
SURVIVAL
IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY MISTRESS
8
NOVEL
written by RYUTO
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ELEONORA
(ELEN)
SYLPHYEL
(SYLPHY)
MELTY
GRANDE
IRA


Upon returning to my room, I found Ira sprawled out on the bed. She was dressed in something that looked like a micro bikini. It barely covered anything at all.
"Aren't you cold...?"
It was still the middle of winter, and the heater in the room wasn't on. Hell, I was properly bundled up in winter clothes, and I was still a little chilly.
"I deployed a temperature-regulation technique around the bed, so it's quite comfortable. Hurry up and join me."
"It is a wife's duty to heal her husband's exhausted body."

Survival in Another World with My Mistress

NOVEL 8

WRITTEN BY Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY Yappen



Seven Seas Entertainment

Goshuzinsama to yuku isekai survival Vol. 8
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This edition originally published in Japan in 2024 by
MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
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ISBN: 979-8-89373-277-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: August 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Prologue:
Surviving in the Recovered Capital City!

HOWDY, KOUSUKE HERE.

At long last, I finally got revenge on that fox bastard for kidnapping me.

It's been three days since our negotiations with Kirillovich and his Varyag Empire diplomats. They came from the Far East, beyond the Holy Kingdom's massive territory. We formally accepted their party into our nation, which also means we need to use one of the nobility's mansions near Merinesburg to build them a proper embassy. I'm slated to assist with that construction.

When I say "slated to assist," I mean that I'm going to be transporting materials, occasionally doing demolition work, and modifying fencing and the like to make sure everything goes smoothly and safely. Those things aren't really my forte. But it's not like I *can't* do that kind of stuff, okay? I swear!

I'm someone who prioritizes practicality—you know, the type who swears by basic, boxy buildings. Not that I hate over-the-top building design, mind you. I just feel that sort of thing is more in the realm of artwork than architecture. Personally, boxy buildings are my go-to. But don't think I have a bad sense for design, okay? Crap, I can't even convince myself…

Anyway, any hard work I put into designing a building will inevitably result in some confusing piece of failed modern art, so I've opted to focus my efforts on making something practical instead. Better to leave the artsy stuff to people who know what they're doing, you know? I believe in my heart of hearts that if I commit to practicality, I can turn it into a kind of art in and of itself. After all, weapons made without ornamentation are beautiful and cool in their

own right, since they're specifically designed to take lives. Practical tools like axes are pretty rad too. So I've decided to pursue that path instead. Yeah. That's it.

When I finished helping out with the construction, I ended up cutting weeds in the courtyard since they were getting a bit out of control. But now? Well, right now I suddenly found myself frozen in place behind the mansion, staring silently at a suspicious individual cloaked in a robe with a hood that covered their face. I couldn't see their expression, but I could tell they were on guard. And me? I had my recently made plus-nine mithril weed-cutting sickle at the ready.

"Snip, snip!" I said as I suddenly pulled a pair of clippers from my inventory, which caused the robed asshole to visibly flinch. When I loudly snipped the clippers at them, they began to tremble in fear—and just like that, the suspicious individual's identity was laid bare.

"What are you doing here?"

The robed figure trembled, not saying anything. He must've been feeling pretty defeated.

"Weren't you gonna grow out your winter fur or something?"

"…It was sheared off."

"Uh, what about your summer fur?"

"I'll…have to wait until the start of spring."

"Good luck with that."

Winter hadn't quite started here yet. In about two weeks, though, Jack Frost would arrive, and in one or two months we'd be in the thick of it. Spring was at least three months away, which meant the robed asshole in front of me—Cuvi—would have to spend that entire time completely hairless.

"So what are you doing here?"

"The artisans have come to handle the interior design."

"Ah, now I get it. You came over here so they wouldn't see you. Well, once I finish cutting these weeds, I'll be out of your way."

Cuvi didn’t respond, just stood still and out of the way in the corner.

Huh? Wasn’t it careless of me to come to the empire’s embassy like this and make contact with Cuvi alone? Nah, it was all good. I had harpies up on the roof, in the trees, and circling in the air above. Our surveillance system was flawless. Ha ha ha.

***

The group of visiting diplomats from the Varyag Empire were going to stay here at the embassy as official guests. Additionally, the Dragonis Mountain Nation off to the Far West announced that they would be providing heavy support to the Kingdom of Merinard going forward. And the good news didn’t stop there. With law and order completely restored within the nation—due in no small part to Sylphy’s Liberation Army—we’d been able to regain control of the entirety of the old Kingdom of Merinard. This had caused all the nearby nations to officially recognize our statehood. Obviously, that didn’t include the Holy Kingdom or its vassal states.

At any rate, twenty-one years had passed since the Holy Kingdom took complete control of old Merinard, but now it was finally free from its chains and recognized as its own nation. For the people of Merinard, time had started to flow once more.

But there were still plenty of problems that needed to be dealt with.

The first was obviously the Holy Kingdom itself. They had sent a subjugation force of 20,000 soldiers to put us down, and our Liberation Army—more specifically me, the rifle squad, and a team of bomber harpies—had taken out the majority of their men in a fierce battle. Frankly speaking, they’d been pretty much annihilated. It was egg on the Holy Kingdom’s face, so there was little doubt that they’d be wanting revenge for this embarrassment eventually.

