
A CAVE KING'S ROAD TO PARADISE
CLIMBING TO THE TOP WITH MY ALMIGHTY MINING SKILLS!
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A Cave King’s Road to Paradise: Climbing to the Top with My Almighty Mining Skills! Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: A Pirate Ship Arrived!

When I, Heale Sanphales, reached adulthood, my father bestowed a certain domain upon me. This domain was called Sheol, a reef in the distant seas, and I was sent—no, practically *banished* to my fief.

My first impression of Sheol Reef convinced me that my death was only a matter of time. There wasn't even a tuft of grass in sight, never mind any kind of river. It would have been more accurate to call the place a big rock. Despair weighed heavily on my shoulders—but when I entered the only cave on the island, I discovered the true abilities of my crest, <Cave King>.

<Cave King> allowed me to mine minerals safely, swiftly, and efficiently. Thanks to my crest, my vision was clear even in the dark cave, as if I were standing in the light of day. Furthermore, it came with a skill that could hold my mined material in an "inventory," an invisible storehouse.

But that wasn't the end of the bounty I discovered. Buried underneath Sheol, there were many minerals with mysterious powers I had never heard of in Barleon. For example, the mana minerals that could boost my mana pool, or the turtlestones that could increase one's lifespan. With the help of <Cave King>, I dug up one extraordinary stone after another.

I used these stones to my benefit in various ways, like empowering my arcane abilities. As I dug on, I discovered monsters in the tunnels and came across more monsters who washed up ashore, and my community kept growing. Armed with incredible minerals, my crest, and my trusty comrades, Sheol flourished at an unbelievable rate.

Back to the present, I was running through the "forest" at the summit of Yggdrasil's trunk as I made my way down the giant tree of Sheol, and from here, I had a good view of all the fruits of our efforts. We had reclaimed land around Sheol Reef's original rocky landscape, expanding the area of the once-cramped island. One by one, the facilities on the reclaimed land came into view—Yggdrasil, the tree I was running across; the farm; the baths... Sheol had indeed

transformed into a prosperous place.

A young woman with raven hair, Riena, was running at my side. “Lord Heale,” she said, “we will reach an incline soon! Please watch your step!”

Riena was a former goblin who, with the use of a risestone, had evolved into her current human-like form and gained powerful arcane talents. During our time together on the island, Riena and I slowly grew closer and closer—in fact, we had only just disclosed our special feelings for each other, but, no thanks to the sudden appearance in the open sea of a ship with a black flag, our romantic moment had been utterly ruined.

“That aside...” Gazing out at the ship, I muttered, “I find it hard to believe that a ship would come to a remote place like this.”

As I observed it, something caught my attention. The sails were tattered, and there was an alarming amount of damage to the vessel itself. *Hmm...*

Riena nodded. “Agreed. I have never seen a ship of such a grand size before, either.”

The ship’s size was indeed remarkable. The fishing boats of Sheol could only carry around ten passengers, but this ship was perhaps at least twenty or thirty times bigger.

“Yeah, it’s huge,” I said. “It must be a ship of the line.”

A ship of the line was a towering warship that could hold two thousand people at maximum capacity, and they were the capital ships of the Sanphales navy—the navy of my homeland. I had heard that a few vessels had been captured and repurposed by pirates. With that black flag with a skull hoisted high in the air, it *had* to be a pirate ship.

Frowning, I voiced my unease. “A couple dozen people can’t run a ship like that... Hundreds of unwelcome guests might try to invade Sheol.”

There was slight melancholy in Riena’s voice as she said, “That means...we might have to fight again, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe. But unlike the leviathan or the murder birds, we should be able to communicate with these guys. There’s a chance that they only want to make a

brief stop for supplies. In that case, sharing some of our water and food wouldn't be much of an issue."

"That's a good point. I hope it will all end peacefully." Riena paused as a thought occurred to her. "But the person stationed at the coast right now is the general, I believe. We should hurry."

Her worry wasn't unfounded. Erivan—or as the other goblins called him, the general—was the man who supervised the defense measures on this island. He was equipped with a brawny body and <Great Warrior>, a crest which granted him mighty combat abilities. In terms of fighting, he was the most reliable ally possible. However, he had a somewhat quick temper, so Riena was right to be wary that he might immediately start talking with his fists in a confrontation with the pirates. *From what I know, pirates tend to be rough-mannered people. I'm worried too...*

I glanced around us and muttered, "All right, we're near the exit of the forest."

Each of Yggdrasil's branches were so thick and bulky that they looked more like individual towering trees. Many of these "trees" reached for the heavens from the summit of Yggdrasil's trunk, and we called this area a "forest."

Once we were out of the forest, we would arrive at the slope of Yggdrasil's trunk, which was gentle like a rolling hill. If we wanted to make our way towards the direction of the pirate ship, which was still drifting on the ocean, we had to climb down. Then, we had to travel through the rear reclaimed land —which housed our farm and baths—before proceeding through the tunnel inside the natural rock mountain to the other side, where we would find our frontal reclaimed land with our docked fishing boats. After this lengthy journey, we should finally have a better view of the pirate ship.

"It's so far away..." I sighed. But then, moments before I stepped onto the slope, something caught my attention. "Oh?"

An azure, blob-like creature slid forward from his position beside me. This was Ciel, slime monster who was my first friend on this island. Before my eyes, Ciel stretched his body and molded himself into a boat-like shape. He was probably inviting us to catch a ride.

“You’re a lifesaver, Ciel!” I said.

Riena expressed her gratitude as well. “Thank you very much, Mister Ciel.”

The two of us climbed on, and a third passenger soon joined us—Riale, a kobold baby, who rushed up from behind, sprinting on all fours like a puppy. Once everyone was on board, Ciel zoomed down the slope like a sled. With his help, we arrived at the foot of Yggdrasil in the blink of an eye—even further, in fact, because Ciel slid all the way to the tunnel entrance.

“I knew I could count on you!” I gave him my wholehearted praise before turning to Riena. “Okay, let’s hurry!”

“Yes!”

We made our way through the tunnel. I had dug through the walls of the original cave on Sheol to construct this tunnel, which connected the cave to the reclaimed land on the opposite end of the island, where Yggdrasil now grew. The entrance hall of the cave was the starting point of a complex network of underground tunnels that reminded me of an ant nest. Inside these tunnels, one would find the residential area of Sheol citizens and our mining shafts.

Warning bells were ringing throughout the island, signaling the invasion of the pirate ship, and the citizens inside the tunnel seemed to be flustered as well. Among them, I spotted Furay, a goblin girl, and Taran, a gigantic cave spider.

“Ah, Lord Heale,” Furay called out to me, unease clear on her face. “Did something show up again?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “A sailing vessel that looks like a pirate ship is approaching us.”

“A pirate ship?” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Phew, I was worried for nothing.” As someone who had witnessed the colossal leviathan only a few days ago, mere pirates weren’t anything to fuss about. The next moment, however, her eyes widened as a thought came to her. “Oh! But isn’t my dad at the reclaimed land right now?”

Furay was the daughter of Erivan, the general. She knew her father’s temper better than anyone else. Anxiety quickly overtook her expression. She muttered, “Knowing him, he’ll definitely attack them just because of their

status.”

I nodded. “That’s why we’re heading there at top speed.”

Taran seemed to understand that we were short on time, and she brought her body close to the ground. Just like Ciel, she was offering us a ride.

“Thanks, Taran,” I said, and all of us climbed onto her furry frame.

Taran’s abdomen was roughly twice the size of the body of a horse, and at a glance, she seemed as if her movements would be slowed by her bulk. However, when all of her eight legs were in action, she proved to be a good match for a horse. The next thing I knew, we were already at the other end of the tunnel, and the vast blue ocean filled my vision.

“Okay, the ship is...” I scanned our surroundings. “Yikes, they’ve already sent boats in our direction.”

Several boats were approaching us from the direction of the pirate ship, perhaps aiming to get ashore. In fact, one boat had already reached the reclaimed land. Taran had run as fast as she could, but unfortunately, we were too late.

Two monsters were engaged in battle near the closest boat in question. Armed Sheol goblins surrounded the pair, watching the duel with bated breath. On one side was a huge, muscular goblin—Erivan. He wielded an orichalcum axe in each hand, and he was sidestepping an attack from an orc with an equally impressive physique.

What I had learned about orcs had led me to the assumption that they were a race who left their upper bodies bare—a race that didn’t pay much attention to their appearance. However, the man I saw now was a rather fashionable orc. A black coat wrapped around his frame, and golden embroidery lined its hem—such magnificence wouldn’t look out of place on a Sanphales aristocrat. As he moved, the vibrant and colorful feather ornaments on his tricorn hat danced in the air.

The orc’s movements were a stark contrast to his ornate clothing and his bulky form—he nimbly dodged his opponent’s strikes, and when he saw a small opening, he took that chance to stab his slender rapier at Erivan. But a veteran

warrior like Erivan couldn't be underestimated: the goblin spectacularly evaded the swift onslaught of thrusts. The general prepared to counterattack—he swung one axe high in the air, preparing to deal a blow that would snap the rapier in two.

Sensing the goblin general's intention, the orc immediately distanced himself before wiping his brow with his sleeve. He opened his mouth to speak, and I was surprised by his soft and melodious tone. "You truly live up to your name as the strongest warrior of the Verdan tribe, Erivan."

"Yer not half-bad yerself," Erivan replied. "I know ya... Yer Camus from the Corvus tribe, ain't ya?"

"Oh, my. You know of my name, I see. Well, that's not a surprise at all, since nothing can stall the rumors of my gorgeous looks—whispers of my beauty can be heard across every ocean in the world!"

The orc struck a coquettish pose, showing off his body with pride. *Her*, I amended as I took note of the orc's speech and mannerisms. *She must be a lady.* This orc, whose build was burlier than even Erivan's, was apparently called Camus.

I had never heard her name before, but the Corvus tribe rang a bell. It was an orc tribe that mainly made a living off piracy. I'd once heard that their military might was so impressive that even the Sanphales navy had trouble dealing with them. Merchant ships that sailed between continents feared their name, but at the same time, the tribe was also renowned for only taking valuables, not lives, and not particularly aggressively.

"I dunno about yer beauty or anythin', but I hear that ya take pride in yer abilities as a warrior. Now, it's time to pay for burnin' down our homeland, ya bastard orc!" Brandishing his axes, Erivan broke into a sprint.

In response, Camus stood at the ready with her rapier. "I have no clue which orcs of what tribe were responsible for that, but I can't die here!"

And just like that, the fighters clashed with each other once again.

Having grasped what was happening, I clenched my jaw. "We need to stop them...!" All of us got off Taran and ran towards the fighting pair.

“I shall reason with him!” Riena exclaimed. She called out to the man. “General, Lord Heale is here! Put down your weapons.”

Erivan spared a glance in her direction, and though I could see the tension in his face, he still tried to be polite to his princess. “Put down my weapons? Your Highness, this is Camus from the Corvus tribe, the strongest pirate in the world! If I let my guard down even slightly, she’d finish me in an instant!” He swung an axe with all of his strength, forcing Camus to back away.

“My, what high praise you have for me.” Camus lifted an eyebrow. “Likewise, I know all about your reputation as a heartless warrior, Erivan!”

Both of them seemed to know of each other through rumors. However, Erivan couldn’t be further from “heartless,” and the Corvus tribe were renowned for their magnanimity compared to other pirates. The Corvus tribe didn’t kill for entertainment. Furthermore, they only set their sights on grand merchant ships, and let small ships—like fishing boats—be. From the facts I knew, the negative rumors they had heard of each other must have been blown out of proportion.

“Camus over there must be the leader of the pirates,” I said in a low voice. “We’ll restrain her for now and ask her about her intentions.”

Hearing that, Taran walked forward, ready to shoot out her spider silk at my cue. But Erivan’s shout stopped us in our tracks. “Chief! I swear, I *will* seize this orc! Leave her to me!”

My eyes widened. “Erivan...”

So Erivan hadn’t started the fight because he wanted to kill the invader. He had probably wanted to take Camus hostage before the conflict evolved into an all-out war, which would result in heavy casualties. *Okay, I guess I’ll leave things in his hands. But just in case...*

My doubt didn’t stem from a lack of trust in his abilities. I was only worried about him. *If this gets out of control and Erivan is hurt... I don’t want that to happen, and I’m sure everyone on the island feels the same way.* I manifested *Shield*, a non-elemental spell, around his body. This was a defensive spell that would protect him from magical and physical attacks.

The two continued to trade blows for the next few minutes. The loud metallic clanging of axes against rapier echoed out across the shore, followed by the cheers of orcs from the drifting boats on the ocean—they were cheering for Camus. The goblins of Sheol took that as a challenge and gave encouraging shouts of their own.

Erivan clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Yer sword’s like a stick, but it’s pretty hard.”

In response, Camus flicked her hair proudly. “But of course! What else would you expect from a sword made from an alloy of all kinds of metals around the world?”

“So it all comes down to whether that thing’s better than our man Starkers’s axes, aye...? I can’t afford to lose, then!”

As warriors, they were evenly matched in terms of skill. Therefore, Erivan was declaring that the difference in their weapons was what would decide the outcome of the match.

Erivan’s axes were the work of our local blacksmith, Starkers, and were made from the legendary metal orichalcum. The metal itself was durable, of course, but Starkers’s skill was just as significant—every weapon forged by his hands surpassed even the crafts of the renowned blacksmiths in Sanphales. As for the smith in question, he was half-naked as always, folding his arms over his bare chest as he spectated the battle.

Now, Erivan kicked the ground with an audible thud before charging at Camus. He raised his axes high in the air and let out a ferocious battle cry. Not a moment later, Camus replied with a rough holler of her own, and the earsplitting clang of metal crashing into metal shook my eardrums.

Once again, the pair pulled away from each other, but this time, their movement was followed by a snapping sound. Camus’s rapier had crumbled into pieces. Without a moment’s delay, Erivan pointed his axe at the orc’s neck.

He only had one word for his opponent. “Surrender.”

Camus let out a drawn-out sigh before the tension melted away from her shoulders. “I...guess this is it.”

Seeing that, the orcs on the boats lowered their weapons as well.

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With her hands tied behind her back with spider silk, Camus was sitting on the ground as she groaned, “We only wanted to get on shore! Not for free, of course, I had every intention of handing over money.”

“Huuuh?” Erivan sounded incredulous. “Ya could’ve just told us that!”

“Well a certain *somebody* didn’t exactly give me a chance to do that before he started swinging his weapons around!” Camus snapped.

Erivan harrumphed. “That’s rich coming from ya. A whole swarm of orcs comin’ in like that, how’re we supposed to trust ya, huh?”

“W-Well... We have our reasons...” As she spoke, a shadow fell over her expression.

While we were interrogating Camus, the orcs had begun to move onto Sheol one by one, with both hands raised high in the air. Goblins surrounded them,assembling all the orcs in one place. Oddly, none of the orcs looked panicked—they even seemed relieved. More orcs approached the island on sailing boats and rowing boats, but they still looked eager to hurry onto land despite knowing that they would be held captive. They weren’t reluctant to surrender at all.

Erivan raised an eyebrow. “Reasons, aye? Why do y’all have weapons, then? Ya must’ve been schemin’ to play dirty, kill us all, and occupy the island!”

“We’re not! I swear! We had our weapons ready to fight that creature!” Color drained from Camus’s face, and she shuddered in apprehension. “I know that we don’t stand a chance against that thing, but we still have to try.”

Intrigued, I spoke up. “What are you referring to?”

Her tone turned solemn. “You probably won’t buy my story, but...I’m talking about a colossal beast many times the size of the ship of the line that we traveled here on. That creature was a leviathan... Yes, we encountered a beast that should only appear in the legends passed down from our ancestors.”

My eyes widened a fraction at the name. “Leviathan...”

“Only half a month ago, there were over a hundred ships in our magnificent fleet. But then, only moments after we seized victory against a kobold fleet, that leviathan appeared out of nowhere and attacked us... The ship you saw is the only one left. That thing took everything from us, *everything*!”

Camus was trembling uncontrollably. Though her hands were still tied, she shuffled forward to my feet and pleaded, “Please, allow us to stay on this island! If you want money, we have plenty of that, so please, I’m begging you! It doesn’t have to be permanent, we can leave right away once the leviathan goes somewhere else!”

Taken aback, I stammered, “U-Uh, about that leviathan...” I glanced over at the immense dorsal fin that lay nearby. “See that?”

We still hadn’t finished taking the leviathan apart. We’d been focusing on its flesh, which had all been frozen and carried into the cold rooms underground by now, but parts that took more time to cut, such as scales and dorsal fins, were still left on the surface.

When Camus saw it, a myriad of expressions flashed across her face, settling on utter disbelief. “Is that...? Huh? It’s that leviathan’s dorsal fin?”

“Everyone on the island teamed up a few days ago to defeat a leviathan,” I explained.

“Y-You’re joking with me, right?”

“No. Oh, but there *is* a chance that we encountered a different specimen from the one that attacked you, so I can’t guarantee anything... But I can say for certain that we defeated a beast that fits the description of a leviathan. A beast that was taller even than Yggdrasil, the high tree behind you.”

I say that, but I’ll be honest, it still feels surreal to me. To think that such a monumental creature truly existed in the world...and that we managed to defeat it.

“Y-You killed that leviathan... My goodness...” Her voice was shaking. Then, she lowered her head. “I’m so sorry for barging in without permission! Please show mercy! Anything but our lives!”

She was so desperate that she pressed her forehead against the ground, with

no care for the fact that her hat and hairpiece slipped down because of her movement.

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It took both sides some time to clear the misunderstandings, but once that was done, we decided to welcome the orcs with a feast. Now, we were having a self-introduction session at the round table beneath Yggdrasil.

I was first. “I’m Heale Sanphales, the governor of this island.”

“Sanphales?” Camus’s eyes widened at the name before she nodded to herself, strangely. “No wonder.”

She seemed to know that “Sanphales” was a sacred surname that only the royal family of Sanphales could use. As a rule, Sanphales royalty were born with extraordinary crests. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that my ancestors had only ascended to the throne because they had powerful crests. Camus probably thought that defeating a leviathan wasn’t too unreasonable for a Sanphales prince. *That’s the furthest thing from the truth, though.*

Then, the orc proceeded to introduce herself. “My name is Camus Corvus, a...” she hesitated, “...great pirate that...led the Corvus tribe.” Uncertainty was clear in her voice.

Riena turned to me. “Um... I shall prepare some murder bird and satan clam meat instead of leviathan!” She then swiftly made her way to the kitchen.

Leviathan meat was on the menu today—to be more precise, it had been a staple of our meals for the past few days. To Camus and her crew, however, the leviathan was the bitter enemy who had slaughtered their comrades. I didn’t know whether the beast actually ate any of the orcs, but Riena was probably thinking of that possibility and trying to accommodate them.

“I appreciate the gesture, but...I’m all right,” Camus said slowly. Her expression was grim.

I can’t blame her for that reaction. Her fleet of over a hundred ships was reduced to that single, battered ship drifting on the ocean. Thousands of her people were cut down to mere hundreds practically overnight...

That was when Baris, who was sitting at the table as well, spoke up. “That must have been a painful experience for you...” He wore a conflicted expression as he gazed at Riale, who was running around on the table. “On that topic...”

Riale’s birth mother, Queen Arphemina of the Tiberis tribe, had left a message for the people who came across her child. According to the record, orcs had attacked her tribe before the leviathan had dealt a fatal blow. Therefore, the natural conclusion was that Camus and her crew had been the orcs Queen Arphemina had mentioned—the orcs that had murdered Riale’s kin. Baris’s reaction might have stemmed from pity for the young kobold.

The shaman’s attitude towards Camus, however, was decidedly cordial and indiscriminate compared to the other Sheol goblins. Most of the goblins seemed to resent the orcs as a whole.

If I remembered correctly, the Verdan tribe’s homeland had been burned down by orcs. As if that hadn’t been enough, the orcs had even put the Verdan tribe king’s body on display like a trophy. I could understand where their hatred came from.

On the other hand, the Corvus tribe was very different from the brutal orcs on land. I had even heard stories of their tribe rescuing Sanphales citizens stranded at sea and escorting them to the nearest island. In addition, like I had mentioned before, they only attacked large merchant ships, and they would release the civilians afterward. They were famous for their tolerance, as well as being more organised and disciplined than human troops.

All the goblins were likely aware of that fact, but at the end of the day, the Corvus tribe was still an orc tribe—they looked identical to the sworn enemies of the goblins. They must feel torn about that fact.

Seeking clarification, Baris asked Camus, “May I ask why your tribe ended up in a war against the kobolds?”

“That’s, well... It just happened. Their fleet clearly consisted only of small ships, so I didn’t have any plans of initiating aggression.”

Baris nodded. “I see. That means it was a matter of circumstance, yes?”

“Yes. The small boats on both sides started little skirmishes, and, well... A little

while later, I asked all the ships to withdraw." Her lips pulled into a wry smile. "Back then, I thought, 'Ah, having too many ships comes with its own troubles.'"

"Indeed, the more ships you have in your company, the harder it is to keep everyone in line."

"Yep. But thinking back now... Oh, I didn't know how fortunate I was to worry about such things. Who would've thought that...we would only be left with one ship?"

Camus's eyes grew moist. Her hands were trembling, likely from her anguish and frustration over her failure to protect her comrades.

I decided to gently change the topic. "In any case, we welcome your people on this island. We have plenty of food and water. During your stay, we expect you to follow our rules and conditions, but you may return home whenever you wish after your ship is repaired."

"Home..." Camus whispered. "No, our ships are our home. But now, we've lost them." She cast her eyes down and continued in a low voice, pouring all her heart into her next words. "I have a request... My soul is still with the ocean, but my people can't live on the sea anymore. Lord Heale... Please allow us to become your subordinates."

Oh. So that's why the orcs looked so relieved when they came ashore. They've been traumatized by the leviathan and are frightened of the sea now. These people should be veteran sailors—they have an immense knowledge of the sea compared to those who live only on land. But then again, after seeing such a colossal beast and losing so many of their kin... I guess I can understand why they want to stay away from the ocean now.

"I assume that means your tribe wants to stay on this island permanently?" I asked.

"Yes. Of course, we're willing to do any work you give us. And..." Camus took out a small treasure chest decorated with a plethora of colorful gems from an inner pocket of her coat. She then retrieved an elegant silver key, opened the chest, and showed me the contents.

“A sapphire necklace, a ruby ring...and so many other precious jewels,” I observed. “What a treasure trove.”

“Right? Even among all the booty we’ve gained throughout the centuries since the Corvus tribe was founded, it’s top class,” she boasted. “Here, have it. In exchange—” But then, her eyes widened. “What?”

From next to her, an arm reached out and presented a gold cup to her. The “waiter” was one of the golems I had crafted, Unit Fifteen. As a symbol of its status as the golem leader, a gold crown embedded with a whole collection of gems rested on its head. Unit Fifteen proceeded to lay out plates, spoons, and other tableware made of gold on the table. Once it was finished, it bowed politely to Camus.

However, its movement shook the crown onto the ground, and a section of it broke off like charcoal. On reflex, Camus paled. But the golem picked up the crown and put it back on as if nothing had happened before placing the fragment into the bag against its hips. It walked back to the kitchen with brisk strides.

“U-Um, are you just going to let them leave?” Camus asked nervously. “That little one just broke a crown!”

“Well, it belongs to Unit Fifteen.” I shrugged. “And even if it breaks, Starkers —ah, that’s our blacksmith—will fix it.”

“O-Oh...” Camus looked down on the tableware and put away her jewels with a flush on her cheeks. “Sorry. Something like this isn’t worthy of your attention.”

She seemed to think that her own treasure couldn’t hold a candle to the precious metals and gems on this island. *If I were in her shoes, I might feel embarrassed, thinking that what I offered is nothing but a common pebble... But she really doesn’t have to feel that way. And we don’t need stuff like precious minerals in the first place.*

“Don’t worry about giving that treasure to me,” I said. “If you’re willing to develop this reef together with us, I don’t need anything in return from you. I will have to ask you to form a taming contract with me, but I’m not going to force you to do anything against your will.”

She whipped her head up and looked at me. “RReally?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “That’s okay, right, Baris?”

“Oh, we could never object to that.” Baris smiled. “We always welcome new friends to our island. Perhaps you might have noticed, but our princess has already been treating you as one of our own. We are well aware of the conduct of the Corvus tribe. Don’t you agree, General?”

Erivan, who had been sitting with his arms crossed next to Baris, looked a little grumpy. “If that’s what Chief wants, we’ll go along with it. But if y’all want to live on this island, ya better work hard for Chief, just like we do. Chief’s commands are absolute. As long as ya drill that into yer minds, ya can go ahead and live however ya want, while stayin’ the hell away from us.”

With those words, Erivan stood up and left.

“D-Dad!” Furay pulled on his hand, but in the end, he ended up digging into his meal elsewhere.

While Furay tried to reason with him in the background, Baris hesitated before explaining, “Some of the general’s family was killed by orcs. Please give him some time.”

“Ah, I see. Even if we weren’t the cause for such a tragedy...” Camus placed a hand over her heart. “Please allow us to offer our prayers for the ones you have lost.”

“Thank you.” Baris bowed before he continued, “Now then, since we have new residents here, let’s start making plans right away. We’ll need to build more rooms inside the cave.”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

The rift between the two races seems to be quite severe... Hmm, is there any way I can help them see past their differences a little?

While I considered my options in the back of my mind, I established taming contracts with the newcomer orcs.

Chapter 2: A Big Meeting!

On the day after Camus and her crew joined our community, I arranged a meeting with the leader figures of the island. We held our meeting at the large table stationed at the foot of Yggdrasil—a round table of white marble crafted by Baris and the other monsters to hold big meetings.

We sat down in a circle. Baris and Riena, naturally, were present. Erivan looked disgruntled, while Furay chided him about his attitude. Though they couldn’t speak, Taran, Ciel, and Riale were here as well. Last but not least was Camus, one of our new Sheol citizens.



I had arranged this meeting because I wanted to discuss the future of this island. To start, I wanted to talk about the general direction we would steer this island towards—matters concerning the island as a whole, like construction projects we wanted to start or how we were going to divide the labor. We also had to discuss what we should do about Camus's wrecked ship.

We started off with the topic of what we should build or make next.

"That's a good question," mused Riena. "We've made most of the facilities and tools we need for our everyday life."

Like she said, if we only wanted to survive, the island was already well-equipped for that. Water, an essential resource, wasn't a problem because we were pumping the underground hot spring water to the surface. We had plenty of water for drinking and other purposes. The hot water was also pumped to the baths on the surface, so we could bathe ourselves whenever we wanted.

As for food, we had ample reserves. There was a vast underground cold room, where we stored fish and monster meat. We had also constructed a farm at the foot of Yggdrasil with the soil that the cave spiders produced. With the aid of the sunstones, which accelerated plant growth, we could speed up our harvest when we needed to. Yggdrasil also had similar effects on plant life, so I was sure we would be able to enjoy the literal fruits of our labor in the near future.

The island used to be a barren, rocky place, but the farm and Yggdrasil had added the lush emerald of leaves to the environment. *And now, the landscape is scenic and breathtaking,* I thought with a hint of wonder.

Baris concluded, "Hmm... In that case, the only matter on hand is repairing the broken walls and towers that the leviathan destroyed a while ago."

"I guess..." I looked round at everyone else. As I expected, no one offered any new opinion to the mix, presumably because they felt that things were already good enough.

There was one exception—Camus seemed like she wanted to say something. Perhaps she was being reserved because she was a newcomer.

I prompted her. "Hey, Camus. You've seen our island. Have you noticed anything that we should change?"

Her head jerked slightly in surprise. “I...only came here yesterday. I’m not in a position to give out any criticism.”

“That may be the case,” I replied patiently, “but we asked you to join our meeting because we want your input and the opinions of the orc race as a whole.”

“Still...”

I had assumed she would be quite vocal about her opinions, but it seemed that, as the successful leader of a powerful tribe, she knew when she should take a step back and allow others to take the reins.

“Chief’s askin’ for yer opinion,” Erivan grumbled, folding his arms. “Speak up if ya have somethin’ to say.”

Riena persuaded Camus gently. “Miss Camus, we will be neighbors from now on. Please be more open with us.”

“You two... Thank you.” Camus bowed earnestly before she began, “The ships on this island are what bothered me.”

“Ships, huh...?” I said. “You make a good point, we don’t have any respectable sailing vessels at the moment.”

Our only methods of sea travel were the boat I had used to travel to this island, the smaller boats of the orcs, and the rafts which the goblins had crafted under great pressure in terms of time and resources. We had dismantled the relatively large ship which the goblins had arrived on, and Camus’s enormous warship was far from seaworthy.

Baris had actually brought up his plans for ships before. He had mentioned that he wanted to eventually build ships so that we could trade to gain resources and goods that weren’t available on Sheol. However, practically none of us had the knowledge or skills of a shipbuilder, so we had set such plans aside for the time being.

Camus looked at the surrounding landscape as she continued, “All of you are right. This island is prosperous enough that you can lead comfortable lives. So, you could argue that you don’t need ships, and I’d have to agree. But I *do* think that you should construct a place to tie up ships from the outside world, or your

own fishing boats.”

I hummed. “A wharf, hm?”

Thinking back, transporting the crew and baggage from Camus’s ship had taken a lot of effort. We had to make many return trips in our boats. At the moment, Camus’s warship was anchored at a slight distance from Sheol Reef. We didn’t have piers or wharves where ships could moor, nor did we have facilities for ship repair.

On that thought, I continued, “You’re right, making our coast more convenient might be a good idea.” I paused. “For example, if we’d had areas where we could tie up more rafts and boats when the goblin ship sank a while ago, the rescue mission would have been much more efficient.”

Baris nodded immediately. “I agree. Considering that we might trade one day, it would be best if we had facilities where we can load and unload ships swiftly. As for the warship... Now that we have a steady supply of lumber from Yggdrasil, it might be better to repair it than dismantle it.”

“Hmm... Yeah, let’s go with that.” I turned to Camus. “Camus, can I put you in charge of designing the harbor?”

“M-Me?” she stammered, surprised.

“I know a few things about harbors, but I’m sure that you’re much more knowledgeable about that kind of thing. If possible, I want you to decide the details of our wharf.”

She fell into thought with a frown of concentration. After a moment of silence, she let out an audible exhale. “Understood. But—no, ignore that. I promise that we’ll do a fantastic job if you leave it to us. My tribe is capable. I’m sure of it.”

I could see the determination on her face—but then, she glanced over at the sea with wavering eyes. *Maybe she’s wary of being involved with the ocean again.*

“Okay, then, onto the next topic...” I placed two golden stones onto the table.

Most of the others didn’t show much of a reaction, but Camus was slightly

startled. “Is that...pure gold? It’s quite a big lump,” she observed.

I shook my head. “No, they’re called risestones, and they’re necessary for monster evolution.”

Riena, for example, might have a human-like appearance now, but she used to be an ordinary goblin. Risestones allowed the user to evolve their bodies according to their desired appearance and abilities. One of Riena’s original goals had been to gain arcane talent. As a goblin, she couldn’t manipulate mana, and therefore couldn’t cast spells.

When I had first discovered a risestone and shown it to the goblins, Baris had revealed that they had heard about the stone before. In fact, it had even appeared in their myths, and the ancestors of hobgoblins—goblins with burly statures—were goblins who had used risestones to evolve.

“The evolution stone...” Camus whispered, but then she laughed heartily. “That’s absurd. I figured that numerous treasures were buried beneath the cave on this island, but nah, such fairy tale stones can’t be real.”

With a solemn expression, Baris murmured, “Fairy tale... That must mean the Corvus tribe have heard stories of it as well.”

“We sure have. It actually has to do with my own tribe. Legend says our ancestors started off as orcs who were hopeless swimmers, but then, they used the evolution stones to adapt better to water.”

“*These* are the exact evolution stones you are talking about,” Riena declared. “I evolved with one of these as well.”

Camus’s eyes grew wide. “Wait, you mean you were once a goblin?”

“Yes! I was in a race against death due to a curse back then, but thanks to this stone, I managed to extend my lifespan.”

The taller woman sized Riena up with disbelief. “You sure look like a human to me... Oh, but your ears are too long for a human, huh. Still, can such a legendary item really exist?” Her doubt was evident.

Erivan harrumphed in displeasure. “Hah. She’s not gonna believe us no matter what we say. Look at me, for example. Deep down in my heart, I thought it was

absurd until I saw our princess evolve with my own two eyes."

"Weeell..." I turned to face Furay, who was sitting at one corner of the table. "I suppose we should start things by watching over Furay's evolution, then. Furay, are you sure about this?"

The small goblin girl had wished for the ability to use magic due to her admiration for her father's strength. She would have to evolve to gain it, which was why she persevered in the mining shafts with me for a long time. Her efforts had borne fruit, and she had finally unearthed a grand total of three risestones—two were laid out on the table before me, while Furay had the final one.

Furay had claimed that one was enough for her, and entrusted the remaining two in my care, asking that I use them for the benefit of the island. The leviathan's attack had happened almost immediately after her discovery, so she had put off her evolution for a while. She *had* mentioned that she needed time to come to terms with it, so perhaps having the extra time was actually a good thing for her.

Erivan leaned down to meet Furay's eyes and asked, "Furay, ya made up yer mind?"

"Mmhmm." She nodded firmly. "I want to use magic too. I think I'll be a bigger help to Lord Heale and everyone else."

Her father gave her an encouraging nod in return, and patted her shoulder. "I'll always have yer back. If yer gonna use the stone, ya gotta work even harder to help everyone, 'kay?"

"Of course!" She turned to look at me with a bright smile, giving me a big nod. Then, she took out her risestone from her pocket. "Okay, here goes nothing..."

She clasped both hands around the risestone in prayer. The next moment, a blinding light flowed out and engulfed her. Once the light subsided...

"Ohhh!" chirped an excited voice. "I think I'm...taller?"

The person talking looked no different from an energetic human girl, and she wore a black pinafore dress. Her voice was identical to Furay's, and her crisp, lively tone matched too. *It must be Furay.*

She seemed to be around the same height and age as me. *That makes sense. I'm pretty sure I heard Furay is fifteen like me and Riena.* Her long blonde hair was tied into two pigtails at both sides of her head, and she had large eyes that were slightly upturned at the tips, just like the Furay I knew. *Okay, I definitely have the right person.*

Furay was looking over at her hands and feet when Ciel stretched out his body before her like a mirror. When she saw her reflection, she gasped. "Wow!"

Baris hummed. "She has a human-like appearance, just like the princess... Interesting, she ended up looking a bit like you as well, Lord Heale."

"Well yeah, the first person that pops up in my mind when I think about magic would be Lord Heale." She shrugged. "Ah, but if it granted all my wishes, I should be able to do something else as well!"

Furay shut her eyes and squeezed them tight. Then, she was engulfed by light, just like when she evolved. When the light faded away, the petite Furay we were familiar with was standing there.

"All right! It's a success!" she cheered.

Everyone's eyes were as round as saucers.

I was the first one who managed to find my words. "Wait, does that mean you can transform into either form at your will?"

"Looks like it. I wished that I'd be able to move as nimbly as possible. My original form's better for agility, so yeah. Okay then..." She shut her eyes once again and was enveloped in a cocoon of light. This time, she appeared in her human-like form.

"I see, you can switch freely," I muttered. "That's a new discove—" I broke off, realizing that Riena had closed her eyes as well. "Ah."

She seemed to be testing whether she could switch like Furay and... *Yep, she can*. The tiny Riena I once knew was standing in front of me.

"Y-Your Highness!" Baris gasped. "You can return to your original form as well?"

Riena nodded. "Yes, that seems to be the case." She looked down at her

hands and legs. “Wow...” She sighed, half in wonder and half in wistfulness. “I used to be so small.”

If I remembered correctly, the risestone entry in the mineral encyclopedia had mentioned something along the lines of changing to a new body. *Hm, so this change can be reversed at any time, huh?*

As if to back up that theory, Riena transformed back into her human form. As she looked over her body again, she addressed me. “Lord Heale, it seems that I can return to my original form even if I didn’t make that wish when I evolved. I couldn’t use magic in that form, so the structure of my body must have reverted, too.”

“Huh. That’s definitely news to me.” *Everyone must have felt somewhat put off by the fact that they’ll look different after their evolution. But if they can switch at any time, they wouldn’t feel so reluctant.*

Furay twirled around in a circle before grinning brightly at Erivan. “Well? How do I look, Dad? I’m cute, right?”

Erivan had a slight frown on his face. “Uh... Yer a little thin. If possible, I think it would’ve been better for ya to be more buff. Yer my daughter, so ya should have this much at least, ya know.” He pointed at his sturdy arms proudly.

“Boasting about your muscles again?” Furay sighed and looked away, her lips slightly pursed. “I can use magic now, so who cares?”

“I suppose. Yer taller than before, and probably stronger too. But if I was the one evolvin’, I’d definitely wish to become a giant. Yer too puny like this.” He patted her slender shoulders.

Furay let out a long, exasperated sigh, and muttered with a bigger pout, “Why do you measure *everything* by how big or small it is...?”

Ah, I see. Riena mentioned that she pictured me when she wished to become a mage. Furay must have pictured a human as well, since she often saw me using magic.

Everyone looked at Furay’s new appearance with joy, but there was one person who was dumbfounded.

“N-No way...” Camus breathed. “A goblin turned into a human...and can even transform back!”

Next to her, Starkers was spurting out blood from his nostrils like he had when Riena evolved. *Uh...is that because Furay has a greater total surface area of exposed skin now that she’s taller?*

As I cast a healing spell on Starkers, I asked Camus, “Do you believe us now?”

“Y-Yeah.”

She was finally convinced that our risestones were the real deal. *Well, more like she* has *to believe us after seeing Furay evolve and Riena returning to her goblin form.*

I addressed everyone once again. “So the next question is, what should we do with the remaining two risestones?” I paused. “Personally, I want Baris to use one.”

Hearing my proposal, Baris knitted his brows together. “I would be honored to have the opportunity. However, now that we have new residents like Lady Camus, I believe we should take our time to reconsider the candidates that would bring the most merits to Sheol.”

I nodded. “I agree. And I still think you are our best choice, Baris.” I turned to the others and explained, “I have a few reasons, but the main reason is Baris’s crest, <Sorcerer King>. If he evolves and gains arcane talent, there’s a high chance he could become a mage to surpass me and Riena. We don’t have enough magic users on the island, so even after thinking about it again, Baris is the one I nominate.”

Wielders of <Sorcerer King> could manipulate an unfathomable amount of mana at once. Even in Sanphales, people with this crest were few and far between, and it was one of the most powerful crests in existence.

Riena voiced her support. “I agree with Lord Heale. I think Baris should use one.”

Erivan quickly followed suit. “No complaints from me. I know it’s kinda rude to say, but Baris *is* pretty ancient...” He shrugged. “Well, yeah, I want him to live a long life. None of us can even read without this guy around.”

Taran, Starkers, and Ciel nodded in their own unique ways as well.

“No one else has <Sorcerer King>, so yep, I think Baris is the best choice,” I concluded. “Ah, but maybe one of the orcs might?”

Camus shook her head. “We’ve never had anyone with that crest in our tribe, and that remains true to this day. I’ve heard of the might of <Sorcerer King> as well. If he’s able to evolve into a body that can use magic, he definitely should.”

“I see... Hey Baris, looks like everyone agrees.”

The shaman replied with a slow nod. “In that case, please allow me the honor of using one.” He placed a hand against his chest. “I swear that I will make

myself useful to you and everyone on this island, my lord."

"All right, one candidate down," I said. "As for the other one..."

"Before we go any further, how about we ask about the crests of the orcs?" suggested Baris. "It might help us decide."

Camus raised an eyebrow. "Our crests? Well, as I mentioned, the ancestors of our tribe evolved to adapt better to the ocean. Most of the crests we are born with are related to the sea, too." She slid off the glove on her right hand, revealing a glowing emblem with a design that reminded me of a dragon. "My crest is <Sea Serpent>, a crest that can control ocean currents and wind...or so people say."

I blinked. "Does that mean it's actually different?"

She pulled up her glove once again and replied, "In reality, at best it can only summon a slight ocean breeze and manipulate a cup's worth of water."

Baris inclined his head slightly. "<Sea Serpent>... I admit, I have never heard of it before, but I believe it is worth looking into."

"I mean, like anyone else would do in my shoes, I tested out all kinds of stuff. But it didn't turn out to be anything special." She paused. "Anyway, neither I nor the other orcs have crests that can benefit a lot from evolving. You'd probably have better luck with other people."

Hm, is Camus being reserved again? But there is *the chance that she truly thinks that.* "I see... Okay then, does anyone else have any ideas? You can nominate yourself or other people."

One hand shot up into the air without a moment's delay—it belonged to the half-naked dude, Starkers.

I gazed at him. "You...want to evolve, Starkers?"

He nodded profusely. *Hm. He's a master blacksmith, but he can't use magic, so if he evolves...* "Starkers *would* be a good choice," I said aloud. "If he can use magic, he might be able to make better tools, weapons, and facilities."

Everyone else at the table nodded.

But then, Furay raised a question. "I'm not against it or anything, but one

question. Is Starkers even a monster?”

Realization dawned on me. “Oh...”

The risestone was a stone that evolved *monsters*. It likely wouldn’t be effective on races that didn’t fall into that category.

There was a good chance that Starkers wasn’t a monster, because he was the only one I couldn’t tame on this island. A taming contract could only be formed between a human and a monster. I’d suggested it to Starkers before to make life easier for him in the tunnels, and he had given me permission, but the contract had failed.

Furthermore, in human mythology, humans and dwarves had started off as the same race who had later on moved to separate settlements. I wasn’t sure how other races viewed dwarves, but we humans, at least, hadn’t ever considered them monsters. *That being said, I actually don’t have any confirmation that Starkers is a dwarf. I only assumed that because of his stature and smithing skills.*

Riena chose to ask Starkers directly. “Mister Starkers, you...are a human, right?”

In the face of this question, Starkers fell silent for a while before he inclined his head quizzically. He seemed to have no idea what race he even was.

Erivan gave the stout man a consoling pat on his shoulder. “Can’t do much if ya can’t use it. Let’s pass it on to someone else, aye?”

Starkers, however, shook his head over and over, strongly expressing his protest.

With an exasperated face, Erivan chided, “Oi, ya ain’t a toddler, ya know. Yer a respectable adult. Don’t ya feel ashamed?”

But Starkers actually started wailing and bawling uncontrollably like a child. Tears streamed down his eyes, and he was sniffling. *He probably has a lot of wishes he wants the stone to grant, like gaining the ability to talk with us all... I can understand his reaction.*

Gently, I tried to reason with him. “At first, I thought that trying it out

wouldn’t be any harm, but on second thought, we don’t know what will happen if a non-monster uses it. It’s too dangerous.”

