out without any inflection. “Why kill him? Do you hate me and the monster *that* much?”

There was an amused voice. “Hate? Nah, that’s not it. We only wanted to see how you’d react.”

“How...I’d react?” I repeated numbly.

I don’t understand. I don’t get it. They killed him just to see something stupid like that? I reached out and gently placed a bone into my palm. The next moment, it crumbled like a fleeting sand sculpture. *Is...being powerless that much of a crime?*

“Ah, I had a good laugh.” A sigh. “This guy’s always such a premium source of entertainment. Hey, make sure to clean that up.” The next moment, there was a yelp.

My fist had punched my noisy younger brother in the cheek.

“Y-You bastard!” someone hissed.

My memories after that were hazy. All I knew was that my siblings had beaten me half to death with their fists and spells.

When I had come to, I was informed that it had escalated into an unprecedented scandal in Sanphales—the palace guards had been called out to stop a fight between royals.

***

I told Riena the whole story.

“I couldn’t protect my friend or make up for my mistakes...and my siblings turned me into a battered sandbag.”

When I got to that point in the story, I snapped out of my daze. *Ack. I can’t believe I just spilled everything about my shameful past... Maybe the scent of Yggdrasil is affecting me. I feel more relaxed than usual, and I ended up talking about things that I usually avoid.*

Riena’s eyes grew moist, and she had a hand over her mouth. “You endured such horrible things”

I paused, feeling a little awkward. “Uh, sorry about that. In any case, I was a weak human at the start. Even now, well, I’m kinda dumb about a lot of things.”

She shook her head fiercely. “No! That’s... That’s not the case at all!” Her voice was trembling as she continued, “You are an admirable person, Lord Heale! You knew that your enemies were stronger than you, but you didn’t submit—you resisted in every way you could!”

“But I couldn’t rescue him... I couldn’t protect him...” My grip tightened on the jar that contained the ashes of his bones.

Then, there was warmth on my hand. Riena had reached out and placed her hand over mine. “You weren’t able to protect your friend in here. That might be the case, but you only got this far because he was in your life, didn’t you? You grew stronger because he became your friend. Am I right?”

My breath hitched and realization dawned upon me. I hadn’t managed to save the monster back then, but I had *tried* to save him. For the first time in my life, I had stood up to my siblings to protect my friend. Before I had met him, I had just accepted my fate.

She looked into my eyes. “You *are* strong, Lord Heale. To me, you are...someone I admire.” She cast her eyes down for a moment before looking up again, a hint of melancholy on her face. “I was the same. I used to be utterly worthless. I was shunned by my family due to my curse, and the tribe’s ruling class held me in contempt because of my useless crest.”

Her past must have been painful for her as well, and that wasn’t just metaphorical—her curse had eaten away at her body, and she awoke every day knowing that death was looming over her like a scythe.

“To me...living was pure agony for both my body and my heart,” she whispered. “For the longest time, I prayed that my final day would come soon and relieve me of my pain.” She clasped my hand with both of hers. “But then, you appeared in my life and gave me hope! My name, my body...even my life itself!”

“Riena...”

Riena refuted what I’d said earlier with everything she had. “That’s why you’re not powerless or worthless, Lord Heale! After all, you’re someone I...I...” She looked down, avoiding my eyes. “...um, admire very much!”

Trying to hide my embarrassment, I lowered my head as well. “Thank you, Riena...”

“Th-That’s not all! You’re also very kind. That makes me a little worried sometimes, but...I really like that part of you, Lord Heale!” She gave me a radiant smile. A second later, her face flushed cherry red and she shook her head repeatedly. “O-Oh, how could I be so impudent?! I am so sorry! When I’m on this tree, um, well, I feel a little out of it... I’m so, *so* sorry!”

“Y-You don’t have to apologize at all! And, well...what you said actually made me feel really happy.” Confiding in someone and pouring my heart out to them truly did make me happy. *After all, when I came to this island— No, even before I came to this island, I was always alone.* “Thank you, Riena.”

“You’re welcome, Lord Heale!” she replied with a big smile.

A little while later, Riale awoke from their nap.

“Well then, now that Riale’s awake... Shall we continue on to the summit again?” I asked.

“Yes, my lord!”

While we resumed our climb, I turned around on a whim and spotted other monsters ascending Yggdrasil one after another. *Were they all lured here by the tree’s scent?*

I spotted Riale gesturing at a part of Yggdrasil. “Hm? Something the matter?” I leaned in and saw amber-colored fluid oozing out.

“Is that...tree sap, perhaps?” Riena gave the fluid a closer look. “It smells very sweet.”

“Ah, you’re right. And this color...it reminds me of honey,” I muttered. “Oh! Hey, Riale, wait up!” I hurriedly stopped the kobold from licking the sap. “Let me check whether it’s poisonous first. *Examine*!”

Examine was a non-elemental spell that scanned for toxins. If the target was poisonous, it would start glowing purple. *Hmm, looks like this sap is safe to ingest. But I’m still a little worried...* On that thought, I scooped a tiny bit with

my finger and had a taste.

“Let’s see... Wha—” I gasped. “What in the world is *this*?!”

The sap was sweet, but it wasn’t like the pure, processed sweetness I was used to. When it entered my mouth, it was as if I was eating a preserve made from a boiled concentration of a whole bunch of fruits. The rich flavors filled my mouth.

While I stood there, stunned, Riale and Riena followed in my example and licked up some of the sap. Big smiles overtook their faces.

“I have never tasted anything remotely similar.” Riena sighed wistfully.

“Same here. None of the confectionery in the palace could rival this sweetness.”

“Ah, so it’s novel for you as well... It’s hard to believe sap like this exists.”

“This tree comes with unexpected gifts, huh? We can harvest fruit on the island now, but most of our meals are still more savory than sweet.”

“Right! I’m sure we can add a lot more variety to our menu with this sap!”

“I can’t wait! Okay then, let’s head further up and explore even more!”

“Yes, my lord!”

Once again, we started making our way to the summit. Eventually, we arrived at a place where the thick trunk started splitting into branches. *They probably count as branches, but they’re so thick that they might as well be tree trunks themselves.* With all these branches around us, it almost felt as if we were actually in a forest.

“I think we’ve reached the summit...” I muttered. “Well, we’ve made it this far, might as well take a look further inside.”

“I agree. There seems to be smaller branches and leaves lying on the surface here, so let’s take a look around!”

Riale let out a “Woof!” of agreement.

We’d reached the highest point of the trunk, but instead of ascending up the branches, we wandered around their base. I picked up the first leaf I came

across and inspected it. Like I had thought, it was infused with a subtle amount of mana, and it seemed to be radiating a kind of magic that had similar effects to healing spells.

“If we grind these down, we might be able to make tea or medicine...” Riena commented. “I shall take some back with me for experiments.”

“That’d be great. Now, as for the smaller branches...” I picked up a branch roughly the same thickness as a pickaxe handle.

The first thing I noticed was its weight—it was so light that I felt as if I could snap it with the slightest force. Wanting to test its durability, I tried to do exactly that. However, it didn’t snap or even bend in the slightest.

I stared at it. “It doesn’t yield at all.” Its looks and weight were rather deceiving.

In conclusion, Yggdrasil wood is light but durable... I’m a complete amateur, so I might be talking nonsense, but it could be suitable for building ships or boats. On the other hand, it’s so tough that it’ll be hard to craft with. Hmm, maybe Starkers knows a good way around that...

We headed further into the thicket of branches. Suddenly, a splash of vibrant color entered our eyes—it stood out among the backdrop of green and brown.

“What’s over there?” I wondered.

“Wait, is that...?” Riena seemed to have an idea, and she ran over in the direction of the colorful area. Riale and I quickly followed after her.

When we got closer, I realized what it was: a field of flowers that blanketed the ground like a carpet. Beyond it was the light azure of the boundless sky and the deeper sapphire of the vast ocean.

My eyes widened. “Wh-Whoa... This tree even has flowers?”

“No, I recognize them. These are flowers from my homeland. The seeds I planted earlier must have budded and blossomed.”

“Huh? But you didn’t use sunstones on the flowers, right?”

“I’m just as confused as you are...”

“That must mean Yggdrasil also speeds up the growth of plants.” Though it was hard to believe, it was plausible considering the quantity and nature of the mana this tree emitted. “In that case, we should probably set up a farm down by the tree’s roots.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Let’s try planting some more seeds when we get back down!”

“Yep. That aside...”

My mind wandered back to a painting I’d seen in the palace that offered up an artist’s interpretation of heaven, and the scenery here reminded me of that very painting. *Actually, scratch that. This place is so beautiful that it makes the painting feel entirely ordinary in comparison.*

The sea and the sky stretched all the way into the horizon, and in that midst of blue was a field of flowers in full bloom, vibrant and lively like an artist’s palette. Riena and I both sat down—it was the natural thing to do.

“It’s gorgeous...” I muttered.

“It really is. This is the most breathtaking place I have ever seen.”

For a long while, both of us were silent, basking in the scenery. On the other hand, Riale was running about in the flower field.

Finally, Riena’s voice broke the silence. “Hey, Lord Heale... Do you have any dreams?”

“Dreams?”

“Yes. A while ago, you asked whether there was anything I wanted. So I got a little curious about what you wish for.”

“A dream, huh? Well...”

In the past, I had never dared to have anything like that, fearing the inevitable crushing despair that would come from aspiring to something greater. Even when I had tried to catch up to my siblings, the gap between us would only widen even further. But now, I didn’t have to care about that. *I am content*.

One thing lingered in my mind, however. I glanced down at the jar necklace. *This little guy is always in the back of my mind. The monster that my siblings*

tormented. The friend I couldn't save.

If I was stronger back then, would he be...? My heart was filled with regret and frustration. *But I can't change the past. Even if I revive him with a dragon orb, it wouldn't change the fact that I failed to protect him once.*

That's why I want to protect those I now hold precious with all my might. Riena, Riale, my other comrades... I want to shield them from harm forever. Hmm, but that doesn't really count as a dream. A dream needs to be more ambitious. Something I should be more greedy about.

I shook my head slightly. *Then again, despite wanting to protect everyone sounding like a selfless wish, at its core...it stems from a greedy desire to spend more time with all the people here. I want to live a blissful life with everyone. Protecting them is just a requirement for achieving that desire, that's all.*

At the moment, there weren't any notable threats to the peace. Our life here on the island was only growing more plentiful with time. *But if one day, something* does *appear... For example, if that leviathan-like creature Arphemina mentioned shows up, I can't see myself hesitating to risk my life to protect my people. Because I want my comrades to live happily ever after.*

"Okay, I think I've got it." I nodded. "I want to enjoy a happy life with everyone here. I want to make this the most blissful place in the entire world!" I felt a little embarrassed saying it out loud, so I immediately tossed the question back at her. "Enough about me. What about you? What's your dream?"

"I..." Riena hesitated for a moment. Then, she shook her head and said, "My dream hasn't changed! I want to help you achieve your dream, Lord Heale!" She beamed at me.

"Oh, Riena... Thank you. I'll work even harder."

If I want to turn my island into the happiest place in the world, I'll need to work much, much harder.

Determination settled in my heart as I gazed at the distant waters.

Chapter 13: Digging Up a Hot Spring!

A day had passed since Yggdrasil made its sudden but memorable entrance at Sheol Reef. Today, like any other day, I was mining.

“Hm?” Furay, my mining buddy, made a puzzled noise.

I stopped swinging my pick and turned around to face her. She was staring at her new pickaxe. In fact, we both arrived here equipped with new pickaxes, courtesy of Starkers. The pickaxe head was made of orichalcum while the handle was crafted from a Yggdrasil branch.

When we’d returned from our journey to the tree’s summit, we started researching the potential uses of our spoils. From grinding them down, and putting them through a whole bunch of different processes, Riena and Baris discovered that the leaves had similar effects to oral medicine or topical healing salves.

They also found that the leaves could be used to make tea when brewed, and I tried some first thing in the morning. I could confidently declare that it was more delightful than any tea one would find in Sanphales.