That wasn’t even their only heavy loss. In every single one of the battles leading up to our occupation of Merinesburg—and even

our occupation of Arichburg—the Holy Kingdom's army was nearly annihilated. In other words, they suffered significant casualties across this series of engagements, so the nobility in their nation probably viewed us as their sworn enemy at this point. I'd be pleased as punch if this made them reconsider their war with us, but it was also entirely possible that it had only fanned the flames of their hostility. We would have to keep a close eye on their actions from now on.

That being said, the higher-ups in the government and in Adolism probably wouldn't want to throw more lambs to the slaughter of the Kingdom of Merinard, especially not when we possessed weapons they didn't yet understand. Both Danan and Sir Leonard felt that they would probably be taking a wait-and-see approach for now.

I didn't know what Sylphy's next goal was in regard to the Holy Kingdom, but my best guess was she was planning something to free the citizens taken there to be slaves. Perhaps she was considering going through the Nostalgia sect to try and sow discord among their forces from the inside. Either way, getting them to recognize the New Kingdom of Merinard was a number-one priority going forward.

Clearly, we had our share of issues to contend with, but - another priority was looking inward and strengthening our government. The old Merinard was effectively under our control, but it was also true that our current government couldn't have eyes on every single corner of the nation yet.

All of the main cities had already sworn allegiance to the Liberation Army, but it seemed likely that at least a few didn't actually mean it. In terms of pure military might, Sylphy's Liberation Army—the very same army that annihilated the Holy Kingdom's forces—was the nation's most dominant military force. At the end of the day, absolute strength conquered all, so even if it took a while, we'd just have to continue getting our ducks in a row and strengthening our government bit by bit. I had the feeling there

were plenty of folks who were going to complicate things for us, though.

And as if we didn't have enough on our plate already, we also had to deal with the Adolists within the country. All we could really do was leave them to Elen, Archbishop Deckard, and High Priestess Katalina. Obviously, I planned to help out as much as I could as the Fabled Visitor.

There were plenty of other little issues too, of course, but…

"I'm not built for petty political squabbles."

Ifriita, who was there for some reason, nodded at me in agreement. "I bet."

Ira, on the other hand, cocked her head to one side, saying, "You think?"

Did she really believe I was capable of that kind of thing?

In any case, we had all gathered at the Research and Development lab that was set up here in Merinesburg. Also in attendance was the mage squad that accompanied us from Arichburg to Merinesburg, as well as the local apothecaries, alchemists, blacksmiths, and engravers who had earned our trust. There were a lot of young folk here, so even though many of them weren't exactly first-class in their fields yet, they were filled with determination and enthusiasm.

As for why I was here, that was clear as day. Rather than sticking my head into stuff I didn't know jack shit about, I'd decided it was more effective to spend my time focusing on things I was good at.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" I asked.

"What, am I not allowed to be here?" Ifriita—Sylphy's second-eldest daughter—asked, putting her hand on her hip and glaring at me.

Today, she had forgone her usual red tracksuit and was wearing a mage robe similar to Ira's.

"I mean, if you want my opinion, no. Not really," I responded as I shot a look at Ira, who tilted her head again.

"Lady Ifriita can wield magic on par with any of the court mages," Ira explained. "She also bears the blood of this kingdom's royal line. There is no reason to doubt her trustworthiness."

"Huh, okay…"

"Hee hee!" Ifriita puffed up her shapely chest, clearly feeling good after hearing Ira's words. She had a victorious smile plastered across her face.

Well, so long as she didn't get in the way, I didn't particularly care.

"And what about them?" I asked as I pointed over to Grande, currently sleeping soundly inside of Lime, who had expanded in size. Bess was gazing curiously at all the inventions the others and I had made up until now, and there was also some sort of mithril barrel that was audibly sobbing.

"Bess knows a lot about magic, and Poiso is knowledgeable about medicines and poisons. They're both very useful to have around," Ira answered.

"Gotcha…"

"Please forgive me… I swear I won't play any more tricks. *Sniffle*."

Obviously, the fake crying was coming from inside of the barrel. I thought it would be best to ignore it entirely since it contained Poiso's core. By using mithril, we were able to cut her off from the outside world both magically and physically so she couldn't access her clones. This was her punishment for drugging Serafeeta with some kind of love potion the other day.

Capturing Poiso took the combined power of not only Lime and Bess, but of Sylphy and Melty as well. Even Poiso wasn't able to do much against this squad of powerhouses, so she immediately surrendered before it could even come to blows.

"Um, so what are we researching today?" I asked.

"Sylphy and Melty asked us to look into developing magic tools that could be useful for the day-to-day life of our people," Ira explained. "The military wants high-performance weapons that can be mass-produced without relying on any abilities."

"Man, neither request is particularly specific… As far as high-performance, mass-producible weapons go, they've already got muzzle-loading magic guns, right?"

When I created magic guns in this world, I based them on bolt-action rifles and muskets. The design was simple: You loaded the bullet into the barrel of the gun, then when you pulled the trigger, you activated low-powered explosive magic at the back of the barrel that would then fire the bullet. The slugs were .15 caliber, which made them extremely powerful. They also had an extremely long range, around 500 meters. Since I used black steel—a special type of metal highly resistant to heat—the bullets were pretty heavy, but that didn't seem to be a problem for the demi-humans of this world.

"Mm. The mass-produced muzzle-loading models are currently being tested by the Liberation Army. According to the reports we've received, things are looking good," Ira said.