Starkers gasped. It seemed that my concern for him had gotten across to the man. I didn’t know whether he fulfilled the conditions, but I didn’t want to risk it. What if there were malicious effects? That would be awful.

He let out a sigh and folded his arms in front of his chest before nodding a few times, as if to say, “Oh well.”

“If Starkers truly can use it without any drawbacks, I’d agree too, but there’s too much uncertainty...” I let out a sigh of my own. “Any other options?”

There was a moment of silence as everyone mulled over the question. I was expecting Erivan, Taran, or Ciel to volunteer themselves, but that didn’t happen.

Figuring that we weren’t getting anywhere, I muttered, “In that case, let’s ask everyone else for candida— Hm?” I noticed that Baris was raising his hand. “Oh! Do you have an idea, Baris?”

“Yes. I think that putting it off to a later date is worth considering. As with Her Highness, this stone doesn’t just evolve monsters, but can also save someone’s life.”

Baris was referring to the period before Riena’s evolution. A curse used to eat away at her life span, causing her undue suffering. I had lifted the curse itself with a purgestone and extended her life with turtlestones, but her remaining time had been pitiful compared to her rightful life span.

That was when I had unearthed a risestone, which had changed everything. Riena had used the stone at once, and evolution had granted her magic as well as a longer life. In other words, evolution could also drag a person back from the brink of death.

I placed a hand on my chin. “Ah, I get it. We can save it for an emergency, huh?” I had once discovered a dragon orb, which could resurrect the dead. Though the risestone wasn’t quite on the same level, it might be a good option to have when someone was in danger. “That’s definitely worth thinking about...”

Riena nodded. “I agree. Either way, we aren’t in a hurry. Perhaps we might

find someone else who is extremely eager to use it if we ask around."

"And we can't rule out the possibility that we might find more stones surprisingly quickly," added Furay.

Hearing that, I came to a decision. "Yeah, you're right... Okay, thanks for your input. Let's put this to one side for now."

Everyone nodded.

I continued, "Now that's out of the way..." I handed one risestone to Baris.

"Thank you." He accepted it gratefully. "Well then..." He stood up and lifted the risestone high into the air.

A brilliant flash of light took his place. Once the light subsided, what we saw...

...was Baris, who looked completely unchanged.

I let out a subconscious "Huh?" Everyone else tilted their heads quizzically as well.

Furay was the representative who voiced the doubts in our collective minds. "Uh, Lord Baris, you kinda...look like you haven't changed at all."

"Strange." He creased his eyebrows. "I'm certain I wished for magic and a longer life span..." Ciel stretched his body into a mirror in front of Baris. "Ahhh, thank you, Lord Ciel." He inspected his reflection. "Hm. Indeed, my appearance itself is identical."

That was when Erivan let out a loud "Oh!" of realization. He continued, "I think, uh, his head's shinin' a little brighter than before."

Baris shot a glance at Erivan's head. "I believe our heads are equally 'smooth,' General..." He then tilted his head, puzzled. "But, well, I agree, this is slightly odd. The princess and Furay were different."

Furay asked, "Hey, did you wish for anything other than magic and a longer life, Lord Baris?"

The shaman hummed in thought. "I did hope to be frightening when I'm angry so that I can stop the young ones from their mischief. None of them will listen when I scold them, you see."

Ah, I'm not that surprised. He's always grinning and smiling, after all. He's also quite a gentle soul, so he's not that intimidating when he's trying to be stern.

That gave Furay an idea. "Maybe something will happen when you're being strict, then."

"Hmm. In that case, I shall give it a try," he muttered. "Hmph!"

The world turned dark in an instant.

"Wh-What's going on?!" I blurted.

An unfathomable darkness was all that I could see, and *something* was closing in on me, making all my hair stand on end. When the murky shadows retreated, a terrifying silhouette was left behind.

The figure that stood there was a giant with a muscular build that even Erivan and Camus couldn't hold a candle to. The outward corners of its eyes were pulled eerily high, and it smirked at us boldly. Sinister wings as black as tar stretched out from its back, many times its own height.

A dreadful mythical creature floated to the surface of my mind. *A demon...* The thing before me seemed to match the description perfectly.

Riale yelped at the terrifying sight and buried their head into my chest, trembling. From behind me, I heard the sound of a goblin child wailing in panic.

Another child screamed, "Wh-What's that?!"

The demon-like creature turned its head to the children. "Hm? Why are you crying? It's me."

The children ran as quickly as their legs could carry them, sobbing even louder.

Nervously, Erivan asked, "H-Hey, are ya Baris?"

The demon-like creature's deep, ghastly voice echoed in our ears. "Yes, General. I am indeed Baris."

Oh, he really is Baris. He looked like the embodiment of malice, but what spooked me even more was his aura that made me feel as if I were looking into a bottomless abyss.

Furay was stroking the shivering Taran as she said, “Lord Baris, you’re banned from taking on this form! You aren’t just scaring the children, you’re scaring everyone!”

“Am I that frightening?”

He probably intended to sound normal, but it came out more like a threat. Everyone was shaking as we nodded in unison. Ciel stretched out his body once again and took on the role of a mirror.

Baris rasped, “Hmm... Oh, Lord Ciel, thank you.” He leaned forward—only to exclaim loudly, “Wh-What is this thing?! A demon?!”

There was a thud as Baris collapsed onto the ground. He got such a fright from his own appearance that he had lost balance. *Weeell, I mean, he turned into the most frightening sight* he *could imagine. He must be more affected than anyone else.*

But he immediately climbed to his feet and transformed back to the Baris we were familiar with. He cleared his throat. “Apologies for the unseemly sight.”

Wow... The power of the risestone is no trifling matter indeed. He looked scary, but his aura felt even scarier. That might be the special ability he gained. You know, the power of intimidation or something along those lines.

Baris placed a hand to his throat, clearing it a few more times before talking in his usual tone. “That aside, I shall try casting a spell.” He raised his hand before his chest and lifted his index finger. *“Fire.”*

He had once mentioned that he had spent some time delving into the study of magic, so as long as he could manipulate mana, he should be able to cast spells right away.

Everyone let out a “Ohhh!” of excitement as a flame manifested on his fingertip.

“My word...” Baris whispered, voice shaking with emotion. “Unbelievable. To think that such a day would come...” Tears formed at the corners of his eyes, about to overflow and spill down.

I had only seen him cry once throughout all the time I had known him—when

Riena had collapsed during my first encounter with the goblins. Back then, he had wept out of frustration and sorrow, but now, a brilliant smile lit his features.

Riena gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “Congratulations, Baris.”

The others followed suit and offered their own words of celebration for his evolution.

Smiling from ear to ear, Baris bowed gratefully. “Thank you, all of you. I promise that I will make myself useful to everyone. Oh, I need to invest a lot of effort into studying magic as well... It seems that I still have many things to do in my life.”

Later on, I heard from someone that Baris said his body felt much lighter after his evolution. To be specific, he could walk without the aid of his cane, and even sprint. Though his appearance hadn’t changed one bit, his body had most definitely regained its youth. He had also mentioned that he used to look older than his actual age to begin with, so this must just be the same body he’d had when he was younger....

In any case, Baris’s lifelong dream had come true—he could finally use magic!

Chapter 3: Back to the Mines!

While everyone else had gone their separate ways to tackle the tasks we allocated during the meeting yesterday, I was deep down in the cave tunnels. Of course, I was here to dig.

It had been rather hectic recently—preparing for the leviathan's arrival, getting hurt in the battle, and so on. Roughly a week had gone by since I last came to the mining shafts.

"I can *finally* mine again..." I sighed in contentment.

I had been itching to dig for the past week. In fact, whenever I saw other monsters holding pickaxes, I had trouble sleeping on the same night.

But it wasn't solely to sate my personal desires that I wanted to mine, of course. Mining was vital for the development of this island. The risestones we'd used yesterday, the Yggdrasil seed, the sunstones that accelerated plant growth—I had discovered them all in the cave tunnels. Valuable minerals with even more powerful effects might still be buried here. We also needed a substantial amount of stone for construction projects.

I'm not trying to sound haughty or anything, but I'm our most experienced miner. I hesitated before correcting myself, *I think.* I had taken a peek at Taran and the post-evolution Furay earlier, and their mining speed had increased in leaps and bounds. During the few days I had been out of commission, they had been busy polishing their skills.

"I can't afford to be complacent..." I muttered to myself before turning to my two companions. "I'm counting on you two as always, Riale, Ciel."

Next to me, Riale barked with their usual cheer. "Woof!"

Riale's crest was <Clairvoyance>, an incredible crest that didn't just allow them to see things far away—they could also sense items of interest in their vicinity, and had a sixth sense for the emotions of other sentient races. In fact, the pickaxe I was holding at the moment was made of mithril, a precious metal that Riale had discovered. There was a chance that they might find something

intriguing once again.

As for Ciel, who hopped behind me, he was my constant companion no matter where I went. He was the supervisor of the slimes that transported the minerals within the tunnels, and he was my reliable comrade who would pass on my instructions to everyone else if the need ever arose.

“Okay then, let’s get started.”

Wasting no time, I brought down my pickaxe on the rock wall. With a deafening clang, the entire wall collapsed. <Cave King> granted me abilities that elevated my mining efficiency by an incredible extent. Not only that, but it even highlighted the areas where I should dig, and, further, granted me Night Vision, which allowed me to see clearly even inside the dark cave. The monsters under a taming contract with me shared these gifts as well, so everyone could mine safely and effortlessly.

“Yeah, *this* is what I’ve been missing... Nothing can beat this.”

As I swung my pick, I could feel the corners of my lips creeping higher and higher on my face. Mining was the purpose of my life that I had discovered in Sheol Reef. The rhythmical sound of metal against rock was music to my ears.

Suddenly, loud barking disrupted the pleasant song. It was Riale.

“Hm?” I looked down. “Something the matter?”

Riale had raised their petite, black nose high in the air and was sniffing something. *Did they detect some kind of strange scent? Hmm, I don’t sense anything off as a human, but who knows?* They continued to wave their nose in all directions before finally gesturing in one direction with their paw.

At first glance, it only seemed to be a plain rock wall. I didn’t sense any mana in that direction either.

“Is there something over there?” I asked.

Riale nodded.

Okay, there must be an unknown item on the other side of this wall that caught their attention. Considering Riale’s previous discoveries, it might be something valuable.

I heeded the kobold's request and started digging as directed. After three swings, what appeared wasn't more gray rock, but an avalanche of numerous skeletons that rolled onto the ground.

Shocked at the sight, I jumped slightly on reflex. However, when I got a closer look at the bones, I discovered that they didn't seem like human bones. They were small and delicate, and the most striking feature was the beaks on the skulls. Bird skeletons.

In size, they were much smaller than the killer birds. They were roughly the size of the pigeons that occasionally flew into the garden of the royal palace. *Huh. Were they eaten as food, leaving only bones that were thrown into one place?*

But...that's strange, because these skeletons are whole. The skulls and wing bones were left intact, which was why I figured out they were birds so quickly. Normally, one would sever the heads and wings to process them separately during cooking. It's more likely that living birds were buried alive for some reason. They don't really smell rotten, but maybe Riale sensed their stench?

Surprisingly, Riale didn't seem too interested in the bones themselves. The kobold squeezed through the gaps of the skeletons and dug out a round object.

I knelt down. "What's that? A rock—No, an egg?"

Upon closer inspection, the shape of the item reminded me more of a white egg than a gem. *The chick inside must have died by now, so it's probably a fossil. Hmm...but it doesn't seem stony like a fossil should be. Since it didn't break even though it was buried under all those skeletons, it must be relatively hard.*

Riale lifted the object and offered it to me.



“Thanks, Riale.” I stroked the baby’s head. *No matter what this is, Riale gave it to me, and that alone makes me happy.* “That aside...” I turned the object in my hand and observed it. “The more I look at it, the prettier it seems.”

The egg sparkled brilliantly as I looked at it from different angles. It was pure white, without a blemish in sight, as if it were a gem crafted by nature. Its surface was so smooth that it couldn’t possibly be a fossil in my mind. *Maybe I should keep it and store it as a plain jewel, not an egg.*

I scanned my surroundings for similar eggs, but I didn’t have any luck. However, I *did* spot shards that seemed to be eggshells. They were a stony gray and had been utterly crushed, retaining none of their former glory. As a test, I touched one. Its surface was gritty like rock, and, lying nearby, I spotted the tiny skeleton of a chick that had yet to see the world.

“Maybe this egg was special,” I muttered aloud.

That aside, why are there so many bird skeletons in a place like this? I don’t know whether they were wild or domesticated, but one thing is clear: they were buried alive due to some unknown event. I’m curious about their species. Maybe I might find some clues if I dig around here.

“All right!” I stood up vigorously. “Time to do some digging!”

Riale replied with an adorable “Yap!”

I stowed the egg fossil into my coat pocket before getting right back to mining.

Unfortunately, I didn’t end up finding anything related to the birds in the surrounding rock.

Chapter 4: Setting Our Sights on the Ocean!

A little while after Riale unearthed the egg, I went back to the surface for lunch. I was helping myself to some leviathan meat below Yggdrasil when Riena came over and noticed the egg fossil in Riale's tiny arms.

She leaned down curiously. "Is that an egg?"

"Riale found it in the tunnels," I explained. "Pretty, right?"

"Y-Yes, for an egg, it's quite a work of art." She scrutinized the object. "It seems too small to be a murder bird. What species might it be?"

"Uh, well...it's probably a fossil. I found it buried with bird skeletons inside the rocks. It's probably inedible and long dead by this point."

"I see... That aside, I'm surprised you discovered something like this underground. I can't believe it made it through without even a crack in its shell."

"Right?" I nodded. "And it's so beautiful and flawlessly white." During my speech, Riale hugged the egg to their stomach before curling up and dozing off. Noticing that, I added, "Riale seems to love it. Well, finders keepers, so I'll leave it in their care."

Riena chuckled. "Who knows? If Riale keeps warming it, maybe a baby chick might come out one day."

I laughed. "No way." Riena returned a mischievous grin, so she was definitely joking.

That was when Erivan showed up with an axe in each hand. His eyes lit up as he saw the egg. "Oh? Is that an egg ya have there? Do we finally have eggs on this island?"

"No. It's just a fossil, so we can't eat it, General," Riena declared.

Erivan's shoulders slumped. "Aw, that sucks... Ya got my hopes up about eatin' an omelet after goin' without eggs for so long. But hey, Chief. I wanna talk about somethin', are ya free right now?"

I blinked. “You want to talk to me? Go on.”

“That Camus dude says she wants ta build somethin’ like this.” He held out a piece of paper to me. “Baris thinks it looks good, but since it’s gonna be a big project, he said it’s better to get yer permission first, Chief.”

I accepted the paper and looked over it. It was a schematic drawing of the harbor area. “Hmm, I see, I see... It’s a detailed site plan of the entire harbor, huh. She put a lot of thought into this.”

Erivan scratched his head. “I admit, I can’t make heads or tails of that thing...”

Judging from the drawing, she planned to build the harbor on the southern coastal area of Sheol, which was the direction that the cave entrance faced. First, we would build breakwaters stretching out from both sides of the coast, creating a border which sectioned off a large part of the sea, which would serve as our harbor.

In other words, we were going to create a small, artificial lake in the ocean where ships could moor safely. It wouldn’t be an actual lake, of course, since there would be an opening that connected the area of still water to the larger ocean. Inside the lake, we would build several piers, where we could tie up ships and unload baggage.

Along the shore, I spotted a few large rectangular hollows. If my memories were correct, these should serve as dry docks, where we could build or repair ships. After we finished building ships in these cavities, we could then open the water gates and launch the ship into the ocean from there.

Other significant structures included warehouses and facilities to make sails. The last thing that caught my attention was the hexagonal island on the open sea. *She plans to erect a lighthouse here, I see.*

Camus’s drawing was detailed and elegant. But one thing bothered me.

“This is a marvelous plan.” I marveled at it before I furrowed my eyebrows. “But...”

I traced my fingers along the handwritten note next to some of the facilities on the plan—*Optional*, she had written. She had also noted that for structures like the lighthouse, we could adjust the scale depending on our resources and

manpower. Camus had taken the technology and population of Sheol into account and seemed to have concluded that we didn't have to execute the plan perfectly.

"Did Baris say anything else?" I asked Erivan.

"Huh? Oh, uh, he was mutterin' to himself that it's gonna be tough to build a harbor of this scale."

"I see, so Baris thought that too. Judging from her notes, Camus herself seems to think that it's a bit unreasonable for us to build a harbor completely true to this plan."

"Unreasonable? Yer here though, Chief, and ya have all of us with ya!"

"I don't think Camus is looking down on us or anything. But...you know what? Seeing this makes me want to build the perfect harbor."

Hearing that, Erivan's eyes lit up right away. "Let's do that! We defeated that leviathan, so nothin' can stop us!"

Riena voiced her support as well. "I agree! Also, I'm sure that if we accomplish something together with Miss Camus and her crew, we'll get to know each other a lot better!"

I nodded. "Sounds great. Okay then, there's no time like the present!"

And that started our new project—we were on our way to build the best harbor we possibly could!

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Camus wore an anxious look on her face as she asked, "Are you serious about this...?"

"Yes, we are," I said firmly. "We want to build the exact harbor you have designed."

"I mean, that's for the best, of course, but...we don't have that many people on this island. I'll be honest, I don't know how many years a project of this scale might take. The thing is, if we construct everything on the plan, our harbor will have facilities that rival a harbor of a large city..."

Erivan bumped his chest with a fist. “We can do it! We even slew that leviathan, remember?”

The orc let out an exasperated sigh. “Fighting and construction are two completely different things... Even the first step, building the breakwaters, will surely take us over half a year.”

Erivan smirked. “Heh, maybe if yer talkin’ about normal dudes. As for us, weeell... Careful, don’t lose yer mind when ya hear this. Ya see the piece of land we’re standin’ on?” Proudly, Erivan stamped his foot on the reclaimed land for emphasis. “We built this place in one day!”

Camus must have assumed it was a joke, because she grinned and poked Erivan’s shoulder. “Jeez, don’t tease me like that! You may be a handsome hunk, but you won’t fool me that easily!”

“I’m not jokin’!” Erivan exclaimed. e rubbed his nose sheepishly, and added, “Well, to be accurate, it wasn’t a team effort. Lord Heale managed it by himself!”

After a brief glance in my direction, Camus whispered, “That’s even more unbelievable, you know.”

I decided to speak up. “No, I can vouch for him. We really built this land in one day. Of course, it won’t be that easy to construct a harbor, but it shouldn’t take us too long.”

She let out a drawn-out breath. “Okay. For now, I’ll take your word for it, so let’s get started. First, we have to...”

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Camus’s low-pitched cry resounded throughout the coast. “No waaay!!!!!!”

She wasn’t the only one with her jaw on the floor—the other orcs were also gaping in surprise at me as I shot out rectangular blocks of stone from my hand. Loud splashes echoed out one after another as they flew into the ocean. *Ha ha, anyone would be surprised in their shoes.* The goblins, on the other hand, who had witnessed me building the reclaimed land already, didn’t show much of a reaction. They concentrated on their own tasks.

The harbor construction project was going as planned. We were finally halfway through with the breakwaters.

Next to me, Camus said in a hushed voice, “This is crazy... Is it magic?”

“No, it’s <Cave King>’s ability,” I explained.

Levitating stone and constructing the wall that way was likely possible with magic. However, what magic couldn’t accomplish was storing the material in an invisible storeroom like the inventory and retrieving them whenever I wanted to. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that the ability to summon coal and rocks at my whim was one of the reasons we had managed to defeat the leviathan, which was immune to magic.

Camus blinked several times. “H-Huuuh...You know, I’m starting to think that I’m actually inside the leviathan’s stomach.” She seemed to think that Sheol was either heaven or a dream. But then, she continued on in a daze, “No, not just think. I must be already dead.”

“Huh?” I followed her line of sight and saw... “A...red wave?”

From the west, a red, writhing wave was approaching us. The sight was simply surreal, and I started to doubt my eyes as well. As the wave crawled closer, I realized it wasn’t red water, but a “wave” made from countless red creatures. My body tensed up in apprehension.

A trembling voice rang out from the group of orcs. “Blood? Is that blood?”

That voice was like a handle that opened the floodgates, and the orcs sank into collective panic, muttering that it must be the blood of their lost comrades or the curse of the leviathan. A handful were even running towards the cave as if it was their only light of salvation.

I suspended my building process and yelled, “Wait, that isn’t blood! Those are crabs!”

The true identity of the crimson wave was a swarm of red crustaceans. I didn’t know why crabs were heading our way, nor why there were so many of them, but one thing was clear—they weren’t ordinary crabs. My guess was that they were scissor crabs, a kind of crablike monster.

Unfortunately, my words fell on deaf ears.

Camus raised her voice as well. “Sailors, those are scissor crabs! Calm down!” However, the orcs’ panic didn’t subside at all.

Orcs were renowned for their bravery. Even in Sanphales, humans feared them as monsters that wouldn’t retreat no matter what they were up against. And now, faced with the sight of such valiant monsters running for their lives, the goblins started losing their composure as well.

But then, Erivan’s crisp voice rang out. “Don’t throw up such a fuss, y’all! Those things are tiny compared to the leviathan! Everyone, remember what ya did in yer drills! Grab yer weapons and get to yer stations!”

The goblins came to their senses. They were relatively organized and rational as they gathered their weapons and headed to their posts.

On the other hand, Camus was frantically trying to call the other orcs back. “G-Guys! Hey!”

“Hmph. Looks like you orcs have turned into weaklings, huh,” Erivan muttered as he came to stand at the ready next to me, with an axe in each hand. After facing that leviathan, the scissor crabs probably seemed insignificant in his eyes.

The problem was that scissor crabs weren’t exactly easy pickings.

My thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Riena and Baris, who had brought armed goblins with them.

“Lord Heale!” Riena exclaimed. “What is that?!”

“Scissor crabs,” I replied.

Scissor crabs were mighty monsters whose bulky arms ended in lethal pincers, so sharp that they could cut a large tree into two with a snap. Their bodies weren’t much bigger than a human’s, but the eight legs attached to them made these creatures feel bigger and more menacing than their actual size.

They were infamous as abominable pests that made their way onto the coast of Sanphales from the ocean or rivers, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake as they gorged on livestock and crops. Murder birds were pests in Sanphales as well, and the difference between the two species was probably

the fact that scissor crabs only attacked villages along the coast or rivers.

Though their targets were less diverse, Sanphales citizens feared scissor crabs even more than murder birds, and for good reason. These crabs were covered with a shell as durable as iron, and which greatly reduced the effectiveness of non-magical attacks.

There was a light sheen of sweat on Baris's forehead. "Scissor crabs, I see. Even one of these creatures is trouble enough, but they're coming in such a large pack..."

In small settlements like fishing villages, which typically didn't have defensive walls, there had even been cases where a single scissor crab massacred every last resident. But now, a swarm large enough to cover the horizon like a deadly crimson carpet was charging towards us—it was a bloodcurdling sight. The reaction of the orcs was honestly normal compared to the calm of the other monsters.

In a grave tone, Baris continued, "A number of the goblins in our tribe fell at the claws of those creatures along riverbanks..."

"And we can't even negotiate with these monsters," I said with a frown. "Either way, we have to drive them away."

We couldn't afford to let them climb onto Sheol. Even if our people managed to escape unscathed by taking refuge in the cave, our farm would be utterly destroyed. They might inflict lasting damage on Yggdrasil as well.

I thrust out my hands towards the crimson wave that surged forward, aiming my spell. *"Thunder!"* I roared.

A pale bolt of lightning soared out of my hands like a colossal spear. *Thunder* was a mid-tier lightning spell that unleashed a powerful surge of electricity on my enemies. If I aimed it at water, it would spread in an instant, so I had often used it to catch fish.

The lightning bolt pierced the center of the scissor crab swarm. Water frothed and splashed as countless monsters fell listlessly into the sea, leaving a large, gaping hole in the red "horizon line." However, it was like throwing a rock into the water—other scissor crabs immediately filled the gap.

“Darn it...” I cursed before blasting a few more *Thunder* at them.

I could see my spells taking effect as more crabs fell from the wall. But history repeated itself every time as the holes disappeared instantly. The swarm as a whole hadn’t grown any smaller. *The lightning isn’t spreading in the water like I expected... Maybe that’s because the crabs are piling on top of the water and moving across the ocean surface.* At the end of the day, *Thunder* was only a mid-tier spell. *Ugh, if only I’d mastered a more advanced lightning spell...!*

Erivan’s determined voice echoed out from behind me. “We’ll join the Chief! Shoot!”

Soon, I heard the snapping sounds of taut crossbow strings as they were released. Bolts rushed through the air above my head at top speed.

These crossbows had been crafted by Starkers, made from a combination of Yggdrasil tree branches and cave spider silk—materials that were both durable and flexible. Many of the goblins weren’t all that familiar with bows, though, and goblin arms were shorter than human arms, which meant that they couldn’t handle large bows to begin with. Not to mention that archery training required a lot of time and effort. After considering all these facts, Baris had proposed mass-producing crossbows to Starkers.

Compared to the traditional bow, crossbows didn’t have much of a height requirement, while still allowing the wielder to make lethal attacks at long range. On top of that, training was much easier as well.

The flurry of bolts shaved off the frontmost layer of the scissor crab swarm. Unfortunately, there were less than a hundred goblins attacking with me. They weren’t enough to deal a decisive blow.

Following the first wave of crossbow bolts were huge bolts that looked more like spears. We had made use of a gigantic crossbow during our battle with the leviathan, and Starkers had made several more of these later on—the official name for these weapons was ballistae. However, even these were nothing but a drop in the ocean before the all-consuming crab army.

Riena and Baris rushed forward and stood next to me with their palms facing the invaders as well. “We’ll help too!” Riena yelled.

Furay ran over to join them. “Count me in!”

I gave them a big nod. “That’ll be great!”

At my cue, the other three also cast *Thunder*, which I had taught them. Unfortunately, Baris and Furay had only just evolved, so their spells didn’t reach the swarm. I hadn’t given them that many mana minerals yet, so they lacked both experience and vast pools of mana to work with. Riena’s attacks were culling the invading monsters, but her spells were around the same effectiveness as mine.

I chewed on my lip. “This doesn’t look good. At this rate...”

If we couldn’t stop the march of the crabs, they would eventually climb onto shore, swallowing the island whole like a tidal wave. *If we all evacuate to the cave now, we should make it on time... Blocking the entrance with rocks would lock them out completely. The downside is losing our farm and Yggdrasil, and we might be stuck underground forever. But nothing is more precious than everyone’s lives...*

...Hey, wait a minute.

An idea came to me. “Riena, Baris, Furay. I have a request. Can you pour water down on them with magic?”

Riena looked completely lost as she stammered, “W-Water? But that wouldn’t do anything to them.” Baris and Furay both tilted their heads in question.

Water couldn’t burn nor stun those creatures. They were aquatic creatures to begin with, meaning that these monsters had natural resistance towards water. Thus, the three of them probably wanted to say that such an action would be a waste of our mana and time.

But Riena then saw that I was serious and gave me a firm nod. She turned to the other two. “Baris, Furay, please lend me your mana.”

The pair nodded without hesitation and promptly poured their mana into Riena. Sucking in a deep breath, Riena lifted her arms and aimed her palms at the heavens, before shouting, *“Water!”*

Without a moment's delay, water shot out from her hands and climbed high into the sky, piercing even the clouds on its way. It transformed into torrential rain that poured down like a waterfall on the scissor crabs. It was shocking to see that the rain didn't just cover one section of the horizon, but the entire red horizon line.

I had to admit that Riena had gone above and beyond my expectations. Even if I tried casting the same spell, I didn't think I could conjure up so much rain. I glanced at Riena's face, and she seemed just as surprised as I was.

In any case, my spell should be more effective like this! I poured in every last drop of mana I had left and aimed it at the sky above the swarm. *"Thunder!"* I hollered.

The bolt of lightning darted into the clouds. Before I could even blink, thunder boomed and a blinding flash ran across the heavy rain below. The light scattered in all directions, eventually expanding to encompass the whole swarm before it exploded. Almost instantly, the towering mountain of scissor crabs crumbled away, like a sandcastle under the siege of a wave.

Soon, the rain stopped, and calm returned to the ocean surface. A rainbow built a bridge across the sky, and below it, numerous scissor crabs drifted lifelessly on the waves. I didn't spot a single one moving. Slowly, the sea currents carried them towards Sheol.

Cheers erupted around me as I lowered my arm.

“Bravo, Chief!” said Erivan as he walked up to me. Everyone else was enthusiastically celebrating our victory too.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t just me. If the other three didn’t manifest that rain, the battle might have gone another way.”

Erivan nodded furiously, turning to Riena. “Yeah, that rain was amazin’! Yer such a strong mage now, Your Highness!”

Though Erivan and I showered her with praise, Riena seemed somewhat baffled. “Th-That was, well... It was only possible because Baris and Furay shared their mana with me, I think. I couldn’t possibly cast such a grand spell by myself.”

Baris shook his head. “It *was* your achievement. I am still an amateur in the study of magic. The best I can do with water magic is watering our crops.”

“And look at me, who can only manipulate a cup of water, if that,” Furay chimed in. “Ah, but maybe Baris’s <Sorcerer King> helped out?”

“Oh, that makes sense!” Riena nodded. “So it was Baris’s crest at work.”

Baris furrowed his eyebrows and muttered, “I don’t think that is the case...”

Everyone else seemed convinced by that explanation. Personally, I was in agreement with Baris. I didn’t think <Sorcerer King> was the main reason behind that spell’s power. Perhaps we were overthinking it—maybe rain was on its way to begin with. *But it was way too timely. Can such luck be real?*

That wasn’t the only question on my mind. *Why did such a large army of scissor crabs appear in the first place?* I glanced at the lifeless scissor crabs that were beginning to wash up on shore.

Furay seemed to be wondering the same thing. “Anyway, where in the world did such a big swarm come from?”

I gathered what limited knowledge I had and guessed, “They probably traveled a long distance and were looking for land...?”

Scissor crabs were aquatic monsters which would travel from the sea or rivers

onto land to lay eggs and to hunt for meat. Seeing them in the ocean wasn't anything strange.

That being said...there's way too many of these invaders. First the murder birds, then the leviathan, and now the abnormally large swarm of scissor crabs... Is this really just a coincidence?

Erivan shrugged. "Maybe some divine force out there sent them as gifts. In any case, we got a big haul! C'mon, y'all! Pull 'em outta the sea!"

He has a point. It's always good to have more food around. Scissor crabs were a menace, but I'd heard that their meat was a delicacy. And on top of that, their hard shells and sharp pincers could be used as materials for tools and weapons.

Putting my suspicions aside, I raised my voice in agreement. "He's right. We can't just leave them drifting. Let's store them in the cold rooms while the meat's still fresh!"

For now, I focused on transporting the scissor crabs with all my comrades.

Chapter 5: Lending a Listening Ear!

We suspended the harbor construction and devoted all our energy into gathering the scissor crabs. We were in luck—the tides worked in our favor and pushed the swarm towards Sheol, where Riena, Furay, and I used ice spells to freeze the washed-up crabs.

The crabs were so numerous that I honestly didn't think we could finish fishing them out and transporting them within the span of one day, but I shouldn't have underestimated my comrades. The cave spiders threw their silk into the ocean and hauled up piles of crabs at once, while the slimes carried them in an organized manner. Thanks to them, we were done at night.

According to Baris, there were at least three thousand crabs. *Wow.* Of course, that was only the amount we had managed to collect. Most of the swarm either sank into the ocean or were washed away by the currents. Still, we had a great haul. In fact, we couldn't fit them inside our current cold rooms, and most of the crabs were still outside, frozen and stacked into towering piles.

It was already late at night, so we decided to have dinner and call it a day. I'd expand our cold rooms tomorrow.

Food was always best when fresh, so we dined on the scissor crabs right away.

"Wooow!" I exclaimed. The pot in front of me was at least ten times bigger than our standard pots. Inside it, bright red scissor crabs were submerged in boiling water. The salty scent of seawater mixed with the rich aromas of crab meat into a tantalizing mixture that permeated the air.

There wasn't just one of these pots—numerous large pots were boiling away beneath the bows of Yggdrasil.

Riena was standing next to me, and she explained, "Scissor crabs are big, so cooking them in the pots we've been using so far was a challenge. That's why we asked Starkers to make big ones."

Starkers was present as well, and he was already gorging noisily on the tender

meat of the scissor crab legs. It clearly tasted heavenly, because with every gulp, a blissful expression took over his face. The scissor crab leg was at least the size of a cow's leg, so it was very satisfying.

I gulped. I couldn't stop my mouth from watering.

Riena ushered me to take a seat and fetched an iron plate of cut-up crab meat. "Here, Lord Heale! Please have some!"

"Ohhh!" My eyes lit up.

"I stewed it with fish and murder bird bones. I hope you like it."

"You did?" My expectations rose even higher. "Okay then, thanks for the food!" I grabbed a scissor crab leg with my bare hands. Up close, the thickness of the leg was around the width of my face.

I took a big bite. The moment the meat entered my mouth, its juices gushed out and its delectable flavors bombarded my senses. The meat was so tender that it melted on my tongue. "Whouaa..." I let out an unintelligible moan.

Riena chuckled. "How does it taste?"

"...It's delicious. It doesn't feel like I'm eating meat. It's so silky that I feel like I'm drinking soup." I brought the leg closer to my face and took one big bite after another. The meat was gone in a flash. "Ahhh... That was so good."

"I'm glad to hear that! There are still plenty left, so have as much as you want!"

I let out a satisfied sigh. "I will. I feel like I'll never get tired of eating these. Riena, don't hold back either. Eat your fill."

"Yes!"

At my strong insistence, Riena started helping herself to the crab meat as well. Boisterous chatter filled the night air—the other monsters seemed to be delighted at the heavenly taste too.

But one group's silence stood out like a sore thumb with their silence. The orcs led by Camus. They were taking nibbles of small fish that had been stewed with the crabs, but they completely avoided the main ingredient. Seeing that, the cave spiders incessantly gestured and pointed at the crab meat, urging

them to try some, but the orcs refrained.

Camus finally spoke up in the gloomy atmosphere. She seemed to be in low spirits, but she tried to sound as cheerful as she could. “Well, it’s a feast, so let’s try some. The meat looks so juicy.”

One of the orcs sported a despondent expression as he replied, “We only cowered in fear behind everyone else... We didn’t even help with pullin’ them outta the sea...”

The other orcs nodded. “He’s right,” one of them added. “We haven’t done anything to deserve this food.”

Camus persisted. “But they offered it to us, and we can’t be so rude, right?”

The orcs hung their heads. When they finished the fish, they muttered, “Thanks for the food.” They stood up as a group and promptly put away their tableware. They then made their way back to the piles we hadn’t finished transporting yet.

Erivan had been watching, and he scowled. “What’re those guys doin’? All of them are so big and muscly, but they barely ate anythin’. What, do they have somethin’ against crabs?”

Looking worried, Baris said, “Their bodies will give out if they don’t eat more. I hope they don’t fall ill...”

The general stood up from his seat. “Right? And why’re they so depressed when the rest of us are partyin’?! I’ll go tell them to come right back!”

Furay grabbed her father’s hand, stopping him. “Ugh, why are you always like this?! You need to give them some space right now!”

“B-But...” Erivan protested.

Casting her eyes down, Furay continued, “They can’t get back on their feet that quickly after losing so many of their friends and family... We should know that feeling better than anyone else, Dad.”

Erivan looked away. “Hmph, fine.” He fell back onto his seat with a thud. Furay had managed to persuade him, but he still looked grumpy. “But if they keep that up, they’ll start spreadin’ the gloom to us too. How’re we gonna have

any fun then?”

On the other side, Camus went up to the orcs and asked them to come back, but all of her words fell on deaf ears. Seeing that she was getting nowhere, she walked off alone onto the beach and disappeared into the darkness.

I frowned. “Riena, I’ll go over and talk to Camus for a bit.”

“Please do. I am sure that what she needs more than anything else right now is a patient listener.” She clasped her hands together.

I gave her a determined nod. I stood up from my seat and chased after Camus. At the end of the trail, I found her sitting down on the beach lined with glowstone torches. She was staring into the shadowy, distant sea, and she looked as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

I plopped down next to her. “Camus... I’m sure you don’t need someone like me telling you what to do, but maybe your crew just needs a bit more time to come to terms with everything.”

“I’m sure they do, yes. But it’s more than that...” She chewed on her lip. “The losses we suffered this time may be on an unprecedented scale, but it’s not the first time we were forced to bid a brutal farewell to many of our comrades at once. We were thrown into hopeless situations countless times, but we always conquered them together.”

Her eyes wavered as she continued in a low voice, “It’s different this time. Fear of the ocean is rooted deep within us all. The ocean that we loved and were loved by now seems like the gaping maw of a monster ready to swallow us whole...”



Her fingertips were trembling slightly, and she turned away from the sea, as if she didn't even want it in her sight.

She took a deep breath. "If we lost in a battle, I'm sure that we would've accepted the outcome. But no. This time, in the literal blink of an eye, before we could even process what was happening, everyone died." Her eyes wavered, and between sobs, she choked out, "It's all my fault... I don't deserve to be their captain."

I didn't know what to say.

Camus had guided her orc tribe for over twenty years on the violent, unfriendly ocean. She must have both experienced and conquered hardships that made mine pale in comparison. But even a veteran captain like her had been brought to her knees.

I wasn't in a position to give her advice. The best I could do for her was to offer my company when she was down and help her when she needed me.

Mind made up, I finally said, "Sorry, Camus. I also don't know what you should do. But I want to help you find a solution."

She wiped tears from her eyes. "Thank you, Lord Heale." I couldn't even imagine the extent of her frustration and sorrow—only someone in her shoes would understand. "Since we're living on this island, we can't be selfish. I know that Sheol functions because everyone plays a part, and we can't avoid the ocean just because we don't want to approach it."

"That's not true. There's the cave and the farm as well. You don't have to force yourselves to go into the sea."

"Even if we have the choice now, we might need to one day. What if we're the only ones around when someone's drowning? We can't just watch."

"Ah..." *It would be a crippling handicap during an emergency, and that's what she's worried about.*

Camus turned around and glared defiantly at the ocean once again. "We need to overcome our fear."

"In that case... Maybe you can start by fishing along the coast or on small

boats," I suggested.

"Yes. And then, we can slowly progress from there and get further and further away from land... The first step will be construction work in the harbor area since that's close to the sea." She nodded to herself. "We're the most suitable people for this job, so we should do the heavy lifting for the project."

"I see. Well, Riena and I will stick near the sea for a while. If your crew watched us take down the scissor crabs today from the cave, our presence might help them maintain their composure."

"Thank you. That would be a great help." Camus bowed gratefully, but there was still a hint of anxiety in her mannerisms.

I offered a hand to her. "This must be a trying time for you, but let's overcome our obstacles together."

"Yes...!" She held my hand in a firm grip and squeezed it.

"Okay then, how about we get back to dinner?" I stood up. "Erivan and the others said that you definitely need to eat more."

"Great plan." She nodded and gave me a smile. "To tell you the truth, I love scissor crab meat."

"Then you need to eat to your heart's content!"

We headed right back to the feast area, where Riena welcomed us with a warm smile. "Welcome back! You came at a perfect time, the crab fat soup is hot off the stove!"

"Crab fat!" Camus's voice was bright with excitement. "That's one of my favorites!"

Riena's smile broadened seeing Camus regaining some of her spirit. "That's great to hear. I'll fetch some right away, so please, take a seat, both of you." Suddenly, she frowned slightly, looking puzzled. "Um, Lord Heale, what is that on your shoulder?"

I blinked in surprise. "On my shoulder?" I followed her gaze. I saw a tiny white bird with a yellow beak and red eyes that were fixed on my face. "A...bird?"

The bird stuck its tongue out and licked my cheek.

Camus leaned forward to take a better look. “A seagull? Hm, but it’s too small. It might be a fledgling, though.”

I thought it was a seagull at first too. That was the first species that came to mind on seeing its white feathers and yellow beak. But when I considered it a little more, it didn’t seem to match up. Seagulls had gray wings, but this little chick was mostly white from head to toe. The tips of the feathers on their wings and tails were a bright yellow. Its eyes were red like rubies, and it also had long feathers on its head.

“It can’t be a seagull...” I muttered. “But it kind of looks like one.”

Seagulls were frequent visitors of this island. Perhaps due to the decrease of murder bird attacks recently, we saw them everywhere on Sheol, so they were a familiar sight now. Due to my familiarity with them, I was pretty sure this bird wasn’t a seagull. *Plus, I don’t think a seagull could ever be this friendly.* The white bird was rubbing its body against my cheeks.

I reached out and held it in a gentle grip, tucking it into the crook of my elbow in front of my chest. Riale appeared out of nowhere—*where did they run off to earlier?*—and hopped into my arms as well. They started frolicking with each other. *Oh... They’re so cute together.* I felt a loopy grin worm onto my lips.

“Either way, I’ve never seen such a bird before,” I commented.

Riena stared at it curiously. “It also reminds me of a pigeon... Baris, do you recognize it?”

She was right—it was round and fluffy like a pigeon. *But aren’t white pigeons extremely rare?*

Baris hummed in thought. “I admit, I have never seen such a bird before either. It is quite difficult to identify the species of a fledgling, though. But it is quite round and puffy, so the closest bird I can think of is a pigeon.”

There was a note of admiration on his face as he added, “It’s hard to believe that a bird traveled all that distance from the mainland to a remote island like this. Their ability to migrate long distances is incredible.”

Camus placed a hand on her chin. “Huh, you’re right. We don’t see pigeons that often on the sea, so it must be from the mainland. Did it get lost?”

“Perhaps.” Baris nodded. “Likely, its parents made a nest on Yggdrasil. I’m still in disbelief that they managed to fly all this way.”

Now that he mentions it... I hadn’t seen any other pigeons since my arrival at Sheol. Like I mentioned earlier, we only had two main types of birds around here—seagulls and murder birds. Recently, though, I had started spotting normal migratory birds.

The tiny white bird pecked Riale’s cheeks lightly. *It’s so cute...* There were two warm, fluffy little creatures in my arms. *This is bliss. I’m the happiest man in the world right now.*

But someone didn’t seem to share my opinion. Erivan, who was munching away at a scissor crab, said, “Either way, that’s good news. We have new ingredients. Roast pigeon meat isn’t bad at all.”

Furay looked appalled. “Dad, can you stop thinking about eating everything you come across?”

“I can’t believe that’s your first reaction!” Camus huffed. “Nobody could ever bear to eat such a cute little birdie! Right?!” With a radiant smile, she reached for the tiny bird. Unfortunately, the bird dove into my shirt.