They’d also found out more about the sap. When left to simmer for a long time, it would become a concoction with somewhat similar effects to types of dangerous drugs—if consumed, it would make you feel dazed and put you in a temporary state of euphoria. We had probably felt a little more cheerful than usual around the tree yesterday thanks to the scent of that sap. *And it might be the reason why Starkers was so reluctant to leave the tree trunk. He looked really comfortable there.*

As for the branches, I’d already noticed that they were ridiculously light, but it turned out they wouldn’t snap even when we smacked them on rocks. Things only got even more surreal from there. Iron axes couldn’t make a dent in them—only orichalcum axes and knives were hard and sharp enough. Crafting with them was challenging to say the least.

Yggdrasil still held many, many mysteries, and I had assigned Baris, our most

knowledgeable resident, the task of further investigation. On the other hand, Furay and I were testing out the Yggdrasil-orichalcum pickaxes while replenishing my depleted stock of rocks.

“What’s the matter, Furay? Something wrong with your new pickaxe?” I asked.

“Nah, it’s just that...” She paused. “It’s weird that I don’t feel tired at all. We’ve already mined for an hour, but it feels like only minutes have gone by.”

“Huh... Now that you mention it, I think I kind of see what you mean...”

The previous pickaxes we had used had been made entirely from orichalcum, including the handle. It had been light and effective, but the Yggdrasil branch handle was even lighter. It also helped that a wooden handle made for better grip.

However, I didn’t really feel a notable change in fatigue like Furay. It probably wasn’t because the wood was ineffective—I just never felt much exhaustion, even with my previous pick.

I snapped out of my thoughts and addressed my mining buddy. “But you shouldn’t push yourself too hard even if it does feel effortless. Am I clear, Furay?”

“Loud and clear! That aside, you’re practically zooming your way through the rocks today, Lord Heale. Is that because the pickaxe is lighter?”

“Probably, yeah. You seem to be faster as well, Furay. Well, the easiest reference point is Taran.”

We could only use one pickaxe at a time, and it was hard to judge our speed objectively. However, Taran could use four picks simultaneously with her many legs. At the moment, she was using two orichalcum handle pickaxes and two Yggdrasil handle pickaxes. Therefore, we could easily compare the speed between the two types. And it was clear that the new pickaxes were faster by far.

“Oh, you’re right! Okay then, I gotta work hard so that I don’t lag behind!” Furay started swinging her pickaxe once again, inspired by Taran’s godly speed.

I joined them and resumed mining as well.

But not too long into our session, I came across something new. Through a hole I had dug into the wall, there seemed to be a spacious cavern. I peered inside, and spotted a pool of steaming liquid on the ground. Bubbling and splashing sounds echoed from several places around the pool, as if more liquid was bursting out from the ground.

Furay's voice bounced off the mining shaft walls. "Is that a hot spring?!"

I blinked. "A hot spring? Um... Those are places where naturally heated water gushes out, right?" I asked.

Furay nodded enthusiastically. "Yep! There was a hot spring near our hometown, and everyone used to bathe there!"

According to Furay, the goblins of the Verdan tribe had a habit of bathing in hot springs every day. *Huh... I mean, I did notice that they have surprisingly high standards for hygiene. So that's why.*

"I see... If we can make use of this, then we won't need to heat water with magic anymore."

However... I stared at the spring. *How does it work? Is there an underground pool filled with hot water that's gushing out from an opening here? In that case, if I dig down, I'd find myself in the sea... No, that can't be right. I don't think seawater would be steaming hot like this.*

Either way, I should avoid digging too far down and ending up in the ocean. <Cave King> will likely warn me, but I should keep that in mind anyway.

We have a more urgent problem, though. If the water keeps on coming... These tunnels might steadily flood.

While I was thinking about that possibility, I heard Erivan's voice from behind me. "Whoa! Ya found a big treasure, Chief!"

"Sounds like it, yeah. But we need to do some testing to check whether the water is safe to drink, bathe in, or..." I trailed off. "Ah, hey!"

Once again, a certain man had shown up and volunteered himself as a test subject. Before I could stop him, Starkers scooped up some of the liquid and

drank it.

I instantly prepared to cast healing magic just in case. This time, however, Starkers didn't collapse on the ground. In fact, he was leaning down into the hot water and taking large gulps of it—*I guess the water is tasty*. Then, likely having confirmed it was safe, he jumped in with a big splash.

Okay. So the water doesn't have any immediate adverse effects on our bodies. There was still the risk that its effects were delayed, so I cast *Examine* on the water. The spell didn't detect any poison.

"Hmm... I suppose it's harmless, then," I muttered. *Should we develop this cavern into a bathhouse, then? But if we don't pump out the hot water on a regular basis, it's going to fill other parts of the cave. If possible, I want to use it as a source of drinking and farm water as well.*

Is there any way we can transport the water automatically to the surface like how the capital aqueducts do? Ah, but those passages were constructed in a way that they gradually slope down a mountain. If we want to pump water upward, it'd be very difficult unless we use magic.

I honestly wasn't getting anywhere by myself. I knew it might be futile, but I tried asking Starkers—who was currently floating on his back drifting in the hot spring—for help. "Hey, Starkers..." Hearing my voice, he turned his face slightly. "Do you think it's possible for us to transport the hot water here to the surface?"

I pointed at the hot water then pointed upward in the general direction of the cave entrance. After I finished my sentence, Starkers folded his arms and wore a frown, seeming deep in thought. From the looks of it, it wasn't that he hadn't understood my sentence. He was just trying to figure out a way to accomplish what I had asked.

After a lengthy period of consideration, Starkers nodded.

"Oh?" My eyes lit up. "You can?"

Starkers climbed out of the hot spring and gestured, *Follow me*. Everyone present trailed after him. Following his lead, we returned to the surface and ended up at the forge. Starkers patted several different minerals and looked at

me. He seemed to be asking me to provide some supplies.

“You want minerals, got it,” I said. “Gimme a second.”

Over time, we had grown familiar with each other enough to understand basic things like requests right away. I retrieved the items he wanted from my inventory. He had also wanted smooth stone, so I refined some with Workshop.

But then he tapped on several other minerals—he seemed to want more. In particular, his gestures had an emphasis on iron ore. Thus, I summoned up even more ore and sand. *Uh, looks like he’ll need a* lot *of metal ore.*

I kept going, and the next thing I knew, I’d materialized a giant pile of ore rivaling the size of a small shack. *Wow, I didn’t realize that I collected so much of the stuff from the mines.* I was honestly a little impressed with myself.

This was when Starkers thrust a hand forward and signaled me to stop. Then, he began to sort the ores into categories before beginning to refine them into pure metal.

No matter how many times I watched him work his craft, I was still in awe at his mastery over metal. When he held a hammer in his hand, he projected the dignified aura of a master craftsman. *Correction: he* is *a craftsman.* Furay was watching with me, and she let out “oohs” and “ahhs” of amazement.

Soon, Starkers finished refining the metal. Then, he began to process the material even further with a whole range of tools and molds. He seemed to be making components the like I had never seen before. One of the most eye-catching parts was a round metal rod roughly the height of a human. I inspected it, and it was hollow in the center. *Ah, a tube of some sort.*

Our blacksmith mass-produced these tubes, and when he was finally done, he let out a sigh and wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. He then gestured to the golems and slimes to transport the items. Our postal service then faithfully carried the metal tubes one after another into the cave. Starkers lifted a tube effortlessly and gestured for us to follow him once again.

I returned to the underground hot spring to find Starkers placing a metal tube vertically into the water and gesturing instructions to the slimes, the golems, and the goblins. He then communicated something to Taran with another gesture. At once, everyone leapt into action.

With the monsters getting to work, Starkers came up to me and gestured something as well. The golems were attaching one tube to another, and the cave spiders were weaving their silk around the junctions. Starkers pointed at the junctions before pointing at a glowstone.

I blinked. “What do you mean? Ah, are you perhaps telling me to burn the silk between one tube and another?” I manifested a small flame in the palm of my hand, and Starkers nodded at the sight.

I see! He wants me to weld the metal tubes together so that we can connect the spring to the surface with the resulting pillar. This is going to be a big construction project. I should ask Riena to help too.

“Got it.” I gave a nod before turning to Furay. “Hey, Furay, can you go ask Riena to lend a hand? I’ll handle things here, so tell her to help out on the surface.”

“Okay!”

Thus began our new construction project: a device that would pump hot water to the surface. Golems lifted the metal tubes, which the goblins would then nail into the ceiling. From there, the cave spiders would use their silk to temporarily tie the tubes to each other before Riena and I welded the tubes together with our fire magic.

As for Starkers, our lead architect, he stationed himself down at the underground hot spring. With practiced ease, he combined gears, boards, and other components into some sort of mechanism. When he was done with that, he made a trip to the surface. He seemed very busy.

A few hours later, we had finished welding the last tube junction.

Next to me, Riena said, “Great work, Lord Heale!” She had worked from the surface down through the ground, while I had worked the opposite way.

“You did a great job too, Riena!” I looked over our work. “Wow. Pretty grand, if you ask me!”

“I agree! But I do have one question... Will this really work?”

“I’m wondering about that too. That’s the most important thing.”

Crafting tubes to connect two areas was the easy part. The hard part was obviously going to be getting water to flow up through it. *Is Starkers’s mechanism really going to accomplish that? How?*

A rough voice interrupted my thoughts. “Chief! Starkers wants us all to assemble at the foot of Yggdrasil!” It was Erivan, who had just come down from the surface.

“Oh, okay. I guess the mechanism is ready...” I muttered.

“Yeah. I didn’t see him buildin’ anything, so I think we’re done. Chief, you can go ahead. I’ll go down and call the others.”

“That’d be great.” I gave him a small smile before turning to Riena. “Okay then, Riena. Let’s head up.”

“Yes, my lord!”

With that, we returned to the surface and walked through the tunnel leading to the far side of the island where Yggdrasil was. When we arrived, we were greeted with the sight of a boisterous crowd—most of the island’s citizens had already gathered below the tree.

Next to them, I saw an area that was a few steps below the ground level of the reclaimed land, and it had been padded neatly with smooth stone. Starkers must have instructed people to hollow it out. *Ah, so that must be our new baths.*

We folded into the crowd and shuffled towards its center. I spotted Baris there as well. And like I’d assumed, we were all here to stare at the mechanism Starkers had created. The tubes stretched from the underground hot spring all the way to here, and it led to a mysterious T-shaped object that poked out of the ground.

Is the hot water going to pour out from that thing? When I’d welded the

tubes, I had noticed that some of them branched off, and all of those branches had eventually led to similar T-shaped objects as well. Each seemed to have a wheel and a handle.

Starkers was standing next to one such strange device. After he saw that Erivan had summoned all the other monsters here, he gave us all a dramatic bow before starting to turn the wheel. Next, he placed his hand on the handle, but almost as if he were trying to tease us, he only turned it halfway before twisting it back into its original place.

He seemed to be enjoying everyone's reactions, but then someone yelled, "Hurry up already!"

He sighed, shaking his head in what seemed to be exasperation. Finally, he pulled on the handle with great force. Almost instantly, hot water gushed out from the tip of the T-shaped object.

Everyone let out shouts of amazement.

This dude...he's defying nature! I thought with excitement. I had no idea how it worked, but it was clear that he was pumping hot water from the underground cavern. The engineers of Sanphales were said to be the most brilliant minds in Barleon, but I was willing to bet that none of them could match the astounding technology we were witnessing. Through this one device, I had a small taste of how advanced the dwarfs had been once upon a time.

Surrounded by clapping and cheers, Starkers bowed in every direction. However, he suddenly grabbed the opening of the device and turned it upward with a smirk. Then he started turning the wheel again, but this time, much faster.

A pillar of water shot up into the sky. However, it lost its momentum in midair and arced into a semicircle around the source. Hot water rained down on us from above—Starkers had created artificial rain.

We were all taken by surprise, but there was a different commotion this time.

"What the heck was that for?!" Erivan shouted angrily, but Starkers aimed another small tube at him to spray the general with more water.

Starkers continued to aim his tube like a weapon at all the other monsters

who tried to get in his way. The goblin children, meanwhile, were splashing hot water at each other from the small pools of water that had formed on the ground. Before long, my hair and clothes were utterly drenched. It must have been a first for Riale as well, and she was staring up curiously at the raining hot water.

Maybe Starkers is trying to entertain everyone in his own way. Though I could manifest as much water as we wanted with magic, our community had the tendency of being frugal with our resources, whether it be water or food. Making hot water rain down like this seemed lavish in comparison to our usual habits.