"Isn't that enough?" I asked.

"They want you to make something in the event a similar weapon is used against us."

"That won't be easy…"

The guns were more than capable of taking down large monsters and even heavily equipped cavalrymen. Now they were requesting equipment that could defend against them. It was a tough ask.

"You think it's impossible?" Ira asked.

"I do have a few ideas, but I don't know if the performance'll be worth the cost. Guess that's what experimentation is for."

I took Ira over to the back courtyard of the castle where the knights' training grounds were located. The rest of R&D tagged along too, after hearing me mention experiments. Ifriita, Lime with Grande inside of her, and Bess holding the mithril barrel came along as well.

"This is the prototype magic gun I got from the rear base. It's got the same-ish specs as the mass-produced gun," I said.

"Mm, right," Ira responded.

"First, let's check its firepower."

I set up a bunch of partially busted pieces of armor I'd gotten from the Holy Kingdom's men, as well as some pieces of wood fifteen millimeters thick. First, I tried shooting at the ten pieces of wood I lined up.

"The bullet went through all of them."

"Yep, that's what I figured would happen."

The harsh recoil of the gun made me grimace from the pain in my shoulder, and I took another shot at the iron armor. The bullet managed to pierce the three pieces I had lined up back-to-front with no issue.

"Th-that thing's this powerful?!" Ira sputtered.

"Well, the armor's only about two millimeters thick. The results might have been different if there was actually something inside the armor or the shot was taken at a different distance, but none of this is surprising so far."

I tried shooting from about 20 meters away next. If I backed off to the maximum range of around 300 meters, the actual destructive force of the bullet would dip.

"Obviously, protecting against one of these things using armor is a pretty impossible ask. So allow me to present you with this."

I pulled a steel shovel from my inventory and dug into the ground to make a trench. I then used the dirt I'd dug up to make a

wall that I subsequently shot at.

"…It didn't go through," Ira said.

"It won't hold up if it's too thin, though," I explained. "It's gotta be at least a meter thick, I think. That much will be able to protect against bullets. That said, I don't know the exact science behind it. I think our best bet will be to make some kind of tool that can easily make trenches and dirt walls. If soldiers can quickly build trenches, they'll be able to face off against large monsters and charging cavalrymen, right? Plus, building a wall of dirt probably won't require much magic power. Also, if the tool can dig holes, it'll be useful for public works too, which means we can tackle both Sylphy and Melty's requests at the same time."

"I see… You're right that building a dirt wall with magic is one of the most low-level earth spells there is. Even low-quality unrefined magic stones would do the trick, and making a magic tool like that shouldn't be all that difficult. I'll start figuring something out," Ira said with a nod, then took the rest of the R&D folks back to the lab.

I started cleaning up the training grounds, but noticed Ifriita had stayed behind and was currently staring at me for some reason.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I was just surprised by how much thought you've put into this," she said. "I thought you were just a womanizer."

"Well, thanks?" I replied with a forced smile.

I had no idea if she was complimenting or insulting me with that one. But if this meant she was softening up on me a little, then I'd take it.

"I guess I can increase my opinion of you slightly. Just slightly, though."

"Yes, well, thank you very much, Your Highness. Are you not going to join the others?"

"I'm…more of a combat person," Ifriita replied, averting her gaze.

Ah, okay. So she was the type who was skilled in casting attack spells, but not that great at magical theory or tool creation. Honestly, she really lived up to the image I had of her in my mind.

"I can't use magic, so there's a whole lot I'd like to research. Mind giving me a hand?" I asked.

"Hm… Sure, okay," she replied.

The princess was trying to act unmoved, but I could see her nostrils flaring ever so slightly.

Finally. Now I actually had a good idea how to handle this little firecracker. Excellent. She seemed to have a surplus of free time, so I decided to have her help me with my magic research and experimentation.

Chapter 1:
Restarting the Research and Development Division

MAGIC.

I believe magic is the most important component to making a fantasy world feel like a fantasy world. Granted, I also think that if there are monsters running around and people fighting with swords and bows, it's more than fantasy enough too.

In any case, I have no idea how magic in this world functions or operates. Apparently, its primary energy source is something called "magic power," a type of energy that exists not just in the atmosphere, but in all things. This energy manifests in three different locations: within the body, within nature, and within materials.

"I see. I don't get it at all."

"Sorry, but that's about as simple an explanation as I can offer," Ifriita remarked while drawing a chart on the ground with a stick, turning to face me when she was done.

"I understand your explanation, don't get me wrong. That's not the part that has me confused. I'm stuck on how the process of drawing out that energy and turning it into a physical phenomenon works, and what happens to the magic power after a magic spell has been cast. Also, what exactly *is* magic power in the first place? When I start thinking about all that, my brain feels like it's going to melt or something."

"I can't answer so many questions at once… First, hmm, let me see… The common understanding is that using magic power in a spell requires the use of something we call a 'technique.'"

"A technique, eh?"

"Yeah. Basically, a technique takes colorless magic power and applies color to it. For example, basic fireball magic requires the use of a technique that gives magic power three different instructions: turn into flames, turn into a ball, and fly at the area specified."

Ifriita began to draw a pattern on the ground with her stick. It reminded me of the characters and patterns that were engraved into the golem core at the heart of the golem communicators.

"However, a simple fireball spell like that wouldn't have much in the way of lethal strength. Now, this obviously depends on how much magic power you pour into it, but if you only put the bare minimum into the spell, it won't do much but slightly burn the target."