Camus probably meant it to be the brightest and warmest smile she could manage, but in my eyes, she also reminded me of a hunter that spotted a prey.

She sighed. “Jeez, you’re so tiny, but you already have the mind of an adult. That bird must have felt shy in the presence of my irresistible charm!”

“Uh... That’s probably the furthest thing from the truth...” Furay muttered.

“Hey!” Camus yelped indignantly.

Meanwhile, I was trembling. The bird was tossing and turning against my chest, and its feathers were extremely ticklish.

“Hey, that tickles!” I tried to suppress my laughter. As I moved, something caught my eye. “Wait...” There was a white shard on the ground, almost like the fragment of a cracked egg. “No way... Riale, where’s that egg you found today?”

Riale responded by lightly tapping on the bird’s wings, coaxing it to come out of my shirt. The kobold then patted the bird’s back as if to introduce the critter

to me.

I was speechless. I wouldn't be this surprised over a normal egg hatching, but the egg that Riale had found wasn't normal in the least. "Are you saying that this bird hatched from that egg?" I asked incredulously before shaking my head. "N-No, that can't be..."

I didn't know how many years that egg had been buried inside the rock. However, I highly doubted that it would have ended up so deep in only a year or two. To my knowledge, eggs would spoil within three months.

For a while, I was utterly bewildered until a voice echoed inside my head as the bird rubbed its body affectionately against me.

"Tameable monster detected. Tame?"

"Monster...?" I muttered out aloud and looked around me instinctively. I had already formed taming contracts with Riale and our new comrade Camus. In other words, there were only two living beings that were untamed within the vicinity: Starkers and the small bird.

Starkers probably wasn't a monster, since I couldn't form the contract with him before. Which meant that my crest must be referring to the little white bird.

That wasn't the end of it. When I focused on my senses, I realized that the bird's innate mana levels were dramatically higher than the orcs nearby.

If it was a monster egg, I suppose it does *have a chance of surviving such conditions. The bird flew onto my shoulders even though it only hatched recently, so it doesn't seem to be a normal bird.*

In my arms, the white bird and Riale stared up at me quizzically. *Ah, my reaction must have made them anxious.* I stroked them both gently to reassure them. "Sorry about that. Um, are your parents..." I broke off.

Judging from the evidence so far, it was almost a given that the bird had hatched from the egg in question. Which meant that its parents weren't around. I couldn't completely rule out the possibility that they were alive,

though, because the bird's egg had survived even in such harsh conditions. *I'd feel guilty if I tamed it without getting permission from them...*

Riena smiled as she looked at the bird. "Perhaps it thinks that you're its parent, Lord Heale. I hear that some species of birds imprint on the first living being they see. How about you give it a name?"

I hesitated before nodding. "You might be right." It was completely attached to me and Riale, so it probably thought that we were its family. *I guess I'll tame it for now and watch over it until it matures a little more. I can dissolve the taming contract whenever I want. I can reconsider after it grows up and can make decisions on its own.*

"Do you want to live with us?" I asked the bird.

The bird raised one wing enthusiastically.

"I see." I smiled. "You're very welcome here. Okay, now, I need to come up with a name..." *What would be a good name? Hm, when it's with Riale in my arms, they look like siblings. I guess I'll give them similar names, then.* "Rale... No, I want something that sounds softer... Marle, Melle... Ah, I like the sound of Melle!"

Hearing that, the bird unfurled its wings. *It seems to like "Melle."*

"Nice to meet you, Melle!"

As if responding to their new name, Melle gently pecked my face. Once again, we had a new addition to our community.

Chapter 6: Discovering a...Winery?!

A few days had passed since the invasion of the scissor crab swarm, and I had finished nearly all of my construction work at the harbor. I had taken care of the most time-intensive part—stacking the stone slabs—and Camus's crew was going to work on the details.

The only structure we had put off to a later date was the island lighthouse—I didn't have enough rocks in my inventory. We had also finished expanding our cold room to make space for the scissor crabs, so I could *finally* return to mining.

Riale was walking beside me as I made my way down the mining shaft. "Woof, woof!" they barked cheerfully. Chirping echoed out in reply—it was Melle, the bird monster. The pair were running in circles, each trying to touch the other's back.

Melle had only hatched yesterday, but the little bird could already fly around energetically. In that aspect, Melle was identical to Riale—I really shouldn't underestimate monster babies. One thing to note about Melle was their lack of a crest, though. Baris had tried to investigate Melle's crest, but he hadn't had any luck.

Some races of monsters had crests while others didn't. On this island, the goblins and orcs had crests, but the slimes and cave spiders didn't seem to. Perhaps Melle belonged to the latter category. But well, it didn't matter all that much on this island. Sheol was different from Sanphales—we didn't measure one's worth with the power of their crests.

All that aside, Riale seemed elated. The pair were around the same age, so they probably understood each other very well.

"You two are just like siblings," I commented.

Suddenly, Riale whipped up their head. "Hm?" I crouched down. They pointed in a certain direction. "Oh! You found something again, huh? All right..."

I brought down my pickaxe on the rock wall which Riale had indicated. As the

rock gave way, dazzling light filtered through the gap. As my inventory automatically stored the debris, my vision cleared, revealing a golden wall.

"What's this?" *Is it...gold?* At this point, precious metals like gold and silver weren't anything to fuss about, but this was an entire wall's worth. I couldn't even estimate how many ingots this would make.

If this section of the golden wall was made of pure gold, its weight might be even heavier than the combined weight of all the gold lumps one could find in the entirety of Sanphales. Of course, it might be orichalcum instead, but considering its properties, that mineral would likely fetch a price that rivaled gold back in Barleon.

That aside, why is there such a structure here, of all places? The wall was obviously artificial. *There might be golems inside like some of the other ruins I found. It's faint, but I sense several sources of mana inside it.*

"Great job, Riale." I paused to stand up. "I guess I'll try digging it. Unit Fifteen, are you around?!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

A short while later, a humanoid golem with a crown sprinted over.

Unit Fifteen was the leader of the golems, and it also protected the miners from danger. There was a large orichalcum shield in its grasp. The golem's duty was to protect everyone in the vanguard, so its shield was taller than itself.

To be safe, I manifested a *Shield* around us. "All right then. Unit Fifteen, I'm counting on you."

Unit Fifteen gave me a solemn salute. Seeing that, I swung my pickaxe.

The golden wall gave way easily, and I was blinded by the light inside. It had taken me by surprise—I instinctively shut my eyes and lifted my arms to block out the light. Nervously, I cracked open my eyes and saw...

"Wh-What in the world is this place?"

For a moment, I almost thought I had returned to the surface—the area inside the wall was as bright as the light of day. The sources of the light were the shining stones on the walls and the ceiling, probably glowstones. The shiny, unblemished golden walls and floor reflected that light.

To my right were racks made from the same golden metal, and most of the racks were crammed with what looked like golden barrels. As for the left side, there was a complex network of metal tubes like the water pipes Starkers had made. There were also several large glass bottle-like structures attached to the ends of the tubes.

The wall on the far side of the room, meanwhile, seemed to be lined with glass. It was filled with purplish red liquid.

Cautiously, I took a wary step inside.

“Ciel, can you ask one of the slimes to pass on a message to the people on the surface? Bring them here and ask them to investigate.”

Ciel immediately started gesturing to one of the slimes nearby. After receiving Ciel’s instructions, the slime hopped up the shaft.

I nodded to myself. “Okay then, time to start looking around this place. Riale, come here.” I crouched down and reached out my hand to Riale. They nodded before jumping nimbly onto my shoulder.

Getting back onto my feet, I started exploring the place with Unit Fifteen and the slimes. First, I located the source of the faint mana signatures. They seemed to be coming from a table near the wall with the metal tubes. Countless handles and round, protruding items were laid out in an orderly manner on its surface. A part of this device was made of glass, and I could see what seemed to be water wheels installed inside. *What* is *this...?*

A memory floated to the surface of my mind. A long time ago, royalty from a foreign nation had visited the royal palace of Sanphales and had shown me an enigmatic stand. It was apparently used for something called “alchemy,” a branch of techniques that were different from magic.

Back then, they pushed the protrusions they called “buttons” and synthesized a plant, I recalled. I looked over the protrusions, handles, as well as the glass bottles connected to the tubes. *Yeah, this table does look like that alchemy stand I saw in the past.*

But the one I saw before only had tiny glass bottles. Next to the stand before me were several large glass bottles that could fit an entire human inside each

one. *Was this stand used for mass-producing medicine? Also, the shape of these little things is rather distracting...*

For some reason, I found my finger drawn to the small protrusions. *I don't know how to explain it, but...they're shaped in a way that is practically asking me to push them.* But somewhere in the back of my mind, I felt as if someone was telling me to stop, and I withdrew my hand as if I had been burnt.

The numerous protrusions intrigued me, and so did the many handles that were just as great in quantity. However, my intuition was warning me that if I touched anything, something crazy would happen.

I shook my head. "Let's leave them alone for now..." I decided to explore elsewhere, but before I left, I glanced at the purplish red liquid inside the glass on the far side of the room. "Hmm, I wonder what that is..."

It looked intimidating. At the same time, it reminded me of the color of wine. Plus, there seemed to be the slightest hint of grape in the air here. *The strange thing is, the aroma doesn't seem to be coming from beyond the glass, but from the ridiculously pristine barrels on the racks.*

I walked closer to get a better view. These barrels had openings blocked with corks and were shaped like the wine barrels I was familiar with. *I can probably confirm the contents if I have a taste.*

Oh, look at that. There was a jutting pile of rocks between the racks. They were roughly in a humanoid shape, and I spotted heartstones and arcanestones in the center, which were used to create automata. The debris might be the remnants of a broken automaton. I looked around and spotted similar piles a little further away.

"This place seems to have been abandoned for a long time..." I muttered.

I was rather happy with the discovery of these stones. Being able to create more automata—golems—would be helpful. They were very useful, for they could strengthen our security system and help out with various tasks like transporting baggage. *All right, I'll store these.* As I went around collecting the heartstones, I felt something soft prod my ear. It was Riale, who rode on my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” I followed their line of sight. “Hey, that’s...”

On the rightmost rack were rectangular glass bottles. The whole rack was full of these, and inside them, I saw layers of dirt and sprouting plants. They seemed to be saplings of some kind, but all of them had wilted.

Someone’s voice bounced off the walls in an echo. “My word! Now this is a layout I have never seen before.”

I turned around and saw Baris. “Hey there, Baris. You came.”

He nodded. “Yes. I must say, this is quite the peculiar ruin site... Hm, is ‘ruins’ really appropriate for such a room?”

“It’s too clean and intact to be a ruin, I agree. But...there doesn’t seem to be anyone alive around here.”

“Really?” Baris started looking around the room curiously. This place was so clean that it was hard to believe that no one was managing it, so I could understand his reaction.

Before too long, other monsters arrived as well. Riena, Erivan, as well as a group of armed goblins walked in.

“Chief!” Erivan’s first reaction was to rush over to me. “Are ya all right?!”

Ah, they probably came here because they were worried that hostile creatures were lurking around.

But then, Erivan stilled, as if something had caught his attention. “Hm?” Realization dawned on his face. “Is that wine I smell?”

“Do you think it smells like wine too, Erivan?” I asked. I wasn’t quite at the age when one would indulge in alcohol, so I had been doubtful about my theory. However, I’d seen Erivan drinking the liquor carried here on Camus’s ship, so he must be familiar with the stuff.

Erivan was practically bouncing with excitement as he declared, “Yes! It’s definitely the smell of good ol’ wine!”

“Huh. I’m not too knowledgeable about liquor, but I was suspecting that there’s wine inside the barrels.” I hesitated and added, “Probably.”

“I see! So that must mean this place’s a wine vault!” Erivan exclaimed as he looked around. He then lowered his voice and hissed, “Chief, let’s hurry and...”

He didn’t finish the rest of that sentence, using his actions to convey his intentions instead. He grabbed the golden cup that had been left in an ostentatious and convenient place near the rack.

“Hold on, wait for a second.” I hurriedly stopped him. “It doesn’t seem to be enchanted with anything, but just in case, I’ll test whether it’s poison with my spell.”

“Please do...!”

I accepted the cup from the restless goblin and poured in a few drops of purplish red liquid from one of the barrels. Wasting no time, I cast *Examine* on it, and it didn’t seem to be poisonous. The liquid looked clear, and it didn’t smell off at all. In fact, it was so aromatic that I had to fight the urge to drink it.

I guess I’ll have a sip. But you know, I feel like stuff like testing unknown substances isn’t supposed to be my job. It’s not that I don’t want to do it, I just feel a little restless, as if something’s missing. Or a certain someone, who’s usually already causing chaos in the vicinity by this point. Yes, I mean that half-naked dude, Starkers. If this place truly is a wine vault, he should show up at any moment!

Well, maybe he has his hands full with teaching his craft to the goblins... With the cup in one hand, my other hand reached for the cork of the barrel.

The next moment...

“Ahhhhh!”

It was Riena’s voice. She was screaming at the entrance.

“Riena?!” Color drained from my face. I rushed there with Baris and Erivan.

Riena was pale as she looked through the glass on the wall. She wasn’t the only one—all the goblins, orcs, and cave spiders present wore identical expressions as they stared into the glass.

I followed their example and fixed my eyes on the purplish red liquid inside. And I saw... “St-Starkers...?”

The blacksmith's jaw was slack, and his eyes were rolled back as he drifted lifelessly inside the liquid.

"St-St-St-St..." I was so horrified that I couldn't even speak. "Starkers!!!" My voice bounced off the walls of the golden room. Without thinking, I banged my fists on the glass. "Starkers! Get a grip, Starkers!"

He didn't respond. His eyes were vacant and unfocused.

I was trembling. "At this rate..." *...he's going to drown!*

How did he even get inside? There doesn't seem to be an entrance on the wall... Wait. Something caught my eye—the structure I had assumed to be an alchemy stand. One of the handles had been pulled down, and the door-shaped opening on one of the giant glass bottles next to it was open.

Riena finally managed to find her voice again. "Mister Starkers started fiddling with that device, and the next thing I knew, he was sucked inside..."

Okay. I see what happened now. He got sucked into the glass bottle, traveled through the tubes attached to it, and ended up on the other side of the giant glass wall. Now that my initial shock had wore off somewhat, I noticed that Starkers's throat was bobbing up and down—he was taking large gulps of the liquid. *Ah. He wasn't drowning. He wanted to be inside.*

I let out a big sigh of relief. "At least we know it's safe to drink now..." *No, that's too hasty. The nasty effects might be delayed. What we do know is that it's not a liquid with immediately harmful effects upon skin contact.*

The moment they heard that, Erivan and the goblins nearby looked ecstatic. "That means we can drink it, right?!"

Riena, ever the rational one, voiced what I was thinking. "Everyone, wait! We still don't know that for sure!"

I nodded. "Yeah, Riena's right. We need to do a thorough inspection before we... Hm?"

Starkers made a circle with his thumb and index finger. He was trying to signal something. *He's...probably telling us that it's okay to drink? Oh, but he might be expressing that it's delicious, since he looks like he's having the time of his life.*

“See?!” Erivan exclaimed. “Even that Starkers dude said to go ahead!”

I sighed. “Okay, okay. But only one cup for now.”

“Thanks a million, Chief!” Erivan cheered. “Y’all, time to part—I mean, do a taste trial!”

The general and a handful of the other monsters almost had a spring in their step as they hurried over to the wine barrels. As for Starkers, he poked his head above the surface once before diving back in and taking large gulps of the liquid. All of their faces were filled with joy.

Huh. Does wine taste that good? I raised an eyebrow. “Well, looks like the wine is all right... More importantly, this means that Starkers knows how to operate that device.”

Baris nodded. “Yes. Perhaps this is a facility that Lord Starkers is familiar with.”

“That’s very likely. At a glance, it seems to be a wine vault...or a winery, but if that’s the case...” I frowned. *Why was such a facility buried underground here?*

I remembered the shrine-like chamber I had found before, and it matched the description of “ancient ruin.” But this room was so clean that it felt as if it had been in use recently. There wasn’t any mold or even a speck of dust. *Ah, wait. Maybe the automata lying around have been maintaining hygiene until some time a little while ago?*

I hummed in thought. “It’s still strange, though. Whether it’s a vault or a winery, it can’t be a standalone structure.”

After all, manual labor was required to make wine and to transport the barrels. There must be a residence for an intelligent creature of some kind nearby. The goblins were very much interested in the wine, so humans weren’t the only race that enjoyed this commodity. Therefore, this creature or creatures weren’t necessarily human.

That being said, the automata had been left lying in ruin. The facility must have been neglected for a certain amount of time.

“Does that mean there might be houses...no, something like a village buried

nearby?” Riena asked.

“Yeah. But I don’t see any doors or passages that lead elsewhere...” I furrowed my eyebrows and walked around the room once again with Baris and Riena.

We didn’t have any luck. There weren’t any openings like doors or holes—not even any traces of blocked entrances.

I was bewildered. “Huh... How did people even get in here?”

Perhaps asking Starkers would save me the trouble. Our key person, however, was happily drifting on the surface on the other side of the glass. He had a hand over his round stomach—he seemed to be napping.

“Oh well, I guess I’ll try asking him later,” I sighed to myself before turning to the shaman. “Baris, tell everyone to share the wine among themselves. Let’s ask Starkers about the facility when he has free time. If we can make use of it, we should give it a try.”

“Yes, my lord. This room would make a good warehouse. And from what I have seen so far, I believe we should be able to make wine with all the apparatus available.”

“Right. Hm, if we want to make wine, though, we’ll need grapes.” My gaze flickered to the saplings on one rack. They might be grape saplings. All of them had either dried up or withered, however. We probably couldn’t resuscitate them even if we brought them to the surface. “Maybe sunstones might be effective... Riena, how many sunstones do we have right— Hm?”

Riena, who’d been standing in front of a slightly distant rack. She abruptly turned around and jogged over. “Lord Heale! Look at this!”

“Oh? Did you find something?”

“Yes, this stone!” She lifted her hand.

A bluish white stone in the shape of a hexagonal prism shimmered faintly on her palm. Unlike a sapphire, a milky white tinted its blue color.

I was intrigued. “I’ve never seen such a stone before... Is it a gemstone? I’ll take a look.”

I touched the bluish white stone, and <Cave King> automatically stored it in my inventory. The assistant then analyzed it and matched it with an entry in the Mineral Encyclopedia.

Telestone: When placed, allows instant teleportation to other installed telestones. The maximum transport distance is dependent on telestone size.

Tele...portation? I've never heard of that word before. Judging by the description, it sounds like a method of transport, like a carriage, but what does it mean by "instant"? So... For example, if I place one of each on the surface and here, would I be able to move from one place to another in the blink of an eye?

"It is possible. However, as mentioned in the entry, the size of the stones will determine their maximum teleport distance."

I see... I have no clue how it works, but it'll save me a lot of walking, huh? But...that also means I need at least two of these if I want to use them.

I reported back to Riena and Baris about the stone straight away. Though both of them understood the gist of my description, they struggled to picture the stone in action.

Riena nodded slowly. "Either way, that means we need another one of these before we can do anything with them, yes?"

"Yeah," I said. "But hey, I think we might have found the reason why there weren't any exits in this room."

Baris and Riena both tilted their heads quizzically.

I wasn't too confident in my theory, but I decided to voice it. "I was thinking, well, if there was one of these stones in this room and one elsewhere, maybe people would be able to enter that way, even without a door."

Baris furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "Hmm... Does that mean they could travel through the walls? I must say it sounds absurd, but that would explain the structure of the room."

I nodded. “I’m planning on investigating further, just in case. As for this stone, though...”

Having only one of them was meaningless, but if there was another stone buried nearby, I could try to “teleport” there. But what if it was a dangerous place filled with hostile golems? It was too risky to use without proper preparation.

Mind made up, I declared, “I’ll hold on to it for now. It’d be dangerous if someone accidentally activates it.”

“That is the most appropriate course of action,” Baris agreed. “I shall investigate this area a little longer. I do think it’s about time we get Lord Starkers out of there.” He walked up to where Starkers was floating and knocked on the glass panes.

In reaction, Starkers went through the pipes with a satisfied look on his face. *The wine in there is pretty much that guy’s exclusive property by now...*

We looked around for a while longer just in case we had missed something, but we didn’t make any more major discoveries. The good news was that there was quite a respectable amount of wine stored in the warehouse, so the wine connoisseurs among the monsters wouldn’t have to worry about running out any time soon. And although we still couldn’t harvest a great deal, we *were* cultivating grapes on this island as well. Maybe Starkers could use the device to make wine.

But that was only a possible plan for the future. For the rest of the day, I dug around the surrounding area to look for anything that might be related to the warehouse, and by the time I was done, night had arrived.

***

On the next morning, Riena carried the bottles that held shriveled plants from the rack in the warehouse to the surface. I had just taken one out and planted it under Yggdrasil. Unfortunately, the plant hadn’t regained any vitality.

Riena looked at it with disappointment.

“Even if it’s the mythical Yggdrasil, I guess it can’t revive a plant in this state,” I said.

Or maybe it's because the sunlight's a little too intense. Recently, or to be more specific, ever since Melle hatched, the heat from the sun has gotten noticeably stronger than before. Then again, I've never heard of a fully dried-up plant reviving before, so maybe there's no correlation between the two.

"Perhaps..." Riena frowned. "I picked out the ones that were relatively healthy, but...I must have been overly optimistic."

"Huh. So it's going to wilt even more as time goes on... What kind of plant *is* it in the first place?"

"Considering the shape of their leaves, I believe they are grape saplings. They seem similar to the grapes we are cultivating on the island."

"I see. Well, it's a storehouse of wine, so I wouldn't be surprised. It still maintains most of its shape despite drying up, though, so it doesn't seem to be a normal species of grape..."

These were grape saplings left in a place where wine was made and stored. It was likely they were a specific species of grape that made the best wine. I wasn't too knowledgeable about the topic, but I knew that the species of grape played an important part in determining the final quality of the wine. Some grapes weren't suitable for winemaking.

At the moment, the grapes we were cultivating on the island were the type that had often been served in the palace to be eaten as fruit. Perhaps they weren't suitable for wine. *If we're going to make the effort to make wine, I want to make something good. Everyone looked ecstatic when they tried the wine that was stored down there, so it must be good quality. Hmm... Is there anything we can do about this?*

"Should we experiment with sunstones?" I wondered aloud. "Ah, but their main effect is accelerating growth, not reviving plants..."

"Maybe we could use turtlestones to extend their life span. But do they work on plants...?" Riena furrowed her eyebrows in thought. "Seeds and saplings are precious resources on this island, so I hoped that we would find some way to cultivate them. What a shame..." Her fingertips gently stroked the wilted leaves.

Suddenly, the shriveled sapling started to glow with an almost blinding light.

What happened next made me doubt my own eyes.

“Huh...?”

The wilted leaves had transformed into a vibrant, healthy green. They stood tall and proud in the air along the branch, as if they had been reborn.

Riena also wore an expression of disbelief.

“R-Riena?” I stammered. “What did you just do?”

“I-I haven’t done anything.” She shook her head profusely. “I only silently prayed for them to become healthy again. Did you cast some kind of spell on them, Lord Heale?”

“No, I didn’t do anything either... What in the world is going on? Wait...” I took out a shriveled sapling from a new bottle and buried it in the soil. “Can you try that one more time, Riena?”

“R-Right away!” She reached out her hand to stroke the plant. The next moment, almost like we’d gone back in time to see the same thing again, the plant’s leaves turned emerald green as it regained its vitality.

Riena’s eyes widened, and a sheen of sweat formed on her forehead. “A-Am I dreaming?” She was clearly just as confused as I was. Her voice was trembling with panic as she said, “L-Lord Heale, I... What in the world is happening to me?!”

“M-Maybe you used magic?”

“No, I didn’t think about activating my mana at all...”

I hadn’t sensed any flow of mana in her hand either. Besides, I hadn’t ever taught her a spell that could revive a mostly-dead plant, because at least in Sanphales, no one had ever heard of a spell that could achieve such a feat.

I chewed on my lip. “There’s a chance that two coincidences happened in a row. Let’s test it one more time.”

“Y-Yes.”

Riena continued to touch the rest of the plants she had retrieved. But contrary to our expectations, every single one of them revived in an instant, as

if they'd never been wilted to begin with. Then we thought that perhaps it was a species of plant that revived with skin contact, so I and a few other monsters tried doing the same thing, but to no one's surprise, the plants remained dead and drooping.

Baris was attracted by the commotion we were making, and after some thought, he came up with a theory. "Her Highness's crest is <Farmer>, a crest that hastens the growth of crops. Perhaps it's another effect of her crest."

"B-But this is the first time it has ever done something like this," Riena argued. "In Barleon, I touched shriveled plants countless times, but I have never seen this happen before."

Baris nodded, then stroked his chin in thought. "Hmm... Indeed, some of the other goblins that just touched it also have <Farmer>. They didn't produce similar results, which disproves my theory. On top of that, I have never heard of your crest having such an ability before."

Not to mention that <Farmer> is said to barely have any effects in the first place. However, what Baris had said gave me an idea. "Hey, it might be too early to say that it's not her crest's power. Crests seem to...well, at least in the case of <Cave King>, it became more powerful after I gained experience. Maybe that's what happened."

"I see..." Riena and Baris said in unison, but their expressions told a different story.

Baris frowned. "Several of the goblins with <Farmer> that participated in the experiment have dedicated their entire life to agriculture. They should have more experience than the princess, but I have never heard of anything remotely similar from th—Wait. Is it possibly...?"

Realization dawned on Baris's face and he looked down at Riena's thigh, where her crest was glowing faintly. "Hm. The design of the crest is the same as <Farmer>, but it shouldn't be this bright..." Saying that, he took out a piece of paper and a brush. He drew a circular pattern on it before placing it on the ground.

Ah, that should be a ritual to identify crests, if I remember correctly.

He bowed. “Your Highness, please stand on this.”

“A-All right.” Riena dutifully obeyed and moved to stand on the circle.

The circle glowed, and a script of light shimmered into view in the middle. Baris observed the paper and looked as if his suspicions had been confirmed. “Your crest is different now.”

“M-My crest?!” Riena’s eyes widened. “But...why?”

She didn’t seem to have any clue, but my intuition led me to the answer immediately. “Is it because she used a risestone?”

Baris nodded. “That must be it. The princess’s crest is now called <Jörd>.”

Riena tilted her head in question. “<Jörd>...?”

The shaman gave her a description of the crest’s abilities. “The one who can bless and bring life to everything on the ground. The one who asks for the light of the sun and the enrichment of rain through their prayers...or so it says.”

“Wow, it sounds grand...” My eyes widened. “Hold on, rain...?”

I recalled the water spell Riena had aimed at the invading swarm of scissor crabs a while ago. She had managed to summon a rain so heavy that it had poured down on the swarm like a waterfall, but the amount of water had clearly been too great for the amount of mana she had used, and she herself had been puzzled.

Baris looked as if that had cleared up the question in his mind, too. “A crest that can summon rain... The princess must have used both her magic and her crest to manifest the rain back then.”

“Th-That can’t be...” Riena shook her head. Then, she raised her hands, palms facing the heavens.

Almost instantly, torrential rain poured down, but only in the area around us.

Disbelief was written all over Riena’s face. “Wha...” She reached out her hands towards the sky again, and this time, she summoned the scorching heat of the sun. Once again, she froze in shock before calling for rain... And that cycle repeated over and over.

“Is this...real?” she muttered in a daze. For a while, she stood there, flabbergasted. But a short time later, she resumed the cycle again, as if she still couldn’t believe her eyes.

Amazing. I agree, this ability is phenomenal, and I find it absurd too. But, uh, Riena... That should be enough, don’t you think? Baris and I are already drenched from head to toe...



As rain pelted him, Baris said slowly, “The description seems accurate. After all, she managed to change the weather repeatedly. That must be it.”

“Yeah, I think so too.” I smiled wryly. “Riena, I think we have enough evidence now.”

Riena snapped out of her daze with a start and immediately stopped the rain. “I-I’m so sorry! I lost my composure.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault, anyone would be surprised in your shoes.”

When she wished for sunny skies, there would be sun. When she asked for rain, her summons would be answered. It was a power that was unheard of and simply ridiculous for any mortal, earth-dwelling being. There might be some limitations, but being able to use it even once a day was already impressive.

Baris cleared his throat. “In conclusion, Her Highness can revive shriveled plants and change the weather as needed with her powers.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. I cast a wind spell on everyone present to dry our clothes as I added, “And thanks to her, the grape saplings are thriving once again.” While I was at it, I also extended my magic to Riale and Melle, who had gotten wet too since they had been frolicking nearby.

“Th-Thank you very much, Lord Heale,” Riena said sheepishly. “With this many saplings, we should be able to start up a large vineyard.”

Baris nodded. “Many of our tribe fancies liquor. If we can cultivate grapes and make wine, I’m certain it would make yet another improvement to everyone’s lives on this island.”

That wasn’t all. When we began trading in the future, wine might be a good trade commodity. Erivan and Camus had praised the wine in the cave tunnels as exquisite.

“All right, then let’s give it a try,” I declared.

Baris and Riena both nodded enthusiastically in reply.

Chapter 7: Gathering Materials!

I hummed in thought. “I see. In that case, cultivating our grapes on rising ground would be best.”

Riena nodded. “Perhaps it’s because of our limited technology, but the teachings our ancestors passed on to our tribe were that we must situate our grape vineyards on a slope. Apparently, it allows for better exposure to the sunshine and will help prevent the soil from becoming too moist.”

The sunshine, huh...? That reminds me, the sun seems a little intense lately. Is that all right? But I guess the intensity of the sun is a completely different thing to worry about. I agree that we should build a knoll.

“I see,” I said. “In Sanphales, many of our vineyards were on gentle slopes as well. I’m not very knowledgeable about agriculture, but there must be a reason why everyone made that choice. Hmm, but we don’t have any rising ground on this island...”

Most of the land area of the island was flat reclaimed land. We *did* have Yggdrasil, but if we constructed a vineyard on top of it, I had the feeling that it might have undesirable consequences when the tree grew bigger.

Offering the map of the island to me, Baris said, “That was why I thought that building a knoll at the foot of Yggdrasil might be our best course of action.” He had added a small hill to the bottom of the tree.

One thing intrigued me about his drawing, however. A line stretched out from the knoll he’d drawn towards the harbor on the other side of the island. I traced it with my finger. “What’s this?”

“It’s a small river. I propose that we make a canal as well. It will make farming and transporting baggage easier.”

“Oh, I see. Sounds like it’ll be very convenient. But what about the water?” The answer came to me instantly. “Ah, you’ll use the hot water from the underground hot spring.”

“Yes, I shall ask Lord Starkers to extend the water pipes. They will stretch to

an artificial lake on the knoll, and the water in this lake will be directed into the canal. However, this is only a request from those who miss the rivers of their homeland, so it is strictly optional. After all, our slimes are very diligent postmen."

The goblins had originally dwelt in an inland forest, and I could understand their yearning for the sights of their homeland.

"No, if it's to do with anyone's homeland, it shouldn't be neglected," I said firmly. "Let's make a river as well. But, hmm..." I summoned up my inventory in my head. I seemed to be running low on rock. "Looks like I used too much rock to build the harbor... I'll go collect what I need first."

Other monsters, like Furay and Taran, mined as well, so if I spent one entire day digging, we should have enough materials by the end of the day.

"Understood." Baris bowed. "The farmwork has settled down for now, and the orcs are leading the construction of the harbor, so I shall dispatch idle goblins there to help you."

"That'd be great. Okay then, I'll be off."

With that, I returned to the underground tunnels.

When I arrived, I saw that the slimes were already hard at work, carrying one lump of rock after another. When I wasn't underground or nearby, the slimes would assemble all the minerals in the warehouse we had constructed in the cave.

Whenever I *was* present, however, the proceedings were different, because I could automatically store the debris in my inventory with <Cave King>'s abilities. The slimes spotted me and hopped over to me right away. I got to work in silence, storing all the rocks and minerals they brought to me.

More and more slimes crowded around me in a big swarm. "Wow... That's a lot. Those two must be competing again," I muttered to myself as I walked in the direction the slimes had come from. As I headed deeper in, I could hear the clanging sound of metal, as if someone was engaged in a sword fight. "I knew it."

I approached the source. There, I saw Furay and Taran right next to each

other, swinging their picks at full speed as they vied for the title of best miner. “Hey you two, how are things going?”

“Ah, Lord Heale!” Furay chirped. “I saw the wine place earlier! How did you even find it?”

“I have Riale to thank for that,” I replied. “That little kobold always tells me right away if there’s anything buried in the rock.”

In response, Riale stood up on their two feet, placed a paw on their hip, and raised their chin proudly.

Furay nodded. “Makes sense, that was what happened with the mithril too. Riale, we’re counting on you today.”

“Woof!” Riale replied energetically. Taran reached out her pedipalps to pat the kobold baby on the head. At first, Riale had been scared of Taran, but they had grown completely used to her. Though Riale *was* still somewhat tense around Erivan.

I turned around to face Riale, Melle, and Ciel, who had followed me. “Okay then, let’s get to work, shall we?”

Furay raised an eyebrow. “Of course, you’re gonna join our competition, right?”

“Yeah, I happily accept your challenge.”

Thus began another day of mining. I joined Furay and Taran, and we formed a line as we speedily tackled the rock wall.

As we dug, Furay said, “You know, I think it’s been a while since we last had a competition between the three of us.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It might be my first time competing against you two since your evolution, Furay.”

During our previous competition, Furay had still been in her goblin form. Right now, she was in her humanlike form, and when she wasn’t practicing magic, you could always find her engaged in a mining competition with Taran in the shafts. Whenever I was on the surface, Taran and Furay usually took on the position of supervisor inside the caves.

“Mmhmm.” She paused. “Hey, don’t you think I’m somewhat different from before?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, you have a different appearance now.”

“Mm, but I want to ask you for *your* opinion of me now. Has something changed?”

“Um...” *Furay’s a young maiden, so I should be a gentleman and praise her in a respectful way.* “W-Well, you seem to have matured in many ways.”

“Ah, I know that I look different,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Not that, I mean as a miner.”

...*Oh.* I felt ashamed of myself for getting so nervous about saying the wrong thing. “As a miner... Hmm, I guess you seem to be faster?”

In terms of speed, she was almost toe-to-toe with Taran, who could mine with four arms at once. However, even before her evolution, Furay’s speed had been increasing by the day. Her current pace wasn’t that much of a dramatic increase.

I frowned. “No, sorry, but I can’t tell. Do you feel unwell today?”

“Nah. It’s more that, well, whenever I swing down my pickaxe, I feel like my mana levels are increasing...”

“Your mana levels?” I stilled. “Even when you’re not mining mana minerals?”

Mages of a certain proficiency could sense the movement of mana, and in Sanphales, we had called it “mana sensitivity.” Observing Furay carefully, I found she was right. I could feel her mana levels increasing bit by bit whenever she dug into rock. Though the increase was minuscule, it was definitely there.

I considered the possibility that she had come across mana minerals and was automatically consuming them. However, I couldn’t sense the mana signature of mana minerals in the direction she was digging.

My eyes widened. “Y-You’re right...!”

“I am? I dunno why, but no matter what direction I dig in, I feel that my mana’s going up.”

“Huh. Maybe your crest changed as well when you evolved.”

“What? You mean, my <Miner> crest changed?”

“Yeah, there’s a high possibility... We should get Baris to check it right away.”

Furay’s eyes lit up in excitement. “O-Okay! I’ll be back soon!” She ran towards the surface.

I guess I’ll dig up more rock while I wait for her to come back with her results. “She might’ve gotten a crest that’ll increase her mana whenever she mines or something...”

If mining boosted her magic, Furay might become even more enthusiastic about it. Then, eventually, her abilities in both mining and magic might surpass mine.

“Can’t let her leave me in the dust.” I nodded and psyched myself up. Taran vigorously waved her body up and down, as if in agreement.

As Furay’s rivals, neither of us could be complacent. For a while, we single-mindedly swung our pickaxes. When we got to a certain point, though, Riale’s ears perked up, as if they had noticed something.

I crouched down. “Hm? Did you discover something again, Riale?”

Riale nodded.

“Got it. I’ll try digging around.”

This time, I didn’t detect any flow of mana. *I probably don’t have to be too guarded. A* Shield *should be enough.* But just as that thought crossed my mind, Unit Fifteen came over with its orichalcum shield. There’d been situations like this a few times before, so perhaps the golem had learned what Riale’s reaction meant. *Either way, the fact that it comes over immediately is a big help.*

I manifested *Shield*. Without hesitation, I dug in the direction Riale had indicated. The wall gave way to a hollow.

The next moment, spider silk wrapped around my waist.

“Huh...?” I widened my eyes, speechless at the sight before me. There wasn’t any ground below—just a bottomless pit. “That was close... Taran, you really

saved me there.”

Taran waved her body sideways slightly, as if to say, “Don’t sweat it.”

Riale and Melle, intrigued, tried to peer into the pit, but Ciel stretched out his body and stopped them.

I frowned. “It’s good that we’ve got *Shield*, but we don’t know whether we can climb back up if we fall, so it’s better to be careful.” *Not to mention that something might be lurking at the bottom...* I had to suppress a shudder.

Hmm, but there don’t seem to be any mana signatures at the bottom of the pit, I noted. Straining my ears, I could hear a distant splashing. Water seemed to be streaming down from the other side of the pit, and it reached all the way to the bottom. *Ah, it’s probably an underground river. It might be connected to the sea. That aside, I nearly fell in just now. Phew, that was close. Actually... Since water’s pouring in, maybe it’s not just* connected *to the sea—maybe we’ll dig into the ocean if we keep going on the other side.*

“No, wait... What’s that?” I squinted at the starting point of the stream of water. There seemed to be glowing blue stones embedded in the wall, and water was pouring out of them. “Is water coming out from those stones?”

With further scrutiny, I realized that the cavity on the opposite wall was filled with a significant amount of what looked like the same blue stones. The rest, however, weren’t glowing, nor were they emitting water.

“Are they...the same thing? In that case, maybe it’s a type of stone that manifests water.” *Okay then. What to do, what to do... Should I dig in a circle around the wall to make a path there? Or...*

“Hey Taran, do you think you can drag those over with your spider sil— Oh.” Taran scuttled across the wall and arrived at the other side in the blink of an eye. “Ha ha, I shouldn’t have expected anything less from you. Okay, we don’t need all of it, so let’s not be too greedy. Can you take half of that for now?”

At that, Taran weaved a bag-like object with her silk, collected the stones in it, then climbed back.

“Thanks, Taran.” I peered into the bag. “What in the world are these?”

Wasting no time, I took a blue stone into my hand and stored it in my inventory.

Aquastone: A stone that produces water.

"Ah, so it really *is* a stone that makes water. Well well, what a discovery."

In other words, if you have this stone, you can even drink water in the desert... But I guess it's not that useful on Sheol, since we already have our baths and the ability to collect water with magic. Oh, but hold on. With these stones, we can produce water wherever we want, which would be perfect for the artificial river. We won't need to ask Starkers to do all that extra work extending the water pipes from the underground hot spring.

It would be pretty interesting to make waterfalls or other water structures with this. And if we store some on ships, we wouldn't have to worry about a lack of fresh water during the voyage.

I nodded to myself. "Yeah, this will be useful. Good job, Riale."

Riale scratched their head sheepishly, as if to say, "Nah, it was nothing."

I found myself smiling slightly as I said, "Wow, you're already acting like an adult with all your body language. All right, for now, I'll put these away."

After storing all the aquastones, I checked my inventory, and saw there were a total of forty-five. *That's pretty grand.*

"Okay then. Next, I should make a signboard here to warn people to stay away. Unit Fifteen, can you keep watch on this area—" I broke off. The ground was shaking. "Huh?"

The shaking only intensified with time. There was a deafening rumble.

An earthquake? But I quickly rejected that idea. *No, it's different. Clearly, something with a tremendous amount of mana is charging in this direction at an incredible speed.*

I focused on my senses, and the "object" was coming from the left side in the opposite wall. It was at around the same elevation as us. If it continued its

charge, it would end up on the opposite side of this pit eventually. It was too fast—we couldn't escape.

"Don't move, everyone."

I manifested *Shield* and ordered Unit Fifteen to hold up its own shield to prepare for whatever it was. The ear-splitting sound only got closer and closer. Finally, it broke through the far wall, and...

"Oh!" My eyes widened.

...what appeared was a creature that looked like a towering green lizard. I only had a rough idea of its size, but it had to be bigger than an elephant.

When the lizard met my eyes, it looked surprised, but it immediately cast its eyes down. A bottomless pit stared back up at it. It looked up at me again and let out a loud shriek as it fell down.

"Heeeeelp!!!" Its desperate scream gradually grew distant.

Taran reacted on the spur of the moment and used her silk to catch the lizard's tail. However, she ended up getting dragged across the ground, perhaps due to the lizard's hefty weight. Unit Fifteen and I clung to Taran's feet to steady her.

"A-Are you okay, Taran?" I asked nervously.

She didn't respond. Or perhaps she simply couldn't respond because of the strain.

"Ciel, ask for help!" I yelled.

Ciel had already been on the move even before I called out my instruction. He hopped up the mining shaft. Riale, meanwhile, was trying to hold down Taran's foot with their tiny body. Everyone was doing what they could, but at this rate, we would all fall in. *It might be a bit late, but should I cast a wind spell at the bottom of the pit? No, but if I let Taran go, she'll be dragged in almost instantly. What should I do?*

As I was agonizing over the situation, Melle flew into the pit almost nonchalantly.

"M-Melle! No, come back! It's dangerous!"

Despite my protests, Melle turned around to give me a big reassuring smile before soaring down the pit. Then, something strange happened.

The spider silk suddenly loosened up.

Seeing that, Taran quickly pulled up her silk. Then, as she hauled, what appeared before us was a magnificent bird shrouded with crimson flames like a cloak.

I shook my head and looked again. *No, that was just a trick of the light.* The cute, petite Melle was holding the lizard's foot in their beak as they flew over, flapping their wings noisily.

"M-Melle?" I stammered. *Their body is tiny, but they managed to lift a lizard the size of an elephant...?* I already knew Melle wasn't a normal bird, but it was still unbelievable.

Clinging to its dear life, the lizard finally leaped onto the ground where we stood before collapsing onto the ground with a thud. Its chest moved up and down as it panted to catch its breath. "Y-You really saved me there..."

I hadn't spared it any thought earlier since it had been an emergency, but the lizard was certainly speaking in a language I could understand. However, the movements of his mouth—*probably a male judging by his voice*—didn't match up with the words he was producing. Furthermore, I sensed the activation of magic from the lizard, and I realized that he was communicating with us through magic.