Meanwhile, the baths next to us were being filled as well. By the time the orange sunset began to encroach upon the blue sky, we already had a respectable hot spring on the surface.

“All right!” Erivan cheered. “Guys, let’s get in!”

At his words, all the people present began stripping down. They washed their bodies with the showering hot water and then entered the baths one by one.

“Huh, so goblins wash before going into the baths, just like we do,” I observed.

Riena was beside me, and she replied, “Yes. We would be rather upset if the baths were sullied.”

“I see. You guys are no different from humans on that...matter...” My voice grew smaller when I turned to face Riena. I immediately looked away. She was drenched from head to toe, and I almost saw through her clothes.

“Yaaay!” Furay cheered, raising her hands in excitement as she jumped in. “Hot spring, here I come!”

Erivan, who’d already made his way into the baths, scolded her at once. “Hey, Furay! Don’t jump in, it’s bad manners!”

“S-Sorry!”

It was quite a heartwarming sight. The slimes and cave spiders copied the goblins and started heading into the baths as well. Riale was catching a ride on

Ciel's head, and the two floated on the surface of the water together.

Even Baris took off his clothes and joined the others. "Hm. In that case, I shall help myself as well," he muttered. "I never thought I would get to soak in hot springs again. Fate works in the strangest of ways."

Uh. Wait. Am I the only one who thinks this is a little odd?

Then I heard Riena's voice. "Um, Lord Heale. We perspired quite a bit during all that construction work, so let's take a bath as well."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm going to bathe...of course."

"All right!" Riena clapped her hands together. "Please allow me to help wash your body!"

"U-Um..." I stammered.

Oh, I see now, so the goblins have a custom of mixed bathing. That's why they didn't hesitate to go in. But, hm, that's odd... They usually wear clothes. Wouldn't that be because they're shy about being nude in front of others?

I voiced that question out aloud. "Uh... Why isn't anyone embarrassed about being seen naked?"

"Huh?" Riena sounded puzzled. "Isn't it normal to be naked in a hot spring?"

"A-Ah, good point."

Seems like they don't feel any awkwardness about bathing with the opposite gender... Those hesitations probably just aren't part of their culture. If I keep silent about how humans do things, I can probably go into the baths naked as well. In other words, even if I bathed with Riena, no one would bat an eye...

Riena's worried voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "L-Lord Heale, are you all right? Your face is bright red!"

"U-Uh, Riena... I think I'm feeling a bit under the weather, so... Go ahead and enjoy," I stammered.

"Oh, I could never! Please allow me to look after you. I shall do everything I can!"

"N-No, I'm fine, really. I'll be the picture of health once I get some sleep!"

Leaving those last words, I ran away from the baths as fast as my legs would carry me. *I'm a human, not a beast. My guilty conscience won't let me share a bath with Riena while knowing that I'd be taking advantage of her culture. At the same time, I don't want to force my cultural values on the goblins—it's my problem, not theirs. The best solution is for me to take myself out of the equation.*

But there's one problem... I looked down at my clothes. *I'm drenched, and it's really uncomfortable. Should I take a bath alone after everyone else is done? Ah, speaking of which... Half of the underground hot spring should be left untouched. I got it, I can bathe in privacy there!*

I walked over to the cave entrance, grabbed a nearby towel, and bucket walked down into the cave tunnels. *Ugh, I can't resist the allure of a nice hot spring.* Alone, I arrived at the underground hot spring and removed my clothes.

"I need to wash first," I muttered to myself.

I scooped out some hot water with the bucket and threw it over myself. *Oh, now the ground is wet. I guess I'll dry it with a wind spell after I'm done.* With my body clean, it was time for my long-awaited bath! I placed my hand into the water. It's a *perfect temperature!*

Without a moment of hesitation, I sat down into the natural hot spring, letting my body relax in the water. I let out a content sigh. "Yes, *this* is the stuff. This is what I've been looking forward to."

I hadn't had a bath in a long time—we *had* been rather stingy with water, after all. I was even humming a little tune to myself.

But then, a familiar voice rang out from behind me. "Lord Heale! I knew it, here you are!"

My body seized up on reflex, and I nearly jumped out of my own skin. I slowly turned around and saw Riena, who was still wearing her drenched clothes.

"R-Riena?!" I stammered. "Wh-Why are you here?!"

She blinked. "Why are you so surprised? I can't leave you alone when you are feeling unwell. Ah, my apologies for disturbing you. You must have wanted to bathe in silence."

“Th-That’s not why I’m...” I hesitated. “The thing is...” *I guess I should be direct and tell her about human bathing culture.*

Before I could explain, however, Riena let out a loud sneeze. When I took a closer look at her, she was a little unsteady on her feet. She must have been freezing in her drenched clothes.

“A-Are you okay?” I asked.

“I-I am fine, please don’t worry about me. But, um... May I soak in the baths with you?”

“Oh. Um, I’ll—” I swallowed my next words. “Okay, sure. Let’s bathe together.”

It’ll be so awkward if I head out after what she just said. More importantly, what if she collapses? I need to keep an eye on her so that she doesn’t get hurt.

“Thank you,” Riena said. Then, there was some rustling of cloth. *She must be taking off her clothes.*

I fixed my eyes on the cave wall the moment I had given her consent, so I didn’t know for sure what she was doing. Next, there was a sloshing sound. Maybe she was filling the bucket with hot water. Then, there was the sound of water splashing on the ground. This time, she was likely rinsing her body.

My heart almost burst out of my chest. *I don’t think I’ve ever been this nervous before...*

There was a small clatter—Riena placed the bucket on the ground. A while later, I heard the sound of footsteps approaching my direction.

“Please excuse me, Lord Heale!”

I was as still as a statue as I replied, “Go ahead. You must have been freezing. Take all the time you need.”

“I will.”

I felt a slight rippling of water from my right. Riena had sat down beside me.

She let out a satisfied sigh. “It feels wonderful.”

“I-It really does. The temperature of the water is just right, ma’am!”

Calm down. Calm. Down. I never call Riena "ma'am"! Uh, is there anything we can make small talk about? No, that's a bad idea. I'm acting all weird because *I'm talking to her. I should just fall to a natural silence, yes.*

But then, Riena's gentle voice addressed me. "Lord Heale..."

"Yes, Rien—" I cut off, and my breathing hitched.

Riena suddenly leaned on me. Her slightly cool cheek pressed against my shoulder. "Sorry, my face was a little cold... May I borrow your shoulder for a little longer?" She let out a small sigh. "You know, I think this is the first time I'm all alone with you."

"Y-Yeah!"

"You are too kind...*too* nice, Lord Heale..."

"I-I don't think I am..."

My heart was thumping audibly in my chest. Never in my life had my pulse raced so quickly before.

I had respected Riena from the moment I had met her. And...I had likely started having *other* feelings for her after she had gained her human-like form. *I like Riena, and I want her to return my feelings. It's still too early to talk about long-term stuff like marriage, but for now...I want to tell her that I like her.*

Working up my courage, I said in a small voice, "Um, Riena. There's something I'd like to..." I paused, realizing something. "Riena?"

I glanced at her—she was fast asleep on my shoulder. She must have felt so relaxed that she dozed right off. She mumbled, "Lorge Heel..."

For a long while after that, I soaked in the hot spring with Riena. Unfortunately, at the end, I nearly fainted because I had been in there for too long.

At noon, two days after our surface hot spring had been completed, I was doing my usual thing: mining. Now that we had Yggdrasil, we had a sustainable supply of lumber, sap, and leaves. We didn't have to be so stingy with wood when crafting tools, we could now eat sweet desserts without reservation, and

we could also enjoy a good cup of tea.

Not only that, but with our new hot spring bath, we could maintain a higher standard of hygiene, and it was also a great way to alleviate our fatigue. That wasn't the only good news—we also used the hot spring water for our farm and as a source of drinking water.

We'd now practically assembled all the basic necessities for life on this island. In fact, I could confidently declare that we had most of the things we needed to live comfortably. Therefore, one might argue that mining wasn't necessary anymore.

However, I believed that there was a possibility I might discover something that could enrich our lives even further. That's not to mention we had a constant need for rocks, and it was my duty to replenish our stock. Rocks came in surprisingly handy for a lot of things, like expanding Sheol's land area or building fortifications.

I didn't want to sound arrogant, but I was our most efficient miner. I hoped I could continue to mine day in, day out from now on. Riena was in charge of farming, while Erivan took care of our military affairs. Starkers, naturally, was appointed to crafting tools. His latest hobby seemed to be making equipment and weapons for the golems and the security squads.

At long last, everyone had found their niche and were starting to settle into their unique fields of expertise. Like always, the slimes and golems had a monopoly over our transportation service, and making clothes wouldn't be possible without the cave spiders.

It felt surreal that I had been worried about not having enough food and water only a short while ago.

"I hope I discover something neat today..." I muttered to myself as I swung my pickaxe. *It'd be so much easier if I could scan the area and figure out the locations of minerals beforehand.*

Furay, who was bringing down her pick next to me, seemed to share the same sentiment.

I glanced at her. "Hey, Furay, it's already noon. You sure you don't need to

rest?”

“No, I’m fine... I’ll head back up in a little bit.”

“Okay. But don’t work yourself too hard.”

Furay’s morning routine was very predictable. Every day, she would rapidly polish off her breakfast before heading into the mining shaft. Other goblins around her age spent their time playing and having fun while she alone was constantly swinging her pickaxe.

I could only imagine she was desperate to learn magic. To do that, she needed to evolve with a risestone. However, unlike other minerals, risestones didn’t seem to be naturally occurring on this island. The only one I’d found so far was in a stone chamber, where it’d been carefully placed on an altar. In other words, if we wanted to find another one, we had better chances of discovering them within other ruin sites.

Furay was a smart girl, and she likely knew that she was in for a long haul. *But if possible, I want her to get one soon.* I kept mining at a rapid pace—not just for the reasons I stated earlier, but for this diligent girl as well.

Risestones seem to be valuable artifacts, so the next one we find might be guarded by some defense mechanism like golems or magic. Huh, in that case, I should try and sense the flow of mana. We’ll be able to follow that.

And that just so happened to be the precise moment when I sensed a slight flow of mana behind me. I turned around and saw Furay.

I reacted instantly. “Furay!” I shouted as I manifested a *Shield* to protect her. The golem nearby also ran in front of her to act as a physical shield.

“Huh? Ah...!” she exclaimed.

Not a moment later, something exploded with a small bang in front of her. Luckily, the explosion was small enough for my *Shield* to negate all of its force. *Phew, she’s unharmed.*

Furay turned to me and the golem. “Th-Thank you...” Her voice was shaking slightly.

Even if I hadn’t cast that spell, I was certain the golem would have protected

her well enough. Golems were very reliable in situations like these, so stationing them in the cave had indeed been the right decision.

The question is: was that explosion artificial or something natural?

I shook my head. “That’s okay. I’m glad you’re safe. Hmm... Was it some sort of trap?” I frowned.

However, Furay nodded without hesitation, clearing my doubts. “Seems like it. I think there’s something deeper inside.”

“Oh? Did you discover something?”

Furay cleared away the rubble and fished something out. She tilted her head quizzically. “Is this...a treasure chest?”

The item she held out to me was a humble wooden chest without much in the way of decoration. “It might be. You should open it and take a look inside.”

“Okay!” She tried to pry it open. “Huh? This thing’s stuck.”

I hummed in thought. “In that case, it might be locked. I’ll try opening it with a spell.”

I cast a *Pick* and the chest flopped open, revealing three golden stones. *Golden... These might be risestones*.

Furay knew that the color matched the description I had given her, and her eyes lit up.

I looked over the stones and muttered, “Since they’re stones, my inventory should be capable of storing them. I’ll identify them with my encyclopedia.” Nodding to myself, I took out one of the golden stones and tried storing it. *Success*.

Then, I browsed through my inventory. Like I had suspected, it was indeed a risestone and the other two likely were as well.

Furay looked up at me with unease in her eyes.

I gave her a smile. “Congrats, Furay. That was a risestone.”

“RReally?!” Her eyes widened. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope. Here.” I retrieved the risestone from my inventory and handed it to

her.

She took it carefully into her hands before cheering loudly. “I did it!” Joyful tears streamed down her face.