Ifriita manifested a golf-ball-sized fireball at the tip of her finger, then shot it up into the air. It flew fairly quickly but soon disappeared.

"If you want to increase its strength—in other words, its lethality—you can modify the three instructions within the technique itself, or even add onto them. For example, you can replace 'turn into flames' with 'turn into a blaze,' or 'turn into a ball' into 'become a lance.' You could also insert a modification technique, like adding 'swiftly' between its form and the target direction."

"A modification technique?"

"Yup. For example… Well, let me show you."

Ifriita once again manifested a golf-ball-sized fireball at her finger tip, then shot it up into the air at a far greater speed than before. It looked like its range had increased as much as its speed.

"'Swiftly' is a projection-type modification technique that's used in most attack magic spells. This is because raising the speed of a projection-type magic spell makes it harder to dodge and also extends its range."

"I see…"

Modification techniques… Modification techniques, huh? Hmmm… It actually sounds a lot like a sort of programming language. But I have basically zero knowledge on the subject, so I doubt I'll be able to help out much when it comes to developing new techniques.

"You keep saying 'I see,' but do you really get what I'm saying?"

"I get that I don't get it."

"Seriously?!"

"Seriously. Sorry."

I earnestly bowed my head. These were the sorts of things you just had to leave to the pros.

"To be honest," I said, "I never imagined that a single fireball spell could be so complex. It makes me wonder how Ira's lightning magic works."

"She told me a little about it before, actually. She combined nearly one hundred small and large techniques to make that spell."

"Incredible… By the way, is a technique absolutely necessary in order to cast magic?"

"It is," she said with a nod that seemed to say, "Didn't I just tell you that?"

Right, she absolutely had.

"Where do mages deploy those techniques when they cast spells? I know they're typically engraved on magic tools, but as far as I could tell just now, you weren't projecting the technique in the air or anything," I said while pointing at the technique on the ground.

"In their mind," she answered bluntly.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"Um… How exactly does that internal visualization work? Do you picture the pattern in your mind or something?"

"Well…kind of?"

"You don't sound all that certain…"

I wasn't going to be unraveling the operating principles of magic in a single day. I'd only asked Ifriita, but I got a strong sense that everyone visualized these techniques differently.

"Okay, got it. I have one last question. Sylphy and the other elves of the Black Forest use spirit magic, yeah?" I asked.

"That's right. Oh, but other elves can use it too," Ifriita replied.

"Gotcha." I nodded. "Does spirit magic require techniques too?"

"No. Normal magic and spirit magic are fundamentally different. You use techniques to change magic power into all kinds of different phenomena in normal magic, but with spirit magic, you speak directly to the spirits to have them produce said phenomena," she explained.

"I…see?"

"In exchange for not having to put together a bunch of techniques on your own, you have to control multiple different spirits at the same time in order to bring about large-scale phenomena, which can be very difficult. Additionally, you need to have spirits nearby that suit your objective. It's great if there are a few around, but if there aren't, you're out of luck. That's one downside to spirit magic."

"Ah. Well, in that case, it seems to me that normal magic is more useful," I concluded.

"Oddly enough, that's not the case," she countered. "Spirits will accurately reproduce the magic a user visualizes, which gives you a lot more casting freedom. Of course, that means you need a strong imagination, and also that creating phenomena that goes against the laws of nature is difficult."

"H-huh…"

If I tried to continue the programming language analogy, spirits were like applications specializing in singular things like wind and fire. If you wanted to cast a large-scale spell, you needed to boot up multiple applications at once, so the memory and CPU load —in this case the load on the caster—was high. Additionally, a necessary spirit not being present was equivalent to an application simply not existing, so you couldn't create the phenomena you wanted to.

Normal magic was akin to creating the program itself from scratch, so you could cast whatever you wanted regardless of whether the correct spirit was present or not. However, in order to cast large-scale magic or a spell with complex effects, the technique you needed to create had to be complicated enough to match, meaning it was much harder to pull off.

"Guess there are merits to both," I concluded.

"Exactly," Ifriita nodded. "So, why'd you ask? You can't use magic, right?"

"I can't, but magic power is pretty much the most powerful energy source in this world, right? And magic itself is the technology that makes use of it. If I'm going to make efficient tools in this world, I need to have at least a basic understanding of how it all works."

I could push this world's technological culture forward, but magic culture here was already pretty advanced. That's why I felt it'd be much easier to combine the two moving forward.

"Huh… Is that so?" Ifriita asked.

"That's my take, at least," I said. "If nothing else, my airboards and golem communicators combine the technology of my world and the technology of this one."

"Hm…" Ifriita started to give me the evil eye. What was up with this doubt-filled look?

"What?"

"Nothing… It's nothing. More importantly, do you have anything else to ask me?"

"I mean, yeah, but…"

"It's fine. Ask away. I'll answer anything I can."

"Thanks. I'm curious about magic power consumption when casting spells…"

I went on to ask her a ton of questions about magic and magic power. However…

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Ira's silent gaze bore into me.

"My bad."

She didn't say a word, but I could read her well enough.

"Look, I'm sorry… I'll ask you first next time, okay?"

Ira ended up sulking like crazy after hearing that I went to Ifriita with my questions. Truth be told, I'd avoided going to her because I knew she was busy and I didn't want to burden her with a bunch of basic questions. But despite her busyness, she wanted me to come to her about any concerns or questions related to magic I had. Smoothing things over was going to be an uphill battle.