As he spoke, Melle flew over until they were right in front of my eyes. There wasn't even a hint of fatigue about them, and in fact, they even seemed a bit shy due to the praise from Riale, Ciel, and Taran.

I took another look at the green lizard. He was indeed enormous. His proportions were short and stout, but he was likely several times bigger than an elephant. Green scales, glittering like emeralds, covered his entire body. His eyes were even more dazzling than gold, as if someone had placed a shard of the sun itself into his orbs.

"Ah..." When the lizard finally regained his breath, he bowed slightly to us. "First things first, thank you. The name's Roydon."

“H-Hey there, Roydon. I’m Heale. And the monsters with me are Ciel, Riale, Taran, and Melle.” I gestured to each of them in turn.

When I was done, Roydon bowed gracefully, a gesture that seemed a little out of place on a bulky lizard like him. “Man... I can’t thank you guys enough.” He sighed. “Digging a new tunnel for a new discovery is great and all, but it sure is dangerous...”

“A new tunnel?” I blinked. “Did you dig here from somewhere else?”

“Yeah. Took me a month to get here from the north. Was expecting to arrive at my destination after a few more days of digging, but...” He shrugged. “Never thought I’d meet anyone in a place like this.”

“I’m just as surprised as you are. I can’t believe I came across someone underground who I can communicate with...”

And he even said he came all the way from the north and ended up here after digging for an entire month... Incredible.

He looked at me. “You’re, uh...a human, right? I heard your kind has been increasing in number recently on some continents.”

“Yeah, I am. What about you?”

“Me? I’m an earth dragon.”

“An earth dragon...”

In my homeland, Barleon, they were a species considered long extinct. They couldn’t fly, but had the ability to breathe out an all-consuming, unstoppable inferno, and were once hailed as the strongest creatures above ground. *Ah. We saved someone very distinguished...*

What he said next, however, took me by surprise. “By the way, do you guys have anything you want to sell? Or would you like to take a look at my wares?”

I blinked dumbly at him. “Wares?”

“Yeah. I’m a merchant, you see. That’s why I was digging a tunnel to the settlement of the southern earth dragons.”

“I see...”

It seemed that earth dragons traded among themselves like humans did. I realized now that there was a gigantic bag on Roydon's back, and it seemed to be put together with scales. On what must be his waist was something that looked like a belt, and small bags dangled from it. *He certainly looks like a merchant with that outfit. But, hmm... I don't think we have anything that a dragon would want.*

"We'd love to do business with you," I said, "but what should we do about our currencies? Is bartering all right with you?"

"Of course. You saved me from a crisis, and I want to thank you too."

"Oh, you really don't have to feel obliged. We did what anyone else would have done in our shoes. That aside, chatting in a place like this would be pretty uncomfortable. How about we head up and talk over some food?" I suggested.

"That'd be great, I'm famished. Thanks for the offer."

We led Roydon to the surface. During our journey, the monsters we passed by all seemed surprised at Roydon's size, but since I was with him, no one put up a fuss.

"Hm?" Roydon sounded intrigued. "Goblins and orcs... I heard that the animosity was mutual between humans and monsters, but you guys are living together, huh?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "We all get along here." Though I had to agree that it was likely a rare sight outside this island.

While we exchanged idle chatter, I led Roydon near to Yggdrasil. Everyone was surprised at our newcomer, but Roydon was more shocked than anyone else, his eyes wide and mouth gaping. "Wh-Wha... Oi! That's!"

"Hm?" I tilted my head in question. "You mean... Yggdrasil, the tree here?"

He nodded, speechless.

"When I was digging in the mining shaft you saw just now, I found a seed," I explained. "Yggdrasil grew out of it when we buried it in soil."

"Y-You...planted a Yggdrasil seed?" he asked in a daze.

I was taken aback by his reaction. "Y-Yeah. Well, I guess we did accelerate its

growth with a thing called a sunstone.”

There was utter silence as he stared up at it mutely.

I waved my hand in front of him. “H-Hey, are you all right?”

He snapped out of it with a start. “Ye...ah. Don’t mind me. I just didn’t expect that such a thing still existed in this world.”

I couldn’t blame him for his reaction. *Anyone would be stupefied if they saw a tree as tall as a mountain. In fact, when the residents of Sheol saw it for the first time, we all thought we were dreaming.*

Roydon, however, seemed to be moved for one more reason. “They say my continent used to be overflowing with Yggdrasil trees in the past. But now, we don’t have a single one left... Even worse, our continent is now a barren land with only rocks in sight. You can’t even find a single flower growing there.”

“How did that happen?”

He sighed. “It’s due to the war between dragons that has lasted for millennia...and it’s still ongoing. That’s why I’m making trips back and forth between my homeland and the south, where some nature still remains, so that I can get my hands on plants.”

“I see...”

A war between dragons, huh...? I guess I can see why the environment was so devastated. In the myths of Sanphales, there were several accounts of cities that had been burned down by a single dragon. From what Roydon was saying, there must be a lot more dragons participating in the war. To a human like me, it was impossible to imagine what that looked like. It must have been like hell itself.

I decided to change the topic. “In any case, please take a seat and relax for now. We have all the time in the world to discuss business after a meal, don’t we?”

“Oh!” He perked up. “That’d be fantastic. I can’t wait for the food.”

For now, the first thing on our list was to enjoy a meal together.

“Whoa! I’ve never seen such big crabs before! And, these are murder birds, aren’t they?!”

The sound of vigorous munching and chewing echoed out at the foot of Yggdrasil. Roydon was wolfing down food with gusto—he ate giant whole roast murder birds with single bites and munched on boiled scissor crabs whole in their shells, almost as if he were devouring fruit.

I stared at him with wide eyes before exchanging glances with Baris, who sat next to me and looked just as stunned.

“I must say, this is my first time encountering such a monster,” he said slowly.

“Same here.”

In between mouthfuls, Roydon told us about his homeland. The continent he lived in was called Elute, a desolate land. There were tens of thousands of dragons living there, hailing from a great variety of species, and they were all engaged in conflicts with each other.

Sanphales Kingdom was the most powerful entity in Barleon. Human cities in Barleon tended to interact with each other in some way, at least. Unless it was wartime, Sanphales merchants could be found everywhere, even in the cities of other nations. Thus, in Sanphales, you could get a hold of information from all around the continent.

Furthermore, we recently started maritime trade with other continents, so we had opportunities to learn about continents beyond the ocean as well. Naturally, I had always paid close attention to such information. However, as far as I knew, earth dragons like him didn’t exist on any of the continents I’d heard of. *In fact, all dragons are thought of as extinct, not just earth dragons. And of course, I’ve never heard of Elute either.*

Baris nodded. Then, he frowned as he added, “But since he is an earth dragon, he must belong to the dragon race.”

“Yeah. He’s a mythical beast just like the leviathan...” *Well, I mean, we’ve already come across a leviathan, so we really shouldn’t be surprised to discover that dragons aren’t actually extinct.*

Together with a handful of other monsters, Riena lifted a whole roast murder

bird onto an enormous board and carried it over.

“There is still plenty of food, so please eat as much as you want!” she said cheerfully.

“Oh? Thanks a million! I’ve only had preserved food lately, it’s been ages since I last got to eat such fresh and delightful food...” He sighed in contentment. “On that topic, this purplish red liquid tastes great.” Along with his meal, he chugged down wine from a barrel. “Ack, my head’s getting a bit fuzzy.” He hiccuped.

I must say, it’s hard to imagine that earth dragons are mythical creatures when I look at Roydon... I don’t know how to describe it, but he’s like a middle-aged human uncle. All that aside, though, eating as much food as he wants is perfectly fine, but it’d be terrible if he drinks too much and throws a fit. He doesn’t seem to be familiar with the concept of wine, or even alcohol in general, and I don’t want him to get the wrong idea and think that we poisoned him.

Okay. I’ll stop everyone from serving him liquor and get down to business.

“Hey Roydon, can I take a look at your wares now?”

“Ah, thanks for the reminder. Gimme a minute.” He stood up with a grunt. He was a little unsteady on his feet as he retrieved his merchandise from the bag on his back.

“My word!” Baris’s voice was filled with admiration. “What a rare collection you have here.”

He had everyday commodities, like a giant jar, weapons, like swords, and even objects that looked like art made with glass. Every item he brought out was roughly three times the size of what a normal human would use. They must have been just right for Roydon.

Looking at the jar, its design and decoration were stunning. It was almost transparent, and it shimmered under the light. *Hmm, a lot of his wares are either red or green,* I noted. *The jar aside, all of his tools are too big for the residents on Sheol. I guess only our larger golems can use them.*

Meanwhile, Riale and Melle were wriggling in and out of the jar, using it like a giant toy. Starkers walked over at a brisk pace, and there was rapture on his face as he gazed at a giant hammer that seemed to be made from glass.

I stared at his wares with wide eyes. “Amazing... I’ve never seen any objects like these before.”

“Right?” He puffed out his chest proudly. “After all, all of these are made from the scales of fire dragons or green dragons. I can guarantee that they’re some of the most durable and heat-resistant wares you’d find in the entire world!”

“Dragon scales?!” I exclaimed. “Huuuh...!”

Actually, now that he mentions it, the leviathan scales were transparent like glass too. Starkers refined them into the lenses of glasses, and earth dragons must have similar techniques as well. I see, they don’t just fight because the other dragon races are a source of food—they also use the entire carcass for a variety of purposes.

As someone who doesn’t know anything about the war, I’m not in a position to comment, but I feel a little conflicted. But I understand that as living beings, we need to take other lives to survive, just like we do on the island.

“I also have wares like these.” Roydon rummaged through the jute bag fastened at his hip and began to pull out large round items, one after another. “Dragon eggs! All of ’em are tasty treats even when eaten raw!”

My eyes widened. “Dragon eggs, wow... That’s impressive.”

“Yep. The biggest one you see here is a fire dragon egg. The other ones that’re a tad smaller are wyvern eggs. They’re good raw, they’re good fried, they’re even good boiled.”

So dragons even eat other dragon races’ eggs... Ah, but I’ve heard that some species of birds eat the eggs of other kinds of birds, so maybe it’s a natural thing to do. “I-I see... Out of curiosity, do these hatch?”

“Hm? Yeah. If you don’t keep them cool enough, they’ll hatch right away. Most of these eggs would hatch with only a tiny bit of heat.”

Quite the tenacious little things, huh?

Baris said, “I know of wyverns. If I remember correctly, they’re monsters with torsos around the size of horses, yes?”

It was difficult to say whether wyverns were classified as dragons or not. Even after the point in human history when it was thought that dragons were extinct, wyverns had apparently survived for a long time, and there were tales of these monsters attacking humans. Perhaps that was how they’d earned their infamy as hostile monsters among my race. However, there hadn’t been any witness accounts of wyverns for a thousand years, and humans believed that wyverns had gone extinct as well.

Roydon nodded. “Yeah, that’s the one. They’re also the staple food for us large dragons, and, well, they’re yummy.”

Baris gave a wry smile at the dragon’s words before turning to me. “I have heard of an old legend that says wyverns will become attached to their caretakers if you start raising them as hatchlings. I believe buying a handful of them would be a prudent choice.”

I hummed in thought. “I see. Once they mature, they can carry us around as they fly.”

At the moment, the only resident of Sheol who could travel by air was Melle. The goblins and orcs couldn't. Wyverns would be great additions to our community—they could serve as lookouts in the sky, and make it easier to travel to and from Yggdrasil's summit.

"You're not gonna eat them?" asked Roydon, with a mystified look on his face. "I mean, sure, to each their own, I guess. They're all fresh eggs only around two months old, so if you heat them properly, I'm sure they'll hatch in the blink of an eye." He searched through his bag again and took out more eggs. "Okay, I have one fire dragon egg. As for wyverns...there are thirty of 'em. Well, how about it? Do you want them?"

I nodded. "I would love to have them, but what should we offer in exchange?"

"Hmm..." He paused in thought. "If possible, I want branches and leaves of this Yggdrasil tree. Ah, and do you have any other plant-type stuff?"

"We also have a few types of fruit available."

"Nah, fruits are usually tiny. In that case, I'll just take the Yggdrasil branches and leaves."

I blinked in surprise. "Is that really enough?"

"Remember what I said earlier? Plants are invaluable to us dragons. You know how you humans blindly worship, uh, what was it again...gold? To us, it's just as precious."

"Huuuh..." *Considering this, and what he said about the eggs earlier... He wasn't exaggerating about the state of his continent. The war must be so relentless that there isn't even a moment of peace for grass to start growing again.*

"Ah, and as thanks for earlier, I'll give you the fire dragon egg for free."

My face lit up. "Really?" But then, I furrowed my eyebrows. "But..."

Baris nodded, expressing his agreement about my doubt. "Unfortunately, we are unsure whether fire dragons are classified as monsters. Furthermore, can we really keep such a dragon in check?"

Roydon scratched his head. "I dunno about the monster thing, but in general,

dragons think the first living being they see is their parent, and they'll listen to their parents, so you don't have to worry about that."

"Ah, okay." I nodded. "In that case, can we have the fire dragon too?"

"Gotcha. Are you interested in anythin' else?"

"Huh? Um." I gestured at the items he laid out. "This...isn't everything you have?"

"Nope, I also have ores and minerals inside this bag. It's an arcane tool we call a compression bag, you see. All the stuff I gathered when I was digging that underground tunnel is stored and compressed inside here."

"Huh, I never knew such an item existed..." I muttered. *That reminds me, the orichalcum equipment I discovered underground was made up of more orichalcum ingots than they looked like. Maybe the technique used to forge them is similar to the enchantment on that bag.*

"But, well, there's a limit to how much I can stuff into it." Roydon shrugged. "Ah, sorry, but this bag isn't up for sale. If I don't have this thing, I might be stuck underground forever."

The compression enchantment piqued my curiosity. "Just asking, but is it possible for you to teach me compression magic?"

"Unfortunately, we don't learn spells from other dragons. The knowledge just suddenly appears in our head at some point. So I dunno how to teach you."

"That's a shame... But knowing that such a branch of magic exists is already invaluable information. Thank you."

"Sorry I can't help you there. Well, it's not much, but I'll give you all this compressed material in exchange," he said as he fished out what seemed to be several small pebbles.

He then informed me about each material. Rock, soil, gold, silver, gemstones... They were all materials we possessed as well, nothing unusual. However, as an island with a barren rock landscape, we were relying solely on the cave spider's manure for soil. There wasn't nearly enough, and we were dying to get our hands on more soil to expand our farm. We were also in the

process of accumulating rocks to build our knoll, as well.

“That’d be a great help. We were actually short on rock at the moment,” I said. “Especially soil, since we don’t have any of that around here.”

“Oh, really? Glad to hear that! Well, it’s easy to return these to their original size. You just have to wish for them to decompress. Take it all, though, not just the soil and rock! Even if I keep all this, it’d just get dumped with all the rest, and we’ve already got so much.”

“You sure?”

“Totally. Gold and silver aren’t good for anything except ornaments and accessories to us, so yeah. Take them as a token of my gratitude for the food.”

“Th-Thanks. We’ll give you food and water for the rest of your journey. You can take as much fish as you want. We have plenty of that.”

“Whoa, thank you! Well well, I guess I can head right home after this!” He laughed heartily and took a swig of his wine.

I inclined my head in question. “Hm? Weren’t you heading to the southern settlement of your kin?”

“Yeah, was planning on stocking up on some lumber over there. They don’t have other dragon races over on their end, so they’re interested in other dragons’ eggs and scale products, but, well...they look for every opportunity to rip me off. ” He shrugged. “I’ve already gotten what I was looking for, so I’m gonna head back now.”

“I see.”

“Thanks to you guys, I should be able to cut my journey short by ten days or so. Hey, if it’s alright with you, can I come again? I want to tell my comrades too, if you don’t mind.”

“We’re fine with that,” I said. “In that case, we’ll leave that pit as it is... No, I guess we’ll build a bridge to be safe.”

“That’d be a great help. Next time, I’ll bring over more stuff that even creatures of your size can use.” He chugged down the last of his wine.

He was very efficient after that. After promptly exchanging commodities with

us, he finished packing up right away.

Waving his hand merrily, he left us with the words, “I’ll come back again, and I’ll make sure to bring more eggs, so look forward to it!”

With that, Sheol had found our first trading partner.

“And he’s off...” I muttered to myself. “That aside...” I cast my eyes down at Riale and Melle, who must have been tired—they were dozing off on Ciel’s body. From next to them, Riena was gently stroking the two babies. She was almost like a motherly goddess, and I couldn’t tear my eyes off her.

However, there was something that was nagging at my thoughts—what had happened with Melle earlier. *What in the world was that strength they displayed just then? I can’t believe they managed to lift a creature as huge as Roydon with their tiny body. Melle doesn’t have any crests either, so it must be their innate strength at work...*

But Melle is still a baby, and I can’t communicate complex things with them yet. Well, either way, they’re obviously a bird with incredible strength. Maybe it’s the nature of the monster race they belong to. That wouldn’t be strange, since there are unusual monsters out there, like the cave spiders on this island. For now, there’s no point rushing anything. I should watch over their growth patiently.

That reminded me, Furay’s crest seemed to have changed as well. According to Baris, it was still named <Miner>, but there was more to its description now. Whenever she mined, she would gain mana.

My <Cave King> had gained new abilities according to my proficiency levels, and it seemed to work like that for Furay as well. Or perhaps her evolution was what granted her crest this new ability.

Now our guest had left, we decided to build a bridge with spider silk across the pit where we had discovered the aquastones. While we were at it, we widened the cave tunnel to make it easier for Roydon and his kind to travel through with their impressive size, and we also dug out a cavern on the side of the tunnel, for them to use as lodgings.

Chapter 8: Having Fun!

It was still morning, and the sun was high and bright, but a bonfire was roaring at the foot of Yggdrasil. A circle of fluffy cushions was laid out on the ground around it. On each cushion sat one of the dragon eggs that we had received from Roydon the day before.

"Will these things *really* hatch?" Doubt was evident on Furay's face.

There *was* a chance that they were fakes, or already dead, but... "Roydon said that they'd hatch quickly if we warmed them up," I replied. "Let's put our faith in his words."

Of course, we couldn't rule out the possibility that the hatchlings might attack us on sight, either. For the time being, though, Riena was going to look after them. *I should also assign a few armed monsters and golems as guards in case anything happens. It* should *be fine, though...*

Something caught my eye. *Hm?*

Riale and Melle were leaning their ears against a certain egg, one larger than all the rest—the fire dragon egg. To be specific, it was several times larger than a human head, and the two baby monsters seemed intrigued by it. The next moment, however, they suddenly backed away, because the egg shook violently.

"Woof! Woof!"

Hearing Riale's barking, Riena came over immediately. I ran over as well.

The egg was shaking.

I squinted at it. "Is it...going to hatch soon?"

"That might be the case." Riena nodded. "Many bird eggs also tremble moments before they hatch—Ah!"

As she was speaking, a crack appeared on the eggshell. It spread, and large fragments fell off one after another. Finally, something pushed out from inside, as if to shake off the remaining shell on it—the head of a reddish copper

creature.

Shrill chirping rang out. “Tweeeet! Tweet!”

The creature indeed resembled the dragons I knew of—no, not just resembled, it *was* a winged dragon, just like the ones depicted in our myths and legends. However, it was still extremely frail.

“So *this* is a fire dragon, huh?” I muttered.

When the dragon spotted us, fear took over its expression. Riale and Melle approached it, ushering it to come out, but the dragon stubbornly remained in its shell with only its head poking out.

The myths I had heard about dragons all described them as intelligent creatures. I had caught a glimpse of their incredible wisdom off Roydon, who had used magic to communicate, and had even negotiated with us. *Maybe it’s already aware enough to notice that we look completely different from it.*

Hmm... Roydon said that dragons imprint on the first creature they see, but then again, he’s an earth dragon, which is still a dragon *race. Perhaps earth dragons look similar enough to fire dragons for the hatchlings to think they’re their parents. On the other hand, we look nothing alike, so I can understand where its fear is coming from. I guess we should give it some space for now...*

But the moment that thought crossed my mind, Riena crouched down in front of the hatchling and started gently stroking its back. “It’s all right,” she coaxed warmly. “Everyone here is your family.”

Timidly, the fire dragon climbed out of its shell before leaping into Riena’s arms.

“There, there.” Riena patted it. “You’re a good baby, aren’t you?”

The dragon hatchling looked content as Riena stroked it. *Riena is truly a master at soothing babies.* Watching the scene, I felt a smile growing on my face as well.

Riena and I were going to...get married eventually. I had given her a ring, and she had accepted it as an engagement ring. Then, we had confessed our feelings for each other. The mood had been perfect...until Camus’s ship had

appeared, causing us to put off our sweet moment for later.

If we're going to get married, we need to hold a wedding. But, uh, since there was a weird interval since our confessions, it's kind of—no, very *difficult to bring up. I don't know whether goblins hold weddings to begin with, and considering the orcs' trauma, this really isn't the right time to celebrate something.*

My mind went on an extremely important tangent, and Riena looked at me quizzically. "Lord Heale? Is something bothering you?"

"Huh? O-Oh, I was just thinking...about what name we should give to the hatchling."

The moment I replied, a familiar voice echoed in my mind.

"Tameable monster detected. Tame?"

Oh, so dragons count as monsters too, huh...? Either way, we need to think of a good name for this baby.

Riena's face lit up, as if an idea had come to her. "In that case, how does Fierle sound?"

"Fierle... It matches Riale and Melle. I think it's great."

Hearing that, Fierle lifted a wing and chirped.

I smiled. "All right then, you're Fierle from now on. Nice to meet you."

"Tweet!"

"Naming complete. You have tamed Fierle."

With that, we had yet another new member of our community on this island. Fierle wasn't the only one, though—the wyverns hatched one after another as well, and I tamed them too. Riena was just as kind and tender to the other dragon babies as she had been with Fierle.

***

It was the day after Fierle and the other eggs had hatched, and I was at the

foot of Yggdrasil. Thanks to the compressed rocks from Roydon, I had enough stock to start tackling the knoll construction project right away.

At a glance, it had seemed to be a mere pebble that I could fit on one palm, but when I had stored it in my inventory, it had turned out to be enough rock to easily construct a mountain. Perhaps it wasn't all that peculiar, though, since this was the amount Roydon had amassed after an entire month of digging.

There was even more good news—though there wasn't quite as much of it as the rocks, Roydon had given me a generous amount of soil as well. With this, it would be even easier to expand our farmland. There was enough to give our knoll a touch of nature as well.

Since I had all the ingredients I needed on hand, I set about building our knoll below Yggdrasil right away. I added in rock pillars as supports as I piled up soil, slowly shaping it into a hill.

"You know, this is pretty fun too..."

Though I had been forbidden from playing with soil and dirt, I had heard that outside the royal palace, children would pass time by making things out of such materials for fun. Nearby, I spotted goblin children playing with the small soil piles I had built up during my experiments. *Look forward to it, little ones. Once our knoll is done, you can play in a much bigger place. Wait... Hm?*

My gaze shifted to the orcs in the vicinity, who were staring at the merry children with what seemed to be wistfulness in their eyes. *They don't look like they're staring because they resent the goblins, or because they're hostile to them.* After the orc pirates had arrived at the island, there hadn't been any conflict between the two races. In fact, the orcs were so diligent that they always volunteered themselves for work that wasn't related to the ocean.

I tilted my head quizzically. "Why are they reacting like that?"

All the orcs present were adults. They probably weren't staring because they wanted to play with dirt. Then, realization dawned on me. *Ah, that's right. Some of the orcs must have children as well. Or...*had*, until the leviathan attacked them. I can almost feel their fear of the ocean prickling my skin... They don't want anything to do with it anymore.*

Camus's arrival snapped me out of my thoughts. "Hey, Lord Heale. We finally finished constructing the harbor."

"Ohhh, it's done?! Great job!"

She shook her head. "We barely did anything, only worked on some of the details." Craning her neck, she stared up at the low mountain that was well on its way to completion. "Whew, that ability of yours is incredible..."

"I'll have to be honest, this power is just as unbelievable to me. Either way, we'll have more farmland with this. We'll also have a river, so the kids will have more places to run around."

Camus cast her eyes down at the children. There was a softness in her eyes as she said in a low voice, "Right." She seemed somewhat melancholy, just like the other orcs.

"Hey, Camus..." I hesitated. "Remember our plans to let your people gradually adapt to the sea again? Um, on second thought, maybe it's best to wait it out a bit more, don't you think? Everyone must be still grieving their families..."

"Huh? Ah, sorry. We must've given you the wrong impression."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Generally, we leave all our small children back on land. In Barleon, there's a settlement of land orcs where our children, their mothers, the elderly, and orcs without the constitution to withstand the voyage would stay behind."

"Oh, I see. That's why everyone looked like they were missing their families."

"Yes. I mean, how could anyone not be concerned about their families' welfare?"

Of course they would. *I see, so their families are still alive.*

She continued, "Personally, my lord, if you grant us permission, I would like to go back and fetch them. Unfortunately, though, even most of those who have left family behind are still reluctant to return to the sea."

I chewed on my lip. "I'm not surprised, honestly..."

"That's why I want us all to adapt to the ocean once again and eventually

carry out those plans.” Sorrow weighed down her expression as she stared at the children. “But by then...all our orcs left in that settlement might only know life on land—the sea would become a distant memory.”

I frowned. “I hope you can go fetch them here as soon as possible... If you need a ship, we should be able to get one ready in no time. According to Baris, we have everything we need, and we can start repairing your ship at a moment’s notice. I suppose you can also recruit some goblins as sailors if push comes to shove.”

She smiled wryly. “It’s a shame that training to be a sailor is a tough and tedious process.”

“Ah, good point...” As I looked at the finished knoll, an idea popped into my mind. *That might work.* “Oh, then how about we try this out first? So...”

***

The next day, I stood at the summit of the knoll with aquastones in my hands. I aimed my gaze in a certain direction—at the empty channel that connected the knoll’s summit and the harbor.

I looked at all the monsters assembled in the vicinity and raised my voice. “All right, everything’s ready. Time to pour in the water.”

The key figures of the island were present, of course, but it wasn’t just them. Most of the residents were present as observers.

I activated the aquastones and threw them into the wide, relatively shallow pit on the knoll’s summit. This was going to be our lake. I had run a few trials with the aquastones at sea, and I knew I could stop the water flow whenever I wanted to, so I had that option if any problems arose.

Before long water started gushing out of the aquastones, splashing vigorously. The water flowed from the pool into the channel and rushed down the incline of the knoll before finally arriving at the sea. There was applause and cheering from the monsters at the sight.

I nodded to myself in satisfaction. “Great! Then, let’s not waste time and—” Before I could declare that we should go for a swim, someone jumped in without hesitation. “Ah!”

It was Starkers.

Following his lead, all the goblin children eagerly leaped in after him.

“Hey, wait for the Chief’s cue first!” Erivan barked. “Starkers, it’s yer fault, ya know!”

Starkers’s response was to face his own butt cheeks at us before lightly smacking them to taunt us playfully.

Erivan bristled like an aggravated cat. “Y-Ya little—!”

I quickly cut in. “N-Now now, it’s okay! Guys, let’s all go for a swim!”

Everyone present chorused, “Yeah!”

The goblins were enthusiastic and jumped in one after another. In contrast, the orcs were hesitant and perhaps even a little intimidated, but after some encouragement from Camus, they all joined in as well. Next on the list were the slimes and the cave spiders. As for the elderly goblins like Baris, they all watched over the scene with serene smiles on their faces.

But then. I noticed that Erivan was standing stock still inside the water. “You okay there, Erivan?”

“Huh? U-Uh, yeah...” The apprehension on his face was a rather novel sight.

Furay wore an impish grin. “In case you didn’t know, Lord Heale,” she chirped, “Dad can’t swim.”

“Oh, really?” I turned to Erivan.

“D-Don’t joke around, Furay!” Erivan protested. “Chief, I *can* swim, I swear!!!”

Furay sighed. “Yes, yes, whatever you say. How about you try catching up to Starkers? He smacked his butt at you! You sure you’re gonna back down from that challenge?”

“I-I know!” Erivan immediately started moving through the water, but his movements were somewhere between swimming and running as he pursued Starkers, who was swimming like a fish in water.

Scanning the surroundings, I spotted Riale and Melle, who were drifting leisurely on the lake surface. I looked back at Erivan and said, “Don’t push

yourself too hard, Erivan! Okay then, time to get in."

I took off my shirt, revealing the swimsuit I had worn underneath in preparation, and began stretching my arms and legs to warm up.

A soft voice rang out from behind me. "U-Um, Lord Heale, may I have a moment?"

I recognized it instantly. "Sure. What is it, Riena?" When I turned around, I was faced with the sight of Riena, who wore a cute white swimsuit. What concerned me was her nervous expression.

"To tell you the truth, I..." She turned to gaze at the lake, and her eyes widened. "Ah!"

I traced her line of sight and saw Furay clad in a purple swimsuit, seconds away from jumping into the water. She dove in with elegance and started swimming—or at least, that was what I had assumed would happen, but...

"Huh?! N-No way! I can't swim anymore!" There was loud splashing as she flailed her limbs awkwardly. She didn't make any progress forward, but was certainly sinking downward. It sounded like she used to know how to swim, but had lost that ability now.

Erivan's hearty laughter echoed out. "Oh? What's this, hm? Ya made fun of me, Furay, but yer not much better!"

"S-Says the one who didn't manage to catch up to that dude Starkers in the end! You tripped and fell over, splashing water everywhere!" Furay yelled back in defiance. "Wait, actually. Is this...?" She glanced at me and climbed out of the lake. As she approached, she spotted Riena. "Ah, do you have the same problem, Your Highness?"

Riena nodded. "Looks like we're in the same boat, Furay."

"Did something happen, you two?" I asked.

There was a dust of pink on Riena's cheeks as she admitted, "A-After my evolution, I couldn't swim anymore... When I was a goblin, I didn't know the proper technique or anything, but I could kind of paddle around."

Furay kneaded her arm. "It's probably because our limbs—well, more like our

entire bodies are longer now. I used to be a great swimmer, but as you can see, I sank like a log."

"So, um, Lord Heale, if it's not too much to ask..." Riena hesitated. "Can you...teach me and Furay how to swim?"

I blinked at her in surprise. "M-Me?"

Riena nodded. "Yes. Only if that's all right with you."

"I mean, I don't mind, but I'm not the greatest swimmer around either..."

"You only have to teach us the basic motions. As long as you teach us the technique and give us some tips, we can practice on our own."

"O-Okay. I'll give it a try, but no promises."

And that was how I ended up as the two girls' swimming instructor. I wasn't much of an instructor, per se, because all I did was demonstrate what I did and supervise them as they adjusted into the same postures and movements. They were taking turns to support each other in the water, keeping each other afloat as they practiced.

I was watching over the two, but I had to look away from time to time, since both of them had human-like appearances now. *Well, even in the palace, you would never swim with girls, so... I guess it's kind of silly thinking that now, though, since I've already bathed with Riena.*

After a while, Furay could swim without Riena's help. Seeing that, Riena clapped her hands together. "You are truly a talented swimmer, Furay!"

"Nah, it was only possible with your help!"

Furay said that, but she had been a good swimmer to begin with, so it was only a matter of time for her to adapt to her human form in water. On the other hand, even with Furay's support, Riena was struggling to swim.

Furay looked at Riena, who was trying her hardest to swim by herself. "Hmm... Hey, Lord Heale, do you have any good solutions?"

I shrugged. "Practice makes perfect. She was already able to swim before her evolution, so she should be fine once she gets used to it."

Furrowing her eyebrows pensively, Furay said, “Is that really what she needs? I think she’ll perform much better if *you* support her, not me.”

I froze. “Wh-Why’s that?”

“Huh? I mean, knowing the princess, if you’re nearby, she’ll push herself to her limits even for something she’s reluctant about.”

“But that’s unreasonable...”

“Okay, you know what to do. Don’t mind me, I’ll go catch Starkers!”

“H-Hey, Furay!”

Once again, Furay dove in elegantly. This time, she caught up to Starkers without a hitch.

“Sheesh...” I sighed. *Guess there’s no choice*. “Riena, do you need any help?” I approached her.

“I-I am so sorry, my lord. I’m so clumsy...”

“No, it’s not your fault. Very few humans can learn how to swim in a single day, after all.” I paused as I observed her. “I think you’re paddling your feet way too quickly. Try slowing down a bit.”

“Y-Yes!”

Pushing down my embarrassment, I took Riena’s hands and gently guided her as I walked backward. *I must say, Riena’s always giving it her all no matter what she is doing. Even now, she’s listening to my advice earnestly and adjusting her movements. Meanwhile, look at me. Ugh. My heart’s pounding in my chest, and I suspect it’s because we’re holding hands...*

Slowly but surely, Riena started swimming like an expert, as if her earlier struggle had never existed. Even after I let go of her hands, she could still swim without an issue.

Riena raised her head above the water and said, “Thank you, Lord Heale!”

Seeing her brilliant smile, I felt my heart thump even harder. “N-No problem. I’m glad you managed it. Okay then, I guess I’ll swim too—Wait.”

My ears picked up a commotion from the canal that stretched down from the

lake, and I glanced over. It turned out that Starkers was going down the canal as if it were a slide.

I hummed in thought. “A water slide, huh?”

It would be dangerous if the slope was too steep, but I had constructed the knoll to have quite a mild incline. At the end of the river was another lake-like area, so I probably didn’t have to worry too much about him. Following his example, Furay and the goblin children slid down as well.

Riena smiled as she watched over the scene. “Ha ha, they seem to be having fun.”

Not just them—*everyone* seemed to be enjoying themselves. Among them was Erivan, who could now swim somewhat, perhaps a skill he had polished as he chased Starkers. He marched in front of a group of orcs who were gazing at the scene from land.

“Oi!” He barked. “Not gonna swim, y’all? As ya can see, I can swim confidently now, ya know?” He promptly started swimming leisurely. “Hah, it’s easier than I thought! Hey, weren’t y’all supposed to be good swimmers?! Anyone wanna race with me?”

None of them made any attempts to enter the lake. The sole exception was Camus, who threw off her white shirt. “Well now, quite the smug one we have here. I lost to you last time because I was dead tired, but I won’t lose to a novice like you in the water!” Half-naked, Camus grinned confidently at Erivan.

“Oh? So the captain of the orcs is volunteerin’ herself? Bring it on!”

Camus dove into the lake, and the two started competing. Noticing the competition, the goblins started cheering for Erivan. As one would expect, there wasn’t much cheering for Camus at first, but the one-sided shouts seemed to eat away at the orcs, and eventually, they started cheering for Camus as well.

The cheering seemed to give Camus a boost, and her speed increased by leaps and bounds. There was a large gap between the two contestants by the time Camus’s hand touched the goal.

“I win!” She raised her hand triumphantly. “How about that!”

Though their voices were hushed, the orcs cheered in excitement. Applause spread through other monsters.

“Tch.” In a loud voice, Erivan yelled, “Guess there’s something to the Corvus tribe’s reputation after all, huh?!” He was probably trying to encourage Camus and the other orcs in his own way.

Camus bowed her head gratefully, but Erivan turned away harrumphing and went elsewhere. *Seriously, it wouldn’t kill him to be honest for once...* Thanks to him, though, every now and then, more and more of the orcs started entering the lake. At first, most of them only trod around, but as time went by, slowly but surely, more of them started swimming. I knew they couldn’t rush it, but I hoped they would get used to the water again step by step.

I wonder what Baris is up to? I surveyed the area. *Ah, there he is.*

At some point, Baris had ended up on the summit of Yggdrasil. The elderly goblins were looking up at him from the knoll, and they seemed to be communicating with each other in loud voices.

The shaman yelled at them, “Is this all right?!”

One goblin shouted, “A little to the side! Over there!”

“Which direction is ‘over there’?!”

“To the right! Ah, not that way, Baris! Our right, your left! Yeah, over there!”

“Here, is it?! Okay, water incoming!” Baris tied some aquastones to a branch with spider silk. Soon, water started falling into the sea from the branch.

Seeing that, the elderly goblins looked pleased as they sat down and chatted over tea.

I placed a hand on my chin. “I heard that they wanted to pour water down from Yggdrasil. I see, so they wanted to make a waterfall.”

“Yes.” Riena nodded. “There was a waterfall near our settlement, and our elders often assembled there.”

“Huh... I’ve got to say, it’s quite an otherworldly sight.” My gaze was drawn to the scenery—Yggdrasil was a prodigious tree that already seemed surreal by itself, and now water was falling from it, making it even more dreamlike. In fact,

I even spotted a rainbow. I was willing to bet that we wouldn't come across a place like this anywhere in Barleon.

Baris was apparently going to retrieve the aquastones after a short while, but I was starting to think that leaving them there permanently wouldn't be a bad idea at all. *I should also construct new lakes and slide canals where the children can play. The ones here are mostly functional.*

Erivan's voice rang out from behind me, tearing me from my thoughts. "Chief, Your Highness! Do you two wanna test out the slide?"

"Ah, Dad!" Furay yelped. "Are you being a coward because you don't wanna do it?!"

"Oh, shuddup, Furay! Come on, the two of you!" He pulled on my hand and Riena's.

"W-Wait," I protested. "I'm not really..."

But then, Riena held my free hand and squeezed it. "Lord Heale, since we're already here, let's try it."

"Um, but...I'm not a child."

Furay grinned mischievously and wriggled an eyebrow at me. "Oh? Have we found your weakness, my lord?"

"Th-That's not the case!" I shook my head profusely.

"Theeen... That means you will try it, right?" She smirked.

Other monsters joined in. "Yeah! Go, go!"

Uh... Looks like I can't say no in this mood. "O-Of course I will!" I stared down at the canal that led to the bottom of the knoll.

I chewed on my lip. *Oh, what do I do? I'll be honest, this really isn't my cup of tea.* Back in the palace, there was a long slide, and I remembered being extremely put off by it no matter how I had psyched myself up.

Riena held my hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze—she must have sensed my unease. "It's all right, I will go with you," she said.

Riena, you're too kind... Since she was offering, I wouldn't forgive myself if I

chickened out. “R-Riena...” I swallowed. “Okay. Let’s do this together.” I held her hand in a firm grip and sucked in a deep breath. “All right, let’s go!”

We both jumped into the canal. “Whooooa!” I yelped as we zoomed down at high speed. “Waaaaah!” My yelps were, in all honesty, more like shrieks of terror.

When we finally reached the bottom, I was completely out of it. In my cloudy mind, I vaguely registered Riena shaking my body, asking whether I was all right.

My own hair-raising experience aside, our knoll construction project ended in a big success.

Chapter 9: Taking on the Ocean!

That evening, as always, we were digging into our meal at the foot of Yggdrasil.

It was at this moment that Camus chose to come over and suddenly bow to me. “Thank you, Lord Heale. Thanks to you, my crew’s trepidation towards the water has faded tremendously. It’s hard to believe that only yesterday, they were even reluctant to enter the baths.”

I shook my head. “No, the credit goes to Erivan’s quick thinking and how you seized that opportunity, Camus. Either way, we’ve finally taken a step forward. The knoll and harbor are complete. It was a fruitful day.”

“Right,” she replied with a big smile.

The lake was insignificant compared to the ocean, but it must have taken them a lot of courage for the orcs to try swimming again.

During our conversation, Baris approached. “Lord Heale. May I have a moment of your time?”

“Hm? What happened?”

There was a solemn expression on his face as he said, “I have a request.”

“Go on.”

“Yes, my lord. To tell you the truth, approximately ten goblins wish to head to Barleon.”

I inclined my head. “Does that mean they want to return to their homeland?”

“No, that is not the case. You see, there is a fishing village populated by the Ossey tribe, another goblin tribe. That was where we prepared our ships for our journey to seek out a new land. However, some of our kin were left behind in that village.”

“I see. Some of your people are still in Barleon, then.”

“Yes. In addition, we lost sight of some of the ships in our fleet early on in our

journey, and there is the possibility that they returned to the Ossey village... Or at least, that is what I hope."

"In other words, you want to go fetch everyone there."

"Yes, my lord. The ship that Lady Camus and her crew arrived in is magnificent. I believe it can make the journey back to Barleon once it is repaired."

I nodded emphatically. "Of course I support that idea. I'm sure the repairs won't take too long either. But..." I hesitated. "I don't think ten sailors are enough to manage a ship of that scale."

"You need at least fifty," Camus agreed. "On top of that, the vessel is large, which means it has many sails, so the crew will need a lengthy period of training before they can steer it properly."

Baris creased his eyebrows. "I assumed as much, and I told the group that it would be impossible in the short term. However..."

Casting her eyes down, Camus muttered, "If we drag it out for too long, some of your tribe might choose to leave Ossey." Sorrow clouded her features.

She shared the same worries. After all, the orcs had also left behind their families and kin back in Barleon. She continued, "When the leviathan attacked us, some of the ships of our fleet also managed to narrowly escape. If they managed to survive the encounter, I'm certain they would head to the village that serves as our base in Barleon."

That rang a bell in my head. "Ah, is that the village you mentioned before? Where your tribe leave your children and elderly behind?"

"Yeah. The majority of the village population are orcs that live on the land, but we gave them money to look after our kin. It's close to Ossey, actually."

Camus had said that she wanted to go find them and bring them to Sheol. *Since the goblins and orcs are still in Barleon, I agree, it would be best for us to send a ship there, but it's not feasible at the moment.*

After a moment of silence, Camus turned to me, and determination burned in her eyes. "Lord Heale. After the repairs, I will lead my crew and set sail

immediately. I owe all of you a great debt for accepting us into your community. We'll sail to our base and Ossey, then take everyone back with us."

I hesitated. "I understand where you're coming from, but...at the same time, I feel that it's still too early for your crew to tackle the sea again in their state. Even if you force them to go against their wills, it will not end well."

"That's..." She faltered, before falling silent.

Baris broke the standstill. "Rather than being afraid of the ocean," he said, "I feel that...their fear stems from their apprehension of the leviathan, correct?"

Camus nodded. "The leviathan's dead, and I've told them that many times. I even showed them the corpse. But then, everyone starts saying that, no, there must be more than one."

Baris hummed in thought. "In that case... As long as they know that a leviathan attack is nothing to fear, they would conquer their dread, yes?"

"As in, we can defeat a leviathan? But according to Lord Heale, that abomination is..." She hesitated.

We had only barely managed to wrestle a victory out of that beast's grasp after everyone on the island came together as one. Even if I was present on the ship, there wasn't any guarantee that we could defeat it once more.

However, Baris said patiently, "You don't have to defeat it. You only have to survive its attack without any casualties or damage. There is a saying passed down in my tribe... 'Fight bear with bear, and fight tiger with tiger.' We have a supply of leviathan scales, don't we?"