Ever since Furay had received permission to mine in the cave, she had practically spent all her time doing just that, but now her hard work had finally paid off.

“I’m so happy for you,” I said, gesturing to the other stones. “Hey, since all three of these are risestones, you can try evolving three times.”

She shook her head, which took me by surprise. “One is enough for me! If not for you, I wouldn’t have survived to this day, nor would I have gotten this stone. You saw what happened earlier...I might have died if you weren’t around. You should have the remaining two, Lord Heale!”

I frowned. “But you found them.”

“I was only able to concentrate on mining alone thanks to you and everyone on this island,” she replied firmly. “I didn’t help much with fishing or any of the other chores... If you aren’t going to use them, please use them for the sake of everyone else here.”

“I see... Thank you, Furay. In that case, I’ll discuss with the others about how we should use the rest.”

“That sounds great to me!” With those words, Furay handed the other two risestones to me.

I stored them in my inventory. “Okay then, we found our big prize, so let’s take a long lunch before testing them out!”

“Okay!”

With that, we decided to make a trip to the surface. On our way, Furay hummed as she walked—she looked elated from the bottom of her heart.

“You know, today might be the happiest day of my life!” she chirped.

“That’s wonderful. Ah, it’s great that you’ll be practicing magic, but I do hope to see you in the mining shaft from time to time.”

“Of course! I’ll work even harder in the mines! I mean, my crest *is* <Miner>, after all...” She let out a small chuckle. “I’m going to be more greedy! Magic, mining—I’ll have them all!”

“Well, you don’t get to evolve every day, so you should make full use of the opportunity.” In the middle of my speech, I noticed that Riale had disappeared from my shoulder. “Hm?”

I turned around and saw Riale approaching the wall. They were sniffing something.

I crouched down. “Something bothering you, Riale?”

Furay leaned in. “Maybe there’s something in the rock.”

“Oh?” I turned to the kobold. “Is she right, Riale?”

Riale barked enthusiastically.

“I see.” I nodded. “I’ll try digging there, so please keep your distance.” After Riale had backed off, I brought down my pick and saw a metallic glint. “Ohhh! Are these...swords?”

Two shiny silver swords were embedded into the rock. They were rather large. In fact, they were longer than I was tall and broader than my shoulders.

“Even if these are claymores, they definitely weren’t made for humans to wield...” I placed my hand around one of the sword’s grips and tried lifting it. “Huh?”

Unlike the orichalcum swords, I could lift this sword with relative ease. It looked bulky, but it was ridiculously light.

I couldn’t help but voice my doubt. “What *is* this thing? It looks like a silver sword, but...it isn’t?”

“Maybe it’s because you’re using magic,” Furay suggested.

“No, I’m not... Furay, do you think you can lift it?”

“Lemme have a go.” She took it from my hands. “Whoa, it *is* light!”

Furay was much shorter than me, but even she could easily carry the sword. *It’s probably not silver, then.*

“Hmm... I guess I’ll break one and store it in my inventory,” I muttered. “I might be able to identify it with my crest.”

I struck the other sword with my pickaxe and stored the shards in my inventory. Soon, I discovered that the sword was made from a metal that I had never come across in real life before.

“Mithril...” I read its name out aloud.

I didn’t even have to ask the assistant to summon up the encyclopedia—I *had* heard of it before. *Though I’ve never seen it or touched it...*

In the myths of Sanphales, mithril was fabled as a metal of the gods. Swords forged from it could cut anything in existence, and mithril shields would never shatter. That raised one question: what would happen if you tried to cut a mithril shield with a mithril sword? ...That aside, it was the mightiest metal in the entire world.

Mithril: A metal left behind by the divine. The hardest metal in existence that can even be used to slay gods. May be improved through enchanting.

Left behind by the divine, huh? It must be even more special than orichalcum, then.

“Mithril?” Furay repeated after me. “Is that something good?”

“It’s *very* good. According to human mythology, heroes slayed dragons like the legendary Fafnir with mithril swords.”

“Huuuh... I don’t know much about it, but well done, Riale! You’re our star!”

Hearing that, Riale stood up, placed two paws on their waist and lifted their chin proudly.

I blinked. “Well now, where did you learn that gesture? But yeah, she’s right. You’re amazing.”

Riale is a kobold, so...maybe kobolds have a superior sense of smell? I’ll be honest, Riale gave me a wonderful surprise. They managed to find a legendary metal!

Putting my guesses about Riale aside, I said, “In any case, we had a big haul. Let’s take this back with us and flaunt it to Starkers.”

“Right!”

We resumed our journey to the surface. Soon, we were outside the cave, and yet another clear, sunny day greeted us. We were right on time for lunch, and smoke was rising from the kitchen.

Though we wanted to sit down and dig in right away, it was probably better to deliver the mithril to Starkers as soon as possible. As we walked, Furay, who was only around the height of my knees, carried the massive sword—it was so long that I had to look up to see the tip of its blade. It caused quite the stir.

Starkers seemed to have a sixth sense for precious metals, because he turned around to face us, instead of focusing on his current project. The next moment, he abandoned his current project and began sprinting towards the mithril sword in Furay’s hands.

“Eep!” Furay yelped, startled by Starkers’s ferocious expression. He looked like a lion on the hunt. On instinct, she dropped the sword.

Starkers reacted immediately, sliding below the sword before it could fall onto the ground and held it up with both of his hands. He raised it high into the air before placing it on the nearest empty workbench in the forge. Then, he threw himself down and began prostrating, worshiping the sword like it was sacred.

“Hey!” Furay’s eyes widened. “What’s he doing? Has he actually gone mad this time?”

I hesitated. “I’m not too sure, but considering Starkers’s reverence... The sword must be very valuable.”

While Starkers worshiped the sword like a pious devotee, I placed the dismantled pieces of mithril onto the workbench in front of him. *Looks like he’s going to keep going for a while... Oh well, to each their own.*

I turned to my mining buddy. “Hey, Furay, let’s have lunch. I just need to stop by and chat to Baris about Riale, and then I’ll join you.”

“Okay! I’ll help myself, then!”

After we parted ways, I scoured the area for Baris. However, he wasn’t on our first reclaimed land at the moment. *Hmm, is he in the cave’s residential area? Or maybe at the rear reclaimed land, where Yggdrasil is?*

I went over to the kitchen and asked Riena about Baris’s whereabouts.

“Oh, Baris? He should be over at Yggdrasil,” Riena replied. “There are some crops due for harvest soon, so he went over to estimate how much food we’ll get from them.”

“Ah, that was fast! They’re already due for harvest?”

“Yes! Part of the credit must go to Yggdrasil, but the turnips are already ripe for the taking! According to Baris, some of the other crops should be ready soon as well!”

Riena was smiling ear to ear as she talked. The plants’ growth must have been incredibly fast. When Yggdrasil had shot up into the air, the flower seeds she had planted bloomed abnormally quickly. We decided to move our farm to Yggdrasil based on that fact, and now, we knew that our initial theory was correct—the giant tree *does* accelerate plant growth.

“I’ll be stewing plenty of turnips today! Please look forward to it!” Riena beamed at me.

“I will. Thanks! Okay, so Baris is at Yggdrasil, got it.”

With Riale on my shoulder, I headed to the tree. Just like Riena had said, Baris was at its foot, holding a quill and paper.

“Hey, Baris,” I called out to him. “May I have a moment?”

“Well, if it isn’t you, Lord Heale. I have just finished looking over the fields. How may I help you?”

“I have a question for you. Do you know Riale’s crest or how to identity it?”

“Ah, Now that you mention it, Lady Arphemina didn’t mention Riale’s crest in her message, did she? Would you like me to check what it is?”

“That’d be great. You see, Riale found some mithril in the cave earlier, and

well... Maybe they have a special crest that helps them locate metal."

"Interesting..." Baris inclined his head. "That piqued my curiosity even more. Please wait a moment." He sat down and took out a spare piece of paper. Then, he drew a perfect circle and some unfamiliar characters on it. "Preparation complete. Please put Riale on this paper."

"Okay." I did as I was told. "Riale, could you sit tight for a bit?"

Riale was very obedient and sat without a struggle on the circular pattern Baris had drawn. A second later, the circle glowed briefly.

"That will be all." Baris turned to the kobold. "Riale, you may move now."

Riale gave the shaman a nod before they started running freely around the farm once again. Baris looked down at the circle and began his diagnosis.

He hummed in thought. "I don't believe I have seen this crest before. I can only try to decipher what it does based on its description, but since they are a kobold royal, there is a lot to read." There was glowing script right in the center of the circle, and it apparently described Riale's crest. "Hmm... <Clairvoyance>. What an intriguing result..."

"<Clairvoyance>?"

"Yes. This crest apparently allows its owner to not just perceive distant information, but even see through matter. Or to put things plainly, its owner can see things far, far into the distance and can detect things even through obstacles..." Baris perused the text as he continued, "The owner of <Clairvoyance> may find unusual items with this crest and may even sense the emotions and thoughts of other people."

"Whoa, it's even more powerful than I thought..."

My personal guess had been <Explorer>, a crest which mainly helped its owners discover rare or bizarre items. <Clairvoyance>, however, didn't just have that gift—it also had many other powerful blessings.

"Indeed." Baris nodded. "This is my first time coming across such a crest, but it is a particularly formidable one. I can hardly wait to see what things Riale will accomplish when they grow up."

“Same here. With Riale’s help, we might just be able to locate all the precious items buried inside the cave.”

Riale was still a tiny infant in need of our protection, but once they became an adult, they would no doubt become a treasured worker on this island. *Well, with a crest like that, they might start getting curious about the outside world eventually... Oh well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there. All I hope is that they choose the path that makes them happiest.*

An alarmed voice echoing out from the top of Yggdrasil interrupted my thoughts. The goblin lookouts up there seemed to have found something. “Lord Baris! Lord Baris! I spotted a ship!”

“How many?!” Baris exclaimed.

“Only one! But it’s very big!!!” the goblin shouted back.

“My word!” Baris frowned. “It doesn’t seem to be a Verdan ship... Maybe it’s the kobolds or possibly the orcs?”

“Let’s see for ourselves first,” I suggested.

“That is a good idea. I have the telescope I asked Lord Starkers to make, so we should learn more once we use that.”

Baris and I hurried to the summit of the trunk.

The lookout saw us and pointed out to see. “Ah, you two! Over there! To the north!”

We looked in that direction as well. There was indeed a ship on the horizon. However, I couldn’t make out the flag from this distance.

“Lord Heale, please use this.” Baris handed over the telescope.

“Thanks, Baris.” Accepting the telescope, I observed the distant ship once again. This time, I could see the flag—and there was a skull on it.

I chewed on my lip. “Pirates... But it’s a pirate flag on a Sanphales navy warship. If I remember correctly, a few of those vessels were captured by orcs.”

Baris muttered, “In Lady Arphemina’s message, she mentioned her tribe had fought against orcs. In that case, it is all the more likely that orcs are on that

ship.”

“Yeah. They’re hostile towards humans, and that’s the case with goblins too, right?”

“Yes. Orcs were the ones who burned down our homeland and murdered our king. If we were to meet, I am almost certain that there would be conflict.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll fire off a few warning spells and force them away, or... Hm?” The sea seemed to swell dramatically for a moment, but it may have just been a trick of the light. “Hey, Baris? Did you see the surge in the current just now?”

“Now that you mention it, I think I did see something like that... Wait. What is going on?!”

The sea below the pirate ship gradually rose up. It kept climbing into the air until it reached the height of the mountain, and then...

“What the hell is that?!” the goblin lookout yelled in a panic.

A giant creature shot up from below the pirate ship. Its long, black body was elongated like an enormous snake.

Sanphales’s ship of the line was large—*extremely* large. There would be at least a thousand marines standing by on board at any time, and its maximum capacity was two thousand—it was comparable to a small fortress. But that black snake swallowed it up whole in the blink of an eye.

It had happened all too quickly. Both Baris and I were speechless. The black snake plunged right back into the ocean, making a huge splash on its way down.

“Wh-What...was...” Baris’s eyes were wide, and he struggled to speak. The creature was beyond even the shaman’s comprehension.

I had never seen such a terrifying beast before, either. But I knew one word that fit.

“A leviathan...” I muttered in a daze.

The mysterious beast looked surreal—it should only belong in stories to terrorize children. But now, such a legend had appeared right before our eyes.