"You should ask us about miracles, by the way," Elen's voice chimed in, followed by the voices of the rest of her crew.

"Indeed. We will answer any questions you have."

"I'm not as knowledgeable on the subject as them, but…"

I had no idea how they'd heard I was asking about this kind of stuff, but Elen had just gotten back from a work trip, so I took her up on her offer and asked them about how miracles worked. But…

"God answers any and all sincere prayers."

"Put your heart at peace and believe in the Lord."

"Build your spirit internally, without letting it escape outward."

"Could you please try to describe it more concretely?" I pleaded. "You might as well be saying to go 'Wapow! Kazoom! Boom!'"

Their explanations didn't really help much with my investigation of magic, but I could at least tell that their miracles were very similar to spirit magic. Both relied on more nebulous things like deities and spirits instead of techniques. Then, by visualizing results in their minds, they could create phenomena.

I also couldn't tell the difference between healing magic using light spirits and healing miracles. The only thing I noticed was that, after they used healing magic via spirits, I could see little balls of light (the spirits themselves, maybe?) floating around me after the fact.

In any case, I continued to accumulate magical knowledge little by little.

***

Magic, magic power, and miracles—I managed to build up a considerable wealth of knowledge regarding these special phenomena that didn't exist in my old world.



First, it was clear as day that miracles, standard magic, and spirit magic all used magic power, at least in some respect. Magic power was used as an energy source to produce different kinds of effects, and my understanding was that the efficiency rate of this conversion was extremely good.

For example, let's look at Ira's lightning magic. Apparently, her lightning had the same destructive force as natural lightning. If I remembered correctly, the minimum voltage and electrical current for lightning was somewhere in the ballpark of 100 million volts and tens of thousands of amperes, respectively. Needless to say, that was well beyond the kind of energy a single person could instantaneously produce.

Hm? Those numbers are so massive that you have a hard time picturing them? Okay, well…

The 5.56mm NATO rounds I use in my assault rifle produce about 1,300 joules of energy, my 7.62×39mm rounds produce 1,500 joules of energy, and the 12.7mm rounds I use in my anti-material rifle produce about 18,000 joules of energy.

Compared to that, a single lightning bolt produces 1,000 megajoules. You read that right. *Mega*joules. In other words, a billion joules. Of course, directly comparing the energy output of a bullet and a bolt of lightning isn't exactly scientific, but you get the picture. A single bolt of lightning has 55,000 times more energy than a 12.7mm round.

That meant that Ira was able to control that kind of energy with her tiny body. Even crazier was the fact that if she was at her maximum magic power capacity, she could fire off ten lightning spells in a row. I'm sure you can understand just how far beyond this other world's common sense magic power and magic that is.

"So… I've given up on trying to uncover the secrets of magic power or how the energy is converted so efficiently. I'll have to leave that to the scholars and mages of this world," I said.

"Mm," was all Ira said in response.

"Is it just me, or are you just running away from the problem?" asked Ifriita.

"Not running. Changing course," I replied.

It was all about the wording. Choosing not to think about something beyond my capacity was a totally logical decision as far as I was concerned. One worthy of praise, if you ask me.

"Essentially, I want to go back to basics," I said.

"Go on," Ifriita replied.

"In short, I plan on pursuing my interests since I have no pressing issues to take care of," I explained.

"Wow," Ifriita said. "This guy's actually declaring that he plans to slack off."

"Now, now. Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not planning on stuffing my face, sleeping, and drowning in booze. I'm going to be engineering useful tools. Hell, depending on what I come up with, some of 'em might end up getting approved for mass production and sent out into the world to improve the lives of tons of people."

I stuck my index finger out at Ifriita as she narrowed her eyes at me, then I wagged it in her face.

"Mm. Kousuke's airboards are currently being used in the Liberation Army, and the lower-priced versions are in the testing phase. Eventually, they'll be sold to the public," Ira said.

The low-price airboards she was referring to were upgraded carriages that had hover devices instead of wheels. They definitely weren't cheap to maintain, but their speed and ease in transporting goods and materials earned them rave reviews. Since there was no friction between the wheels and the axle, they were also less of a burden on horses, so they could travel two times as far as normal, apparently. Additionally, the levitation magic being used in their hover devices were standard fare, so there was no need to worry about info on them leaking to foreign powers.

That being said, there were no plans to sell the standard airboards; the hover devices used in them were groundbreaking and unique because they were specifically made to eliminate the recoil produced from the wind magic, and the control scheme utilized new technology as well.

"I mean, it's all well and good to want to make useful tools, but is it really going to be that simple?" Ifriita asked.

"Well, there were a lot of useful daily goods in my world, so I want to try and use magic to reproduce them," I replied.

"I see," Ifriita said.

"Hm… For example?" Ira asked.

"Well… I'd like to make some refrigerators, for one."

If refrigerators became commonplace in this world, people would be able to store perishable goods for way longer. Obviously, this would be a huge benefit to normal households, but it would also be a big deal for restaurants and the like.

"Refrigerwhat now?" Ifriita asked.

"What is that?" Ira was also curious.

"Okay, so…" I explained the concept of the refrigerator to both Ira and Ifriita.

"I get it. It's true that perishables tend to go bad in the summer, and I know that storing food underground in dark, cool places helps them last longer," Ifriita said, nodding thoughtfully.