"Oh...!" I recalled our battle with the mythical beast. Neither magic nor normal weapons had worked against its scales. Our harpoon managed to piece its scaleless abdomen, but magic had been utterly useless.

Baris continued, "That isn't all we have. There are robust metals on this island, such as orichalcum. We only have to construct a ship that won't sink even if you encounter a leviathan."

His statement opened my eyes. "That's brilliant." It was true, this island was overflowing with robust and sturdy materials. With those in hand, building an

unsinkable ship wasn't impossible at all.

Camus nodded enthusiastically. "Even a large beast like a leviathan can't swallow that warship whole. As long as it can't damage anything, we'll survive without any issues."

"Indeed," Baris said. "Of course, realistically speaking, building a ship that will never sink is a difficult task. However, that is not the point. What's important is how much reassurance we can give to the crew." His logic was sound.

"Ah, that reminds me." I perked up. "We also have more dragon eggs we bought from Roydon. If we hatch them and assign them as guards for the ship, I'm sure everyone would feel much safer, right? Even if a leviathan does appear, these scouts will give you plenty of warning."

Baris added, "Another thing we can consider is making golems that can swim and sending them as escorts of the ship. If there is no wind to propel you forward, the dragons and golems can also give you a boost by pushing you."

"On top of that, with aquastones on board, you won't have to worry about running out of fresh water," I said.

Camus nodded to herself. "A sturdy ship, powerful escorts, and an unlimited supply of water, huh? It'll be a very luxurious voyage."

I smiled. "And I think there's still plenty of room for improvement, too. All right... Camus, alongside your project to adapt your crew to the ocean again, could you draft up some plans for upgrading your ship?"

"Of course."

This marked the beginning of our full-scale efforts to prepare for Sheol's first voyage.

Camus was an efficient woman—the very next day, she came up to me with a ship blueprint in hand. At a glance, it seemed to be filled with details for the upgrades she had in mind.

I spread out the blueprint on the round table at the foot of Yggdrasil to look over it. “I see, so you plan to reinforce the hull, deck, and masts with orichalcum plates.”

Beside me, Camus nodded. “Yes. And on top of that, I’ll piece together a layer of leviathan scales.”

“Now that sounds like a ship that’s practically unsinkable.”

Both of the materials she mentioned were not just incredibly durable, but also remarkably light. They wouldn’t impede the vessel’s sailing speed. On top of that, she also added a few improvements in terms of food storage, such as installing a cold room with ice.

“Well, that’s the gist of the improvements to the ship itself,” she said. “Next up is asking you to make our escort golems. As for the orcs, I’m thinking of taking baby steps. I’ll try to convince them to go fishing on boats for now.”

I nodded. “I think that sounds brilliant. Hmm, but we’ll need to talk to Starkers about the use of orichalcum and scales.”

We still have plenty of orichalcum available, but is there enough to cover an entire warship with the stuff?

“In that case, let’s go ask our good pal Starkers,” she said. “He should be at the forge right about now.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We immediately headed to the forge with the blueprint in hand. There, I approached Starkers.

“Hey, do you have a minute? I want to ask you something.” With the drawing as reference, I used gestures to communicate our plans with the orichalcum plating to Starkers.

The man listened patiently, nodding enthusiastically as I explained. *Okay, seems like the amount of orichalcum and scales we have isn’t an issue. All that’s*

left...is the question of whether we have the technology to achieve it.

Once I finished my explanation, I said, “So yeah, that’s what we’re considering. What do you think? Is it doable?” *Maybe it’s a silly question. I mean, Starkers was the man who managed to direct the water of the underground hot spring to the surface. I’m sure it’ll be a piece of cak—Huh?*

For once, Starkers was folding his arms with a frown on his features. The creases between his brows only deepened after a long stretch of silence. Then, he picked up a twig and started drawing something on the ground. However, almost immediately, he shook his head as if to say, “That’s no good,” and he scratched out a part of his drawing with his twig.

Huuuh... This seemed to be a project of such a high difficulty that it had even stumped Starkers, our engineering expert. I looked him over. *Is it just me, or does dense steam seem to be seeping out of his head...?*

My mind wandered, but my eyes were glued to the drawing on the ground. My intrigue wasn’t exactly caused by its novelty. Rather, I was surprised at how detailed and meticulous it was. *Starkers isn’t just a blacksmith and a musician, he’s even an artist, huh...?*

The aristocrats of Sanphales had constantly vied for superiority against each other in the fields of music and art, but Starkers’s skill was a cut above all the artworks I had seen so far. Furthermore, those who were crowned as champions in these fields tended to only be blessed with talent in either one, not both, but Starkers had it all.

Due to his superb skills, he easily conveyed what he wanted to tell me through his artwork. The drawing depicted a leviathan biting a ship. *I see...* Apparently, a patchwork of small plates wouldn’t be much help—the ship would still fall apart.

Camus crouched down. “You mean... Even if the plates are intact, the hull wouldn’t make it, right?”

Starkers nodded. Then, he drew an arrow stretching out from the drawing before working on a new one at the other end. This time, a leviathan tried to bite a shiny hull, but its teeth snapped. If we wrapped the hull with one enormous orichalcum plate, even a leviathan literally couldn’t make a dent in it.

However, Starkers pointed at the forge and shook his head.

I glanced at our forge, and the ship in the distance. “I see. So our facilities at the moment aren’t good enough.”

It would require a tremendous amount of orichalcum to make a giant plate that could envelop the towering warship, but the problem wasn’t with the supply, since we still had plenty of material. Unfortunately, though, we didn’t have a mold to pour it into, at least not on this island.

Was it even possible to melt down such an incredible amount of orichalcum at once, in the first place? I had watched Starkers working on it before, and compared to iron, it seemed like orichalcum needed to be heated for much longer. That must have been one of the reasons we couldn’t craft a large sheet of the stuff.

Camus nodded. “Personally, I don’t think we have to go this far, but our pal here is saying that the ship isn’t safe enough without such measures, no?”

“Should I call him a perfectionist, or a craftsman who takes pride in his work?” I mused. But something caught my eye. “Hm? Starkers?”

The blacksmith was looking at me. He clapped his hands together and his expression lit up—an idea must have come to him. He beckoned for the two of us to follow him, and he led us to the pile of orichalcum ingots, which was as tall as a building, or maybe even taller.

I tilted my head quizzically. “That was sudden. What is it?”

Starkers pointed to the furnace nearby. It wasn’t all that big compared to the mountain of orichalcum. *I really don’t think we can fit all this orichalcum at once.* But then, it hit me. “No, wait... Oh!”

“Hm?” Camus glanced at me. “Did you find a good solution, Lord Heale?”

“Yeah. But Starkers, melting the orichalcum might be easy, but crafting with it would be rather strenuous, won’t it?” I asked worriedly.

In response, he thumped his puffed-out chest with his fist.

“You’ll take care of the rest, huh...?” I muttered. “Got it, let’s give it a go!”

He nodded before instructing the large golems to carry the orichalcum ingots

to the dry dock where Camus's ship rested.

We didn't have a furnace large enough to melt all the metal at once, but that problem was simple enough—after all, I had magic. Of course, though I could melt them, I couldn't cast them, but Starkers was claiming that it was possible for him.

I chased after Starkers, who marched towards the dry dock. On our way, Starkers seemed to have thought of something, because he communicated with a slime through gestures. After receiving his instructions, the slime hopped off towards Yggdrasil.

The ship of the line was already resting inside the dry dock we were heading to, ready for repairs to begin at any time. We had drained the water, fully exposing parts of the hull that would usually be hidden beneath the sea, so we could repair the bottom of the ship. When we wanted to return it to the ocean, we could just open the water gates to let water flood in until it was sea level.

I marveled at the structure. Though I had piled the rocks to make the basic form, the builders who had shaped it into the magnificent facility before me were Camus and her crew, and I was thoroughly impressed.

Starkers went to the bottom of the dry dock and supervised the golems as they set down the load of orichalcum. He started swinging his hammer around, almost like a warm-up. When he was done, he turned to face me and pointed at the giant pile of orichalcum.

"That should be my cue to bring on the fire... Okay, here goes nothing."

I nodded to him, and promptly blasted *Fire Wall* at the orichalcum. *Fire Wall* was a basic spell that was inferior to *Fire* in terms of intensity. However, it made up for its lack of power with its vast range and lengthy duration.

When the orichalcum started to melt, Starkers used a pole to stretch it out like honey before sprinting at top speed, wrapping it around the ship as he went. He was attempting something remarkably sophisticated—he would lather the hull with the molten orichalcum and hammer it into shape before it cooled.

He moved on to the next stage. With awe-inspiring speed, he swung down his hammer at the hot orichalcum. I had to be honest—he was so fast that all I

could see was a blur. His was as fast as a bird suddenly swooping down from the sky to seize its prey. Before my eyes, he shaped the orichalcum to match the curves of the hull.

As he worked, one after another, the cave spiders made their way into the vicinity. Taran was there at the front of the procession, and they positioned themselves along the upper edge of the dry dock. From where I was standing, they seemed to be lined up at regular intervals along the top of the dock walls.

"Hm?" I tilted my head in question. "What are the spiders doing?" My eyes widened. "Oh!"

All the spiders aimed their silk at the ship at once. Large golems pulled on the silk strands simultaneously, and the ship was slightly suspended off the ground. *Aha. They're allowing Starkers access to the bottom of the ship that was resting against the ground.* Starkers proceeded to cover the bilge, which was shaped a bit like a soup bowl.

As he worked, the original pile of orichalcum grew smaller and smaller as he hurriedly covered the hull with the metal. Finally, he turned to me and pointed at a nearby bucket of water. It must be a signal for me to use water to cool the orichalcum, which was still hot and reddish-black.

I cast a water spell on the metal. The next moment, a golden and shiny ship filled my vision.

Camus's eyes lit up. "Wooow! That's impressive!" she shouted excitedly.

I can't believe he managed it. We don't have any respectable facilities around, but he still crafted such a splendid coating, and in no time at all! "That guy's a miracle worker as always..."

Starkers gave me a big thumbs-up and raised his chin proudly, as if to say, "How about that!" He wasn't finished, since he turned to the large golems and gestured instructions to them. At last, he waved at me and Camus, signaling that he could take care of the rest.

Looks like he doesn't need our help anymore. I nodded back. "All right, I'm leaving it in your hands," I told him. "As for us, Camus, shall we prepare for some fishing?"

“Let’s do that. I’ll go call the orcs over.”

“Please do. And I’ll make those golems as promised.”

“Okay.”

We parted ways, and I headed to one of the piers to craft golems that could move in water. One of <Cave King>’s abilities was Automaton Creation, which allowed me to make moving automata with heartstones as their cores. It was a versatile skill—I could customize the automata’s shape, materials, or even embed them with arcanestones infused with magic, allowing them to cast spells. At the moment, I had nine heartstones and the same number of arcanestones, loot I had scavenged in the wine storeroom underground.

“I can make nine golems with these...” I muttered aloud. “Let’s make one as an experiment first.”

Since they were going to be aquatic golems, perhaps a fish-like form would be best. *The bigger the better in this case, but I have the feeling a rock golem would literally sink like a stone... Yeah, I should consider our abundant iron or our sturdy orichalcum. I’ll use orichalcum, add in an arcanestone infused with the* Shield *spell, and shape it like a fish roughly the size of a shark. Let’s go.*

I activated the skill in my mind and not a moment later, a stunning golden silhouette of a fish shimmered inside the water. The “fish” poked its head out of the ocean. Of course, it didn’t have any eyes or mouth.

“All right, first golem complete!” I scrutinized it. “Good, it can float and swim in the water without issues.”

As if to respond to my comment, the fish—no, the shark-shaped golem started swimming in circles inside the ocean. If I followed the naming convention with our other golems, it should be Unit Sixteen.

“Looks like it’s a big success. I’ll give it an arcanestone later and boost its mana levels so that it can cast *Shield* whenever necessary. Okay, let’s keep going and make them all!”

Ah, hold on. Making nine shark-type golems might not be the brightest idea. It’s probably better if three of them are amphibious, so that they can help out on the ship as well. That would mean making six aquatic golems...

Hmm. Hey, I think I should spice it up a bit with one golem. Maybe not a shark-shaped one, but something bigger. Much bigger, actually. Say, around the size of a whale. It'll be a waste to use orichalcum for that one, but we have loads of iron, so it should be enough. Wait, why stop at whale-sized? Why not make one as big as a leviathan? I cracked a wry smile at my own thoughts. *Now that's going too far.*

"I guess I'll make one a little bigger than the ship itself. That should be fitting as a guardian."

Mind made up, I set to work immediately. In the blink of an eye, a colossal mass of iron lifted its head out of the water.

"Whoa, you're huge!" I craned my neck to look up at it. "Hello there, Unit Seventeen. Nice to meet you."

With a loud splash, the towering Unit Seventeen dove back into the ocean, spraying me with water.

"I think I went a bit overboard with this one. Oh well, I'm sure it'll be a good deterrent against scissor crabs, at least."

I continued with my golem crafting. In the end, I crafted two giant whale-type golems, four shark-types, and two humanoid-types. That meant I had one pair of heartstone and arcanestone left over, but I was thinking about saving them just in case we needed them for something else.

Not long after I'd finished my crafting, Camus showed up. "Lord Heale, I've brought them over!"

"Hey, Camus!" I waved to her. "You have perfect timing, I just finished preparations."

A crowd of orcs trailed after Camus, and there was still anxiety on their faces. As a demonstration to them, I instructed the golems to raise their heads above the water. I heard a few frightened yelps. Some of the orcs were intimidated by the giant whale-type golems.

I immediately introduced the golems to the crew. "These guys are on our side. They'll protect us at sea."

The relief was evident on their faces.

Camus turned around to face her crew. “You’ve also gotten a brief look at the ship. A ship of iron is already awe-inspiring, but we have a warship covered with orichalcum! How can such a ship ever sink? There’s even more—we’re going to cover it with leviathan scales on top of all that.” Her unsaid message was, *That’s why we can sail safely.* “And these golems will protect us from the sea itself... Sailors, are you still scared of the sea after all this?”

Silence. None of the orcs replied.

In the rational part of their mind, they must be aware that these were the safest conditions one could ever ask for. However, the traumatic memories from their devastating defeat against the leviathan must still weigh heavy on their hearts.

Camus must have realized that, because she said, “For now, let’s just try some fishing in the boats today. We’ll be inside the breakwaters with all these guards. It’s pretty much the same as going into the lake last time, isn’t it?”

This time, the orcs nodded mutely.

Camus and her crew then proceeded to row out into the ocean, and started fishing as planned. As she had mentioned, they were fishing inside our breakwaters, where a swim back to shore wouldn’t even take two minutes. *Even if the unexpected happens, it should be fine...right? I mean, I’m keeping watch, and Riena has come over to check on things too.*

The young woman in question was gazing at the orcs. “They actually look somewhat happy,” she said in a hushed voice.

“I think so too. I can even hear some laughter.”

Though they still hadn’t fully conquered their traumas, the orcs actually seemed to be finding joy in fishing. As sailors, they had lived on the ocean, and many of them must have liked fishing as a hobby to begin with. *From the looks of this, I think they’ll soon regain enough confidence to feel assured even at a further distance from shore.*

A thought popped up in my mind. “A change of topic, but Riena, how are Fierle and the other little ones doing?”

Fierle and the newborn wyvern babies were still resting on their cushions, and they had to eat with the help of other residents.

“They’re all doing very well. Actually, I think they’re growing a little too rapidly... It’s only been a few days since they hatched, but all of them have doubled or even tripled in size compared to the first day.”

My eyes widened. “Th-That fast?”

“Yes, and they have a healthy appetite for fish as well. At the rate they’re going, I have the feeling that they’ll grow bigger than us in less than a week.”

“Maybe rapid growth is a trait of dragons...”

Now that I thought about it, there wasn’t much mention of dragon hatchlings in the myths I was familiar with. Roydon had mentioned that the dragons fought with each other every day, so perhaps this maturity rate applied to all of their subspecies.

I hummed in thought. “That’s good news. I was thinking about having a few of them on board the ship as guards.” *That way, they’d even have aerial security. Now...it’s just up to the orcs. But considering how they’re enjoying fishing, I’m sure that they’ll—Hm?*

A whirlpool had abruptly appeared on the open sea.

I squinted at it. “What’s that?”

The moment those words left my lips, a pillar of water erupted from the ocean surface. Something emerged.

“A leviathan?!” the orcs shrieked.

The creature that appeared was indeed enormous. It even had an elongated body like a snake and a fiendish face. But clearly, it wasn’t a leviathan, since it had no scales and was many times smaller than the real deal. The body that rose out of the ocean was, at most, around the height of our watchtowers.

“What nonsense are you all spouting?!” Camus roared. “That’s a giant merray! We’ve defeated these monsters thousands of times!”

It seemed to be a marine monster, and not too powerful or rare in Camus’s eyes. The orcs quickly regained their wits—is what I would like to say, but they

didn’t. The giant merray opened its jaws wide, and its howl was all it took for the orcs to scramble as they paddled desperately back to land. A handful of them, in panic, dove into the ocean and were struggling as if they had forgotten how to swim.

The monster itself fell swiftly at the hands of the goblin guards, who shot it down with a ballista bolt from the shore. However, the panic of the orcs didn’t subside at all.

“We can’t let this go on!” I yelled. “Rescue the drowning ones!”

Riena and I went to save the orcs with the help of the goblins who’d been waiting on land. The goblins paddled over in boats, while we who could use magic cast wind spells to nudge them back onto the reclaimed land.

A while later, when the rescue operation was finally over, we were all back on shore when Camus came over, her shoulders sagging with defeat.

“I’m so sorry, Lord Heale.” She bowed.

“No, it’s not your fault.” I shook my head. “I was too careless...”

“It’s *not* your responsibility,” she insisted. “I never thought they would be intimidated by a mere giant merray.”

I chewed on my lip. “That must be how deep their fear of the leviathan runs.” When faced with a giant snakelike monster, it was only natural that their first instinct was to think back to the leviathan.

Camus looked utterly lost, like a sailor without a map at sea. “Everyone should know that they’re safe now, but...none of them would listen to my words.”

“Camus...”

A realization dawned on me. Perhaps the orcs’ reluctance to return to the ocean wasn’t out of their trauma or fear. As sailors, as people who lived at sea, Camus and her crew must know that it was a merciless place to begin with. But they managed to conquer the violent, unforgiving beast that was the ocean time after time, because they had a powerful, charismatic leader like Camus. Now, in their eyes, Camus was a weak and feeble captain—and that was the

heart of the problem.

If it weren't for the life-changing encounter with the leviathan, from my interactions with her, I had the feeling that Camus should have been a more confident, assertive captain. The leviathan, however, had dealt her a crushing blow. She had said it was her fault that she had lost so many of her comrades; maybe it was her guilt that made her speech somewhat passive and hesitant when she addressed her subordinates now. Perhaps seeing their leader in such a state was the reason the orcs couldn't recover their confidence either.

"It's because I'm so weak..." Camus bit hard on her lip and clenched her fists. "I'd be more useful dead than alive."

Riena frowned. "Miss Camus..." She reached out and gently held Camus's hands. "I... When my family and kin were killed, I was the same. The only thing I could do was run. And because of that, I think I can empathize with you somewhat. I was so bitter, so *angry* at my own powerless self."

She closed her eyes briefly, before gazing into Camus's eyes with determination. "But when I was drowning in self-loathing, Lord Heale told me that he wanted me to be his companion. And I shall say the same to you now, Miss Camus. I want you to be my comrade. We *need* you. So please don't ever put yourself down like that again! You are never unworthy!"

Camus's eyes widened. "Riena..."

I nodded. "That's right. Plus, you're not weak at all, Camus. It was only the leviathan that was superior to you in strength." As I talked, I reached into my pocket and took out a golden stone—a risestone. "So you only have to become stronger than a leviathan. This stone should help you."

She cast her eyes down at it. "That's...the evolution stone."

"Use this and evolve into the monster you want to be. Into a monster that won't lose to the leviathan in a contest of strength...into a monster that can protect all your people."

"B-But it's a very precious stone!" Camus stammered. "I'm a newcomer here, and I don't deserve it!"

I shook my head. "You're already one of us, Camus. And if you're using it to

bring back all our families, it'll help everyone."

"Lord Heale..." She shut her eyes for a while in silence. Then, she slowly opened them and nodded. "All right. I'll use it." As she accepted the stone from my hand, she asked, "Should I pray for the ability to use magic, like the others who have evolved here?"

"I think that'll be best. We also have mana minerals that can increase your mana levels. Other than that, it'll be great if you can unlock the true strength of your crest."

"Thanks. To tell you the truth...I've always wondered about it. I always thought, ah, if only I could use the full powers of <Sea Serpent>... Then, even the most ruthless oceans wouldn't terrorize me."

Her crest, <Sea Serpent>, was a crest that was fabled to manipulate water and wind. On paper, it seemed to be a powerful crest. But according to Camus, it wasn't all that strong for her—the best she could do was summon a breeze.

She continued, "If evolution helps me wield my crest at its full potential, I'm certain that our voyage would be much easier. I'll try praying for my crest too."

"Well, Riena and Furay's crests changed, so I'm sure that the stone will grant your wish and evolve your crest as well."

"That is what I hope. I will pray...for a strength that will help me protect everyone."

Camus raised the stone into the air with one arm. Light gushed out of the stone and enveloped Camus like a cocoon.

When the light faded away, Camus was still there. At a glance, she didn't seem different at all.

She blinked, looking at herself curiously. "How did it go?"

Ciel stretched out his body like a mirror for her. She leaned in and observed her reflection. "Oh? I...seem to be even more gorgeous?"

I think she looks completely unchanged, but, well, she knows herself best.

"But that's not the important part." Camus raised her arm and faced her palm at the ocean.

Gradually, the currents stirred, and water climbed high into the sky like a waterspout. The column grew bigger and bigger until it was tall enough to pierce the clouds, and Camus's eyes widened in shock. "N-No way..."

I quickly gathered Ciel into my arms and held Riena's hand as I shouted, "C-Camus! Stop! We'll be blown away at this rate!"

"Ah! S-Sorry about that!" She hurriedly faced her palm at the waterspout. It dissipated in an instant, as if it had never existed in the first place.

I patted down my ruffled hair and said, "Well, it looks like you can use the legendary powers of your crest now."

"Right. But...it's definitely much more mighty than even the descriptions I heard before. Perhaps I didn't just unlock the full powers of my crest—it increased in strength as well."

"Unfortunately, we don't have any way to check that." I sighed. "But clearly, it's not a normal crest, just like Riena's."

Camus hadn't managed to wield the full powers of <Sea Serpent> before, possibly because it wasn't very compatible with the body of an orc. Because of that, we had no way of knowing whether this was her crest's rightful power or an enhanced power due to her evolution. But Camus had prayed earnestly for abilities that could earn her a victory even against a leviathan, for abilities that helped her protect her people. Her crest must have grown stronger to respond to her wishes, at least in my opinion.

"Yeah..." She clenched her hand into a determined fist. "Either way, with this, I can face the ocean once again."

I nodded. "In that case..." I retrieved a heartstone and arcanestone from my inventory. "Okay, I still have one of each... Camus, can you and your crew assemble at the warship in the dry dock tomorrow morning?"

She blinked in surprise. "Sure, but why?"

The orcs should have witnessed Camus's waterspout from a distance. That was a good foothold, and I wanted to give them one more encouraging push to boost their confidence.

“I have a plan,” I said mysteriously.

“Got it.” She nodded before walking over to the other orcs.

Riena looked puzzled as she asked me, “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to demonstrate Camus’s power to everyone.”

“I see. Hmm, but shouldn’t that waterspout just now have been enough?”

“It *is* a display of her abilities, but there’s a more striking and profound way to hammer it into her crew’s hearts.”

After seeing that Camus had left the vicinity to rejoin the orcs, I headed towards the open sea and crafted a certain golem.

“Sorry for giving you this role, but I hope you’ll be a good training partner tomorrow.”

When I was done, I left the area.

The next morning, Riena and I headed to the warship to see that the orcs were already waiting for us.

Camus stepped forward. “Lord Heale, I’ve brought everyone here.”

“Thanks. Well, you see, I was thinking that if everyone actually gets back onto the ship, it might help open your eyes and conquer the fears in your hearts somewhat.”

“Huh?” She tilted her head quizzically. “I mean, yes, it might be helpful.”

The warship was still in a dry dock—it wasn’t drifting on the ocean, so it wasn’t too different from being in a building on land. But it seemed to spark some nostalgia for the orcs, and they started reaching for tools like ropes and brushes. This ship, after all, had been their home.

Okay, the first step is complete. Next, I’ll have to be a bit forceful. Camus and her crew need this shove if they want to move forward. Furtively, I raised my hand at the shore.

The water gates opened.

“Wh-What?!” the orcs yelled in alarm. They didn’t have the time to make any

further comments, because the sudden flooding of water rocked the ship, and they all scrambled to cling onto masts or the top edges of the hull. It must be a learned reaction from all their years on the ocean.

But I wasn't quite done yet.

Without warning, the ship was dragged towards the direction of the ocean. None of the orcs had expected this sequence of events, and color drained from their faces.

Camus's crisp voice rang out like a knife cutting into the discord. "Everyone, hang on tight! This mighty ship won't sink from a bit of jostling!"

"Y-Yes, Captain!" the orcs replied in shaky voices.

Abruptly, the ship stopped moving.

One of the orcs tried to lean out from the gunwale. "W-We gotta get outta here!"

"Don't dive in!" Camus barked. "We don't know what's down there, it's too dangerous!"

The orc in question snapped out of his panic as realization sank in.

Camus gave out instructions calmly. "In the vast ocean, the only safe place is your own ship... Everyone, don't lose your head. Raise the sails! Shooters, get into your positions at the ballistae!"

"Aye aye, Captain!" chorused the orcs as they acted as instructed. It was an emergency, and everyone was scrambling to get their jobs done.

Finally, preparation to set sail was complete. I shouldn't have expected anything less from the veteran crew—they had raised all the sails in under ten minutes.

"Captain! We're ready!" an orc reported.

"Bravo. All that's left is to get into the sea with the help of my <Sea Serpent>." She paused, and her eyes widened. "Wait... That's!"

There was ferocious splashing of water in front of the warship, and what soared out of the frothing sea—was the leviathan we had once defeated.

“A leviathan?!” The orcs were stupefied.

Naturally, it was an artificial leviathan. Its true identity was a golem I had crafted yesterday to resemble the leviathan. Though its body was made from stone, I had taken great care to mimic the leviathan’s form, scales, eyes, and nose. Most importantly, the golem was identical to the actual beast in size, and that was convincing enough.

My plan was to help the orcs conquer their fear through this golem. It was also the culprit that had dragged the ship into the ocean. I had even equipped it with an arcanestone infused with the *Fire* spell, and it could spew out fire from its mouth. I was supplying it with my mana, so if my calculations were correct, it should have the ability to blast out a column of fire around the same size as the real deal did.

It didn’t waste any time—it turned to the heavens and spouted a colossal inferno from its maw.

“Ahhh!!!!!!!”

Like I expected, the orcs shrieked in panic. But one voice was even louder, overwhelming the symphony of fear and dread.

“Everything will be all right! *I* will protect you!”

It was Camus, who alone stepped forward and pointed her palm at the leviathan. In response, the golem aimed its blaze at her.

“Riena,” I said in a hushed voice. “If anything gets out of hand, you know what to do.”

“Yes, my lord!”

Riena could manipulate the weather, and she could easily summon torrential rain to put out the fire. We could use *Shield*, too, so even a nightmare scenario was salvageable.

The column of fire approached, roaring into our ears. Camus, however, didn’t even take one step back. She manipulated seawater to meet the fire head-on. The stream of water was incredible, almost as if she had manifested a great waterfall at her whim, accomplishing a feat that even magic couldn’t. It must be

the power of her <Sea Serpent>.

Fire clashed with water, sending steam erupting out with a deafening and explosive bang. Camus pressed on, summoning a waterspout, and aimed it at the leviathan. The torrent of swirling water engulfed the leviathan and launched it high into the sky, before flinging it away into distant waters.



“She did it!” Riena cheered.

The orcs were watching the scene with wide eyes.

“Act now!” Camus yelled. “I’ll summon wind to push us back to the harbor!”

She aimed wind at the sails—likely another power of <Sea Serpent>. Violent gales lashed the sails, propelling us forward. Thanks to them, the ship managed to reach land almost instantly. One after another, the orcs made preparations to climb ashore. It seemed that their urge to return to land still lingered.

Camus bowed at the orcs sincerely. “Everyone, just once more. Please, follow me to the sea once more. I promise—this time, I *will* protect you all. So...give me one chance, that’s all I ask. Come with me.” Her voice was commanding. Reassuring.

Even then, the orcs were silent. But after the seconds ticked by, some of them exchanged looks before nodding.

One orc stepped forward. “Please raise yer head, Captain. I’ll be frank. The scariest and saddest thing to us was...the fact that you stopped being the captain we knew and looked up to.”

All the orcs nodded at his words.

He continued, “But it’s our fault that you were pushed to such a state... If yer willing to start anew, Captain, we want to follow you.”

“Everyone...” Camus looked over her crew, eyes wavering with emotion.

“Captain! We should be the ones asking you! Please give us a chance to follow you again! How can we call ourselves the Corvus tribe if we’re separated from the ocean?!”

As one, the orcs all bowed to Camus. Tears formed in the corner of Camus’s eyes, and soon, they overflowed, tracing trails down her cheek. The other orcs, equally tearful, gathered around her.

Camus stood tall and proud as she said, “Let’s do this. Let’s take on the sea together again, just like we always have.”

Her crew all shared determined nods.

Chapter 10: Seeing off a Departure!

A week had passed since Camus's evolution.

I had spent every single day of the past week down inside the mining shafts. The monsters, on the other hand, had been busy up on the surface, building vineyards and further upgrading the ship. And today, there was a crowd in front of the warship—Camus had assembled the orc crew and the new goblin sailors there.

"Whoa, it's floating!" a goblin gasped. Other goblins let out amazed yells as well, stunned by the sight of the ship of the line drifting on the ocean.

The warship's hull was a lustrous gold thanks to its orichalcum plating, and a person with a sharp tongue might denounce it as slightly distasteful. However, the goblins and orcs all seemed to appreciate the lavish color of gold, and they were all celebrating it wholeheartedly. As the audience cheered, a boat was lowered from the warship and headed in our direction. When it reached the pier, Camus climbed out.

She walked towards me, and I asked, "How is it, Camus?"

"I've done several test sails after that incident, and I must say, it's a marvelous ship. Combined with the power of my crest, no one can bring us down," she declared with full confidence.

"That's great." I gave her a smile. "But are you sure about setting sail today?"

"The earlier the better, don't you agree? Once we finish our send-off ceremony, we'll depart at once."

"Ah... I see."

Today, Camus and her crew of ninety orcs and ten goblins would set sail from Sheol on this ship. As their guards, ten wyverns—who were still rather small—and golems that could swim would escort them. The wyverns had already grown large enough to rival the average large-breed dog, but they were still very young, so Camus had said that she would mainly keep them onboard.

As for the leviathan-type golem I had crafted for training, I had also asked it to follow the ship and protect it from beneath the ocean. With this fearsome golem as its guard, Sanphales ships would at least give the warship a wide berth.

Their destinations were the villages of goblins and orcs, located in Barleon. They would pick up the members of the Verdan tribe and Corvus tribe respectively before returning home to Sheol. Camus had told me, she also had plans for loading their baggage left there and stocking up on the commodities available for trade in the villages.

Soon, the send-off ceremony, to wish our sailors a safe homecoming, began near the harbor. We were holding a banquet in the vicinity of the harbor, where a grand display of wine and a variety of Sheol cuisine was laid out. I was going to sit at a table with all the leading figures of the island and Camus, and we would all dine together.

The moment Camus reached her seat, she bowed gratefully. “Thank you, all of you. We’re only able to set sail again thanks to each and every one of you here.”

Everyone told her, in their own ways, that they only did what any comrade would do. Among them was Erivan, who huffed, “If that’s what yer think, ya better make sure to bring back all the goblins in our tribe.”

“Of course.” Camus nodded. “I will definitely uphold that promise.”

Erivan raised his cup. “Then ya should eat yer fill today. Ya probably have ta be stingy with food on the sea. All right, cheers, everyone!” He yelled this last part loud enough for other tables to hear.

Everyone present toasted, kicking off the celebration banquet. When the orcs had first arrived at Sheol, there had been tension between them and the goblins. But now that they’d lived together for a while, the ice between the two races had melted, and they seemed to get along much better. In fact, I saw different races chatting as they gathered around the same table. Some goblins were even shedding tears, lamenting their temporary parting with their orc friends.

Gazing at the sight, Camus commented to me, “You know, a lot of my crew

still want to stay, but not because they're avoiding the ocean out of fear. I think more of them wish to stay behind because Sheol is so snug and cozy."

"That means they must really like this island." I smiled. "Well, I'll be honest, we're worried about sending you all off into the ocean. You can never predict what might happen on your journey."

"That's true. But no matter what happens in the future, we need to pull off this voyage at least, to the very end."

"Yeah."

All of the monsters wanted to reunite with their families and kin. This was a dear wish of both the goblins and the orcs, and it was something we had to invest every effort into.

Camus nodded. Then, a thought occurred to her, and she asked us, "Before I forget... We're going to stock up on things in Barleon—are seeds the only things we need? If there's anything else, I'll grab it on the way."

Erivan perked up. "In that case, grab some booze, and..."

"Dad!" Furay yelled, appalled. "Didn't you hear what she said?! *Need*, not want!"

"Hey! A kid like you might not understand, but booze *is* vital!"

While Furay and Erivan bickered in the background, Baris spoke up. "Hm. If you ever find any books or texts on sale in the orc village, you would do me a great favor if you purchased them. It's rather difficult to teach everyone how to read and write since we don't have any texts available on the island."

"I support that idea!" Riena's face lit up. "If you find any technical books, we might be able to manufacture a lot more things here. I would love to increase our variety of clothes and food, for example."

"Yeah, it'd be great if we can get our hands on books about architecture and tools, too." I nodded. "Ah, and spell tomes."

Camus hummed in thought and nodded. "I see. There probably aren't that many available, but I'll buy everything off the shelves when I'm there. Barely any—well, practically *no* orcs read books, so they must be left collecting dust in

giant piles inside the shop warehouses."

An idea seemed to pop into Furay's head as we talked. "Hey, how about you buy some livestock too? We already have monster meat here, so... Dairy cows, sheep, and chickens probably would be good?"

Ah, I see. Wool from sheep, milk from dairy cows, and eggs from chickens. She's right, they would be great additions.

"Livestock, got it," Camus replied. "I don't think we'll have much of these available either, but I'll buy as many as I can. Anything else?"

No one seemed to have any other comments.

"Okay, looks like we have a shopping list ready." Camus stood up, and one after another, the orc and goblin crew followed her example. "I think it's about time we get going."

It was time to leave.

Camus made a determined vow to everyone present. "I swear, I will come back with all our families." With that, she headed to the boat moored at the pier.

All of us followed her to see her and her crew off. As everyone exchanged promises and words of farewell, I walked up to her and said, "I'm counting on you, Camus."

"Leave it to me. We've made so many preparations. It'd be harder to fail." She puffed out her chest with pride. Fear no longer cast a shadow on her face.

Then, Camus turned to Riena, who stood next to me. "Hey, Riena. Make sure to keep that promise we just made, okay?"

"I-I will! So you must keep yours, Miss Camus, and return home safely."

"Of course. I definitely will, for your sake as well."

They exchanged a firm handshake.

"A promise?" I asked.

Hearing my query, Riena looked a little shy, while Camus grinned meaningfully as she replied, "It's a secret."

Soon, Camus and her crew set sail. All of us on shore waved our hands and cheered enthusiastically until the ship disappeared below the horizon.

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The next day, I rowed a boat out slightly offshore from the harbor. I was here for a reason—to fulfill the request Camus had made before she left.

Sheol Reef was an isolated island in the middle of nowhere, and on top of that, there were very few landmarks to refer to on their route to the island until it was visible. We *did* have Yggdrasil, but it wasn't tall enough to rival the mountains back in Barleon, so according to Camus, it wasn't good enough. Therefore, she had asked me to build a lighthouse. Since I was putting in the effort to make one, I might as well make it the tallest and most spectacular lighthouse possible. Thus, I was going to go all the way—I would construct an island specifically for the structure.

One might wonder why I was going out of my way to build a separate island. The reason was simple. If it was on the main island, it would be a major hazard if it ever fell over. I couldn't be further from a qualified architect, so I couldn't guarantee it wouldn't collapse one day.

Today, I was here to do a preliminary inspection of the planned construction site, so that I could gauge how far it should be from the main island to minimize that risk. I wasn't planning on starting the actual construction straight away. I had used up quite a lot of stones to craft the colossal leviathan automaton, and I needed more in my inventory before I could tackle this project.

"How tall should it be?" I wondered. "Actually, the better question should be, how big *can* I make it?"

Ah, hold on... I didn't think of it until now, but building would be a breeze if I can picture a finished lighthouse from the beginning and craft it with my skill. With Workshop, I can freely refine the stone in my inventory to a desired shape and size. But I don't know whether there's a size limit. I was able to make a golem imitation of a leviathan with Automaton Creation, though, and the same amount of stone should be enough to make a stone tower...right?

"The maximum weight of material you may refine at once with Workshop is 10,000kg."

Ah, I see. So that means I can't manifest a giant stone tower from the get go. I mean, stones crack easily, so maybe building a tower with one giant stone block

isn't the best idea. After all, that's why we made smaller blocks of them and piled them up to build the watchtowers and harbor on the island.

"Okay, that means I'll have to go slow and steady like always, huh?" *Well, it's probably not going to take all that long, if I pile up stone slabs at maximum size.* "You know... While I'm at it, why not build a tower that will reach the clouds?"

Nah, that might be unrealistic. Still, if I really can build a tower that tall, it'd be easy for Camus and her crew to spot us from afar. "Well, I'll have to see how much stone I'm able to gather before I can decide on that."

Camus had estimated her voyage would take approximately twenty days, which meant I had plenty of time to work with. I could use the first ten to gather materials, then start building it afterward. *Plus, I really should go to Starkers for some advice first. He's a man of many talents, and he might know a thing or two about construction.*

At the moment, all the structures on the island, like our harbor or watchtowers, were constructed pretty simply by piling up stone slabs. All of them had stayed upright and served their purpose well up until now—but that might just have been because our facilities weren't all that tall. To construct taller and more durable buildings, we'd probably need mortar to bind the building blocks together.

Mortar was a type of paste used in construction to fill the gaps between piled-up stone slabs, and it had been vital in the construction of the lofty buildings back in the capital. To make mortar, we'd need to make cement from finely ground lime or volcanic ash and mix that with water. At first it would have a mud-like consistency, but it would eventually harden like rock with time.

I was able to harvest lime and volcanic ash from the mining shafts, so I already had the base materials. The problem was, though I knew of the materials and the basic recipe, I was completely clueless about the detailed steps. Most of the monsters that lived on the island used to dwell in forests, so their construction knowledge centered around wooden architecture. Mortar, a material only used in stone architecture, was a completely foreign concept to them.

That means there's likely no one in Sheol who knows how to make the stuff. I know the gist, but I don't know how it'll turn out since I don't know the right

proportions of ingredients...

I wasn't getting anywhere alone, so I sought out help. I returned to the island to look for Starkers, who was in his usual spot, banging an anvil rhythmically with his hammer.

"Hey, Starkers. Do you have a moment?"

His swinging arm stilled.

"Do you know what mortar is by any chance?" I gestured to him using the rectangular blocks of stones nearby, before retrieving lime and volcanic ash from my inventory. "It's, well, stuff we smear between rocks."

In response, Starkers mixed the ingredients and made a gooey gray paste.

My eyes lit up. "Yeah, exactly! You're the best, Starkers."

He puffed out his chest, as if to say, "It's nothing!"

I know it already, but he's amazing. I wasn't expecting him to know construction on top of everything else, but it seems to be a piece of cake to him.

When I scooped up some of the mortar with a finger, there was an announcement from my crest.

"Unlocked new recipes in the Workshop skill. You may now craft cement, mortar, and concrete."

I know cement, that's the powder which we process to make mortar. But..."concrete"? What's that?

Concrete: A type of material mainly used in construction.

A type of building material, huh? Maybe I can do some experiments with it. Well, I still have no idea what it is...but anyway, I can now make mortar directly with Workshop. Let's do that. Ah, wait, I need water, don't I? Something caught my attention. *Hold on...*

My crest told me that I already had water in my inventory. It seemed that the aquastones I'd discovered a while ago were supplying me with it.

“That means I can mass-produce mortar by myself.” I turned to the blacksmith. “Thanks, Starkers, I should be fine now.”

However, Starkers seemed to have something to add. He took a few stone blocks and pierced holes through them, before piling them up on an iron pole like a skewer. He shook it, but the column of stones remained standing.

“Ah, I see! Something like a spike or pin!”

There was a slight frown on his face, as if to say, “Not quite that,” but then, he immediately nodded.

“I’ll keep this in mind. When I make the stone blocks, I’ll poke holes in them.” Suddenly, I found my eyes drawn to one of Starkers’s crafts. It was an elegant silver crown. In design and size, it didn’t seem to be made for a man, but for a more slender woman.

I pointed to it. “Hey, what’s that crown?”

There was a startled look on his face, and he immediately hid it behind his back.

I was just as taken aback by his reaction. “Wh-Why hide it? Come on, you can tell me.”

He shook his head firmly.

Having observed him for a while, I had noticed before that Starkers had a habit of crafting flowers with gold and doing what seemed to be confessing to goblin girls. However, since he couldn’t speak, the girls didn’t realize they were confessions of love, only thanked him. When he was met with failure with one girl, he would repeat the process by making gifts for another girl. Perhaps he was making the crown for the same reason.

It was this precise moment that I spotted Riena walking over to me. A step ahead of her were the little ones: Riale, Melle, and the newborn fire dragon Fierle. Fierle flew into my chest, and I caught them in my arms. They were rather hefty, already as big as a standard hound. *They’ve grown so quickly...*

Recently, I had tasked Riale and Melle with taking care of Fierle and the wyvern hatchlings. Though Riale was a great help as a rare item detector in the

mining shafts, they were still only a baby, and I wanted them to make lots of friends. They could always help out with mining once they were slightly older.

As I stroked Fierle's back, I said softly, "Riale, Melle...I can never thank you enough."

Riena, who'd arrived almost immediately after the children, beamed at me and said, "Lord Heale! The vineyard is finally complete!"

"Wow, really?! I'll go take a look right now."

"Please do! Ah, Mister Starkers." Riena turned to the man and bowed. "Thank you for accepting my request. I am counting on you."