Chapter 14: Taking on a Mythical Beast!

Baris and I immediately headed down the tree to assemble Riena, Erivan, Taran, Ciel, Starkers, and Unit Fifteen for an emergency meeting. The topic was, of course, how we would handle the leviathan that had just appeared.

Erivan voiced his doubts after hearing our report. “Uh, are ya sure? Do ya need to get ya eyes checked?”

I shook my head. “I wish it were my eyes that were the problem. But unfortunately, there are too many witnesses. All the goblins on lookout can vouch for our testimony.”

Riena nodded. “The goblins fishing at the northern part of the coast also said that they saw a giant snake far in the distance. Furthermore, they reported that a large wave crashed into Sheol right after the sighting. So that would explain it...”

“It’s real, then...” Erivan’s face turned grim before addressing me. “Is it heading in our direction?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “It descended beneath the waves, and hasn’t done anything since then. There’s a chance that it doesn’t attack living things on land, but...there’s no guarantee.”

Perhaps the giant snake only targeted ships and marine life. However, I didn’t know for sure, especially since the legends detail leviathans destroying the coastlines of countless nations.

There was a steely look in Baris’s eyes as he spoke up. “Lord Heale, I have a proposal.”

I turned to him. “Go on.”

“Have you heard of the stories where people drove the leviathan away?”

“No, I haven’t. There are such cases?”

“Yes. Many, in fact.”

Hearing that, Erivan let out an excited “Ohhh!”

I was just as surprised. “How did they do it?”

Baris replied in a solemn, steady voice. “They offered sacrifices to the leviathan—the flesh and blood of their living kin.”

For a moment, my mind blanked. A while ago, I had asked Baris whether there was any way to defeat a leviathan. He had said that he had a simple charm for such a devastating scenario and had laughed it off as a joke soon after. *So...*this *is the actual charm he avoided talking about?*

Without a moment’s delay, he continued, “Lord Heale. Please use me as a living sacrifice to appease the leviathan and ask it to stay away from this island.”

For the first time since we’d met, I raised my voice at Baris. “Don’t be stupid! I would never do that! I could never let *anyone* do that!”

“My lord is right!” Riena backed me up, her voice just as fierce as mine. “Your death isn’t necessary!”

Erivan was downright mad. “Exactly what they said! I’d rather we all die together than have you sacrifice yerself!”

Baris, however, shook his head slowly. “Please think about it carefully, everyone. The life of a feeble old man is all it takes to save this island. No one has ever defeated a leviathan before, not even in the legends. However, like I said, there *are* many stories of people driving them away with living sacrifices.”

“Baris...” Riena chewed on her lip in frustration. “In that case, *I* should be that sacrifice. I remember one of those stories... The survivors managed to escape danger by sacrificing a woman of high status—their princess! Lord Heale, please use my life to save this island!”

“Your Highness!” Baris gasped in horror. “The point of that story was just that a sacrifice drove off the beast! The status and gender of the sacrifice doesn’t mean anything! Lord Heale, if you have to choose anyone, choose me!”

Baris and Riena both made desperate appeals to me. I could feel their strong determination to protect this island no matter what it took.

I took a deep breath. “Baris. Riena. As your lord and your governor, I prohibit you from taking such actions. That is an *order*.”

“Lord Heale, please, *please* reconsider!” Baris insisted. “I am but a bag of old bones. You don’t have to go out of your way for someone like me!”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Baris,” I said gently. “Sheol is just as precious to me. But I can’t abandon any of you, and I won’t let *anyone* disappear from our community. I want to protect *all* of you.”

No matter how powerful my opponent was, I couldn’t face losing another friend. My hand clenched around the small jar against my chest. *When this little guy died...it felt as if my world was crashing down upon me. I don’t want to experience that ever again.*

I let out a long exhale. “That’s why I won’t let any of us die. *Never* bring up living sacrifices again.”

There was a hint of a smile on Baris’s face when he heard that, but he immediately bowed his head and apologized. “Please forgive me, Lord Heale. I was being selfish.”

“It’s okay. Just remember what I said, will you? I’m the same—I’m willing to sacrifice my own life to ensure the safety of this island. But I want to keep that as a last resort. I want to struggle in every way I can before we make a decision like that.”

“You are indeed wise.” Baris nodded. “We should start preparations right away, then. First, we should transport all our food and supplies deep inside the cave so that we can use it as a stronghold if need be. I don’t believe the beast will chase us all the way into the cave’s deeper tunnels.”

“That’s a solid plan. But what if the entrance gets blocked or if the entire island is destroyed?” Considering the size of the giant snake, there might be a big cave-in if it slammed into the island. “We’re also done for if it burns Yggdrasil and our fields. I don’t want to just focus on avoiding confrontation—I want to think about our offensive options as well.”

“Hm...” Baris frowned. “If the myths are to be believed, however, magic might not work on the creature. If that is the case, we have no chance of victory.”

“Then we’ll just fight with weapons.” I turned to our head blacksmith. “Starkers, do you think you can make use of the mithril we just found?”

Starkers slammed his chest with his fist in a “you-can-count-on-me” gesture.

“Great.” I gave him a nod. I looked around, meeting everyone’s eyes as I did. “Guys, please lend me your strength.”

I rarely ever made such an earnest plea, but they all nodded with determined looks on each of their faces.

From that day forth, we dedicated all our time and energy into developing a strategy to defeat the leviathan.

Our first step was to prepare a shelter deep within the cave like Baris had suggested, since most of our people wouldn’t be actively participating in the battle. We prepared a space in the cavern we were pumping hot water from, and we built a new cold room to stockpile food. I had also arranged for the transportation of twigs and lumber as fodder for fire.

Then, we assembled anyone capable of serving in battle. With me as their leader, we discussed our plans to slay the leviathan.

“Sorry about working you so hard, Taran...” I muttered.

In response, Taran waved one of her legs—it was her way of telling me that it wasn’t a big deal. I had asked all the cave spiders to spin silk from morning till night. That tremendous amount of silk then went into the hands of goblins, who had woven it all into a thick rope. In fact, the rope was so thick that it was probably about the same width as my waist.

Apparently, spider silk wasn’t the only material in the rope—the goblins had woven in thin, stretched-out threads of different kinds of metal. Part of the rope was also wrapped in thick sheets of metal alloy. Our plan was to have the rope stretch from the surface to the underground area of the cave, and it was nearly finished.

The forge was equally as busy. The blacksmiths weren’t just making metal threads for the rope—they were also making a gigantic arrowhead. The stem was about as thick as the rope, and it honestly looked more like a ship anchor. Its tip had been coated with mithril, and it had sharp blades stretching out that

were jagged like saws.

Starkers led the giant arrowhead crafting project. He was very invested in his task—he had made countless minor adjustments to ensure maximum lethality.

There was one more large construction project happening on the reclaimed land. We had piled up slabs of stone to form a base, and on top of that was our secret weapon. It wasn't a house—from above, it looked like a colossal crossbow. In fact, that's exactly what it was.

Erivan and Ciel stood on the crossbow base.

"Good!" Erivan barked. "Turn it slightly west!"

The towering crossbow looked bulky, but the moment Erivan gave out his instructions, it turned instantly.

"A little to the right!" Erivan yelled. "Okay, good! Shoot!"

A fraction of a second after Erivan shouted, there was a whoosh of wind as the crossbow was drawn and released. A wooden log shot out and was hurled far into the distant waters.

The crossbow had been created with Yggdrasil branches and its bowstring had been made from cave spider silk, just like the large rope.

"How's it going, Erivan?!" I shouted.

There was a triumphant look on his face as he replied, "We're all set and ready to go on my end! The slimes are movin' perfectly as well!"

At that, the slimes began sliding out from beneath the crossbow. They were a vital part of the crossbow team and were in charge of making sure it could aim quickly. They were stationed between the bow and the platform, and they would immediately turn the crossbow whenever Erivan gave out instructions.

"I'm counting on all of you," I said in an earnest voice. "You guys play a key role that will determine the outcome of our battle with the beast."

All the slimes jiggled their bodies—their way of nodding to me.

Erivan and the slimes weren't the only ones present—the large model golems, Units One to Five, formed a row in front of the structure as guards, and they

were all equipped with towering orichalcum shields. A little to the side, the humanoid Units Six to Fifteen were holding up shields the same size as themselves and were standing in formation.

“The golems have perfected their movements as well...” I muttered.

Our golems would fight at the front lines when the leviathan arrived. I didn’t know whether the heartstones gave them souls or “lives” per se, but in my mind, they were precious comrades. I was going to do everything possible to preserve their lives.

That being said, their bodies were much sturdier than any other Sheol citizen. Not only that, but as long as their heartstones—their cores—remained intact, I could make new bodies for them. Even still, I had made preparations for the nightmare scenario by adding little alterations to their bodies with Sculpt. Now, their heartstones were surrounded by several layers of robust metals and minerals. With this, even if their bodies were destroyed, I could revive them.

“Okay, everything’s going smoothly. The rest is all up to me...” My lips formed into a thin line at that thought.

I don’t like fighting or war. But...I know a lot about it. Who would’ve thought it’d come in handy now?

Back at the palace, people had called me “trash.” However, that nickname never came up when it came to my knowledge. I had a thorough understanding of all the major conflicts that had occurred on Barleon. Sanphales was the most plentiful nation in Barleon, and we were a powerful nation that excelled in the art of war. All royals studied tactics in preparation for our eventual debuts as commanders on the battlefield. I was no exception.

I didn’t want to boast, but I had never lost to any of my other siblings in tabletop war simulations. *Keyword: simulations. It’s all theoretical.* In any case, my mind contained a library of information concerning all of the battles across Barleon in which the Sanphales army had played a part.

As a matter of course, our military had fought against gargantuan creatures—including dragons much like the leviathan I’d seen—and had even seized victory against them. *Although, the dragons were barely a fraction of the size...let’s ignore that for now.*

In summary, I could confidently declare that in the field of destruction, Sanphales was at the pinnacle of expertise. My home nation had amassed knowledge of all forms of death and destruction, and I had inherited this lethal treasure as well. On top of all that, this island had many natural advantages that I planned to make full use of to protect our home.

I finished patrolling around the island. Most of our preparations were finished.

That was when Riena came up to me. “Lord Heale, I have informed the goblins about our plans.”

“Thanks, Riena. I don’t know how strong that leviathan will be, but if we all work together and pull on it, I’m sure that we’ll manage somehow.”

“I shall place my faith in all of us as well.” Riena nodded solemnly. “One more thing, Lord Heale. Are you sure that you’re not going to choose the safer path?”

“You mean the path of sacrifice?”

“Yes. If you wish it, I am willing to offer my life at any moment.”

I sighed. “Even if I tell you ‘no,’ I’m willing to bet that you’ll throw yourself in front of that beast if we get backed into a corner. But listen, I won’t le— Ow!” I yelped as Riena held my hand and squeezed it hard. “R-Riena?!”

She stared straight into my eyes. “In that case, Lord Heale. Can you promise me that you *definitely* won’t die?”

“Riena... Yeah, of course.”

“It’s a promise,” she emphasized.

“I promise.”

Hearing my vow, Riena gave me a firm nod.

That was when Starkers came over with a shiny silver item in his hand. He knelt dramatically before me and presented the edged tool.

“Oh, you’ve already finished...” I muttered as I accepted the pickaxe. Unlike my other picks, it was made from mithril and had both a slightly longer handle and head.

I was spellbound. *It’s beautiful...*

Furay, who had been watching nearby, muttered, “Why not a sword or a spear?” She scrutinized the pickaxe with a raised eyebrow.

Uh, I guess it would *look silly on the battlefield, but I have my reasons.* “My crest is <Cave King>, and I’m fastest at swinging a pick,” I explained. “Plus, this technically doesn’t count as a weapon.”

Legends taught us that weapons like swords and spears couldn’t even make a scratch on the scales of a leviathan. Therefore...

“Ah.” It seemed Furay had realized my point. “Since it isn’t a weapon, it has a chance of piercing its scales, huh? I mean... I get where you’re coming from, but I feel like it’s a bit of a stretch.”

I shrugged. “I’m not really hoping for much, but it doesn’t hurt to try. Mithril weapons are renowned for their ability to pierce all materials, so I’m honestly not too worried about that.”