"We have an ice chamber in the castle for freezing goods, but standard households definitely do not," Ira added.

"Wait, you've already got a refrigerator?!" I asked.

"No, it's an ice chamber. It's so cold that if you went inside during the summer, you'd think it was winter out. The issue is that it uses a spirit stone this big to solidify a pact with an ice spirit," Ifriita explained, using her hand to give me a rough size of the stone in

question. It was a little bigger than a softball… Maybe about the size of an infant's head?

As far as I could recall, elves processed precious gems in order to produce spirit stones. Making a spirit stone that big definitely would have been expensive.

"I don't plan on using anything that expensive, mind you. Ira, there's magic for producing ice, right?" I asked.

"Mm, yeah. Ice bullets," she replied, raising her hand and instantly generating a sharp chunk of ice.

"That magic you just did utilizes techniques for producing ice, making it sharp, and sending it at a target, right?"

"Basically."

"Is there any magic for freezing water out in nature?"

"I've…never heard of a spell like that."

"Mm… I don't think one currently exists," Ifriita said. "But I think I could whip up something from scratch using ice bullets or blizzard magic. I think it would also be pretty easy to produce using spirit magic."

Wow, so that kind of spell didn't already exist? Was this world's magic limited to attack spells?

"I think you could probably just extract the ice-producing technique from the ice-bullet magic. What I was thinking of is an icebox-style refrigerator…"

I wrote down the gist of what I had in mind on a scrap of paper. The icebox fridge design was a large box with separate top and bottom sections that used strong heat-insulating materials. The top part would be a metal box capable of effective heat conduction that would have ice put into it, which would then cool the air of the bottom section, keeping any food there nice and cold.

As far as I was aware, this type of fridge was widely used in my world before electric fridges came into fashion. I'd heard that

back then, there were a ton of vendors that would go door-to-door selling ice.

"In my old world, we used electricity to directly cool foods in the fridge without having to use ice, but in this world, it'll probably be pretty difficult to consistently supply large amounts of magic power, huh?"

"Mm. Aside places atop an underground vein vent, yes," Ira said.

"True. But do you really need to attach an ice tool to each and every fridge? I think there'd be more profit to be had if you made an ice-producing magic tool, then had state-run ice vendors," Ifriita suggested.

"Oooh…" Ira said.

"Good point," I replied.

I couldn't help but clap my hands together at Ifriita's proposal. She was onto something. I'd been so focused on making a brand-new magic tool that I hadn't seen how profitable it would be for the nation to use ice vendors. We'd be creating a new product in the form of the fridge, plus more jobs for people via the ice vendors.

"Leave it to a couple of engineers to not think about the practicality of their inventions," Ifriita said in an exasperated tone, shaking her head.

"I can't argue with that," I replied. "But honestly, I still think a fridge with an ice-producing magic tool would be really useful."

"The cost is going to spike if you need to attach a magic tool to each and every one. Useful, sure, but your average family won't be able to afford one," Ifriita said.

"Urgh… Good point."

"I'm not exactly a pro when it comes to accounting, so you should probably talk this over with Melty," Ifriita suggested. "I think it'd be a good idea to produce a box you just put ice into, a box with an ice-producing magic tool attached, and a magic tool for ice

vendors. That way you can get a clear idea of how much each is going to cost. Then you can ask Melty for her take."

"Okay."

"Right."

Both Ira and I nodded earnestly. I couldn't very well go around making convenient and efficient stuff without considering other factors. I had seen the light.

"What's that look for?" Ifriita asked.

"I was just thinking about how I shouldn't judge a book by its cover."

"Ohhh, sure. Well, how about you tell me exactly how you judged this book?"

I could see the veins bulging at her temples as she smiled, but I didn't have the time to calm the storm that was Ifriita's temper. I ended up quickly making several prototypes for the body of the fridge using my craft skill. Once Ira made an ice magic tool for me, I was going to head over to Melty to get her up to speed.

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After making fridge prototypes and talking everything over with Melty, we all decided to go ahead and make icebox refrigerators and set up ice vendors. We put the new product into multiple restaurants in Merinesburg, and people seemed to be quite taken with them. Of course, that had led to brand-new requests, which was why I was currently in the R&D lab.

"So? What are you working on now?"

Ifriita was here. She'd been popping into the lab pretty often as of late, so she must've had quite a bit of spare time on her hands. Didn't she have, like, princess work to do? I considered asking her, but I didn't want to make her angry; she'd be a pain to deal with.

"I'm making a device to cool beer," I explained.

"Why…?" She seemed genuinely confused.

"You know local restaurants have been using the fridges, right?"

"Yeah, I heard about all that from Sylphy. Sounds like they're a hit. I only helped out a little, and even I was getting thanked."

"Right. Apparently one of the restaurants started using them to cool alcohol, and their customers are big fans."

"Okay…"

"So now it's being used as an alcohol-cooling device instead of for storing food."

"That wasn't part of the plan."

"Sure wasn't. Plus, the fridges can't exactly cool a ton of beer. We've been getting requests to improve that, and now here I am, having to build an ice-powered alcohol-cooling device."

More specifically, I was working on an ice-cold beer dispenser. It would chill the beer by running it through metal tubes cooled by ice. The tubes themselves were coiled, and I was using copper to make them. I'd remembered that copper had really good thermal conductivity. In terms of corrosion-resistance, there were probably better materials to use, but for now, this was just a prototype.