Starkers thumped his chest confidently, as if to say, "You can trust me!" He turned around slightly, and, perhaps by coincidence, he held the crown from earlier at an angle where Riena could see.

I blinked. "What's this request you're talking about?"

"A-Ah, I just asked Mister Starkers to make a small tool, it's nothing! Now, Lord Heale, let's hurry over to the vineyard!"

"S-Sure."

I didn't inquire any further, instead heading to the vineyard with Riena. When I arrived, I was greeted with the sight of grapevines lining up along the incline of the knoll in an orderly fashion.

I marveled at it. "It's magnificent... Wait, did we have this many saplings in the wine warehouse?"

"I used a few sunstones to speed up the growth of a handful of saplings. Once they bore fruit, I used their seeds to expand the vineyard until it reached the scale you see right now."

"Huuuh... Looks like we'll have a great grape harvest."

"We will! I have actually left one vine as it is, and the grapes are still on it! I left it especially so that you can have a taste, my lord. Shall we?"

Riena proceeded to guide me to the summit of the knoll. A splendid grapevine stood before me, weighed down with plump fruits. Riena swiftly plucked a

bunch before picking out one fruit and peeling it.

“Here you go, it’s delicious!” Smiling from ear to ear, she held it out to me.

A sweet, pleasant aroma reached my nose, and its source was the juicy grape. “Th-Thanks,” I stammered as I accepted it and ate it. “Yeah, you’re right... It’s tasty.”

The grape was extraordinarily sweet, had just the right amount of sourness, and was even plump and juicy. *You know, it actually kind of reminds me of the slimes.* I looked down at Ciel, who followed me around wherever I went. He seemed tantalized by the grapes as well. Riena took notice, and she offered some to him. He started crushing it inside his body—his way of chewing it. *I assumed these were grapes specifically bred for wine, but they’re good to eat too.*

Seeing the delight on my face, Riena smiled wide and chuckled. “I’ll make some juice with them later, so please look forward to it!”

“...Yeah, I will.”

But in truth, Riena’s smile was so heartwarming and bright that I almost forgot the sweetness of the grape. My thoughts abruptly went to the ornate silver crown Starkers had made. *Do goblins wear accessories like tiaras during their weddings? What are their weddings like to begin with?*

I cast my eyes down in thought. *Riena’s wedding...*our *wedding. I should start planning it, at least.* “Hey, Riena, it’s been a while, but...”

“Yes?”

“W-Well, I asked for your hand in marriage, remember?”

Her face flushed red like a cherry. “A w-wedding?! What in the world is that, I wonder?!”

I blinked. “Huh? Wait, I haven’t even mentioned the weddin—”

“I-I have no clue!” she said firmly. “I’ve never heard of any weddings!”

Ah... Does she mean it’s still too early? Maybe we need more time together before we progress to that stage. “S-Sorry! I didn’t mean to offend or pressure you!”

“N-No you really don’t have to apologize, really!” she said in one breath. “But I swear, I really don’t know anything about a wedding!”

“Huh? O-Okay.” *Maybe...goblins don’t hold weddings? She seems really anxious for some reason, so perhaps they have an unspoken rule dictating that we mustn’t mention the word until a certain time after one’s engagement.* “G-Got it.”

Would it be better for me to leave such matters in Riena’s hands? Or...should I set up the right mood for it and bring it up in a more fitting setting?

“I-I shall head off to see the other fields!” Riena stammered.

“Back to work, huh? I’ll have to dig up more rocks too.”

“Please be careful. When you get back, I shall welcome you with tasty grape juice!”

“I can’t wait!”

I turned away from Riena’s smiling face and headed down into the cave once again.

Chapter 11: Fighting with Our Pickaxes!

For the following three days, I single-mindedly dug away underground to replenish my stock of stones. And today, I would do the same.

“All right... Time to start digging!” I declared.

“Yes, my lord!” the others replied vigorously.

I was in the middle, with Furay to my left and Taran on my right. Together, we swung our pickaxes at once.

This time, it wasn’t a competition—instead, we were cooperating, using the strength of our numbers to efficiently gather rocks. We dug at the same pace, creating a tidy tunnel as we went. If I wanted to make the biggest lighthouse possible, I needed an incredible amount of rocks. Furthermore, I needed more lime for mortar and iron for building iron pillars. Thankfully, the latter two materials were among the items Roydon had given me, so I had a good head start. Either way, my main goal was still the same: gathering rocks.

The three of us weren’t the only ones mining. Recently, many of the monsters in Sheol had been taking part. Even Starkers was here today, swinging his pick nearby. However, too many people digging would pose a risk if we all dug in different directions, because our guard golems would be shorthanded. Thus, most people were digging in small clusters, just like Furay, Taran and me.

The three of us were good mining buddies, and teamwork came naturally to us. Everything was proceeding smoothly, and I’d already added a great deal of stones in my inventory. *Maybe I should start building the lighthouse the day after tomorrow.*

As we dug, Furay asked me, “Lord Heale, you mentioned your father before. He has a crest called <High King>, right?”

Perhaps due to the fact that we had been mining shoulder-to-shoulder for days on end, Furay recently liked to chat with me often. Well, calling it a “chat” was perhaps a little inaccurate—most of the time, Furay talked about Erivan while I listened patiently. Today, however, she seemed to want to hear my story

instead.

"Ah, I did say something like that, didn't I?" I said. *If I remember correctly, when I mined with Furay for the very first time, I talked about my father.* To be honest, now that I had completely gotten used to life on the island, my father was already starting to become a distant memory to me. *In truth...a part of me wanted to forget about him.*

"His crest sounds impressive, so he must be a great man, but what kind of person is he?" Furay asked.

"Weeell... He's an incredibly strict person."

I couldn't say this to Furay's face, but my father wasn't a man who was accepting towards monsters as a whole. And knowing that man, it was easy to imagine he would be displeased if he ever learned that I'd been tenacious enough to survive to this day.

Wait. Is that really how he'd react...? I recalled my conversations with my father back in Sanphales...or perhaps I should say the lack of them. I couldn't really say I knew the man, now I thought about it. We never had many chances to speak in the first place—or rather, he never bothered to speak to me. On the day I was granted my fief, among all the mocking and laughing that had broken out when my domain was announced, there had been one man who hadn't even batted an eyelid. And yes, that man was my father.

I had only assumed he would be prejudiced against monsters because most Sanphales citizens were. My father hadn't ever personally voiced his opinion. Now that I thought back, the only way I knew how to describe my father was a strict man. Nothing more.

"A strict person, huh....? Hey, between my dad and yours, who's harsher?"

I paused. "Erivan, well, often smiles and laughs, so not him. Plus, he's actually quite kind, isn't he?" My impression of my father was a man who was just as callous and uncompromising towards his own family as he was with strangers. Erivan's type of strictness was rather different.

"Ohhh... Is he always yelling at people, then?"

"No, he's not like that, either. But I can tell you one thing. He never smiles,

that's for sure."

That's right. Now that I take my time to reconsider my father, he wore a mask of perpetual apathy, and he would never let emotions get the better of him. At his core, he was a cunning man who always acted for the profit of Sanphales. Huh. If he ever found out that I'm still alive and living in a community of monsters, I wonder how he'll react. At worst, he might order my execution.

That being said, in name, I'm a governor of Sanphales, and I technically haven't lost my status as a prince. Furthermore, this land was assigned to me by an oracle. I have full power over the laws and regulations within my domain, so if I say that there's a law that permits humans to live with monsters here, I...guess it shouldn't be an issue? And I mustn't forget the fact that we're the most remote place possible. Sanphales wouldn't gain much from sending the army here, so there's a very low chance of my father suddenly launching a full scale invasion here.

Before he acts, he'll try to gather information about Sheol in any way he can before making a decision about what to do with this island. Though...I can't rule out the possibility that he might try to threaten us with his military might.

No matter what he ends up deciding, the best thing to do is to give him the impression that this island is difficult to conquer. Even if we don't truly have the power to back it up, as long as we're able to keep up a formidable, menacing appearance, we might make him think twice before invading. And actually, a tall lighthouse would be a good way to do that.

Furay hummed in thought before muttering in a low voice, "I'm kinda surprised."

"Huh? Why?"

"I mean, you smile all the time, Lord Heale. You know, I'm actually quite charmed by your smile." She stared at me with a straight face.

"F-Furay..." I felt a little shy hearing a comment like that from her, especially since she didn't seem to be joking.

She paused before adding, "But maybe not your smile when you're mining. It doesn't really reach your eyes, and it's kind of scary, to be honest."

I blinked in surprise. “I-It’s that scary?”

Her reply was immediate. “Yeah.”

Ah. Maybe I’ve regressed to my expression at the beginning, to the face that scared Riena, Baris, and Erivan when I first met them... I need to be careful from now on. I swung down my pickaxe as always, but this time, something wasn’t quite right. *Hm? The sound seems to be...echoing back from beyond the rock wall?*

Furay noticed as well, and she traded nods with Taran. “Lord Heale, usually, when sounds echo back like this, there’s a cavity nearby.”

“Yeah.”

I cast *Shield* around us. Unit Fifteen reacted swiftly, marching forward and raising its physical shield to protect us. Seeing that everyone was ready, I swung down my pick.

The rocks gave way, revealing a pitch-black area beyond. The next moment, numerous red lights appeared inside it, suspended in midair. Almost immediately, the red dots stretched out into red lines that rushed towards us.

“Is something attacking us?!” Furay exclaimed in panic.

We were safe; the *Shield* spell around us blocked the red light beams upon contact.

I squinted into the cavern. “Are those...golems?” I launched one *Fire* spell after another towards the red lights. The flames ignited the bodies of the source, illuminating the area and revealing the identity of our enemies.

“Huh?” Furay was stunned. “Floating...rocks?”

Inside the mechanical room were countless drifting rocks. Or rather, round rock-like spheres. They were completely black, and had holes in their centers, which was where the red light was flowing out from.

“There’s so many of them...” I said in a low voice. “More importantly, how are they able to fly?”

There were dozens—no, around a hundred of them. *Are these another type of guardian golem?*

While we spoke, my fire spell engulfed the floating rocks. But the fire didn't seem to deter them, because they were already aiming their light beams at us again.

"If fire doesn't work..." I cast *Freeze*. I could encase them in ice and investigate them slowly.

Chilly, white fog surrounded most of the floating rocks and froze them. "Hurray!" Furay's cheer echoed out inside the chamber. However, in the blink of an eye, the glowing holes sucked up the ice. Even worse, the red light shifted into blue light, and this time, they aimed blue light beams at us.

"Wait..." My eyes widened. "Could it be...?" The blue light beams clashed with my *Shield* spell and turned into a coat of ice. "These things are reflecting my spells?"

"I'll help, Lord Heale!" Next to me, Furay thrust out her two hands and cast a lightning spell at the rocks. But the same thing happened once more—they absorbed the lightning. This time, the lights shifted to yellow, and the rocks fired yellow beams at us.

Furay's eyes grew wide. "They're copying our spells?"

"Looks like it. Not only that, but they're absorbing the mana of our spells, too." With my mana sensitivity, I could tell that they had consumed our mana and were storing it inside their bodies.

"Does that mean magic doesn't work against these guys?"

"I can't tell for sure... They might reach a limit eventually if I keep using magic, but..." The problem was that I had to fight while keeping up the *Shield* spell, which meant I couldn't solely dedicate all my mana to attacking. Even if I had plenty of mana reserves, what if the rocks absorbed all of that mana and hurled them back at us?

I promised everyone that we'd all put safety first. I should consider retreat just in case... Suddenly, my pickaxe trembled. "Hm?" I looked down and saw it was Ciel, poking at the pickaxe in my hand. "What's wrong? Does my pickaxe bother you in some way?"

"Oh! Are you telling him to smash those things with his pickaxe?" Furay

asked.

Ciel wobbled his body up and down in agreement.

“I see... Since we’re up against rocks, pickaxes would be the best tool, huh?” I said. I never thought the day would come when Ciel would voluntarily make proposals to us. Perhaps he had learned and grown after all our time together. “All right, let’s go and smash them the traditional way. Unit Fifteen, guard the entrance.”

Unit Fifteen nodded and poised with its shield at the ready. Just in case, I cast a *Shield* on the entrance.

“Okay then,” I sucked in a deep breath, “Furay, Taran...and Starkers?”

Starkers had appeared out of nowhere and had gotten in line with the rest of us, hammer in hand. With an expression brimming with confidence, he gave us a firm nod. *Is he going to fight too? I mean, I know he has incredible physical strength. I guess we’ll find out.*

Now that Ciel had hopped onto my shoulder, too, I called out to the rest of my teammates. “I’ll cast *Shield* around each of us, but stick close. Let’s go!”

“Yes, my lord!” Furay yelled.

We all lifted our pickaxes and charged at the rocks. With a ferocious battle cry, I swung down my arm. The rock crumbled noisily before tumbling down onto the ground.

Is it my mithril pickaxe that’s effective, or is it <Cave King>? Ack, it doesn’t matter. The point is...

“It’s working!” I yelled.

Immediately, I repeated the same motion on the rock next to my first target, and it also crumbled with one hit. *All right! This is pretty much the same as normal mining.*

“Okay, how about the rest of us?” As I fought the rocks, I looked out of the corner of my eyes at the others.

“Hurgh!” Furay yelled. She seemed to be struggling somewhat. She’d only managed to take down one rock after three swings.

As for Taran, she was smashing one rock after another in a flurry with her four pickaxes. As soon as she was done, she immediately hopped into the next cluster of rocks and started mowing them down. She was under the protection of *Shield*, so I didn't have to worry about her getting injured, but she was making full use of her agility to nimbly and elegantly dodge all of the light beams.

Huh. You know, it's actually the first time I've seen her in battle. Taran usually seemed gentle and mild, but in battle, she wore a different face—she almost seemed like a whole new person. *Okay, technically, she isn't a "person," but right now, she's acting in a way that befits her intimidating appearance.* So far, Taran had the most fallen rocks to her name.

I can't let her overtake me like this...! Now then, how is Starkers doing? I scanned the surroundings. *Huh? Where did that guy go? Ah,* there *he is!*

Slightly in the distance, I spotted someone under the concentrated fire of the light beams from several rocks. *Sheesh, I* told *him to stay close...*

Sweeping down the rocks as I went, I made my way towards the man. Gradually, I got a better look at him and what he was doing. He was actually rummaging through the debris of fallen rocks. *I knew it. He isn't here to fight—he was intrigued by the rocks themselves.*

But the next moment, he proved me wrong, because he suddenly lifted his hammer and smashed a drifting rock into pieces at godly speed. All I saw was a blur. Then, he started inspecting the new pile of debris he had made. *I take that back. Like I initially suspected, he's a strong fighter on top of all his other talents. He seems very interested in the rocks, though. Does that mean these are valuable constructs?*

At a glance, they seemed to be made from black rock, but upon further inspection, the material also reminded me of glass. From time to time, I spotted a golden gleam and something shiny inside. I paid closer attention as I destroyed them, and discovered that at their center were golden stones and something that looked like crystal balls. It was likely one of these was the source of the light beams.

The golden stones I knew of already were risestones or arcanestones, and in

this case, the latter seemed more likely. *Are these golems after all, then?* When I looked even closer, I realized a familiar blue stone was hidden behind the golden stone. *Ah. That must be a heartstone.*

Perhaps this encounter had brought us good fortune, since I'd be able to craft new golems with these—nearly a hundred golems with arcanestones, in fact. They would be a great help as security and manual laborers. What I didn't recognize was the crystal ball. *I'll look into these when the battle is over.*

I scanned our surroundings. The army of a hundred golems had been cut down to a pitiful number. I had defeated a dozen or so, but Taran, who had gotten much further into the chamber, had taken down most of the crowd. Furay had also just finished dealing with her share. As for Starkers, when I looked at him, he was easily juggling away with around a dozen crystal balls.

Nodding to myself, I said, "All right, they're all down on our end. As for Taran, only a handful are left—ah, she's done."

Taran had just finished taking down the last rock on the far side of the chamber and was waving her four picks at me.

"You're the best, Taran!" Furay waved back.

I joined in, waving my pickaxe in admiration for Taran's valiant efforts.

But then, without warning, the ceiling opened up behind Taran. A colossal drifting boulder appeared from within.

"What in the world...?" I gasped, staring at the boulder that was at last ten times larger than the rocks we had faced.

Furay's eyes were wide. "I-It's huge...! Is it their boss?"

Taran reacted instantly. She leaped onto the boulder and slammed her pickaxes at it at a speed too extreme for my eyes to keep track. But she didn't even make a dent in the thing.

In response, the central hole of the boulder widened. It looked like an eye. I could sense a tremendous amount of mana amassing inside.

"Taran, get away!" I shouted. Not a second later, Taran hopped down.

We didn't get so much as a second to catch our breaths—the entire boulder

was bathed in white light, and with a roaring sound like thunder, an explosion of light and lashing wind expanded out from it.

"Furay, Starkers!" I called out. "Over here!"

"C-Coming!" Furay yelled, scrambling over with Starkers.

We clustered as one so that I could enhance Taran's shield as much as possible. Thanks to our quick reaction, we managed to fully block the blast from harming any of us. However, the wind was ferocious, and it threatened to toss us around even with our *Shield*, so I pumped in more and more mana to weather the storm.

The same couldn't be said for Taran—she couldn't stand her ground and, inside her *Shield*, she was sent rolling towards us like a ball.

"You okay, Taran?!" I shouted.

She immediately climbed back onto her many feet and shook her body up and down. *Oh, phew. She isn't hurt. Okay, is the entrance all right?* I turned my head around, and Unit Fifteen seemed to be safe too.

"What an explosion," I muttered to myself. *The boulder's amount of mana is enough to rival mine from a while back. Hmm, but it's not an explosion of fire. Is it holy magic?*

Furay nodded. "Yeah, and the bad news is, that just now was a wide-area spell. If it focused its attack on one of us... Yikes."

If it fired out beams like the rocks we had defeated earlier, I wasn't sure how long my *Shield* could last. Furthermore, Taran's attacks had been completely ineffective.

"Taran, was it too tough?" I asked.

She nodded with frustration.

"I see..." I frowned. In terms of speed and pure strength, Taran was superior to me, but even she hadn't managed to break the big boulder. I might be better at handling a pickaxe than her, but it would still be difficult to crack the boulder, nonetheless. "If it has a weak point, it has to be the glowing part in the middle... The problem is, we can't get any closer."

If it launched an attack like earlier, even if *Shield* could protect us from injuries, we would still be blown away.

Furay commented, “But that thing sure is taking its sweet time to attack us... Ah, it’s glowing again.”

This time, it must be preparing its light beam attack. “Furay, Starkers!” I barked. “Get behind Unit Fifteen! I’ll cast a *Shield*, but Furay, manifest your own on top of it!”

“Yes, my lord!”

They both obeyed my instructions immediately. As for Taran and I, we exchanged glances and nodded. Taran put down all her picks on the ground before scuttling over to me. I climbed onto her back, and she started racing faster than a horse towards the boulder. *She’s so fast!* Without the picks, she could dedicate more of her legs to running. *I guess that gives her a speed boost.*

The boulder wasn’t idle—it shot out its light beam in response. Huge pillars of light smashed into the ground behind us, and it was closing the distance, aiming faster than we could run. Moments before the next one could pierce us, Taran leaped high into the air. She landed far away from the light beam, but a new one aimed at us almost instantly.

Taran’s movements from here on were nothing short of incredible. She hopped right, she hopped left, she hopped onto the ceiling, onto the walls...almost as if she could bend the rules of nature to her every whim. *Just as you’d expect from a spider!*

The boulder couldn’t keep up with her movements and had trouble aiming its beam. On the other hand, the passenger clinging onto Taran’s back—me—was desperately trying to suppress my nausea. We kept up the game of cat and mouse, and eventually, the boulder gave up on its beam attack.

“Now!” I yelled. “Taran, let’s go!”

At my call, Taran dashed at full speed towards the towering boulder. Mere instants before its eye could flash again, Taran leaped high into the air.

“Huuurgh!!!” I cried, swinging my pickaxe with all my might, my aim set on its glowing eye.

With a grating noise, it cracked like glass, and the giant boulder crumbled immediately. The rumbling sounds it produced were deafening, almost as if I had taken down an entire stone building. As rock debris rained down on the ground, Taran landed nimbly with me on her back.

“We did it!” I cheered. “Taran, I knew you could do it!” I climbed down and high fives one of her feet before I showered her with praise. “What a powerful enemy we faced... If not for your speed, Taran, I wouldn’t have ever gotten close enough to it.”

In response, Taran tapped her palps together, almost like a clapping motion. At the same time, the assistant’s voice echoed inside my head, announcing that my skills would be enhanced. *Hm, I probably fulfilled some sort of requirement by defeating that thing.*

“Expanded range of automatic storage. In addition, you may now use this ability even outside caves, but limited to mined material.”

That means... As an experiment, I tried storing the fallen debris around us. Until now, the maximum range I had was roughly two or three footsteps from my standing position. However, with this upgrade, the range was several times what it had originally been. *That’s an awesome upgrade. I can even store things outside the cave now!*

A voice rang out from behind me, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Lord Heale, Taran! That was amazing, you two!” It was Furay, who ran over and high-fived with me before giving a big thumbs up to Taran, showing her admiration towards us.

“You did a great job too, Furay,” I said. “And...good, you don’t seem to be hurt anywhere.”

“I’m all right. Starkers and Mister Ciel are fine too!”

At the entrance, Unit Fifteen was waiting, and it wasn’t alone—other monsters waved to us as well. They must have arrived and started spectating our battle at some point. I could hear applause—they were celebrating our victory.

Hold on, where's Starkers? I whipped my head back and forth. *Ah, there he is!*

Starkers seemed to be gathering the black rock shards. *Is he going to make something with them?*

"I've gotta say, though, that thing was way too big," Furay said. "The debris it left is like a small mountain."

"Right. I'm really curious who made it..." *I don't even know whether it was the work of an intelligent race, actually. It could be natural.*

I stared up at the ceiling where the boulder had come out from. Even with the help of Night Vision, however, the space there seemed to be empty. I couldn't see anything even after careful scrutiny. *It must have been lying dormant there for a long time. The little ones weren't strong enough to defeat us, which was likely why the big one came out. It would have been a near thing if they all attacked us at once from the start... I'm so glad we found out early on that magic doesn't work.*

I really need to thank Ciel for showing me the way. I crouched down to gather Ciel, who was jiggling on the ground, into my arms. "Ciel, thanks for telling me that magic wouldn't work. You were a great help."

Hearing that, Ciel shook his body happily. He even seemed to be bowing to me humbly. *Is it just me, or...is he becoming more expressive as time goes on?*

"Okay. Now, I should look into the stones and crystals," I muttered.

I had already stored the materials around me, so all that was left was to check my inventory. *Heartstones, arcanestones... Yeah, I've found these before.* Since heartstones were the cores of golems, the black floating rocks must have been a type of golem. The light beams, were likely spells cast using the magic inside the arcanestones.

But then, I came across three unfamiliar terms. First, I retrieved a black shard from my inventory. "Resistone...that's new."

Resistone: Stone with natural resistance against magic. On ingestion, it will grant a living being resistance to magic.

I figured it was such a type of stone since magic didn't work. And wait. By "ingestion," you mean...?

"It is edible."

"It's edible?!" I exclaimed. "A *stone* is edible?!"

Furay tilted her head in question. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Uh, apparently this black shard has resistance against magic, and, uh, it's edible."

"...For real?" Furay took the black shard into her hand. She felt for its texture and sniffed it. However, it felt smooth and hard like a crystal, and weighed around the same too. It didn't seem edible at all.

But then, I spotted Starkers in the distance, who opened his mouth wide and sunk his teeth into a black rock, crushing it like hard candy. *Wow. How hard are his teeth? Hmm, maybe it's surprisingly brittle?*

"We can eat this thing..." Furay muttered, and her eyes lit up with curiosity. Rising to the challenge, she brought it closer to her mouth. But she immediately shook her head and put it down.

I gave her a wry smile. "Furay, even if we *do* try to eat it, we should at least wash it with water first. We can even crush it with a tool before attempting it."

"You're right... If we melt down, it wouldn't seem like a stone anymore, so it wouldn't be all that offputting."

But I can't believe it's possible to gain magic resistance through eating these things. I would have preferred it to be something we can "consume" on command like mana minerals. Oh well. Either way, it's going to be very useful for making golems, and to offer better protection to everyone.

A thought occurred to Furay, and she frowned. "Wait. The big guy you defeated just now looked like it was a slightly different color, wasn't it?"

I nodded. The other blackish debris I had scavenged from the last big boulder was a different material, and it had been exclusive to it.

Black Iron: Harder than iron and has high heat resistance.

This was the material that had withstood Taran's attacks. Though it wasn't all that fancy, considering its attributes, it would be useful for a variety of things. *For example...maybe cookware?*

"It seems to be a material called black iron, a hard metal that's resistant to heat," I replied.

"Black iron, huh...? What were those round crystal balls, then?"

Soakstone: A stone that can absorb and store a set amount of mana.

"They're soakstones, which can apparently absorb magic," I answered.

"Huuuh, another miracle stone, hm?" said Furay. "So that's why magic didn't work against these guys."

I supposed this one wasn't much of a surprise either. The assistant hadn't said that resistones could render all magic null, so it was probably the combination of that and the soakstones that had blocked my spells. The crystal ball of the big boulder seemed to be several sizes bigger than the rest, but it was still the same kind of rock. Though...it had been reduced to splinters, a mere shadow of its former self. *Maybe its size affects the amount of mana it can absorb.*

Furay looked around the chamber. "Wow, though. Look at the amount of debris everywhere."

"Yeah, there's a lot. I guess the first thing on our list is to store it all."

Armed with all these materials, I could craft even more golems with greater strength to serve as reliable guardians during mining and on the surface. All the golems besides Units One to Fifteen had joined Camus and her crew, so we were actually a little short on golems at the moment. This was perfect.

With the help of our slime postmen, we spent a while after the battle gathering all the materials in the chamber.

Chapter 12: Making a Sculpture!

“Whoa! There’s so much stuff!” Erivan exclaimed as he looked up at the mountain of rocks piled up at the foot of Yggdrasil, where I’d heaped the five types of stone I harvested from the floating round golems earlier.

Baris looked just as stunned. “I have grasped the basic function of each one, but I must say, I still find them surreal.”

We were currently holding a meeting at the round table beneath Yggdrasil to discuss how we were going to handle these stones. My first suggestion was that we should eat the crushed resistones. However, everyone was rather reluctant—with the sole exception of Starkers, who was munching away merrily.

Deciding to set an example for everyone else, I picked up a fragment and bit into it. “Gah...” I could feel my face scrunching up. With one bite, a tangy bitterness filled my mouth.

All the monsters watching were sweating nervously. Of course, none of them followed my example. In the end, I decided to rely on Riena’s talents. I asked her to experiment and come up with a good recipe to make the stones more agreeable.

After my tasting session, Baris turned to me. “Setting aside the flavor of the resistone, with this much material available, we should be able to craft a respectable number of golems.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “We can start branching out from our usual transport and security golems. But for now, the first thing on the list is still security golems.”

We had just come across a chamber with numerous hazardous golems, after all. We could never have enough security golems around. Furthermore, I wanted to start a division of aquatic golems like the ones I made for Camus and her crew, to be positioned around Sheol. The waters around Sheol Reef were filled with perils, and it was better to be safe than sorry when it came to dealing with satan clams, scissor crabs, and giant merrays.

The most important factor to decide when creating golems was the magic I

would assign to them—the spells I would imprint into their arcanestones. I had assigned *Shield* to all the golems I had made so far. That was probably the best choice for our upcoming golems.

Hmm, but is it? Come to think of it, what spells were those floating golems enchanted with? Their attacks looked like some kind of light beam, but I'm not sure. Actually, how were they able to float in the first place? None of the stones that made up their bodies had floating properties... One thing to note is that the amount of arcanestones I scavenged was around two hundred, roughly twice the number of heartstones. Does that mean each golem had multiple arcanestones? That would mean arcanestone could be dedicated to the light beam spell, while the other was dedicated to the floating spell.

A floating spell, huh? If I knew this spell, it'd open up so many doors for crafting. Oh well. For now, let's go with the innocuous option. Safety should always come first.

Mind made up, I said, "Personally, I'm planning on crafting a handful of golems that can use the *Shield* spell. I'll add soakstones and resistones to them to grant them magic resistance. These golems will be small, and they'll serve as guards for our mining monsters."

Everyone nodded in response.

"I think that's a solid plan," Erivan said, "but it'd be nice if we had a few more of those on the surface. Ten of our goblins also left on that ship with Camus, so we're a bit short on hands for lookouts."

"Of course, I want to station some of these security golems on the surface as well," I agreed. "I also plan on adding one more upgrade to fend off invaders."

"Another upgrade?" Erivan raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. I'm thinking about implementing another arcanestone to each and enchanting them with flashy warning spells to deter our enemies."

It would be a waste of our arcanestones to only enchant them with superficial spells for the sole sake of intimidation, however. I would choose spells that would make these golems useful soldiers during an emergency. The golems I had crafted so far were purely defensive—they were only armed with shields,

whether magical or physical. Technically, I had crafted them to be capable of wielding the standard equipment a human would use, but I hadn't really explored that ability yet.

"I see," Baris said. "That means they can help hunt murder birds and satan clams."

"Exactly." I nodded. "I'm also going to craft aquatic lookout golems, and it might be a good idea to embed them with offensive spells so that they can catch fish. Does anyone else have any ideas?"

Straight away, Erivan's hand shot up in the air. "I sure do!"

"Erivan." I nodded in acknowledgement. "Go on."

"Could ya make one more gigantic golem? Somethin' bigger than Yggdrasil!"

With a frown, Riena interrupted him. "While I understand your liking for grand things, General, what are we going to do with such a golem?"

"U-Uh, ya know..." His gaze swam.

Riena looked at him with disapproval. "Not to mention that it will block the sunlight, and might collapse our reclaimed land with its weight."

Baris nodded. "The heavier the golem, the more damage it will cause to the stone blocks of the reclaimed land. It's not a realistic proposal."

"Y-Yeah, I figured..." Erivan scratched his cheek and chuckled sheepishly.

I did think there was some merit in his proposal, though. "No, I was actually thinking the same thing, Erivan."

"Huuuh?!" everyone exclaimed as their eyes widened in surprise.

Even Erivan, the man who made the same proposal, had the same reaction. "Ch-Chief! Yer way too nice sometimes. I know yer tryin' to stand up for me, but _"

"That's not why." I shook my head. "I think it will be useful."

"Useful?" Erivan tilted his head quizzically, and so did everyone else.

"When I was talking to Furay, I had a thought." I hesitated. "What would humans do, especially ones from Sanphales, if they ever came across our

island?”

Frowns weighed heavily on the monsters’ expressions.

Erivan was the one who broke the silence—he didn’t mince his words. “I don’t mean any offense by it, but knowin’ how humans are like, they might try to attack us.”

“Yeah, that’s very possible,” I agreed. “But at the same time, very few humans are willing to take on enemies they think they can’t beat. So, what do you think we should do?”

There was contemplative silence this time as everyone wrung their brains for plans.

In a subdued voice, Baris said, “Would the best course of action be...to make our enemies hesitant about attacking us?”

“Yes. Whenever Sanphales considers invading somewhere, they have to scout out the enemy walls and towers,” I said. “If the structures in place are significantly advanced or imposing, they would sometimes retreat and scrap their plans of battle.”

It didn’t seem to make sense to Erivan. “I get that, but...” He tilted his head, puzzled. “What does that have to do with a giant golem?”

“It doesn’t have to be a golem. Something like a lighthouse would work too. Say, Erivan, if you ever saw a man-made structure taller than even Yggdrasil, what impression would you get?”

He paused. “I’d be amazed. Ah, I see!”

“Anyone would be left in awe, and a certain amount of trepidation, towards the people responsible.”

There was a wide grin on Erivan’s face. “The bigger the better, then!”

I nodded. “Exactly. In human mythology, we have many stories about towering statues. Our nations and cities made them not just as decorative symbols, but also as a way to display how prosperous, to outdo their competitors. The grander these structures are, the greater the impression they leave.”

Riena hummed in thought. “That makes sense. If we ever saw such a statue in the settlement of another tribe, the general would definitely be surprised.”

“Indeed.” Baris stroked his chin. “Everyone would all open their eyes wide like the general did, and shout, ‘It’s *huge*!’”

Erivan muttered under his breath, “Are ya pokin’ fun at me?”

“Now, now.” With a wry smile, I placated Erivan before getting back to the topic. “Humans are always wary of things bigger than ourselves. But like everyone else said, situating it on land would be inconvenient, and it’d be a risk if it ever collapses. That’s why I set my sights on the ocean.” It might also come in handy during the lighthouse construction, or if the lighthouse was ever on the verge of falling over. “What do you guys think?”

Everyone chorused their agreement.

I nodded. “All right! I’ll make the aquatic golems first, and then make the giant one right after!”

We continued brainstorming for a while, and we came up with a few more practical ideas, such as fire fighting golems with water spells and blacksmith golems armed with high heat resistance and fire spells. I decided to make these alongside the security golems, but just in case, I kept aside thirty heartstones, sixty arcanestones, and some other materials in case I ever needed them.

Once the land golems were complete, I went to the shore to craft aquatic golems that I then sent into the ocean. The golems I made this time had a different design from the ones I’dad made for Camus, because when I asked Starkers for advice, he had drawn a few fish-like illustrations, so I based the new ones off his diagrams. They were still shaped like fish, just like before, and were similar to sharks in size. The difference was their larger fins and their ability to climb ashore. I had also embedded them with lightning spells, so they could catch fish too. *They do look a bit silly when they stand on their fins on land, though.*

Next up was crafting a towering golem inside the ocean. *Well, not quite “inside,” because only its feet would be in the water.* Everything above the part that corresponded to a human’s ankle would be exposed. Together with the central figures on the island, I traveled t by boat to a place slightly offshore

from the reclaimed land.

Erivan, sitting in the same boat, asked, “Chief, have ya already decided what kinda statue it’ll be?”

“Mostly. It will be, well, a statue of an imposing and mighty man.”

“In that case...” Erivan paused. “How about a statue of me?”

Furay scowled. “Dad, what are you thinking?! That’s embarrassing, and more importantly, aren’t these types of statues meant to be modeled after the most influential member of the tribe?!”

“A-Ah... Then, how about this? The body’s mine, but the head will be Chief’s.”

“No!” Furay said firmly, shooting down her father’s idea. “That’s creepy!”

But uh, I don’t really want to make a statue of myself either, I’d feel awkward too. And I’ll be honest, I can’t really picture my own face and body in my mind..

Furay was persistent in her objection, and Erivan eventually gave up, albeit reluctantly. I actually felt some pity for the man, since he had been the one to propose it. His majestic muscles were his pride, after all. And I couldn’t argue the fact that Erivan was an intimidating man in looks, which made him the perfect monster to model the statue after.

I paused. “In that case, how about we model only its body after Erivan? As for the face, I’ll just choose something that seems to fit, like all the statues I see in temples and shrines. Does that sound like a decent compromise to you, Furay?”

“Well, yeah, I suppose.” She was finally convinced.

Erivan wept tears of joy as he yelled, “Ch-Chief, I’ll *never* forget my debt to ya until the day I breathe my last! I’ll strike a magnificent and dignified pose right now!”

I smiled. “Please do.”

Delighted, Erivan stood before me with his axes in hand and took a pose that emphasized his burly physique. *Okay, I’ll make a colossal golem standing in the ocean that’s identical to him. Unfortunately, though, since it’s a golem, it’ll end up changing its pose if it ever moves.*

Now then, what materials should I use...? Well, it's mostly for intimidation purposes, so I'll use stone, since it's going to be just as tall as Yggdrasil. For its bulging muscles, I'll use gold. While I'm at it, I should also toss in a couple of arcanestones to allow it to use fire magic and Shield*. The axes will be iron or some other common metal, and its eyes will be clusters of glowstones... That way, it should serve the purpose of a lighthouse too.*

I paused my train of thought. *Ah, am I being too greedy? Can such a golem even stay upright? But, I mean, it's not going to move unless it really has to, so I'll make its legs thicker so that it'll be more stable. If it doesn't work out, I guess I can always modify it to be smaller. That being said, it'll be dangerous if it topples over. It might cause a large wave on impact, and I'd need to bounce that away from shore with magic. We should be fine, though, since I've evacuated all the boats in the area and all the citizens from the coastline.*

As I manifested the *Shield* spell, I began preparations to craft the golem. I selected the materials for the golem with my crest. "Okay, all that's left is sculpting its form." Lastly, I closed my eyes and ordered my crest to model it after the man before me.

However...

"Stop right there, Starkers! Don't get in the way! *I'm* the model of that statue, not you!"

By the time Erivan's voice barked out, I had already activated the skill.

When I opened my eyes, I let out a dumb, "Ah."

What I saw wasn't Erivan, but a man who must have run in at the last second —Starkers, who rolled his eyes back into his head and raised his two hands to make V signs.

A large, blinding sphere of light flashed on the ocean surface before subsiding, revealing a towering statue. A towering statue of *Starkers* rolling his eyes back and with his hands raised in V signs.

A cry of grief threatened to split the heavens. It belonged to Erivan.

I could only stare up at the Starkers statue, flabbergasted. *What? What in the world is this thing?!*

On the other hand, Erivan must have thought that nothing could be done to salvage the situation, because he collapsed onto the ground. I immediately told him that I could modify the golem's looks. But before I could say anything else, there was a commotion over at the reclaimed land, and I turned around.

I was greeted with the sight of countless monsters. The goblin children were making a ruckus over the sudden appearance of the Starkers golem. Showered with the noise, the Starkers golem moved from its V-sign pose to strike all kinds of bizarre poses. It boasted its muscles, it...uh...showed off its manly cleavage slightly, and it blew kisses at its audience.

The spectators seemed to be entertained by its movement, and the children cheered merrily at the Starkers statue. Faced with such a sight, Erivan could only mutter two words before falling silent. "I lost."

Furay breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, it's a good outcome for me, I guess, since a giant statue of my dad would be really awkward." She seemed to be one of the supporters of the Starkers statue. Her words were like pouring salt on a wound, and Erivan froze in shock.

On this day, the second symbol of Sheol—after its predecessor, the Yggdrasil tree—was born. Its default pose was, of course, relatively solemn. I had asked it to raise its axes high above its head. However, its eyes were still clearly rolled back into its head, and its jaw still hung slovenly slack.

Chapter 13: A Pitch-Black Sky!

I stopped digging and turned to Furay and Taran. “All right, I think it’s about time we grab lunch.”

“Gotcha!” Furay chirped. “I wonder what’s on the menu.”

“I’m sure that Riena and the other chefs will do a wonderful job.”

We chatted as we returned to the surface. One of the rules on the island was that all the miners had to rest on the surface at noon. It seemed like an ordinary day as we approached the cave entrance.

But that was when a deafening roar echoed out.

“Wh-What was that?!” I yelled.

It sounded like an explosion. *Is someone doing some kind of experiment?* The next moment, unarmed monsters filed into the cave.

Upon seeing me, one of the goblins shouted, “Ah, Lord Heale! The sky, it’s...it’s pitch black!”

I frowned. “Pitch black? Is it another swarm of murder birds?” Something similar had happened a while ago.

“No, it’s nothing like that! I swear, a patch of the sky in the distance is completely dark, and it’s heading this way!”

I didn’t know the details, but clearly, it was an emergency. I could hear the ringing of the bells that our golems were equipped with.

When I marched out of the cave, I was greeted with a darkness that reminded me of night. I froze at the unbelievable sight. “Wh-What is *that*?!”

A patch of dark sky had painted over the sun, blocking it out completely. And this dark, inky segment of sky was rushing towards us, as if it was eager to engulf our island as well.

I had never seen such a natural phenomenon before. In the corner of my vision, I spotted Riena, who was sprinting in my direction. She seemed to know

more than I did.

“Lord Heale, we’re in trouble!”

“Riena! Do you know what that is? Wait...!” My eyes widened.

The Starkers golem I had only just crafted was spewing fire at the black sky. When the inferno made contact with the black patch, it ballooned into a roaring fireball, and dark smoke filled the area around it. *The explosion earlier must have been the golem’s work.* Starkers—the man—looked pleased as he watched. He raised a fist, as if to say, “Go get them!”

When I had first made the Starkers golem, it had admittedly seemed a little questionable, but when a blazing inferno was shooting out of its mouth, the statue felt like a majestic ally, standing tall and proud.

However, even the golem’s flames didn’t bring back the azure sky. The hole was filled immediately, and the black sky continued soaring our way. *Good, that means it’s not invincible. But...what in the world is it made of?*

Riena shifted her gaze from the Starkers golem to me. “Those are locusts! Monster locusts called devilhoppers!”

Stunned, I exclaimed, “Devilhoppers?!”

One would find them in Sanphales as well, deep in the forests. Each monster was around the size of a human head, and their agility was something to behold. As omnivorous creatures, they would appear on our fields and eat everything there—our crops, our livestock, and our people.

To us humans, they were a terror comparable to wild boars, or wolves. What made these monsters different, however, was the mucus they spat, which could melt down living creatures and plants like acid. They disliked hard matter, and were infamous for their habit of turning their food into goo first.

But this makes no sense. “Are you sure they’re devilhoppers?” I asked.

Unlike murder birds, devilhoppers normally didn’t attack in swarms, especially not giant swarms like these. Not to mention that we were in the middle of the ocean.

I shook my head to snap out of my daze. Though there were several questions

burning in my mind, I had priorities to attend to. “Furay, Unit Fifteen!” I yelled. “Stay here and guard the entrance! Even if they make it this far, don’t let even a single one of them inside!”

“I won’t!” Furay promised as she cast *Shield* at the entrance. Unit Fifteen marched forward, lifting its orichalcum shield as it stood on guard.

Evacuation seemed to be mostly finished—Baris must have arranged it right away. The harbor was now filled with golems and armed monsters. Our giant crossbows and ballistae were also moved into their positions.

“Taran, take me and Riena to that watchtower!” I commanded as we climbed on.

Dutifully, Taran darted like lightning from the cave entrance to the harbor, where I saw the goblin general.

“Erivan, status report.”

“Chief!” He greeted me. “Evacuation’s done, no one’s left behind. The only ones around would be the Starkers golem and the aquatic golems.” He paused. “Well, if those things really are devilhoppers, the golems should be fine. Their mucus isn’t the type that melts rocks and metals, if I remember right.”

“Right.” I paused. “Though I wish we could all take refuge as well...” I found my eyes drawn to the sky, and I spotted a group of murder birds frantically soaring through the sky to escape the devilhoppers. They were swallowed by the swarm instantly.