Riena nodded. “I agree. Still, against such an opponent, we should do everything we possibly can, even if it means exploiting loopholes in wording!”

“Mmhmm. You’re completely right, Your Highness,” affirmed Furay. “Even if it’s a loophole, it’s worth testing.”

My shoulders drooped. *No one’s mentioned how stylish and cool this pickaxe looks... I actually invested quite a bit of time and effort into working through the design with Starkers. The goal was to make it seem magnificent and imposing, but it looks like it didn’t make much of an impression...*

The two goblin girls nodded to each other, leaving me to mope by myself.

Then, Furay said, “That reminds me. Lord Heale, remember the risestone I found?”

“Ah, your evolution, right. Sorry, but even if you evolve now, I’m afraid I can’t supply you with mana minerals.” I gave her an apologetic look.

“That’s okay, I know. I mean, I can’t just demand that you teach me magic in an emergency, so I’m going to postpone my evolution until things settle down again.” She hesitated. “And, um, yeah. I think I need some time to brace myself for that change.”

“I understand. After all, you might look completely different afterward. Either way, once we deal with the leviathan, I’ll teach you spells. Can you please wait a bit longer?”

“Sure.” She nodded.

Riale bounded up to us and started barking energetically in front of Riena. “Woof! Woof!” They clasped a Yggdrasil twig in their tiny paw. They seemed to be insisting on participating in the battle as well.

I crouched down. “No, Riale. You can’t join us yet.”

“Arf, arf!” Riale replied, sounding slightly unhappy about my response.

“Hey, Riale.” Riena gathered the kobold into her arms. “How about you fight with me, hm?” The baby was sound asleep in the blink of an eye. “Oh dear, they must be exhausted.”

I peered into Riale’s face and lowered my voice. “They must have sensed how tense everyone’s been...”

Now that I stopped to think about it, it was thanks to Riale that we were able to hold our own in this fight. Without mithril, the thought of slaying the leviathan would have never crossed my mind.

In any case... I took a deep breath. *All the preparations are done. Now, we wait.*

The night was uneventful. We were all able to get to sleep peacefully.

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The next morning, Riale’s fierce barking woke me from my sleep. They seemed to have sensed something—or rather, to have *seen* something with their <Clairvoyance>.

I immediately realized that the leviathan was heading our way. Not a moment later, the sound of bells filtered into the cave from outside.

I reached the surface and was welcomed by a clear, sunny sky. But below it, a towering obsidian snake—no, a *dragon-like* creature—was poking its head out of the ocean. The dragonkind's eyes were pitch-black like a starless night sky, and it was glaring right at us.

"The leviathan..." I muttered in a small voice. I couldn't take my eyes off the colossal beast. *I've never seen anything like it outside of the legends. It must be the leviathan.*

As if it was done giving us time to prepare, the dragonkind headed right towards us, soaring elegantly across the sky.

Erivan's voice boomed. "All right! Everyone ready?!"

A chorus of "Yes!" echoed out from across the island.

With the voices of my people behind me, I awaited the beast's arrival with the humanoid golems and Taran at my side. Slightly behind us were our larger golems, standing in a line with enormous shields on their arms. These shields obscured what was further behind us—the giant crossbow.

Riena, Erivan, and Ciel were clustered together beside the crossbow. The other slimes were stationed beneath the towering weapon. A mithril arrow had been notched onto the string. Our thick spider silk rope was tied to the tail end, and it stretched all the way into the depths of the cave.

Meanwhile, Baris, Starkers, and Furay were stationed at the cave entrance, right next to the large rope. I couldn't see any further than this, but everyone inside the cave should be standing by next to the rope as well. When the time was right, we would all pull on it together.

Our strategy was probably clear at this point. First, we would fire this gigantic harpoon at the leviathan to lock it in place and prevent any nimble movements it may attempt. When it was still, I would slam this pickaxe into its head.

The plan itself was, in theory, perfect. However, I grew increasingly uneasy as the leviathan approached, and I got a better look at its actual size. It just kept getting bigger and bigger... And almost as if it wanted to deal the final blow to

my shaky confidence, the beast, which had ascended high into the heavens, turned to face us and opened its terrifying maw.

My entire body tensed up. *It's going to attack!*

Roaring flames blasted out of its mouth. I quickly thrust out both hands before me and cast a water spell. *"Water Arrow!"*

My *Water Arrow* tore through the torrent of fire, reducing it to pure steam before slamming against the leviathan's body. It didn't even leave a scratch. Water spells were rather ineffective against marine creatures to begin with, so I wasn't too surprised. There was still a chance that some other element might work.

Without a moment's delay, I fired the mid-tier spell, *Thunder*, at the beast. A bright flash of light darted straight through the air at the leviathan, and it soon shrouded the beast's towering frame. However, like I had suspected, lightning spells didn't work either.

I chewed on my lip. "So magic really *is* ineffective against this thing." My spells were only good for riling it up.

The angered leviathan's movements became much more agile and rapid, and it started spouting fire in every direction—it didn't even stop to aim first. I summoned up a *Shield* to protect everyone.

However, my *Shield* couldn't cover the entire reclaimed land, and some of the flames exploded onto the stones, shaking the ground beneath our feet. We had stacked our defensive wall high and thick, hoping that it would offer even a semblance of protection against our invader, but it was blasted into pieces in the blink of an eye.

I tried to steady myself, but the quaking knocked me off-balance. Seeing that, the leviathan turned to face me and plunged down from the sky. *Okay, it's going to ram itself into us... All right!*

"Erivan!" I yelled. "Ready?!"

"Any time, Chief!" the general shouted back. "Turn to two o'clock! No, three o'clock!!"

The crossbow rotated instantly.

“Now!” Erivan hollered. “Shoot!!!”

The sound of wind tearing resounded from behind me. The harpoon, however, was nowhere in sight. Riena had used a non-elemental spell, *Hide*, to turn the harpoon and rope invisible.

And naturally, the leviathan was completely oblivious as it continued its charge. With a sudden howl, however, it stopped moving. The harpoon had flown right at the leviathan and, with Riena’s spell having worn off, we could now see it sticking out of its abdomen.

The beast crashed down into the ocean with a deafening splash. But considering its size and strength, it wouldn’t die from an attack of this caliber. We moved on to the next stage of our plan.

Erivan raised his voice. “Okay! Pull!!!”

Loud shouts of “Yes, sir!” rang out like an echo. The other monsters were pulling on the rope inside the cave. It was a slow process, but we were indeed dragging it out.

The leviathan had fallen into the ocean. It soared out of the sea once again and writhed around like a fish on a hook, trying to free itself from the harpoon. As it struggled, it tried to dive into the ocean, and its large body slammed against our defensive wall. Water and rubble were flung high into the air, leaving a mess in its wake.

However, no matter how hard it struggled, it was stuck, almost like a dog on a leash. To fan its unease even further, I opened up my inventory and selected a monumental amount of stone and coal before making them rain down around the massive creature.

I knew that wouldn’t injure it at all, but it served as a good distraction and obscured the creature’s vision. The leviathan’s anxiety had reached its peak, and it knew it couldn’t just stay there and let us do as we pleased. Once again, it started hurling its fiery breaths everywhere. Alas, it was a rash move, because it ignited the coal around it and only ended up blinding itself even more.

“We won!” someone yelled out from behind me. It was Erivan, who was

convinced that the beast was down after seeing it engulfed in black smoke.

“No, not quite yet!” I shouted, and not a moment later, an immense torrent of flame burst out from the smog.

Its speed and size was on a whole other level compared to all the flames it had spat at us until now. The scorching fire didn’t even graze the water, but steam was rising from the ocean around it nonetheless.

My Shield *won’t be able to block that... I might be able to protect myself, but it’d be impossible to shield everyone else here along with Yggdrasil.* On the spur of the moment, I channeled all my mana into a *Water* spell to meet the inferno head-on with an aqueous pillar.

The leviathan’s attack was ridiculously strong. It crashed into the water I’d manifested with so much force that I felt as though it were pushing me backwards. The sizzling sound of evaporating water gradually inched closer to me, and sweat streamed down all over my body like a waterfall. *At this rate...*

The moment that thought flashed across my mind, I felt someone supplying me with mana from behind.

“Lord Heale!” Riena exclaimed as she channeled mana into me. Her voice was loud and firm, like an anchor chaining me down to this world. “Don’t lose!”

“Riena...” I whispered. I dug my feet into the ground, shouted a battle cry at the top of my lungs, and I poured every last bit of mana I had into my spell. “Huuurgh!!!”

My *Water* spell steadily consumed the flame and struck the leviathan, making it jolt and almost lose balance.

“Erivan!” I yelled. “Now!”

“On it! Aaand...pull!”

At Erivan’s shout, there was a sharp tug on the rope, and the gap between the leviathan and myself decreased in an instant. Seeing that, I threw as much rock as I could on the creature before I started running. Taran joined me.

“Get ready!” I called out as I ran.

The humanoid golems nearby lifted their shields and formed a circle around

Taran and me. The leviathan was so exhausted that it could barely even aim at us, yet it breathed out several small flames in desperation anyway.

I manifested a *Shield*, and I felt another layer of *Shield* protecting me—Riena had cast the spell from behind us. The flames hardly made a dent in our protection.

As we closed in, the leviathan likely realized it had lost this battle. When the beast was dragged within a stone's throw of us, it tried to flee by soaring into the sky. *I won't let you.*

"Taran, it's your turn!"

Heeding my command, the spider wrapped silk around my arm. With a rapid twist of her body, she flung me at the leviathan's head. I repeated a motion I had become all too used to—I lifted my pickaxe...

"Take thaaat!!!"

...and smashed it into the leviathan's head.

The leviathan let out a pained roar. My plan was perfect...or so I had assumed, but I had completely forgotten to take the leviathan's voice into account.

An earsplitting howl pierced my ears at point-blank range, and I felt as if my entire world was shaking. During my fall, the world started to turn to black.

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Within my fading vision, I saw the leviathan falling listlessly onto the reclaimed land. As I made my slow descent through the air, I saw Riena and Erivan running towards me. Behind them were Baris and Starkers.

Riena... Guys... This time, I was able to protect the people important to me...

"Lord Heale!!!"

Moments before I completely lost my grip on reality, I heard Riena's desperate scream.

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was the pleasant warmth on the back

of my head. I blinked, and my vision gradually focused. I saw the face of a beautiful young woman with raven hair staring down at me—Riena.

“Lord Heale? Lord Heale!” She called my name, and I could hear the relief in her voice when she said it a second time.

“Ri...ena...?” I rasped as I took a look around me.

My comrades were all looking down at me with worry in their eyes. Erivan and Furay were shedding tears of joy, Riale licked my face, Baris had abandoned his calm persona to clasp his hands before his chest and look up to the heavens, and Starkers was high fiving Taran and Unit Fifteen before starting to dance on the spot.

Meanwhile, I finally realized why my head had been so warm—I was resting on Riena’s lap. Ciel had flattened himself into a mattress below the rest of my body.

Oh. I’m...alive.

“Guys, thank you...” I whispered, my voice shaking with emotion.

All the monsters around me cheered in reply. Someone started playing an instrument, and I could see people celebrating, shaking each other’s hands gleefully.

Something warm splashed on my cheek. I turned to look up once again. Tears formed in the corner of Riena’s eyes like glittering gems as they slid down her cheeks.

“Lord Heale... Lord Heale!!!” she muttered between sobs as if that were the only word she knew.

My eyes widened as she threw her arms around me in a tight embrace. “R-Riena...”

I sat up and gently patted her back as I whispered, “Sorry for worrying you...”

“I’m so glad...” She sniffed. “What would I ever do without you?”

For a long while after that, I stroked her back, offering her silent comfort as she cried her heart out.

Chapter 15: Look at All the Comrades by My Side!

We'd defeated the leviathan. In the aftermath, we found the reclaimed land completely battered and filled with holes. But in exchange, we'd won without losing a single person.

The slimes and goblins were currently busy with filling all the holes in the stone. However, the leviathan hadn't only left us with a list of repairs—its body also bore many gifts.

When we ripped off its black scales, we realized it had the same transparent properties as glass but was roughly as hard as diamond. Before we could stop him, Starkers had eaten its flesh raw and proved that leviathan meat tasted heavenly.