"All right, let's experiment. I think this'll work," I said.

"You seem confident," Ifriita replied.

"Well, this existed in my old world. Can you produce some ice for me?" I asked.

"I'm not great at ice magic…" she said, but nonetheless produced a chunk of ice the size of a fist. Judging by her appearance and name, I got the impression Ifriita was probably best at fire magic.

I shattered the chunk of ice with a hammer and began to spread it on top of the coil, then put a funnel over the end where the alcohol would be coming out and poured water into it.

Hm… What sort of modifications should I make for when this thing actually serves alcohol? It'd be a pain to have to pour it in with a funnel every single time. There'd be sanitary issues as well. Just attaching a barrel of liquor to this tube wouldn't cause the liquid to flow, after all.

In the other world, they'd used a compressed CO_2 gas cylinder to apply pressure, but those didn't exist here… After this, I'd have to talk to Ira and see if she could make a magic tool that produced a small amount of wind magic. That'd probably work as a substitute for a gas cylinder, right? The problem was whether or not a wooden barrel would be able to handle that kind of pressure. I could always put the barrel somewhere high and have the magic tool produce a weak output, but man, if it ever got used sloppily, the barrel itself could explode.

"How cold will it get?" Ifriita asked.

"Ice-cold, I suspect," I replied.

In any case, the important thing was to focus on experimentation for the time being. I opened the faucet and water soon came pouring into my cup. I took a sip, and yeah, it was ice-cold.

"Well, the experiment is a success. Here."

Ifriita was watching with great curiosity, so I handed her my full cup of water.

"…Mm, yeah. It's pretty cold," she said.

Mm? What was with her change of attitude…?

Oh, I get it.

"Sorry, I should've been more considerate," I said.

"I-it's fine," she stammered, sipping at the cold water again. "It really is nice and cold. But I guess that makes sense considering how much ice… Well, actually, this seems super efficient."

"Exactly. Oh, and by the way, by using heat instead of ice, you can use this exact framework to produce hot water in a short period of time," I said.

Gas boilers worked exactly the same way, but with fire instead of ice. That said, for heated liquids, you'd need to control the amount of time the heat was being applied, so we'd probably have to put a golem core inside of the device. If we ever made something like that, it'd end up being an expensive magic tool.

Regardless, we had proof of concept now, so I called over Ira and the other members of R&D to talk about turning this into an actual product.

"Hmm, so you're using copper tubes? The blacksmiths in town could make this," Ira said.

"The case is basically the same as the refrigerator's, so the same workshops could make them too," I explained.

"Wind magic tools for the barrels? What if we made the funnel like a large tank, then closed it just enough to keep out bugs and other stuff?"

"As far as the drainage for the melted ice is concerned, we can put a cork on the bottom, then set it up so the water can be poured out into a bucket and disposed of. The big problem is the ice consumption."

"How about we start by cooling some ale?"

The members of the R&D team started brainstorming while inspecting the prototype beer dispenser. Since they were all talented and passionate individuals, as soon as I came up with an idea like this, they immediately set their minds to work trying to turn it into an actual product. Truth be told, if I used my powers to their maximum abilities, I could have easily made a perfect ice-cold beer dispenser, but I was showing self-restraint. It was fun to work together with everyone like this, and more importantly, this world had magic and magic tools. It was entirely possible that they could

come up with a groundbreaking product thanks to them possessing a perspective that I simply didn't have.

One of the dwarf artisans brought in a small barrel of ale from who knew where, then started cooling it.

"Now this hits the spot! It's cold and delicious!"

"I never realized how good cold ale could be."

"I'll have another."

The members of the R&D team ended up getting wasted, and the other folks with spare time on their hands came over to see what was going on, which led to them getting wrapped up in our little party as well.

"This is going to sell. Kousuke, please make more stuff like this," Melty said.

"You're asking the impossible," I replied.

Melty kept asking me for minor miracles while participating in the festivities. I couldn't just come up with these sorts of ideas out of nowhere. The only reason the dispenser even existed was because one of the restaurants in town made the request.

"Good luck. I know you can do it, Kousuke. Just think back on all the super-useful goods you used in your day-to-day life in the other world!"

"Money-grubber."

"If only she wasn't like this. I mean, I know it's for our country, but…"

A little ways away, both Ira and Sylphy were looking at Melty as if she was some kind of injured animal.

Er, less looking, more helping? Please?

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While I was busy trying to improve the lives of our citizens, the international situation was steadily developing. Specifically, the Dragonis Mountain Nation to the west of Merinard and just beyond the Federation of Small Nations had welcomed the New Kingdom of Merinard as a nation state in the grandest terms possible.

This in turn caused the Federation of Small Nations to the west to cease their suspicious activities—their attempts to carve out chunks of Merinard's territory, to be specific. Dragonis's statement regarding the New Kingdom of Merinard was incredibly amicable, and heavily implied that should anyone attempt to take a swing at us, they would not stand idly by.

According to what I'd heard about the Federation of Small Nations, they knew the Dragonis Mountain Nation was not to be defied. Many of the nations making up the federation flourished as a result of the dragon commerce with Dragonis, so making an enemy out of them would mean they couldn't capitalize on those benefits. Because of that, the federation was following suit and starting to cozy up to us. Talk about being self-interested, right?