Riena nodded gravely. “It seems that we do not have that luxury.”

“Yeah. If we let those things reach Sheol...” I shuddered. The locusts would leave Yggdrasil and our farm utterly devastated in their wake, and Sheol would return to a barren island void of all greenery. I looked at all the faces before me. “Yggdrasil and the farm are Sheol’s treasures. We must—no, we *will* stop those creatures with our own hands.”

Everyone nodded without a word. With a deafening roar, the Starkers golem shot out a pillar of fire. A loud explosion left our ears ringing as it pierced the devilhopper swarm like a stake.

This was my cue—I raised my voice. “Everyone, to your stations!”

At my command, the monsters began their respective preparations for our attack. There was still a decent amount of distance between us and the swarm. I could put off manifesting a *Shield* spell around us until they were a little closer. With that in mind, I decided to put all my efforts into offensive spells first—I would cast at full power. I thrust my palm at the black sky and aimed.

But there was a problem. The swarm was unimaginably large, filling an entire region of the sky, and I wasn’t sure where to aim. *No, I can’t afford to waste any time. The only thing I can do is hurl as many spells as I can at it.*

My first choice was *Fire*. A roaring fireball lit up its surroundings like a lofty bonfire, expanding as it crashed into the swarm. Its size even surprised me, the caster—the crimson flames filled my entire vision. Upon impact, the flames transformed into a blinding flash that painted over the whole canvas of the sky. After a short delay, the island was shaken by thunderous booms and lashing gales.

“Ya got ’em!” Erivan yelled out in the wind. “Our chief never disappoints!”

But when the light, smoke, and ashes died down, the sky was still dark as devilhoppers covered it like a curtain.

“Am I dreamin’?!” Erivan gripped his head, his eyes wide with shock. “Even that spell didn’t work?!”

I didn’t know how many I had taken out with that spell, but the swarm was still very much thriving. *Looks like our enemy is a tough one...*

At once, Riena spoke up. “Lord Heale, let’s try what we did last time.”

“You mean, summon rain and thunder?” I asked. It was the strategy we had used during the scissor crab invasion. Lightning spells had better range and destructive power inside the water. We could do the same thing this time—we just had to aim at the sky instead. I nodded. “Good plan, let’s go!”

“Yes!” Riena stood next to me and faced her palm skywards as well. “I shall begin!”

As soon as the words left her lips, the already black sky turned a shade darker.

Instantly, I could feel humid air flowing in our direction. The obsidian cloud steadily expanded to envelop the entire devilhopper swarm, and heavy rain poured down like a veil. Sheol, however, remained completely dry. It was as if she had drawn a dividing line—on one side was a storm, and on the other was a clear sky. Riena did a splendid job—it was likely even magic couldn't achieve such results. Her crest, <Jörd>, was incredible.

"You're the best, Riena!" I yelled. "Now it's my turn!"

I poured all my mana into a lightning spell and unleashed it upon the devilhoppers. The black patch of sky fell down like a crumbling wall.

"Good, it's working!" I nodded. "Riena, cast your lightning spells too!"

"I shall!"

Riena quickly joined me, providing her aid. Blinding white light flickered across the swarm, and one after another, the monster corpses fell into the ocean. The unnatural darkness of the sky cleared away, and though it was still somewhat gloomy, it was the normal lighting of a rainy day.

The two of us poured in every drop of mana we had, and under our combined hail of attacks, the army of devilhoppers fell apart in no time at all. As the sky grew brighter, a tall wave swept towards us, possibly due to the impact of the countless bodies. When the devilhoppers had finally disappeared from sight, the heavy clouds cleared away, as if they had never been there to begin with.

"Yahoo!" Erivan cheered. "I never expected anythin' less from ya, Your Majesty!"

"I didn't do anything!" Riena bowed to me humbly. "It was only possible because of Lord Heale's magic."

I shook my head. "No, Riena, you were vital to our success." *She managed to summon rain to cover such a large part of the sky... It's not the first time, but it still seems surreal.*

Erivan walked forward, and he seemed puzzled. "I gotta ask, why the heck did those things appear here? We've been gettin' a lotta annoyin' visitors lately—those scissor crabs, too."

Baris hummed in thought. “Perhaps the monsters nearby flock to this island because there is no other land in the vicinity. We have thriving greenery here as well, which must make it even more attractive.”

I found myself agreeing with Baris’s theory. *But there are still many unanswered questions. From what I know about devilhoppers, they shouldn’t move around in such grand swarms. And I’ve never heard of them traveling across the ocean like that. Not to mention...* I frowned as I looked at one of the devilhoppers that was now flying towards us, a survivor of our lightning storm. The goblins beneath the watchtower aimed their arrows at it right away, shooting it down.

“I’m not sure, but...they seem a bit too big,” I said in a low voice as I gazed at the falling locust. I had heard that devilhoppers were normally the size of a human head, but the specimen I was looking at seemed much larger.

“Ah, looks like there’re a few tenacious ones,” Erivan muttered. “I’ll go hunt ’em down with the golems.” He promptly headed off to deal with the flying stragglers.

Now that the worst was over, I had time to think. The devilhoppers seemed to have a clear destination in mind. Considering the angle they had been advancing in, it must be Yggdrasil. There probably wasn’t anything strange about them being attracted to vegetation. But at the same time, the invasions seemed to be growing more frequent. The leviathan, the scissor crabs, then these devilhoppers.

I didn’t have a clue as to why, or what exactly was attracting them here, but I had the sinking feeling that even more powerful invaders were on their way. The idea of being attacked by human nations, especially Sanphales, was scary, but the threat of nature was even more prominent. Either way, we had to upgrade our defenses further.

Until now, I had thought that I was going overboard with our defense mechanisms, such as the Starkers golem. But who would have predicted that invaders which overpowered them easily would appear so soon? *I shouldn’t just focus on amassing raw power. To deal with enemies like this, I’ll have to use my brain a bit more, just like we did this time.* Baris was a shrewd man, but perhaps

Sheol required a specialized tactician who was more well-versed in the art of warfare.

I was quiet for a long time, engaged in my thoughts. That was when I noticed Riena in front of me. She was peering into my face worriedly. “Lord Heale, are you feeling unwell?”

“No, I’m fine.” My eyes widened. “Wait, that thing in your hand is...”

“Yes!” She beamed at me with a whole, somewhat charred devilhopper in her hand. “It’s a whole grilled devilhopper. It’s just as tasty as murder bird meat!” She offered it to me, still holding onto its legs.

“Y-You eat these?!”

“We do! They’re nutritious, and I’ve eaten them since I was a child! We have a new supply of food now.”

“I-I see... Uh, I’ll try them later, thanks.”

Riena had a brilliant smile on her face, but I really couldn’t bring myself to eat these things. As for the monster residents of the island, however, all they saw was a grand feast. When I looked around, I saw the others were retrieving the devilhopper corpses that had washed up. Starkers was already helping himself to a whole devilhopper, munching away happily. *Raw*.

It certainly doesn’t look appetizing, but maybe it tastes good? Oh well, it’s still a valuable source of food. Let’s freeze them and store them underground.

The next moment, I heard a goblin shout, “There’s a whole other lot of them!”

I turned my gaze to the ocean once again and furrowed my eyebrows. A swarm of devilhoppers around the same scale as the precious one was advancing towards us once again.

“These things again?” I muttered. “Riena, can you summon rain?”

“Yes!” She lifted her palms up to the sky. But no matter how long we waited, no rain answered her call. “Huh?”

What rained down on the swarm wasn’t water, but glaring sunlight. Fire flared up, spreading across the swarm. The devilhoppers pelted down onto the

ocean.

“Did you burn them, Riena?” I asked.

“N-No, the only thing I asked for was rain. I can’t summon such powerful sunlight with my cres—” She broke off as she seemed to focus her gaze on something behind the burning swarm. “What?!”

I followed her line of sight, and there, I saw a dazzling, golden bird gracefully soaring across the sky.

Chapter 14: The Arrival of a Guardian!

I gaped at the sight. “What in the world...is that?”

A giant bird was flying towards us, burning the surrounding devilhoppers to a crisp on its way. Its body shone like the sun, almost as if it was made of fire itself. Human myths had records of phoenixes, legendary monsters, and the bird looked similar to those depictions.

“The hell is that thing?!” Erivan exclaimed, before commanding the monsters present to brace for combat. “Keep yer guards up, everyone!”

“Erivan, wait!” I said hurriedly. “I’ll try talking to it first!”

“C-Can we actually communicate with that thing?”

I chewed on my lip. “That’s what my intuition is telling me, yes.”

For the past few days, I had felt that the sunlight was more intense than before. It hadn’t brought unpleasant heat, however. It had felt more like the gentle warmth of a hearth. Now, that comfortable sunlight was stronger than it was ever before, likely due to the presence of that bird. That was why I couldn’t imagine it being hostile to us. Even when it flew past the Starkers golem, it didn’t stop to attack the golem. What was even more mystifying, though, was the fact that the Starkers golem hadn’t attacked the bird either.

The bird soon stretched out its wings gracefully before gliding down in front of me. Its red eyes, however, were fixed on something else. On Fierle, the fire dragon behind us. No—on *Melle*, who was riding on Fierle’s head.

I had a bad feeling about this. In the back of my mind, I had slowly been coming to the realization that Melle wasn’t any ordinary bird or monster. Though their egg had been buried in the rocks for a long time, they had still hatched safely. They had managed to hoist up Roydon with a strength that didn’t seem right for a tiny bird. Furthermore...the sunlight had started growing stronger right around the time Melle had hatched.

I addressed the bird. “Who are you?”

“I am Elysion of the fenix race. I have come to fetch the scion of our royal family.”

“Fenix”...? We’ve got another enigmatic visitor here... After our encounter with a leviathan and a dragon, we had gradually grown used to seeing obscure creatures showing up. *More importantly, who do they mean by “scion”? No, that’s a silly question. It must be Melle, who they’ve been staring at this whole time.*

“Do you mean Melle?” I gestured to the baby bird.

“Yes. This noble fledgling is the only offspring of our royal family. In truth, I had long thought that they were lost to time.” Elysion turned to the chick and lowered their head reverently. Melle tilted their head in question, and they seemed completely lost.

Okay. So, according to Elysion, Melle is fenix royalty. “In other words, you mean that Melle is this...‘fenix’, too?”

“Yes. They are the only child of our king—the sole child born from a union between him and a bird that lived in the world of the ground. We fenixes are only permitted to mate once in our entire lives.”

I...think that means they can only lay one egg? “I see,” I said. “You mentioned that you’re here to fetch Melle. Where are you going to take them?”

“I shall bring the child to a place where they can receive the proper education of a sovereign in preparation for the eventual day of our king’s passing. They shall then rule over the heavens for all eternity.”

“You wish to educate them, even though they are still just a newborn?”

“Physical age does not matter to our race. After all, we can change our appearance as we wish.” Light enveloped the bird, and their silhouette shifted.

When the light faded away, Furay exclaimed, “A-A human?!”

I doubted my own eyes. No longer was a bird standing in front of me, but a human girl with rainbow-colored hair spilling down her back.

Elysion knelt down before Melle. “Your Highness. I beg that you come with me.”

But Melle was cowering in fear, because in the girl's hand was a golden birdcage.

I could feel a frown taking over my expression. "Are you planning on locking Melle up in a place like that?" My tone was harsh.

How long had it been since I had last spoken out of anger? I couldn't dull the edge in my voice as I recalled the caged monster that I had failed to protect back in the palace.

In an unruffled tone, Elysion replied, "It is our duty to protect our royalty eternally, so that their blood would never be lost again."

I walked forward and placed myself between her and Melle. "Melle doesn't want to go with you. They're already our family. We won't let you take them away."

Riena, Furay, Erivan, and all the other monsters stepped forward to surround Elysion. Riale and Fierle marched in front of Melle and growled at Elysion in warning.

"...Family? Is that true, Your Highness?"

Melle offered no reply to Elysion's inquiry. We didn't even know whether Melle could understand our speech.

However, Elysion's eyes widened a fraction. "My word... We cannot go against the decisions of our royalty. Be that as it may..." She turned to me. "Lord Heale."

This girl knows my name? I hadn't introduced myself yet, so by all rights, I should be a stranger to her. Then again, she seemed to know what Melle was thinking even though there was no reply, so perhaps she could read minds.

She continued, "You require the permission of our king for one of our kind to descend from the heavens."

"How do we get that permission?"

"You must erect an altar in the sky. There, you will carry out the appropriate ceremony to request the descent of our king and ask for permission for the royal fledgling to live below the heavens. Our king will answer your summons

and appear before you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What if I say no?”

“Our king will likely take his child back to the sky with force,” she answered with a grave expression.

Chewing on my lip, I said, “All right. In that case, should I head up into the sky with you, then?”

“No. Under the mandate of our king, I have come to this land to bring back his child. My deepest apologies, but I cannot take any of you with me, and I must not aid you in the altar’s construction.”

“In other words, we need to get up there by ourselves,” I muttered. If that was the case, I could just ask Fierle and the wyverns to carry us up into the sky. They had already grown to the size of cows, and they were capable of flight now.

Elysion must have the ability to read minds, because she warned, “Even if you borrow their wings to fly, it is meaningless unless you build an altar.”

I looked up at the sky. Even if we had the ability to fly, it was impossible to construct a floating altar up there. “What are we even supposed to do, then? Where exactly does the sky begin, in your eyes?”

“Well... If I were to use something you have as a reference, please look at that tall tree.” She gestured at Yggdrasil. “I am certain that our king will answer if you pray at a height that is twice that of its canopy.”

“Twice as high as...” I frowned. “So, you want us to build an altar up there?” The floating golems I had fought flashed across my mind. If I knew the right spell, I could have used arcanestones to construct a floating altar in the sky. But I didn’t, so the only thing I could think of was to build a tower and erect an altar at the very top.

Seeming to have read my mind again, Elysion added, “Altars are structures of faith. Faith is zeal, and faith is passion. Our king will only answer with disinterest towards short-lived and insincere constructs.”

“So we need to build it with all our spirits, just like how humans build shrines,

huh? But as you can see, an island of our scale will have difficulty building such a tower." I asked for her wisdom in a roundabout way.

"...My deepest apologies, but it seems that I must take my leave." She looked apologetic. "But allow me to make one statement. Humans have achieved similar heights with the lone power of their own race...so it is not impossible." Light swelled around her and began to engulfed her. "There, the humans besought that we fenixes lend them our power. However, their prayers went unanswered, because the tower collapsed before they could meet a fenix. But you are not alone on this island—I am certain that you can manage it with your comrades' aid."

Then, she disappeared along with the light.

Furay rubbed at her eyes several times. "Um, was I dreaming?"

Riena was blinking in a stupor. "I must have had the same dream..."

I shook my head. "No, it wasn't a dream..."

At this rate, Melle would be snatched away from us. To me—no, to Riena, to Riale, to everyone on this island, Melle was an irreplaceable part of our family. If it was what Melle wished for, we would happily give them our blessings for their departure to anywhere in the world, whether it be the other side of the sky or the bottom of the ocean. However, what Melle wanted, at least for now, was to stay with us.

Riena nodded. "Melle is our precious family."

Furay nodded as well and added solemnly, "It's still too early to think about becoming a ruler or whatever. Kids are supposed to play games and live a carefree life."

Erivan slung an arm around her shoulder. "Exactly what my daughter said! Kids should monkey around until they're much bigger. Furay used to hang out with the guys and wrestle with them until only a few years ago!" He grinned.

"H-Hey!" Furay yelped indignantly. "Y-You didn't have to tell everyone!" She gave her father a piece of her mind by lightly punching him over and over.

While that was going on in the background, Baris turned to me. "A fenix this

time, I see... I have never heard of such creatures before, but then again, the visitors to this island always bring surprises with them."

"An altar and a ceremony..." I schooled my face into a serious expression. "Baris, I will need your help."

There was a deep frown on his face, but he nodded firmly. "Indeed, the art of prayer is my area of expertise. However, I admit, it is my first time even hearing of an altar dedicated to fenixes, never mind building one..." He closed his eyes briefly. "But I shall do everything within my power."

"I'm counting on you. Together, we *will* protect Melle." *I will never let anyone lock them away in a cramped birdcage like that.*

I clenched my jaw before turning to all the monsters present and making a declaration. "Please listen, everyone. From this moment onwards, we have a new goal that we must achieve at all costs. We will build a tower that will climb up into the sky itself."

Chapter 15: Building a Tower!

We started building our tower on the day of Elysion's visit. I had just finished the first step—constructing a large island. I couldn't use mortar in the ocean, so instead I had built the frame of the artificial island with stone blocks. I heeded Starkers's teachings and had made holes in the slabs before piling them until they were above sea level. Then, I'd stuck a giant iron pole through the middle to reinforce the frame.

On Baris's advice, I had also added a few touches to strengthen the structure's stability. I had redesigned the slabs with a slot in the bottom and a protrusion from the top, which would fit together like puzzle pieces when I stacked them on top of each other.

With all that complete, we now had an enormous open space in the ocean that was void of water. Now, I filled the area with soil and mortar to create the foundation for the tower. On top of this new island, we would begin the official tower construction—was what I would like to say, but we stopped here.

We were going to build a tower taller than even Yggdrasil. Since we were offshore from the main island, we should be safe even if it collapsed, but I couldn't guarantee that. It was better to be safe than sorry. Besides, considering the amount of resources and labor we'd be investing into the project, I wanted to avoid failure. Thus, I decided we should plan thoroughly before we got to work on the actual structure.

First, the shape of the tower itself was going to be a tall and narrow cone-like shape. It would consist of layers of numerous cylindrical stone blocks stacked on top of each other, and the higher the stone blocks, the smaller the layer's diameter would be, creating a slope that was similar to terraced fields. On the outer walls of the terrace, I would build stairs to allow us access to the top.

I actually based this design off Camus's blueprints—off the lighthouse she had asked me to build. Furthermore, Baris had said that in the legendary age depicted by the myths of monsters, such terraced temples had been constructed all over the world as races competed to build the tallest structure.

There must be good reasons such a design had been so popular back then. We had actually conducted a few experiments with scaled-down models, and we found that, indeed, this design was extremely stable.

However, models were, in the end, only models. And the taller we made the models, the more susceptible they were to tremors and jolts. We could reinforce them with the puzzle-like slots and the iron poles, as well as with mortar, but I still felt anxious about it, because I had kept Elysion's words in mind. She had said that during the ceremony, the tower had collapsed before the humans could meet a fenix.

In other words, something or someone was going to get in the way of our construction, or even try to destroy our tower. But I had no way of knowing whether the culprit would be living creatures or natural phenomena. I had to prepare for such incidents and make the tower as sturdy as possible.

"Heyaaaarh!"

There was a loud cry of exertion as Erivan swung his greataxes at one of the tower models, one that was approximately the size of a shack. Erivan's admirable strength did its work, and a crack spread across the tower before the entire thing collapsed.

Baris frowned as he looked at the model. "Hmm... Even if we take the general's absurd strength into account, the tower is a little too fragile."

"Yeah," I nodded. "If a beast like the leviathan shows up, it wouldn't even last a second." We had been up against titans before, and our definition of what counted as "our absolute best" was far beyond the standards of what a normal human would be satisfied with. "What should we do...? Ah, actually. When we built that ship, we covered the hull with orichalcum, didn't we?"

"Oh, protect it with a layer of metal, I see."

"Exactly. But the problem is, this time, we'd need enough metal to coat a tower taller than Yggdrasil..." I hesitated. "No, let's think about that later. We should test it out on a model before we go any further."

I asked Starkers to coat the tower model with metal, and he hammered down iron to cover the tower's entire surface.

Erivan looked pleased as he gazed at the iron tower. “Would ya look at that! This thing looks tough. Okay, time to test it!”

Once again, he raised his greataxes and swung them down with all his might. There was a shrill clang as metal screeched against metal, but the tower seemed to have endured without even a scratch.

Our elation didn’t last long. The next moment, the tower *tilted*. It slid out from its base as if it had been pulled out like a carrot, and promptly collapsed once again.

Baris folded his arms and hummed in thought. “The tower itself seems to be intact and unharmed, but it was knocked over.”

I frowned. “It’s still flawed... Starkers, do you have any good ideas?”

Hearing that, Starkers took out an iron rod bent into a spiral shape from his straw skirt and raised it for us all to see.

I leaned forward, intrigued. “What’s that?”

With a proud look on his face, Starkers pulled on both ends of the spiral rod and flattened it into a straight line. The moment he let go of it, however, the iron rod returned to its original spiral shape immediately.

Erivan’s eyes lit up. “Whoa, amazing! What’s that you’ve got there, Starkers?!”

Riale, Melle, and Fierle were all wide-eyed with curiosity as well.

Furay only raised an eyebrow. “I know it’s pretty cool, but how is that gonna help us in any way?”

Starkers wagged his finger as if to say, “Tut-tut.” He then headed to the forge, grabbed his hammer, and began beating down a clump of metal with loud clangs. When he was done, the metal had been transformed into a long pole with a spiral-shaped metal rod on the end, like the one he had shown us earlier. He promptly stabbed it into the ground, spiral end down, before turning to Erivan.

“Whaddya want? Ya want me to hack at this thing? Uh, it’s already kinda swaying, is it really gonna last?” Erivan stared at Starkers skeptically.

Starkers replied with a confident nod.

“Okay, I’ll do it if that’s what ya say.” Erivan raised his axes high in the air. “Huuurgh!” His eyes widened. “Whoa!”

The metal tower fell over upon impact. However, with what sounded like an elastic “boing,” the tower swayed in the opposite direction. But it wasn’t done, because it then swayed back to the initial direction it had fallen. As the process repeated, the tower slowly swayed back to its original standing position, almost like a pendulum.

“Wooow! How did ya manage this?!” Erivan exclaimed. “It swung back and forth, then became straight again!”

Baris clapped his hand, admiration clear on his features. “I see! It returns to its resting position like the string of a bow! If we build such a structure below the tower, even if it falls over, it will still come back up.”

Starkers nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

I grinned. “All right! We have a plan, so let’s start building this thing!”

Thus began the construction of our main tower.

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I sent enormous blocks of stone flying out of my hand and arranged them into a circle before pouring mortar out on top of them. “Everyone, your turn!”

On my command, the crowd of monsters used large spatula-like tools to spread out the mortar. When that was done, I piled up more stones on top, and the monster would attend to the next layer of mortar...and the cycle went on. Then, we would fix iron plates to the outer walls and build the stairs that allowed us to travel up and down.

Though it wasn’t visible now, below our feet was a scaled-up version of the spiralling iron rod Starkers had devised. Calling it a rod probably wasn’t accurate—in diameter, it was several times as thick as a human shoulder, and apparently it wasn’t just made from iron, but an alloy made from iron, orichalcum, and various other metals. *With this, even if an earthquake shakes the tower, it should stand back up again. I’ll be honest, I still have doubts about*

that, but...it's better than doing nothing, right?

The cave spiders were also contributing by wrapping the outer walls in a cocoon of spider silk, hoping that it would further reinforce the structure. We were all abiding by the policy of "leave no stone unturned."

Furay was standing watch next to me, and she said, "By the way, couldn't we have made Yggdrasil taller instead? Why build a tower from scratch?"

"I considered that too. But doing that might cause the roots to swallow up our farm and knoll, and we've invested so much effort into them."

"Ah, good point... Well, good thing that we were planning on making a lighthouse to begin with. We had a lot of stuff already prepared."

"Yeah. We would've been completely lost otherwise. I mean, how are we supposed to construct a tower of this size totally from scratch?"

Indeed, our many preparations had come in handy. After all, we had been planning to build the grandest lighthouse in the world even before Elysion's visit. At first, the demand that the tower had to be twice the height of Yggdrasil had made me wary and anxious. Back in Sanphales—or even the entirety of Barleon—no man-made structure had managed to reach such heights. However, there were plenty of mountains around that height, and many that were even taller. With that in mind, the task didn't seem all that daunting anymore.

It also helped that our construction was proceeding smoothly. While we piled up stone slabs, Starkers was smelting iron pillars—the supporting stakes that would be driven through the holes of the slabs. He made numerous pillars and was instructing the slimes to carry them.

Erivan was helping out with the transport of iron pillars, and he called out to me. "This is a piece of cake for us, Chief! We're heroes that even beat a legendary leviathan!"

I nodded firmly. "We're all in this together, and nothing can stop us."

That wasn't an exaggeration. The combined forces of my <Cave King>—which would summon items into places I wanted—and all the people on the island could easily overcome any obstacle. We had tackled many astounding projects

until now, like our reclaimed lands or the knoll. And so far, like always, we were finding success—the tower was climbing higher and higher.

Each stone slab, the building blocks, was huge. In width, it was greater than the height of the one-story houses which the citizens of Sanphales typically lived in. Every additional layer of stone gave an incredible boost to the tower's height.

There was no stagnation or delay in our work. During our lunch break, as we helped ourselves to food, we were even relaxed enough to chat animatedly about the height we had already climbed to. The tower was holding steady and didn't sway one bit. I was optimistic that after three or four days, we would literally be higher than the clouds.

But what we faced three days later, instead of success, was hardship.

"A-Achoo!" I sneezed. It was freezing cold. For a moment, I nearly messed up the placement of the rock slab.

"A-Are you all right, Lord Heale?" Furay asked, concerned, but her legs were shivering uncontrollably.

The slimes' movements were stiff—perhaps their bodies had hardened due to the cold.

We had just climbed to a height slightly taller than the tip of Yggdrasil, and the air had suddenly grown frosty. Seeing that, Riena used her magic to keep us warm.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Riena."

"It's nothing." She frowned slightly. "It's hard to believe that it's so cold up here... When we were on the ground, it was a warm day."

"I don't know how it works, but I remember seeing snow on the summit of tall mountains even after the arrival of spring," I said. "Maybe the sky is a cold place in general."

Even Furay, who had at first declared that the chill was nothing but a small breeze, was now shivering like a leaf. And, of course, the half-naked Starkers was curling into himself and shaking.

Riena chewed on her lip worriedly. “Everyone is at their limit... I have asked monsters to transport coats made with murder bird pelt from the surface. I have also arranged for them to carry hot soup up as well, so let’s warm our bodies up first. Don’t worry, I shall heat the soup up right away.” She held my hands and squeezed them gently. Her hands were warm, almost like the first breath of spring on snow.

“Th-Thanks,” I stammered, feeling my heart pound in my chest.

Riena and all the monsters were here with me, and for them, I could endure even the most bitter frosts. My body, however, couldn’t keep up with my spirit. The situation was more severe than I had predicted.

Even worse, due to our distance from the ground, trying to transport anything from the surface was a huge chore. A trip up and down the stairs would take several hours. At first, we had transported baggage with spider silk, but unfortunately, we had gotten to a height where even that process would take too long, so now, Fierle and the wyverns delivered most items back and forth.

Only a little while ago, the hatchling dragons had been the size of hounds, but now, they had already grown to rival cows. They were even capable of steady flight and fishing whenever they needed to. According to Riena, they could, in fact, hunt murder birds. Naturally, their movements would be slowed down with the weight of baggage, and there was the risk that some sort of avian predator might try to attack them. Thus, Baris and Erivan kept an eye on them at all times from back on the surface.

On the other hand, Riena was my guardian on the summit of the tower. When I was summoning rocks, I was completely vulnerable. Furay and Taran also took turns, and they stood watch while I worked.

There were fewer monsters with us compared to the beginning. As the tower climbed higher, its diameter also shrunk, so we didn’t need as many helpers to spread the mortar. There were only around fifteen monsters on the job now. *I want to return the remaining monsters to the ground as soon as I can. It’s freezing up here.*

The rustling of wings caught my attention. It was Fierle and the wyverns.

Furay’s eyes lit up. “I’ve been waiting for you guys!” She and the other

monsters rushed forward to accept the coats and put them on immediately.

Riena took the cylindrical soup container into her hand and heated it with a fire spell.

“Ahhh, it’s so warm...” I sighed as I huddled inside a murder bird coat as well, feeling warm relief in my heart.

The next moment, I spotted Melle, who had a guilty look on their face as they hopped down from Fierle along with Riale. The little bird was despondent as they bowed to everyone present.

I crouched down. “Do you...feel responsible, Melle?” They must think that it was their fault we were toiling away every day.

Riena had just finished serving the soup to everyone, and she gathered Melle into her arms. “I told the little ones to stay on land since it’s cold up here, but it looks like they had different ideas.”

I leaned down and smiled at the bird. “Melle, you don’t have to torment yourself over it. You don’t want to return to the sky, so we don’t want to let you go, and we *won’t* let you go. We were planning to make a lighthouse in the first place, so it was actually a good opportunity for us.”

Melle bobbed their head. But then, when they spotted their companion Riale shivering, they flapped their wings anxiously.

“Join us, Riale.” Riena crouched down to nestle Riale into her arms as well.

Before she could reach them, however, Melle suddenly began glowing brilliantly. I felt a gentle warmth spread through my body.

I blinked in surprise. “What happened, Melle? It’s suddenly...”

“It’s really warm now.” Furay tilted her head quizzically before sighing in satisfaction. “Feels like I’m basking in the sun...”

There was joy on Melle’s face when they saw our reactions.

“Did you do that, Melle?” I asked.

Melle nodded in reply. *Amazing... They’re still only a baby, but they can already wield so much power.* Elysion had said that Melle was the scion of fenix

royalty, but if I had to be honest, that truth hadn't really sunk in. But Elysion must have told the truth, because the warmth I felt right now was identical to the warmth Elysion had brought along with her. It wasn't just simple heat—I also felt fatigue lifting from my body.

Riena patted Melle's head gently. "I never knew you could use such powers too, Melle. You're a great help. I prayed for sun as well, but there was a limit to how much I can warm the area up."

Though Riena could control the weather with her crest, it seemed that such drastic effects were beyond her ability. I didn't really know what exactly being a fenix entailed, but thinking of how Melle had lifted Roydon a while ago, they must have astonishing potential hidden inside them.

I joined in and patted Melle's head too. "Thank you. All right, I can feel my strength coming back!"

Wasting no time, I immediately resumed construction. Melle stayed behind with us and continued to provide warmth, so we were able to work without the hindrance of the cold.

The next day, we resumed our tower construction. Unfortunately, we had some unwelcome visitors—murder birds attacked us almost the moment we began. But murder birds weren't much of a problem, because we had hunted them down countless times by now. Fierle and the wyverns eliminated them quickly. Just to be safe, Riena cast a *Shield* spell to protect everyone.

Despite these incidents, we steadily climbed higher and higher into the sky. Finally, the clouds seemed like they were within reach.

My eyes lit up. "All right! Just a little more." At the rate we were going, we could probably reach the target height with one more stone layer. On a whim, I peered down. We were so high up that the residents looked like dots on the ground, and I couldn't stop my legs from growing weak.

I shook my head to snap out of it. *Oops, nope, bad idea. I should avoid looking down as much as possible.* Regaining my composure, I piled on the last stone layer. "And...that's the last one."

As the final slab fell into place, Furay cheered, “Yahoo! We’re finally done!” The other monsters joined in the celebration, clasping each other’s hands in elation.

Technically, we weren’t quite finished yet. We still had to cover this layer’s outer walls with iron plates. But that was the job of Starkers and the other blacksmiths. I should leave it in their capable hands and attend to other matters.

“I need to call Baris here right away,” I muttered to myself.

Baris was in charge of the ceremony. We promptly asked Baris to come up from the ground.

The shaman soon arrived on the back of a wyvern, and the moment his feet met the floor, he said, “Lord Heale, please listen carefully to what I have to say.” His face was schooled into a grave expression that I had never seen before, and on instinct, I straightened my back and listened attentively. “Firstly, I have never held ceremonies to summon a fenix, nor do I possess any knowledge on the matter. Before Elysion’s visit, I had never even heard of the race known as ‘fenix.’”

“You’re not the only one, Baris. It’s the same for me and everyone on the island.”

Baris nodded. “Indeed. However, we know one fact—these fenixes are categorized as monsters as well. Since they are monsters, ceremonies for summoning noble monsters should work. If that’s the case, I should be capable of performing one.”

He paused before he added, “Naturally, please be aware that this ceremony does not summon a specific monster.”

“You mean, the fenix king might not show up?”

He nodded. “Another monster might answer our summons.”

I furrowed my eyebrows. “That means we might end up summoning something dangerous.” *Yikes. If something as powerful as the leviathan shows up, I don’t know whether we can handle it. I have a feeling that this might have something to do with the collapse of the tower Elysion mentioned.*

“Well, the chances of that are rather low.” Baris smiled wryly. “It is, in the end, a ceremony. What I fear most is that no monster will answer our call at all.”

Baris was a shaman, but in general, he adopted a skeptical stance towards myths and legends. He probably considered the ceremony he had in mind to be just a cultural performance, more than anything.

“Either way, it doesn’t hurt to try,” I said. “Just in case, let’s tell all the residents to be on high alert.”

Everyone attended to their tasks right away. Baris was first, arranging for wyverns to transport food that would serve as offerings, like fruits and fish. A handful of wyverns also carried a giant mirror onto the summit and placed it in the middle. Starkers must have made it—the mirror stand was gilded elegantly with gold, and the mirror that sat on top was so long that three humans could have laid flat on it in a line.

As I came closer, I noticed that the “glass” was made from leviathan scales. I stared at it, intrigued.

“This is a mirror necessary for the ceremony,” Baris said. “We will communicate our location to the monster with light.”

“Huuuh. That’s an interesting tool.”

It would be boorish of me to say that manifesting light with magic would be faster. Normal goblins weren’t equipped with arcane talent, so using a tool like a mirror to reflect light made a lot of sense.

Baris glanced at the offerings placed in front of the mirror and nodded to himself. “The preparations are complete.”

“Sheol is also on high alert,” I said. “We’ll stand watch on the tower, so you’re safe. You can begin at any time.”

“Understood. Now then...” Baris walked in front of the mirror and sat cross-legged. In a dignified voice, he began chanting words that were incomprehensible to a human like me.

I was on guard, honing my senses and checking for any mana signatures as

the ceremony went on. Making full use of my eyes and ears as well, I observed the area with vigilance.

The sky was surprisingly silent. *But if Elysion is right, something will definitely get in our way. I can't let my guard down.*

That was when Furay raised her voice behind me. "Ah! Over there!"

I whipped my head around to look in the direction she was indicating. A bird, and it wasn't a fenix. It had a magnificent crown like a rooster and was rapidly closing the distance between us.

I squinted. "A murder bird? No, that can't be."

For a moment, I thought it was some kind of alpha murder bird, but it was too large. It had black fur and a snake-like tail. If my memories were accurate, it had to be a monster called "cockatrice."

Cockatrices were dreadful monsters feared by everyone in Sanphales. From their eyes, they emitted petrifying light. From their mouths, they spat mucus that could melt through even the hardest of rocks. They were even equipped with spells that could forcefully put people to sleep.

That wasn't the only bad news—the cockatrice heading in our direction was at least ten times bigger than an elephant. It was huge, even for a cockatrice. Though these monsters were terrors, they were scarce. In Sanphales, there was normally only one attack on a village every few years or so. People spread the saying back in Sanphales that these ruined villages had been cursed by monsters. In conclusion, it was a rather rare monster. Perhaps it had been summoned here by the ceremony.

The moment they spotted the cockatrice, Fierle and the wyverns flew at it without delay. They must have thought it was manageable prey like murder birds.

"Wait! That thing's dangerous!" I yelled, but it was too late. "Ugh!"

I immediately cast *Shield* on our dragons. The cockatrice seemed to conclude that magic wouldn't work against the group, and it flapped its wings violently, blowing the dragons away with the resulting wind. It then turned to us, and its eyes flashed.

I manifested the *Shield* spell around us as well, but since I was managing two spells at once, my new one wasn't as durable. I had nothing to fear, though, because Riena and Furay were here, overlapping my spell with theirs. The light beam soared towards us.

Suddenly, a brilliant pillar of light flew out from our side—*Melle* had manifested it. It easily engulfed the cockatrice's light beam and shrouded the body of the monster. It shrieked and frantically smashed its enormous form into the tower.

"Ahhh!" I cried.

The tower swayed and began to keel over. Everyone scrambled to grip onto the gaps between the stone slabs and tried to hold on, but there was a limit to how much force we could endure.

That was when Taran came to the rescue, whipping out her spider silk to catch everyone. In the middle of the tower summit, like glue, the slimes wedged themselves between the floor and Baris, as well as the tools, keeping everything in place.

Soon, the tower stopped slanting. It then swayed in the opposite direction like a pendulum, and after swaying back and forth a few times, it finally returned upright.

"Ph-Phew, we're alive!" Relief washed over Furay's face.

We had to thank the iron spiral embedded in the ground. Starkers faced his butt towards the cockatrice and smacked it smugly, as if to say, "How about that!"

The cockatrice saw red and roared furiously before charging at us once again.

"Furay, keep up the *Shield*!" I commanded. "Riena, we'll take that thing down!"

"Yes, my lord!" Riena exclaimed.

The two of us channeled our mana to create colossal balls of flames and hurled them at the monster. The blazing inferno swallowed up the screeching cockatrice, and there was a deafening bang. The monster had been blasted into

smithereens.

“We did it!” Furay cheered along with the other monsters.

“Yeah...” I smiled. “Great job, everyone. You’ve also improved by leaps and bounds, Furay.”

“Heh heh!” She grinned proudly. “I mean, what else would you expect from someone who can increase her mana infinitely after her evolution? Watch out, because I’ll surpass you one day!”

“I’ll gladly take you up on that challenge,” I declared. “Melle, you were fantastic too. Thank you.” I gently patted Melle, who had caused the cockatrice to lose its composure with their light. I had sensed mana inside their light, so it might have been a spell of some kind.

Glancing around, I spotted Baris, who was continuing the ceremony as if nothing had happened. “That monster from earlier must have been one of the forces that tries to knock such towers down...” I muttered to myself. “Hey, wait a moment.”

Our joy was short-lived. Our tower was swaying slightly once again.

“Wh-What?!” Furay exclaimed. “Did something else show up?!” She scanned her surroundings.

I did the same, but there wasn’t anything of note in the sky. I gazed down at the sea.

Water didn’t fill my vision. Instead, I was looking down at a sea of writhing tentacles right below the tower.

Furay’s eyes widened. “A squid this time?!”

Indeed, the tentacles coiling around the tower were identical to a squid’s. However, it definitely wasn’t a squid. Such a behemoth squid could only exist when hell froze over.

“I-Is that perhaps a...kraken?” Riena said in a hushed voice.

Krakens were monsters that looked like enormous squids. When we had first heard of the leviathan, Baris had theorized that the witnesses must have mistaken a kraken for a mythical beast. Though we had seen a real leviathan in

the flesh, back in Barleon, it was a beast that only existed in fiction. Without such an otherworldly monster as competition, krakens were said to be the strongest marine monsters that existed. An alarming number of Sanphales's large ships had been taken down by these creatures. Perhaps Baris's ceremony had summoned this thing as well.

I frowned. "That doesn't look good! Let's tear that thing away, guys!"

Everyone nodded in reply. Riena and Furay aimed fire spells and lightning spells at it. Fierle joined in and spewed out fire from their mouth.

However, none of our attacks seemed to even faze the creature. I decided to try another element, ice, but the tentacles wouldn't freeze. Back in Sheol, the Starkers golem on the ocean immediately spouted out fire to drive the kraken away from the tower. But it was counterattacked as the tentacles reached out and coiled around it, and it seemed to, uh, make an indecent expression as it wriggled its body.

Faced with the sight, Starkers covered his face with his hands, utterly ashamed. *Well, we can revive the golem as long as its heartstone is safe, so that isn't too big a deal. The more pressing thing is to come up with a strategy to defeat that monster...*

The kraken's body and tentacles were coated with a layer of slimy mucus. In the military records of the Sanphales navy, fire, lightning, and ice didn't work on these monsters due to this mucus. How would one escape the clutches of such a monster, then?

The navy hadn't had much of a choice. They had been forced to send out a ship as a decoy and escape while the creature was distracted. However, one captain had left a report that their ballistae seemed to be relatively effective in comparison.

Having located the necessary information in my mind, I yelled, "The two of you, cut it with blades of wind!"

"Okay!" they shouted.

Together, we unleashed a flurry of wind spells on the kraken. I had hoped that the wind would be enough to send it flying, but its reputation had been well-

earned, because it stayed in place with its incredible strength. Even if we sliced off its tentacles, they stuck to the tower stubbornly and writhed around in a frenzy. More and more tentacles extended out of the ocean. No matter how many we cut down, more would take their place, as if there was no end to them.

Magic wasn't working, so I tried physical impact. I summoned rocks from my inventory and let them slam down on the tentacles, but it wasn't effective either. Melle used their light to drive them away, but the main part of the kraken was beneath the water, so the tentacles didn't falter one bit. Fierle and the wyverns didn't even have the time to attack—evading the tentacles took everything out of them.

The tower was swaying increasingly violently. Eventually, the tentacles would make it all the way to the summit, where we were.

I clenched my jaw. "I don't know how long we can last against this thing..."

There was still no sign of any fenixes, and I didn't think they were willing to give us a hand either. The only choice we had was to accomplish our goal as soon as we could before running for our lives.

Luckily, the kraken didn't show even a sliver of interest towards the main island. I had instructed Erivan to stay there no matter what happened, and I had faith that he wouldn't draw the monster's attention by attacking recklessly.

"The only thing we can do is to buy time until the ceremony's complete..." I muttered, bracing myself for a harsh battle. But then, something caught my eye. "That's..."

A magnificent ship was sailing towards us from the horizon at an astonishing speed.

I recognized it. "That's...Camus's ship!!!"

It was the ship Camus and her crew had left on. *Ugh, what horrible timing! If they approach, the kraken will attack them. I can proudly declare that our warship is one of the most durable structures in the entire world, but even it will be helpless if the kraken drags it to the ocean floor.*

"Fierle!" I shouted. "Can you go tell the crew to stay away from this place?!"

At my command, Fierle stopped breathing out fire and nodded before shooting across the sky at a ferocious speed.

“Everyone, we can do this! We can pull through!” I yelled.

All the monsters present worked together to attack the kraken. The kraken was relentless, but we fought back defiantly. We exchanged intense volleys of attacks back and forth.

The heated battle went on, but for some reason, Camus’s ship didn’t stop and retreat. I frowned. “Camus? Why is the ship still going?”

Did Fierle have trouble communicating my message? *No, that’s not possible. Camus and her crew should have a good view of the tower from this distance. They must have noticed the swarm of tentacles that have already climbed halfway. Camus is an experienced captain, and she must have realized that it belongs to a kraken.*

So why is she still leading the ship here?

Wait... Is she trying to help us?

We still didn’t know the full scope of the kraken’s might. It was too dangerous for them to get any closer. I sucked a deep breath, preparing to shout at them to stay away.