Once we finished taking the beast apart, we set aside its scales and flesh as valuable resources for Sheol. The day we defeated the leviathan would become a very important day in the history of this island.

I tried to offer my aid with dissecting the leviathan and freezing its flesh, but everyone voiced their firm objections. Thus, I ended up resting the entire time at the foot of Yggdrasil. I couldn't deny that I was aching all over, especially my joints. I decided to accept everyone's goodwill and just waited for time to pass by peacefully.

During my rest, Erivan came over and suggested that we hold a banquet with the flesh of the leviathan as our main dish. I agreed, and we scheduled a celebratory banquet for that night.

In the evening, the monsters lined up large tables below Yggdrasil, and a scrumptious feast was laid out on them. The plates were piled high with leviathan meat, which had been grilled, stewed, boiled, and so on. As sides, there were also fruits, fish, and even murder bird meat.

Erivan stood up. "All right, everyone! A toast to our victory!" He raised his cup filled with fruit juice.

Everyone toasted in response and finished the juice in one gulp. I sluggishly touched my cup to join in spirit. My body ached so much that I could only lift my arm slightly.

The toast signaled the start to our lively banquet. The faces of each and every citizen of Sheol Reef were lit up with vivid joy—even more so than when we'd defeated the murder birds.

Taking in this sight, I whispered to myself, "We really won..."

If I were to be honest, somewhere in the back of my mind, I had probably braced myself for death during our battle. *I was scared of dying, and I was even more terrified of everyone else dying...*

Erivan, Starkers, and Taran caught my eye. They had stuffed their cheeks full of meat and were munching away to their heart's content. From the sounds of all the people around them chatting, they were actually holding an eating contest.

I stared at everyone slightly absentmindedly. But then, I heard a "Woof!" from next to me. I cast my eyes down and saw Riale. Ciel was with them too. They were offering fruits to me. *Oh, they might have been concerned because I was spaced out and wasn't eating anything.*

"Thanks, you two." I gathered them both into my arms and stroked them. Riale's fur was soft and fluffy, while Ciel was smooth and squishy. A smile tugged at the corner of my lips. At the same time, reality finally started sinking in. *So this isn't a dream.*



As the two little creatures warmed my heart, Baris came over with a cup in hand and called out to me. “Lord Heale, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude for risking your life to defeat that beast.”

“I should be the one thanking you all, Baris.” I smiled. “It wouldn’t have been possible without your help.”

Baris gave me a humble bow. “I just can’t believe we managed to slay a beast of legend... Even now, I’m having trouble believing we really did encounter a leviathan.”

“Yeah, same here. I’ve never seen a creature that large before. For a moment, I almost thought our battle with it was a dream.”

“Indeed. But to tell you the truth...being able to live so happily and comfortably on an island like this already seems like a dream to me.” Baris looked over at all the monsters celebrating around us. “However, it *is* reality. After coming to this island, I feel as if all the things I’ve learned until now have been overturned. We killed a mythical beast, and I even had the fortune of meeting someone like you, my lord. Though I may be a bag of old bones, there are still so many things I have yet to see.”

“I get it... I want you to live a long life as well, Baris. Well, to put it another way, I really want your help. Not just for what we’ve achieved so far, but for all we’ve yet to achieve in the future as well.”

He closed his eyes briefly before saying, “Lord Heale, I am very honored to receive such words. Before I came to this place, I didn’t put much value on my life. As long as I could protect my princess, I would be content with dying at any time. However, there are so many things I want to do now. Rather strange for a person of my age, don’t you think?”

He let out a chuckle before he continued, “Now then, I shall take my leave. I have some very studious children waiting for me to teach them how to read.”

“Studious, huh? I can’t wait to see what they’ll do after they grow up.”

“I as well. The problem is that there is a limit to what I know and can teach. I’m also rather short on time...” He sighed.

I frowned. “I’ve assigned you a lot of jobs, so you must be very busy. It would be nice if we could eventually build facilities like schools and libraries...” Now that fulfilling our basic needs was no longer an issue, we had enough surplus on hand to start considering more sophisticated projects. *That being said, it’s not like we can dig up books. We’ll need to import them from somewhere.*

I mulled over the problem and continued, “Construction is the easy part. Getting our hands on books is the issue. If we want to import texts, we need to establish trade with an outside party.”

Baris inclined his head. “To achieve that, we’ll need large ships that can travel long distances. And we will need facilities to help us build them as well.”

“Right. There’s a whole lot of work to do. I’m counting on your help, Baris.”

“But of course. Please tell me if there is anything I can do. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” He gave me a deep bow before walking away.

He’s right. We have so many things we need to make. I nodded to myself.

Another person chose this moment to call out to me. “Lord Heale, sorry for keeping you waiting!” It was Riena.

All the residents of Sheol had helped with the banquet in some way, and Riena was there as our head chef to supervise all the cooking. She seemed to have finally finished her work.

“Hey, Riena. Looks like everyone is enjoying the food.”

She grinned. “I think so too! It looks like it was worth all the hard work! But...” Her smile slowly turned into a frown as she stared at my face in concern.

“Oh! Sorry about that,” I said sheepishly. “I am going to eat, I promise. I just got distracted by my thoughts.” I grabbed a fork to dig into the meat right away. But then, a sharp pain tore at my arm, and it slipped from my hand. “Oops... Ah.”

Riena picked up the fork I had dropped and replaced it with a new one. She then lifted my plate and served some meat onto it.

“Th-Thanks, Riena,” I said.

She continued to fill my plate, and with a stern look on her face, she said,

“Lord Heale, I have one request.”

“What is it?”

“When you’re doing something, or when you face problems which are difficult for you to handle alone, please rely on me...on everyone.”

“Riena...”

“You’re very important to all of us. So please...”

I recalled the fight with the leviathan this morning. If Riena hadn’t shared her mana with me, the battle might have gone another way. Back then, I didn’t—No, I *couldn’t* ask Riena or anyone else for help. Perhaps in my eyes, I’d felt that them lending me their aid was already gracious enough, so I couldn’t ask for more.

If Riena gave me her mana, her *Shield* would weaken in turn. That would put her and all the people she was protecting in danger. I didn’t want to lose any of them. But now, Riena had made me realize something: my comrades didn’t want to lose me either.

Oh... I see. It wasn’t a conscious thought, but somewhere in my mind, I did see myself as their governor. A governor has a duty to protect their people. Though I do admit that many people don’t fulfill that duty properly...

From the very beginning, I had tried to defend my comrades—to be their guardian. What I didn’t realize was that to them, I was just as precious. *That’s why I can’t die. I need to live on for all of us.*

I took a deep breath. “Got it. I won’t try to solve everything by myself anymore.”

Riena bowed apologetically. “Please forgive me for my impudence, my lord.”

“Hey, don’t be like that. Tell me what’s on your mind. There are many things I can’t do by myself.”

“Thank you. And, well, you seem to be having trouble with your hand, so...” Riena picked up a piece of meat with the fork and brought it close to my mouth. “Here, please open wide.”

I felt heat gathering in my cheeks. “Uh, this is one of those things that I *can* do

on my own!” I protested.

“No, you need quite some time to recover.” She was firm. “You weren’t able to raise your cup earlier. I was watching.”

“Y-You saw that...?”

“I can read you like a book, Lord Heale! Please open your mouth!”

I surrendered and did as she said.

She fed me during the rest of the banquet. She was very attentive. Whenever I got meat juice on my mouth, she would even wipe it off. The people nearby all took turns poking fun at us—Furay, Erivan, Starkers, Taran... The list grew longer and longer, and my face grew hotter and hotter.

Our banquet that night was a huge success. Despite the fact that I spent the time in a constant state of embarrassment, everyone else had a load of fun.

***

A few days later, I had made a full recovery and could finally walk straight. I was in a room inside the residential area of the cave and was changing my clothes when Riena greeted me.

“Good morning, Lord Heale. Are you feeling better?”

“Morning, Riena. I still hear a bit of ringing in my ears every now and then, but I’m mostly fine.”

She gasped. “That’s not good! I think it might be better if you take it easy for a while longer.”

“I’m fine, really. You’ve cast a lot of healing spells on me, I took my medicine properly, and I had plenty of rest. I was actually feeling a little sluggish due to a lack of exercise. That’s why I’m going to move around a bit today and check in on everyone.”

“I see...” She frowned slightly. “In that case, please allow me to accompany you. Riale’s with me too!”

“Ah. Shall we head off together, then?”

“Yes!”

“Woof!”

With two companions by my side, I left my room in the residential area. A wide tunnel stretched down from the main cave shaft, and there were a number of stone rooms lining both sides.

Glowstones were embedded into the walls of each room as lighting, and all of the walls, ceilings, and floors were lined neatly with smooth stone. The sun was still out, so most of the adults weren’t around, but I spotted goblin kids playing hide-and-seek. A few elderly goblins were watching over them with warm expressions.

We left the residential area and arrived at the main cave shaft where large stairs led up to the cave entrance hall. The general structure of our cave was relatively simple—the one main shaft branched off into smaller tunnels which led to different areas.

While we were climbing up to the surface, we came across Furay and Taran, who happened to be heading down.

“Ah, Lord Heale!” Furay walked up to me. “Are you okay? Can you walk now?”

“Yeah, sorry about worrying you. As you can see, I’m the picture of health.” I gave her a small smile. “Are you two going to dig around?”

Furay nodded and Taran lifted her four pickaxes proudly. *They’re motivated, huh?* It was contagious, and my feet nearly grew a mind of their own—I was itching to mine as well. “Okay, I’ll join—”

“Nuh uh. Not yet, Lord Heale.” Riena trained her eyes on me like a warden.

“I-I know,” I stammered. “Um, work hard in my stead, you two...”

“I will!” Furay chirped with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “I’ll be having the time of my life down there!”

Now she’s just kicking me while I’m down! Although, from her perspective, this was her chance to overtake her mining rival.

We waved goodbye to Furay and Taran before we resumed our journey to the surface.

Furay found what she was looking for and realized her wish. Once she evolves,

though, she'll probably find a new goal. What is she going to work towards next, I wonder?

As for Taran, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call her the unsung hero in our fight against the leviathan. I can't thank her enough for everything she did.

Those two have probably been polishing their mining skills while I recovered. If I don't get back down to the mines soon, they're gonna leave me in the dust.

Now then... I looked around us. *We've nearly reached the surface.* One thing stuck out like a sore thumb—the metal tubes on the ceiling. The wider tube pumped the underground hot spring water to the surface.

Meanwhile, there was a smaller tube that ran parallel with small holes along it. This was a ventilation tube that Furay had asked Starkers to make. They had informed me about their project beforehand, and it had been constructed over the past few days. *With this, the air won't feel so stifling inside the cave.*

Finally, I arrived at the surface for the first time in days. I scanned the area. The leviathan carcass was nowhere in sight—we seemed to have finished dissecting it. However, the battle had left many raw wounds on Sheol. Part of the reclaimed land had collapsed, and a section of the defensive wall had crumbled completely.

I spotted golems and goblins transporting the giant crossbow we had used against the beast. Below the crossbow was a platform with wheels, and they were moving it along with a rope.

I got closer so that I could get a better look. Among them was an exceptionally buff goblin: Erivan. He noticed me right away and left the line of porters temporarily.

"Chief!" he exclaimed. "Have ya recovered?"

"Yep. I'm feeling much better. Sorry for worrying you."

"Nah, I'll be honest, I wasn't too worried. I had full faith that nothin' can keep ya down."

Riena chuckled. "This again? General, remind me. Who was the person who kept asking me about Lord Heale's health every single time he bumped into

me?”

“W-Well...” Erivan scratched his cheek, looking a little sheepish.

He was a man who put on a tough outer shell and never bared his weaknesses, but at the same time, he was a compassionate man who cared deeply about everyone here. Though he did have a sharp tongue from time to time, we all respected and adored him. After all, it was no secret that he was a kind person.

“By the way, Erivan,” I said. “I was just wondering, but are we going to keep this crossbow?”

“Yeah. I’m thinkin’ about placing it somewhere along the coast. We all worked together on this thing, and it’d be a waste to trash it. Plus, with this, we can take down even the biggest ships with one strike.”

I hummed. “If we had more mithril available, maybe we could have defeated the leviathan with this thing alone.”

He nodded. “I’m plannin’ even more security measures so that we can deal with most threats by ourselves, even while yer down in the mines, Chief.”

“I know I can trust you on this. Keep up the good work, General.”

“You leave it to me!” Erivan thumped his chest with his fist before turning back to the crossbow.

If this were an army, Riena and Baris would be strategists or commanders stationed back at headquarters, while Erivan would be down there in the battlefield leading the troops by example. He was a mighty and charismatic warrior. I was sure that he would continue to lead Sheol to a better future, perhaps pulling us forward literally from time to time.

“Now then, next up...” I muttered to myself.

I walked towards the source of the loud metallic clanging sounds. In the forge, Starkers and the goblins were, just like any other day, busy at work. *What are they making this time?* I peered at their hands curiously. I saw thin metal rods and round pieces of glass.

It wasn’t too hard to deduce. “Glasses, huh?”

Riena nodded. “Yes. Just like humans, some of our goblins are shortsighted, but we didn’t know how to manufacture glasses. Starkers noticed that and made them for us.”

Some goblins were crafting the metal frames while others worked on the transparent lenses by bending or shaving at them. *Yeah, these are definitely the glasses I know.* It clicked in my mind. *That’s right, the leviathan scales were transparent. So they’re making glasses with those...*

Starkers had been aware that some of our people had visual impairments and had kept that fact in mind. Then, when we discovered the scales, it had likely triggered a revelation. He had long been using his unique talents to solve our problems on this island—he would think about what we lacked and what solutions would be possible based on what we had access to. I was sure that he would continue to make use of his extensive knowledge to introduce all kinds of wonderful things to Sheol.

Right now, he had a focused look in his eyes as he cut the scales and beat them with a hammer. I actually had some business with him, but it wasn’t anything urgent. *Maybe later,* I decided.

We left the forge and made our way to Yggdrasil. Our next destination was the farm at the foot of the tree. I was greeted by a surprising sight—there were boxes and barrels crammed with a variety of fruits and vegetables, and they were practically overflowing. *That was fast!* Baris stood next to these containers, and he seemed to be making notes on a piece of paper.

“Morning, Baris!” I called out to him.

“My, Lord Heale!” He turned to face me immediately. “And hello there, Your Highness, Riale. My lord, are you in good health now?”

“Yep, made a full recovery, as you can see.” I marveled at all the produce. “That aside, wow, what a harvest!”

“Indeed, especially considering the fact that only half a month has passed since we moved our farm over here. Our hypothesis was correct—Yggdrasil *does* hasten the growth of plants.”

“Certainly looks like it.” I nodded. “We won’t run out of vegetables with this.

Ah, we were growing wheat as well, right?”

“Yes, our wheat is growing rapidly. Soon, we will be able to make bread.”

“That’s great! I can’t wait.”

“I share the same sentiment. We have so many wonderful things to look forward to, I feel inspired to live so much longer.” He grinned.

Hearing that, I schooled my face into a serious expression. “About that. You might have heard from Furay, but she found risestones. If you evolve as well, Baris—”

“Thank you for your kind offer, Lord Heale. I’m aware that we have more in our inventory, but when you’ve regained your energy, let’s discuss how best to use them. There is no rush. I’m still very much alive and kicking.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “In that case, I’m counting on you to manage our harvest.”

“It’s safe in my hands!”

Baris gave us a wave to bid us farewell. Riale was sitting on Riena’s shoulder as we left the farm.

There’s still so much I can learn from Baris. He’s the true brains of Sheol, hands down—our navigator plotting out a course, steering us towards the greatest bounties. Riena, Erivan, and I just aren’t able to do what he can.

“Okay, that should be just about everything...” I muttered.

Goblin children were bathing in the hot spring at the foot of Yggdrasil. I spotted some slimes drifting lazily on the water like small floating bubbles.

This was when Riena spoke up. “My lord! Would you like to head to the summit of Yggdrasil after this? You see, we expanded the field of flowers we saw last time!”

“Really? Now I’m intrigued. It’s an uphill climb, so it’ll be a good exercise.” I prepared to take my leave, but something stopped me. “Oh.”

Ciel hopped over to my feet. He seemed to be offering me a ride to the tree summit.

I gave him a smile. “Thanks, Ciel.”

Ciel stretched his body and let Riena and Riale climb on as well. Then, he began making his way up the tree trunk.

When we arrived at the summit, I saw quite a few goblins around. A handful were on lookout duty, while another group was gathering leaves and branches. What caught me by surprise, however, was the spider webs that'd been strung between the branches of the tree—the work of our cave spiders. Apparently, these were traps for avian creatures like the murder birds.

I watched them as we pressed on. "I've got to say, this island has developed quite a lot," I commented.

"All of this was only possible thanks to all your hard work, Lord Heale!"

"No, I'm not alone anymore... This life is only possible because you were here with me, because *everyone* was here with me."

That's right. We wouldn't have seen this bright future come to fruition if any one of us hadn't been here. Maybe she's right in the sense that it wouldn't have started without me, but all I did was give everyone a chance. And...to be honest, the person who gained the most from being on this island...that's me.

"That's not—" Riena stopped and shook her head. "Ignore that. Thank you, my lord. That makes me really happy. Ah, I think I see it!"

"I do too! And wow, it's definitely bigger than before!"

Riale rushed forward, leaving us behind as they dashed right into the field of flowers. Ciel hopped around energetically as he chased after the kobold.

"This is actually Riale's favorite place as well," Riena explained.

"Huh. You know what, I like it too. It soothes my very soul." *This place truly is like paradise... Paradise, huh?* "Hey, Riena, there's someone I really want to bury here. I want this to be the place he finds peace. May I?"

"Of course! I'm sure he'd be elated!"

"Thanks."

I dug a small hole in the soil of the flower field. There, I carefully laid down the jar around my neck. This would become the grave of the monster that I couldn't save.

Riena crouched down. “That jar is...” She hesitated. “Are you sure you want to bury him?”

Whenever I was in trouble or feeling down, I had a habit of finding solace by gripping this jar filled with the ashes of someone precious to me. Riena knew that, and she was likely wondering whether I was truly okay with burying such a priceless keepsake.

“I am, but I’m not sure whether he would feel the same way. That’s why I want to ask him directly one day.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean...”

“Yeah, I want to revive him someday and apologize. So... Please wait here until then,” I whispered.

I covered the hole with soil and clasped my hands together in prayer. I looked beside me, and Riena was praying for his peace along with me.

In a small voice, I muttered, “Thank you, truly.”

“You really don’t have to. Lord Heale, I made a decision. I’m going to help you! I will also dig for a dragon orb to revive him!” she replied enthusiastically.

That was when I heard footsteps behind us. When I turned around, I saw the humanoid golem Unit Fifteen, who had a crown on its head. It was both the leader of the golems and our local messenger. There was even a bag hanging from its shoulder.

Unit Fifteen fished out a wooden box from the bag and offered it to me.

“Oh, this is...” I muttered as I took it into my hands. Unit Fifteen gave me a bow before it promptly left the area. “Thanks, Unit Fifteen!” I hurriedly called out.

Riena stared at the box curiously. “What might this be?”

“Ah, you see...” I opened the lid and showed the contents to her. Inside was a ring fixed with a magnificent pearl. It was the pearl I had found after defeating the satan clams with Riena a while back.

I had tried giving it to her back then, but I had forgotten to turn it into an accessory first, so she had gently declined. That was why I had approached

Starkers later with the request that he turn it into a ring.

I took a moment to admire the item. He had apparently used mithril for the metal band, and it was featherlight. He had even sculpted plant designs across it. Finally, there was the pearl sat atop of his fine artwork. The ring was so delicate and elegant that it was hard to believe that Starkers, of all people, had crafted it.

This will definitely look amazing on Riena. I'm sure of it. And...I need to tell her something when I give it to her. I want her to know the feelings that have been brewing in my heart for so very long.

When I had looked back on my memories, I realized that I had special feelings for Riena since the moment we'd met. My love for her hadn't started just because she gained a human-like appearance.

While Riena was a considerate girl who was kind to everyone, she also had the heart of a lion. She was willing to stare adversity in the face without backing down. Slowly, but surely, she had stolen my heart.

In the underground hot spring, I had planned on telling her how I felt. However, that had ended in failure after she fell asleep.

That was why I wanted to take this opportunity to try again—this ring was a token of my affection.

Her eyes widened. "This is...the pearl from the satan clam we defeated together! I see, you turned it into a ring."

"Yeah. I kind of gave it to you as it was last time, remember? That's why I asked Starkers to turn it into a proper present." I held it out to her. "Please have this, Riena."

"I-It's for me?!" She gasped in surprise. Her face flushed pink, and she avoided my gaze.

I tilted my head quizzically. By now, accessories with gems were quite a common sight on this island. *Why is she being so shy? That reminds me, when I gave her the plain pearl, she reacted in the same way.*

"Yeah." I nodded. "I asked that it be made to fit a human-sized finger."

By now, Riena's cheeks had gone past pink to cherry red, and she finally managed to find her words. "U-Um, Lord Heale, pearls... Pearls are, um... To us goblins, we only give pearls when we are asking for someone's hand in marriage!"

"M-Marriage?!"

I see, so that's why Riena's reacting like this... I-I mean, I wanted to give this ring to her to say that I liked her, but in the case of marriage, it's... I'm not good enough for Riena. I'm a weak, pathetic guy.

That definitely doesn't mean I don't *want to marry her though! I'd be lying if I said I didn't! But still, it's too early for me to ask for her hand in marriage! There should be a bunch of steps and procedures before such a sacred event. For example, a Sanphales noble would first walk around the palace gardens with the person they want to court or dance together with in a ball... I guess I can't do that stuff here.*

"S-Sorry," I stammered. "I was too ignorant, please forgive me..."

This must have put Riena in a difficult spot as well.

When we had first explored Yggdrasil, Riena had mentioned that she liked me. That was why I was certain that she returned my feelings somewhat. However, marriage was a completely different matter. Traditionally, getting married was vowing to one another that you wished to form a family with them and raise children together. One needed to choose their partners carefully.

A while ago, Riena had mentioned that I was a little dorky, so it was probably inconvenient to be proposed to by someone like me. *We're even from different races...*

My mind was running all over the place, and I had completely lost my composure. But then, Riena reached out a hand.

"N-No, that's all right. In fact..." She snatched up the pearl ring from my hand so fast that she left only an afterimage. "That's why I shall accept this gratefully! So, you must marry me now!"

I was struck speechless for a moment. "Huh? Huuuh?!" *No. Wait. That doesn't make any sense! When I gave her that ring, I was completely oblivious!* "Y-You

can’t agree to a marriage proposal so easily! It’s a decision that will decide the rest of your life!”

And...marrying me*? No, she deserves much better.*

However, Riena was firm in her reply. “No! It’s already happened! If you try to take it back, the goblin gods will punish you!”

Riena continued to scare me, saying that I would turn into a worm in my next life or that all my teeth would get cavities. She was clearly making it all up on the spot.

However, this determined, bold part of her was probably one of the reasons I had fallen for her. She would always tug me right out of my shell.

By now, after inventing those many creative forms of retribution, Riena was out of breath. Her cheeks were bright red as she leaned in towards my face.

Her breath tickled my lips as she whispered, “Or...do you not want me?”

“N-No, I could never...!” *I could never think that. In fact, she is the person I want more than anything.*

Under the watchful eyes of Riale and Ciel, I tried to muster up as much bravery as possible.

Riena looked into my eyes, and in a pleading tone, she whispered, “Then...”

Seeing that, I found my resolve. I would protect her for the rest of my life. “Riena, I like you.”

“I do too... I love you, Lord Heale.”

Slowly, both of us leaned forward. Today, I experienced the first kiss of my life.

Or at least, I was supposed to, but the sound of a bell rang out from the reclaimed land near the cave entrance.

On reflex, both of us jolted backward and exchanged nods. I was feeling both shy and a little disappointed, but there was something more urgent at the moment. Together, we headed to the source of the sound, and from the summit of Yggdrasil, we actually saw what had raised the alarm.

Out on the open waters, there was a hulking warship with black sails. A tattered black flag was raised high, and even from here, we could see its emblem—a white skull.

“Pirates!” I exclaimed. “Riena, let’s find the others right away!”

“Yes, my lord!”

We promptly started running towards the foot of Yggdrasil.