But what happened next stole my breath away. The ocean surface near the tower stirred.

Furay’s eyes widened. “It’s a whirlpool!!!”

Perhaps the kraken was finally going to show itself. I braced myself for it to emerge. But the whirlpool only grew bigger and bigger, until it transformed into a waterspout that reached the heavens. Water and howling gales blended together into a storm that spread throughout the nearby waters. Inside the waterspout, a colossal squid was thrown into the air, helpless as it spun around with the wind.

“The kraken’s caught up inside it!” Furay gasped. “It’s the ship! They must’ve done it!”

So this is the full power of Camus’s crest, <Sea Serpent>... I was left in awe.

The towering waterspout was even grander than the one she had summoned to fling away my leviathan mimic.

At first, the kraken thrashed its tentacles wildly, but as the wind became fiercer and more violent, it eventually went limp. When the storm cleared, the kraken crashed into the ocean. It swam away as fast as it could, and soon disappeared from sight.

“Yahoo!” Furay cheered, exchanging high-fives with Starkers and Taran. As for Riale and Melle, they were hopping up and down with Ciel. Meanwhile, a ball of fire was launched into the sky from Camus’s ship, perhaps in a gesture of celebration as well.

Riena was waving to Camus’s ship from beside me as she said, “We won, Lord Heale! I never thought Miss Camus and her crew would show up to save the day.”

“Same here.” I smiled. “I bet nothing can scare them anymore.”

When the crew had first arrived in Sheol, they would have never even attempted to defy a kraken. Camus and her crew had finally conquered the burdens of their past. I waved to the ship as well.

Suddenly, a blinding light drew a line across the heavens, and it headed right for our tower. I could sense the tremendous amount of mana oozing off it, and the light glided down in front of us.

A stunning fenix emerged from within. Its rainbow colored feathers and radiant golden tail were ethereal—*divine*. Behind this fenix was Elysion in her human form, with wings extending out from her back.

“Your Majesty,” Elysion said in a low voice, “they are the ones from my report.”

“We are Alvis.” The fenix shifted his gaze onto Melle. “Greetings, our child.”

Melle seemed frightened as they tucked themselves behind my legs. Seeing that, Alvis maintained his stern expression as he gazed at me. “Are you the one known as ‘Heale’?”

“Yes, I am.”

He hummed in thought. “Heale, your people are the first to have ever summoned us successfully.”

“Well, it’s for Melle’s sake.” I gathered Melle into my arms. “Everyone put in all our efforts.”

“To think that you would go to such lengths for our child... We have watched from beginning to conclusion, and we have to recognize your feelings for our child as genuine.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That means you were sitting by and watching during the battle just now.” *He could have helped us a bit,* I grumbled in my mind. *His own child was with us.*

I didn’t know whether he had heard that thought, but he replied, “Forgive us. We wanted to test your people. After all, you claimed that you wish to live with our child, did you not? If you succeed, we will entrust our child in your care. We are concerned about the character of such people, and we are certain that the sentiment is mutual.”

“Well, I guess you have a point there.” I paused. “Does that mean you’ll give permission for Melle to live with us?”

“Our child is already inseparable from your people. Our only choice is to give our blessing.”

Hearing that, Furay and the other monsters cheered.

The next moment, Alvis’s sharp gaze bore into me. “However, our kind’s life span differ from yours. The day of parting will arrive eventually.”

“I am well aware,” I replied. “When Melle finds something they want to do or dedicate their lives to, we will happily support them in every way...even if their wish is to leave our island.”

“Is that so...” Alvis paused. “My child, Melle.” He used the name we had given to his child.

Still a little timid, Melle poked out their head.

“Your desire is to live with these people.” He inclined his head. “In that case, as your parent, we will permit it.”

Melle nodded.

“It was our fault to begin with,” he sighed. Then, he seemed to mutter to himself. “We failed to keep an eye on you as your parent, and that is what led to this situation. But oh, who could have predicted that such a calamity would befall this world?”

We had discovered Melle’s egg buried deep underground. Some kind of incident must have led to that. Sheol’s underground area was still filled with secrets—I hadn’t just found a Yggdrasil seed, there was even an artificial structure like the winery.

Alvis’s words pulled me out of my thoughts. “Melle was a child we had with a bird on the surface. A rock of unimaginable magnitude fell to the ground from high above our heavens, and as a result...our wife perished.”

Perhaps Melle’s mother had stayed behind stubbornly in her nest to protect her egg. Around the area where Melle had been buried, I had also found the remains of other birds and smashed eggs.

The fenix hung his head in defeat. “It was all because we were a fool who failed to protect our family...”

“Alvis...” I chewed on my lip.

I could feel his earnest, almost desperate desire to live with his child. Melle was, after all, a child he had assumed to be lost forever. However, Melle had met us first, and out of consideration for their feelings, Alvis didn’t want to separate us.

Alvis continued, “You are a kind soul... But do not worry. Knowing that our child is safe and healthy is already wonderful news for us. Allow us to express our gratitude.” He bowed to me. “We would like to offer something as a token of our appreciation, but...we are afraid we are not knowledgeable about the preferences of humans.”

“You really don’t have to.” I shook my head. “That aside, can we talk about the fallen rock you mentioned earlier? What happened?”

“To our knowledge, this area was once land. But due to the great rock, it was transformed into an ocean.”

“A meteorite, right?”

“Indeed. It seems that your people are aware of the rocks that fall from the sky as well. However, the rock back then was nothing like we have ever seen before—it brought about several years of rain and darkness upon the lands of this world. The destruction was so extreme that we assumed all living beings on the surface had perished.”

“I see... Were there creatures living around here back then?”

“When there was still land, humans like you and monsters lived here.”

I was intrigued. “Really?”

“Yes. However, we are unaware of the details. As a rule, we fenixes are prohibited from communicating with those whose feet are planted on the ground. Though we have seen their appearances and their settlements, we have never conversed nor interacted with them.”

“Ah...” *That’s a shame, but it’s still valuable information. In that case, there might still be many buried ruins waiting for us to discover.*

Alvis hummed in thought. “We do not know much about the underground, but it will likely be a good experience for Melle. And...on the topic of our child, we have a request.”

I blinked. “What is it?”

He hesitated. “We ask that you grant us permission to stay in this tower. It does not have to be long, we shall only visit from time to time. We cannot stifle our concern for our child.”

“Ah, that’s it?” I smiled. “Of course you can. Actually, feel free to come down onto our main island whenever you want.”

“We are grateful for your offer, but like we have said earlier, talking with your people is behavior frowned upon as a fenix. Our duty is to guard the light of the heavens.”

“Okay. Well, in any case, we welcome you and your kind whenever you want, wherever you want, whether it be the top of the tower or anywhere else. Please come to visit Melle often.”

Alvis looked taken aback. “You...are willing to allow us to meet our child?”

He can read minds, so why is he surprised? Or...is it because that thought came naturally to me?

He nodded. “It must be your sincere feelings. We can rest assured that our child is in good hands.”

I shook my head. “You think too highly of me. For Melle’s sake, it’s better to be on good terms with your people. That’s it. You’re Melle’s kin, after all. Once they grow up, Melle might want to be around those of their own race more. I would be eternally grateful if you welcome them warmly if that day ever arrives.”

“...You have our deepest gratitude. We desire to talk more, but we are afraid that due to the rules of our race, we can only speak to those of the land for a limited time. We must take our leave.” Alvis stared long and hard at Melle, as if to burn the image of his child into his eyes. He then turned to me. “Heale. Please take care of our child.”

“Leave it to me. I— no, all of us here will protect Melle with everything we have.”

Alvis gave me a firm nod, and then he unfurled his wings and departed for the heavens. Elysion bowed deeply towards me before she followed after her king. They drew faint, glowing trails of rainbows as they flew. *Will Melle fly away one day, just like them?* I wondered. I didn’t know when that day would arrive, but until then, we would watch over Melle as they walked the path they chose in life.

All of us saw the fenixes off until they faded away from view. Then, we descended from the tallest tower in the whole world.

Chapter 16: A Grand Celebration!

When I returned to the main island, I was greeted with a great commotion at the harbor. Camus's ship had reached shore, and numerous goblins and orcs walked down onto the pier—there were clearly more passengers than when the ship had departed. Seeing that, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders.

Some monsters were busy unloading the cargo, while other monsters were hugging each other in elation at their long-awaited reunion. I scanned my surroundings and saw many goblins and orcs with unfamiliar faces—they must be the members of the Verdan tribe and Corvus tribe who had been left behind in Barleon. Everyone let out loud shouts of amazement when they looked up at Yggdrasil and our tall tower. Beginning today, this island would be their new home. But there was no anxiety on their faces—all their eyes were bright with anticipation.

And, naturally, Camus was there among the passengers who alighted. Erivan came up to her and raised his hand in greeting. "Yo! Ya came back pretty quick!"

She puffed out her chest in pride. "It's all thanks to my evolution. I can summon wind whenever I want, wherever I want, after all! I think I actually took too long."

Erivan grinned. "I gotta say, ya surprised me. That thing was huge, but ya charged right at it!"

"Well, I have you and all the residents on Sheol to thank for that." Her tone was brimming with confidence. "To us, the sea is no longer something to fear, but something to conquer."

"Ha. Ya sure talk big. But I suppose it'll be fun to spar with ya now. When we exchanged blows last time, I'll be blunt, but ya were a let-down at best."

With a scowl, Camus replied, "Don't talk such nonsense. I didn't lose to you, I lost to our little Starkers's weapon. I shall gladly accept any challenge head-on."

"'Challenge,' ya say?" Erivan cocked an eyebrow. "Watch me, I'll wipe that

proud expression off yer face and make ya cry for yer mama in seconds." He lightly bumped his fist against Camus's sternum.

Doubt no longer clouded the expressions of the orcs. They must have found their determination to live with the ocean once again. From what I saw, Erivan's opinion of her had changed now that he'd seen Camus's new aura of self-assurance. They were both passionate and somewhat hot-blooded monsters, and they would probably still be at odds with each other from time to time, but I was sure that they still would cherish each other as comrades in the same community.

"Welcome home, Camus," I said. "You came back in the blink of an eye."

"The credit's all yours." She grinned, and I could see the spark of triumph in her eyes.

"Not only that, but you really saved us just now. If you guys hadn't dealt with that monster, we probably wouldn't be celebrating here at this moment." I sighed.

"Aw, a kraken's nothing. It's like a little adorable puppy to us now." She frowned slightly. "But never mind that monster, what in the world is that tower?" She stared up at the tower, and the higher her gaze climbed, the wider her eyes grew.

I smiled wryly. "A lot of things happened during your absence. We meant it to be a lighthouse. Kind of."

"Who in the world gave you the idea that it should be so...*massive*?" Camus gestured at it with exasperation. "I mean, I've got no complaints, since that thing told me exactly where to go."

At that moment, Baris came over. He had been talking to the goblins who had come home. "Please excuse me, Lord Heale. I have just looked over all the goblins we have brought back from the village, and it seems that my theory was correct—the ships that went astray returned there. We have approximately seven hundred new residents."

My eyes widened. "Wow, that many?!"

Camus added, "We also have around five hundred orcs who returned with

us.”

Taken aback, I stammered, “Wh-Whoa. It’s going to get really lively around here, huh?”

I was delighted at our new additions. However, we were a little under-prepared. Even if we had enough food to go around, we definitely didn’t have enough bedrooms. I needed to head into the caves as soon as I could and dig as if my life depended on it.

“We also bought all kinds of supplies!” Camus said cheerfully. “Look over there.” She gazed at the cargo that was slowly being unloaded from the ship. “For livestock, we’ve got sheep, dairy cows, and chickens. We only managed to procure a handful of each type, but we have both males and females of all of them, so we can breed them with no issue. Ah, we also grabbed plenty of seeds and books.”

Hearing that, Erivan gave Camus several meaningful looks.

She grinned. “Oh, no worries. Naturally, we come bearing booze. After all, we’re going to hold a great celebration. We didn’t just bring booze, but a bunch of other things too.”

Celebration... Ah, right. We need to throw a party celebrating everyone’s return. Riena had headed to the kitchen immediately after she had reached the main island. She must be busy practicing her artistic culinary skills at the moment. Our population had soared by five or six times in the span of seconds, and making enough to fill everyone’s stomachs was already going to be a challenge, much less holding a banquet.

I breathed in, bracing myself. “I can’t just dally here,” I muttered to myself before declaring, “I’ll head off to build new rooms!”

Very soon, I was digging away underground to literally make room for our new residents.

We honestly had neither the time nor the resources to hold a celebration on the day of everyone’s arrival. For the rest of the day, I frantically swung my pick to procure resting areas for everyone. But unfortunately, I didn’t win the race

against time—while we were still making preparations, our new comrades would take up temporary residence in the colossal chamber where we had discovered the floating golems.

On the other hand, Riena was just as swamped with work, grilling as many fish as she could. She didn't have any time to prepare for a banquet either. Many of the monsters had to lend a hand unloading cargo from the ship, too, which turned out to be a great challenge. In the end, the tumult of our ship's homecoming only managed to settle down the next morning. Due to all these reasons, we ended up postponing our banquet for a later date.

After I had formed taming contracts with all our newcomers on that day, I collapsed into bed and blacked out. Of course, I spent the next day digging away—we wanted to allocate one room to each family, and I had a lot of work to do. At least there was already the bare minimum space for everyone to spend the night in, so I didn't have to rush as much as the day before.

When I returned to the surface for lunch, I saw that everyone was still bustling about. Some monsters stood out—they were showing our newcomers the ropes. Baris was also announcing something in front of a crowd, and I was completely under the impression that he was giving out instructions.

The next moment, however, the monsters began singing at once. The song was riveting, and it had a mood to it that was both somewhat holy and cheery.

When they were finished, I walked up to Baris. "Hey, Baris. That was a lovely song."

"Ah, Lord Heale...!" There was a hint of surprise in his expression.

I blinked. "Is there something on my face?"

"No. I just had the thought that you have grown slightly tanned," he said. "You are quite the fine-looking man."

"B-Baris!" I stammered. "Even if you butter me up, you're not going to gain anything from it."

"I am not currying favor with you, not at all. I mean it. Lord Ciel, could you show Lord Heale what he looks like now?"

Hearing that, Ciel slid forward and stretched his body into a mirror.

“Thanks, Ciel.” I smiled before leaning in. “Hmm. Yeah, I think I’m more tanned than before. I’ve recently spent a lot of time under the sun to build the tower, and we’ve been getting a lot of sunlight due to the power of fenixes. That must be why.”

On reflex, I craned my neck to look up at the sky. We usually had good weather here at Sheol, and rain only paid a visit occasionally. It was another fine day, and I felt gentle sunlight warming my skin. Perhaps the fenixes that stayed at the top of the tower contributed to it.

“You mentioned the song we were singing earlier,” Baris said. “It is a devotional song we use to express our gratitude to the gods. War and combat have left maladies in the bodies of those present, you see. I have educated them so that they can teach reading, writing, and songs to others in our community.”

“Ah, I see. I expected nothing less from you, Baris. You’ve put so much thought into this.”

“I’m not worthy of such high praise.” He bowed. “But with this, I am certain we can start a schooling system very soon.” He looked over our surroundings, and his voice softened with emotion. “At first, when it was only us here, this was but a barren island. Who would have thought that we would come this far?”

I felt the same way. When I had first arrived at Sheol Reef, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that I would be blessed with such a big, wonderful family.

“Let’s keep going and shape this island into the home of our dreams.” I smiled. “You’ve helped me so much this far, Baris, and I hope you’ll continue to take care of me from now on.”

“But of course. I should be the one saying those words.” A wide smile spread across his face. “I shall also arrange for everyone to practice instruments such as flutes. Please look forward to our performance.”

“I will.”

Baris bowed and returned to the song practice session.

A school, huh...? As a prince, I had received personal tutoring from the many educated individuals in the royal court, so schools were a foreign concept to me. *I can't wait to see how it turns out.*

A thought occurred to me. "Oh yeah. Do we have enough tools to go around? I should head off to check on Starkers."

The forge must be so busy that they needed all the help they could get. There were so many things on the to-make list, like beds and tableware.

That was what I assumed, until I was greeted with the mountain of piled-up tools left in one corner of the forge. We had so much that there was probably even excess. *Okay, we should have enough for everyone, then.*

"Starkers is amazing... He always exceeds my expectations." I sized up the pile. "I can't believe he made all this in one single day."

However, Starkers was still hammering away. Perhaps he had more things to craft. I approached him, thinking that perhaps I could help with something.

Surprisingly, he wasn't making tools, but he was instead using jewels and precious metals lavishly to make accessories like bracelets and the like. These items clearly weren't necessary in the short term, and definitely not in the great amount he was crafting. *Does he want to open up a shop or something? Oh well, we already have enough tools, so he can do what he wants with his time. And maybe I'm missing something—perhaps he's really making them out of necessity. Guess I'll ask him.*

"Hey there, Starkers," I called out to him. "Looks like you're making some gorgeous crafts."

Starkers jumped in surprise the moment he heard my voice. He then leaned over the accessories and tried to hide them with his body.

I blinked. "U-Uh, Starkers? I'm not asking you to give them to me or anything. I was just curious why you're making them."

With a frown, he waved at me with disapproval, as if he was chasing me away.

“Heeey...” I protested. “It wouldn’t hurt to tell me.”

However, Starkers hugged the accessories in his arms and hid behind the other blacksmith monsters, who were working on their own tasks.

I narrowed my eyes. “You know, you’re actually making me curious with all the secrecy.”

A voice rang out from behind me. “Everyone has their own little secrets.”

Turning around, I saw Camus. “Ah, hi. I guess you’re right, but...it’s Starkers we’re talking about. Him hiding something makes me a bit uneasy.”

“Oh?” She raised an eyebrow. “Are you implying that our little Starkers is scheming something that’ll harm the monsters on the island?”

I shook my head. “H-He’s never done anything like that before. I’m just...” *I was just surprised, because it was really out of character for Starkers.*

But she’s right. Accessories can’t cause any harm. Maybe he just wants everyone on the island to dress up. I don’t know how the men would take it, but a respectable portion of the women would likely be overjoyed. It might be his way of welcoming them.

With those thoughts in mind, I turned to Starkers, and he started acting suspiciously once again. I frowned. “Oh, he is *definitely* up to something...” I muttered under my breath.

Camus interrupted my train of thought. “Don’t sweat the small stuff, Lord Heale. More importantly, do you have nothing for me?”

I blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I pulled that voyage off successfully. Don’t I, well, deserve thanks in some form?”

“Ah, now that you mention it...” I nodded. “I’ll do anything within my power.”

“‘*Anything*’?” she stressed. “Well, well...” An uncanny grin crawled onto her lips.

Um. I’m a little scared... “O-Of course, it has to be something within my power,” I reminded her. “After everyone settles down, I’m thinking about

holding a ban— Ah?!”

There had been no warning. Camus suddenly hugged me tightly. Then, she swiftly placed her hand against my shoulders, slid them down to my waist, then to my feet. “You’re surprisingly delicate, huh...? Ahhh, I really want to make you mine!”

“C-Camus!” I protested in a panic. “St-Stop! I already...!”

With a sullen look on her face, she pulled away. “I know. I’m not blind, I know that you already like someone else.”

I chewed on my lip. “I... Sorry, Camus.”

“Don’t worry about me. I actually want to give you two my support.” She paused. “Lord Heale, if there’s anything on your mind, you should voice it properly, not put it off for later.”

“Camus...”

She had noticed my feelings. Maybe my body language or demeanor whenever I looked at Riena had tipped her off somehow.

“You know, my comrades and I owe a lifelong debt to your people, and we want to repay it however we can.” With a stern expression, she looked around the island. “That’s not all. *I’m* happy if this island flourishes more. I want to see that future with my own eyes... That’s why I’ll invest my every effort into Sheol,” she declared firmly, almost like a vow.

Then, she grinned wide as she continued, “I’ll be in your care from now on. Riena actually asked me to do something, so I’ll get going. I repeat, Lord Heale: we have mouths for a reason—make sure to convey your feelings properly, okay?”

Camus gave me an audible, encouraging slap on the back, and it was so hard that it stung just a tad. She then left, jotting down some kind of note as she went.

“Convey my feelings, huh...?” I muttered to myself. Her words were still echoing in my mind.

I had confessed my love for Riena, but we had been interrupted, and one

incident after another had come our way after that. I hadn't talked about our relationship at all since that day. *Okay. I should do this again. I need to find a quiet place where we can be alone and profess my feelings clearly.*

Mind made up, I nodded. "Let's do that tonight." *So what if I'm busy? I've had enough of going in circles using excuses such as that.*

On that night, I paid a visit to the kitchen, where Riena was.

She looked surprised. "Lord Heale? May I help you?"

With a bold expression—*not quite*—I stammered, "R-Riena, um... If it's all right with you, do you...have a moment?"

"Y-Yes. We have just finished putting away the dishes, so I am free now."

"I see..." I hesitated. "Could you come to the summit of Yggdrasil for a bit? There's something important I want to talk about."

She took a deep breath and met my gaze with a serious look in her eyes. "Understood. I actually wanted to talk to you as well, Lord Heale."

We headed towards the forest at the top of Yggdrasil. In the beginning, it would have been pitch black at night, but now, thanks to the glowstone streetlamps, it was bright enough to walk around without stumbling. Some monsters lingered around here to soothe their fatigue after a long day, and some even stayed the night, so it wasn't an intimidating place at all.

When we finally reached the summit, Riena suddenly turned around and looked over the entire island of Sheol. I followed her example.

The first place that caught my eyes was our new harbor and the structures there, such as the warehouse where we stored the ship's cargo and the workshops for crafting boats and sails. Glowstone streetlamps dotted the area, and Sheol, despite its size and location, already looked like a respectable town.

Gazing down at the sight, Riena said, "The island has grown rather bright, compared to before."

"You're right. The nights are no longer dark here."

When I had first arrived at the island, darkness had been my only companion

as I gazed out at the ocean from the cave. The only light had come from the distant moon and stars.

I turned to Riena. “Is this place all right?”

“Yes. Let’s gaze at the night sky while we talk.”

Together, we sat down on the tree trunk. *The early bird gets the worm,* I thought. *I should bring it up first.* “Um!”

But at the same time, Riena’s voice overlapped mine. “Um! Oh...”

“Ah.” Nervously, I prompted, “G-Go ahead.”

“N-No, you can go first, Lord Heale.”

“I-It’s okay, you can.”

“No, I’m sure. I can bring it up later.”

Awkwardness ensued. My initial resolve crumbled into nothing, and I was struggling to find my words.

Then, Riena chuckled melodiously. “Oh, you’re honestly too nice. You’re almost...like the moon above us.”

“M-Moon? I am?”

“Huh? Yes, that’s what I think. Even in the darkest nights, the moon would shine upon us, and it’s just like you, Lord Heale. The sun is too bright, and we can’t look directly at it. But you shimmer gently like the moon, and...everyone is drawn to you.” She flushed cherry red. “M-My apologies, that must have sounded strange.”

I felt heat gather in my cheeks, and I had to fight the urge to fidget. “N-No, it’s not strange at all. I’m just, you know, a bit shy? I mean, I think you think way too highly of me.”

Riena shook her head profusely. “No, I am not exaggerating at all! The reason I am here, we are here, and Sheol is here today is because of you. To me, you were the moon that guided me through my darkest nights. I’m sure that everyone on this island agrees.” Her already red face flushed even brighter.

Without warning or explanation, Riena then transformed into her original

goblin form. She reached out and held my hands. “You extended a helping hand to me when I came to this island and pulled me up from my abyss. Camus and her crew managed to get back onto their feet because of your kindness as well! That’s why you’re irreplaceable, you’re amazing, my lord!”

“Th-Thanks... It means a lot to hear that from you.”

Thinking back, Riena had always showered me with compliments. I had always been a necessary, worthy existence in her eyes, and even now, that gave me the will to live on.

I took a deep breath before I continued, “But, Riena, it’s the same for me. To me, you and everyone on the island are my moon and stars. Everyone shone brilliantly from the day I met you all, and you are still just as dazzling.”

I liked Riena, and I liked everyone on the island. But before I had realized, my eyes were constantly drawn to Riena, and Riena alone, almost like a stargazer tracing a constellation they had only just learned. That was why I wanted to formally express my feelings to her once again.

I continued, “Riena, do you...remember how I brought up a wedding a while ago?”

She opened her eyes wide. This time, however, she didn’t lose her composure and acted shyly like she usually did, but instead nodded with an unreadable expression. “Yes. Back then, I was... I’m sorry, I ran away because I was overwhelmed.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I brought it up too abruptly.” I paused. “But Riena, I want to hold a wedding with you. I can’t help but feel that my vow back then ended up unfinished, so I want to do this properly.”

The orcs had arrived just when the two of us had said that we wanted to marry each other. A lot of things had happened one after another, after that, and it just hadn’t been the right mood to bring up a marriage again.

“Once again, please allow me to make this vow to you.” I squeezed our joined hands. “I will protect you for the rest of my life, Riena. Please stay by my side.”

“Lord Heale...” A bright smile lit up her face, more brilliant than any star. “Me too. I will protect you for the rest of my life. I shall be by your side forever and

ever.”

Joy rushed into my head. I was over the moon, and anything like weddings or a kiss completely flew out of my mind.

For a while after that, we gazed up at the starry sky and talked long into the night. Sometimes about what project we should tackle next. Sometimes about the future of Sheol—of our home.

***

It was a week later that I finished building all the rooms for our new residents. One certain morning, I opened my eyes like usual.

I yawned, and as my vision came into focus, I was slightly startled at the sight before me. “Oh? What’s going on, everyone?” For some reason, Ciel, Taran, and Furay were in my room.

“Morning, Lord Heale!” Furay chirped.

“M-Morning, Furay. Uh... What’s that you’re wearing? This isn’t your usual attire.”

Furay had a preference for plain clothing, but today, she was wearing what looked like a fancy pale blue dress. She twirled around, showing off the magnificent garment. “Hee hee, cute, right? Well, I gotta dress up on a big celebration day, after all!”

For a moment, I had been completely lost, but I then remembered that we’d been planning to hold a banquet celebrating the monsters’ safe homecoming. “Oh... Right, it’s today, huh?” I looked over at her two companions. “Ah, Ciel and Taran are wearing ribbons! Quite fashionable, aren’t we?”

Hearing that, the two monsters leaned forward, showing off their white ribbons proudly.

“All righty then, you need to get changed too, Lord Heale,” Furay announced. “We goblins made this based on Miss Camus’s design!” She held out an intricate coat that wouldn’t look out of place on an aristocrat.

“U-Uh, I’m fine with my usual clothes, thanks,” I declined.

“No can do! *Everyone’s* dressing up today!”

“O-Okay.” I gave in and changed into the coat like she insisted. Ciel stretched out his body as a mirror once I was done. “Thanks, Ciel.” I observed my reflection. “It’s been so long since I’ve worn stylish and formal clothes.” *But it’s extraordinarily comfortable. It’s light, it seems well-ventilated, and I have no complaints about it at all.*

“That coat’s made from threads that Taran weaved carefully one by one,” Furay explained.

“Wow, it is? That must be why it feels even better to wear than my usual clothes.” I turned to the cave spider. “Thanks, Taran.”

Taran waved her feet, as if to say, “No big deal.”

There was an ornament on my coat, too, I noticed: a gorgeous golden feather decoration fastened to my chest area. *Is this a fenix feather? Maybe the goblins used something that Alvis or Elysion shed. Actually, they put in a lot of work on the buttons as well. They sure weren’t stingy with gold and silver...*

Intrigued, I asked, “Did you guys really have to make it so extravagant?”

“Isn’t that obvious?!” She huffed. “After all, today’s...a grand celebration!”

“Y-Yeah, you make a good point.”

Maybe Baris and the other leader figures planned this so that I seem like a proper and dignified governor in the eyes of our newcomers. I mean, I usually don’t look like a leader at all.

Erivan chose that moment to walk into my bedroom. “Yo, Chief! Lookin’ neat!” He, however, was half naked as always.

Furay scowled and yelled, “Hey, Dad! I gave you a pelt coat too! Where did that go?!”

“Huh? Bah, I don’t need no fancy stuff like that.” He waved his hand flippantly. “Our main stars today are—” He only got that far into his sentence, because Ciel and Taran instantly covered his mouth. Apologetically, he bowed to the two before continuing with a notably wide grin, “It’s cuz, uh, everyone’s the star of our celebration today. So it’s better for us all to look unique, right?”

“Y-Yeah, what he said.” Furay let out a dry, clearly forced laugh.

I furrowed my eyebrows. “Guys? What’s happening? You’re acting weird.”

“Y-You’re imagining things!” Furay said hurriedly. “Okay then, Lord Heale, let’s head to the banquet at Yggdrasil! Everyone else is already there.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

The group led me to the foot of Yggdrasil, where a large crowd of monsters had already gathered. Many of the newcomer kids were frolicking around in the river and the lake.

“Looks like everyone’s having fun here,” I said with a smile. All my hard work on the construction had been worth it.

There were already dots of reddish purple scattered around the vineyard. Some of the grapes must be ripe already, thanks to Riena and Yggdrasil. I spotted a handful of the newcomer monsters gazing up at the sky. I turned around to see what had their attention, and beyond the harbor was a lofty tower that reached the heavens. They were all captivated by the magnificent structure.

“I don’t mean to sound haughty, but wow, I can’t believe we managed to pull that off...” I muttered. Something caught my eye. “Hm?” A golden bird landed on the summit of the tower. The fenix seemed to be watching us. Perhaps they wanted to come down to the ground and join in our merriment. “Aw, why not fly down? We’ve really gotten lively around here.”

Before the ship’s voyage, there were just a little over 300 residents on our island, but we had grown into a population of 1,500 practically overnight. As if that wasn’t enough, the numerous golems I had crafted were further adding to the bustle of Sheol. *Well, I do think that the Starkers golem spewing out fire on the ocean stands out a little too much, but it’s not like I can do anything about that now.*

We now had a harbor and even an enormous warship. With these new structures, Sheol had finally gained a way to make contact with the outside world. And of course, I couldn’t forget our tower and Yggdrasil—outsiders might spot us first. One day, humans...*Sanphales* would learn of what this island had become. I needed to take action so that I could protect everyone when the inevitable happened.

A voice called out to me. “Morning, Lord Heale.”

I turned to face the side Yggdrasil was on, and saw Camus. Her usual outfit already had flair and extravagance, but she was even more dazzling today—it must be the fenix feathers and gold handicrafts that adorned her.

“Morning, Camus,” I greeted back. She started staring hard at me, and a little taken aback, I asked, “Uh, are my clothes weird or something?”

“No, you look handsome.” She nodded to herself, pleased. “I knew it, it fits you perfectly. I’m brilliant!”

I tilted my head quizzically.

With a smug grin, she said, “That coat fits you snugly, right? I took the measurements.”

Ah, she makes a good point. The material isn’t the only factor that contributes to how comfortable an article of clothing feels. This coat hugs my body just right. And then, I remembered how she had suddenly thrown her arms around me, interrupting my interrogation of Starkers. “Wait... Is that why you hugged me back then?”

She clicked her fingers and gave me a big smile. “Exactly!”

“Ah, so that’s how it is...” I smiled wryly. “You could have just told me.”

“No, keeping it a secret was absolutely necessary. I had to take the utmost care. After all...” She cast her eyes down, and a single tear slid down her cheek. “I mean, it’s the most special day...it’s the happiest day of my first crush’s life. I can’t afford to mess up, right?”

“H...uh?”

“Ah,” she sighed. “How regrettable. If only we could have met sooner...”

Abruptly, Erivan marched over and forced a cup of reddish purple liquid down Camus’s throat. She choked, and between coughs and hacks, she hissed, “E-Erivan! My charms may be irresistible, but that’s going too far! And wait, was that juice?!”

“Shuddup!” Erivan barked. “Tastes great, right?! Of course it does, it’s juice made from grapes grown on our island!”

Ah, it's made from grapes we harvested from the knoll, huh! I took a good look around, and everyone seemed to have a cup of it. The aroma of grapes permeated the air.

"Stop right there, you two!" Furay ran in as the pair started bickering. "And Miss Camus, we still gotta keep it under wraps! L-Lord Heale, head over to where Lord Baris is, okay?!" She then dragged the two away to somewhere else.

"G-Got it!" I nodded and did as she said. As I walked, completely baffled, I muttered, "Why in the world did they react like that?" I turned to my companions, and Ciel and Taran seemed somewhat appalled.

I found Baris directly beneath Yggdrasil. "Good morning, Baris. Looks like the feast has already begun."

"Indeed. Some of the monsters have been working incessantly, and I ended up starting it early. My apologies, I should have asked everyone to greet you first."

I smiled. "Nah, you really don't have to. Everyone's already partying, and we already took care of the meet-and-greet during the taming contract. There isn't anything I want to announce, either."

"Ah, I see. Well, I have informed them about the rules of Sheol and delegated duties to all of them. In that case, there shouldn't be anything we need to attend to."

"Good work. Phew..." I let out a sigh of relief.

"Hm? Is something the matter? Were you fatigued, perhaps?"

"Kind of. It took an entire week, but things are finally calming down, and the exhaustion's starting to settle in too. That's not all, though. I'm just relieved that you're the same as always."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Do I look unchanged?"

"Huh? Are you different in some way?" I scrutinized him from head to toe. His clothes were the usual—he wasn't wearing any accessories specially for the banquet.

I frowned and wrung my brain for ideas, and during the silence, Baris looked at me with an impassive face. *Um. Uh... Help. I have no clue. Would he get mad if I said that? After his evolution, he gained the ability to take on a frightening appearance... The last thing I want is for him to be angry.*

Nervously, I stammered, “U-Um, your skin...seems a bit more youthful?”

A vicious scowl flickered across his features.

“I-I’m so sorry!” I apologized immediately. But it must have been a trick of the light, because when I laid eyes on him again, he was wearing his usual expression. *Or...was it? Either way, for now, Baris is smiling wide.*

“No, nothing about me has changed.” He grinned impishly.

Oh, he got one up on me there. “B-Baris... Just a guess, but when you were young, you must have been quite the prankster, weren’t you?”

“Ho ho ho,” he laughed. “I certainly was. Well, to tell you the truth, I smeared some cosmetic oil onto my head, you see.”

At that moment, I noticed that countless shadows were cast down on the ground and were flying past us. “Hm?” I looked up. “Whoa, look at that!”

They belonged to our dragons—to Fierle and the wyverns. Fierle was at the forefront, and two lines of wyverns followed suit behind each wing. Their formation was disciplined, almost artistic, and everyone gaped at the sky in awe.

“They can already pull off stuff like this...” I muttered to myself. “And wow, they’ve gotten so massive.”

The wyverns were already large enough to rival horses, and in Fierle’s case, they were as big as an elephant. The former hatchlings’ wings were stretched out as they soared across the sky proudly, and they looked exactly like the magnificent dragons in the myths. If they hadn’t been on the island... If I hadn’t met Roydon, the tower would have remained unfinished to this day. If our dragons hadn’t transported materials back and forth, the construction would have taken twice or even three times the amount of time.

“They are now respectable adults in their own right,” Baris said. “I am certain

that they will continue to be Sheol's dependable guardians."

I nodded. "Yeah, and we'll rely on them to protect our home. And, by the way..." I noticed that Riena was nowhere to be seen. "Is Riena in the kitchen?"

"The princess? Her Highness is..." He paused, and he turned his gaze elsewhere. "Ah, there she is."

I looked in the same direction, and there, I saw...

My breath hitched. "Riena..."

Riena was there, and she was wearing a dress of pristine white. It wasn't like the practical dresses she usually wore, but instead a snow-white dress decorated with layers upon layers of gorgeous frills. A white veil flowed down from her head, and a silver tiara sat on the top of her head, gleaming under the light. I recognized that tiara. It was the one Starkers had worked on—the one he had tried to hide from me.

Many of the monsters had dressed up for the occasion. The goblin and orc ladies weren't wrapped in clothing that allowed maximum mobility, but in glamorous dresses. The giant pile of accessories Starkers had crafted was decorating them now.

However, Riena's attire was too lavish, too strikingly opulent compared to the others. Above all else, the style of dress she was wearing was what brides wore to their weddings back in Sanphales. Behind her, Riale and Melle were carrying the long train of her dress.

Starkers then rushed in with hurried footsteps and handed a bouquet to Riena. It wasn't a normal bouquet of flowers—it was a bouquet consisting of flower crafts made from precious gems and metals, and it shone like stars. Riena accepted it and bowed to the man before turning to face me.

"Huh? Wh...at?" I sputtered, completely bewildered.

There was a pat on my shoulder. It was Camus, and she said, "You know, I made a promise before I left. 'If my voyage ends without incident,' I told Riena, 'Let's hold a wedding.'"

"F-For who and whom?"

She sighed. “Oh, you’re so oblivious. For you and her, of course.”

I looked around me, and everyone’s gazes were either on me or on Riena. Among the crowd was Erivan, who was weeping manly tears. “Her Highness is finally gettin’ married!” He hiccuped. “With *Chief*! Furay, she’s finally one step ahead of ya!”

“Wh-What nonsense are you talking?!” She huffed. “I-I’m not sour at all! I mean, Lord Heale is gonna marry our princess! Of course I’m happy...” She sniffed.

“Aw, c’mon, don’t cry! Furay, I know exactly how ya feel!” He slung an arm around her shoulder.

Scowling, she gave him a light smack on his head. “Get your hands off me, you musclebrain dad!”

“Lord Heale,” said Baris, smiling from ear to ear. “Please take good care of our princess.”

“B-Ba...Baris!” I yelped. “But, Riena said it’s still too early!”

No. Wait. Riena never said anything like that. She was extremely shy the moment I brought up the word ‘wedding.’

Oh, I see now. She wanted to make this wedding a surprise.

Everything clicked into place, and I murmured, “She could have just told me, though...”

But at the same time, I wasn’t all that bothered. A few days ago, Riena and I had a heart-to-heart on Yggdrasil. Our hearts had been connected, and I had even thought that a wedding wasn’t all that important compared to her presence by my side. It didn’t matter when we held our wedding, but who I was with.

Finding my resolve, I stepped forward, intent on walking over to Riena, whom Starkers was guiding by the hand towards me. However, Ciel and Taran stopped me.

Camus tutted. “Hey, the groom’s meant to wait for the bride.”

“O-Oh, right. Oops, I nearly messed up. I got too hasty.”

“Uh, I was joking, I think you should just do what you want. You take people’s words way too seriously...” She sighed as she watched me grow flustered again. “You have both already conveyed your love for each other, right?”

“Yeah, we have, but...”

“Then stand here, straighten your back, and wait for her.”

I let out a long exhale and hardened my resolve. I couldn’t help but feel somewhat shy. We were standing in the center of a crowd, and everyone’s gazes were on us. Even the newcomers were watching attentively, intrigued by the grand proceedings here.

In fact, monsters were even playing music. It was the song Baris had been teaching them. *Oh, they practiced specially for today! I mean, I’m sure that he was speaking the truth when he said that he did it for the benefit of Sheol as a whole, though.*

Finally, Riena was right in front of me, and Starkers released her hand there. Almost as if she was his real daughter, he started bawling, and tears flowed down his face like waterfalls.

I heard Furay’s voice in the background. “Um, dude. Why’re you crying so hard?”

But my attention was on Riena, who walked unhurriedly to my side. Her expression was obscured by the veil, but I was certain that her cheeks were bright red.

“I’m sorry, my lord...” she said in a hushed voice.

“Riena...” I shook my head. “I should be the one to apologize. I’m sorry I didn’t take the initiative to say anything.”

At this point in a human wedding ceremony, our priest would ask questions to the bride and groom, confirming that they both wished to marry and make the vows. However, goblins didn’t have such a tradition.

In that case, this time, I won’t hesitate.

“You are my one and only, Riena,” I said.

“I love you, Lord Heale,” she replied.

I lifted the veil covering Riena's face and gently leaned in to meet her lips. Thunderous applause and cheering burst out at once. Music began to play to bless us.

Slowly, I pulled away, and I saw Riena's face, flushed with both shyness and joy.

"Your Highness! Chief!" Erivan yelled. "Congrats on your marriage!"

"Aw, must be so nice..." Furay sighed.

"This day has finally come for our princess..." Baris's voice shook with emotion. "Oh, if only we could show this scene to the ones who have passed on."

They all gave us their blessings. Ciel and Taran repeatedly made clapping gestures and celebrated our union. As for Starkers, he had whipped out his maracas somewhere down the line and were shaking them noisily. *I'm very grateful for his will to bless us, but I'm afraid to say that he's being way too loud.*

"All right, time to toast to our newlyweds!" Camus raised her voice. "I grabbed loads of delectable liquor specially for this occasion, so drink your fill, guys!"

Erivan grabbed his cup and leaped in front of Camus. "What she said! Everyone, cheers to the Chief and Her Highness!" He raised his cup high in the air.

The other monsters lifted their cups and yelled, "Cheers!" before gulping down their liquor.

"H-Hey!" Camus yelped, a little peeved. "Ugh, you have no patience to speak of!"

"Quit naggin'!" the general barked. "Ya gotta drink up too, ya hear me?! I challenge ya to a drinkin' contest!"

Neither of them backed down from the challenge, and they chugged down liquor directly from barrels.

Riena watched them nervously. "W-Will they be all right?"

“Let’s stop them if things get out of hand...” I sighed. “Ah, hey there, Riale, Melle.”

Riale hopped onto my shoulder, while Melle hopped onto Riena’s, so they could give us their blessings as well. Riale’s fluffy fur was almost ticklish against my neck. The dragons soared through the sky with Fierle in the lead, and they were almost like acrobats as they did all kinds of tricks in the air.

“Wow, they’re already that agile in the sky?” I marveled at them. “Hm? Is it just me, or is it a bit bright?”

I looked around and saw that a gentle light ray was shining down upon us from the top of the tower. Perhaps this was the blessing of the fenixes.

With a smile, I murmured, “I need to thank them sometime...”

The next moment, I gasped in shock as a deafening explosion left my ears ringing. “Whoa!”

The culprit was the Starkers golem, who must have spewed out fire, because smoke surrounded it. *Did the golem mean that to be fireworks or something?* Around it, the aquatic golems burst from the ocean’s surface to jump high into the air, celebrating our big day as well.

Sheol had truly become a lively place.

Riena watched everyone with a warm smile on her face, and then she turned to me. “Lord Heale, I shall work even harder from now on.”

“I’ll do the same,” I told her. “I’ll be there for you, and you’ll be here for me.”

“Yes! We’ll be together forever!”

We exchanged determined nods.

Then, surrounded by the blessings of all our friends and family, we both leaned in to share a soft, blissful kiss.