Next up was the Varyag Empire, which now had an embassy in the capital city of Merinesburg. They had also formally welcomed our independence, and while they weren't nearly as amicable in their terms as Dragonis was, they'd praised our rejection of demi-human racism and publicly announced their pleasure at having an ally who rejected the Holy Kingdom's human supremacy. Or, at least, that was the sense we got.

"The way they worded their announcement is so roundabout that it really doesn't read that way."

"Yes, well, the higher-ups in the empire don't really express such matters straightforwardly; it's how their aristocracy and royalty speak."

"Okay, sure, but Sylphy and Serafeeta speak plenty candidly, and they're royalty, right?"

"That's because the Kingdom of Merinard has a pretty short-lived history. Remember, King Ixil was only of the second generation of the royal line."

"Gotcha."

Now that I thought about it, I didn't actually know much at all about Merinard's history. Maybe I'd ask someone about it when I had the time… Not right now, though.

Let's get back to the topic at hand.

Obviously, not every nation was happy with us. The Holy Kingdom announced that it found it absurd that a bunch of bandits who'd taken over a group of cities and had the power to murder swaths of innocent civilians and soldiers could possibly call themselves a nation. Meanwhile, their vassal states and allies stood alongside them, making it clear they saw us as an enemy.

It was doubtful that any of them would take real action during the winter, but once it got warm again and they had their supplies in order, who knew what would happen?

Come to think of it, though, we all did. They would most certainly come after us.

The Liberation Army had finished the battle to reclaim their nation, but now they were to be swept up in a battle to protect their home.

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The seasons changed, and winter arrived.

Unlike Japan, winters in this world didn't see much snowfall. In its place was a near-constant chilly winter wind. Honestly, as someone who came from a country that had four seasons, I found it to be a bit disappointing.

It was probably for the best that it didn't get too cold, though. That being said, we did get some frost buildup, and it was chilly

enough for a thin layer of ice to form over the water. Apparently, people did occasionally die from the cold.

"How are our provisions looking for the winter?" Sylphy asked Melty from beneath the kotatsu I'd built using my craft ability. She had a serious expression on her beautiful face, but there were citrus fruits sitting on the kotatsu in front of her, which made the whole situation pretty surreal.

"Reports from all over the nation are confirming that we have plenty of food and fuel to go around. We have a particular surplus of fuel, thanks to Kousuke's hard work," Melty reported.

"I cut down a whole bunch of trees before winter arrived. When I close my eyes, I can still see them all…" I said.

After all of our hard work fighting the Holy Kingdom, the Liberation Army—rather, the New Kingdom of Merinard—immediately had to prepare for the winter.

As I explained earlier, winters in this world and specifically in Merinard didn't see much snowfall. Obviously it was still cold enough for a person to freeze to death if they slept outside without a fire or a blanket, but if they were at home bundled up properly with the firewood they needed, they could get through the winter with no issue.

Who used to prepare the firewood? The demi-human slaves, of course.

It should be obvious why the firewood output this year was lower than last year: the Liberation Army's freeing of the slaves. Most of the demi-humans we'd saved had either joined up with our forces, begun working on the farms I made, worked as civil officials, or started their own businesses. There were a lot less people choosing to stick to physical labor compared to previous years. This was causing quite a few problems across the country. Nobody would choose to work a difficult, exhausting job like this if they could find better work elsewhere.

The fault, of course, lay at the feet of the Holy Kingdom's government and their long history of using demi-humans as cheap labor. Because of that, the humans in Merinard all believed that manual labor was a low-paying job suitable only for demi-humans. Melty was doing her best to correct that misconception, but it wasn't going to be easy or fast.

"We'll be fine next year. They're just going to have to learn the hard way this year," Melty muttered with a sadistic smile.

I didn't know the details, but apparently she'd sprung some kind of trap on the merchants and influence holders across the nation who were still trying to use demi-humans as cheap labor. It was safe to assume that this trap of hers was probably awful, so I decided not to pry. It's never a good idea to poke a sleeping beast.

"Zzz…"

Ira, on the other hand, was sitting on my lap, sleeping over the kotatsu. She was extremely busy these days. Not only was she a genius mage, she was also a talented alchemist and a skilled magic tool craftswoman. She was developing all kinds of magic tools while compounding highly effective and precious new medicines that were extremely difficult to make. Not only that, but she was also still keeping up with her work as a court mage and training the next generation too. She might as well have been working at one of Japan's most exploitative companies.

To be honest, I was concerned about her physical health. She had the motivation to do it all, though, so there was no use trying to stop her. Every now and then she'd run out of juice like she had today, and all I could really do then was dote on her. Maybe next time I could try and force her to take a breather before it got to this point.

"Can't you people try and live, you know, more peacefully?" Grande asked.

"It's not like we enjoy going to war," Melty replied with a frown at Grande, who was also sitting beneath the kotatsu wrapped up in a

blanket.

From Grande's perspective, our wars must've seemed incredibly foolish. There were monsters in this world, as well as swaths of land they ruled that humanity had yet to occupy. If we wanted to strengthen our respective nations, why not just develop that land? And yet humanity couldn't help but fight one another. Just when you thought one war was over, we started preparing to fight another one. Of course Grande would admonish us.

"By the way, Kousuke? How are the harpies doing?" Sylphy asked.

"All good for the moment. Sounds like their morning sickness is over and done with," I replied.

"I see… They beat me to the punch."

A slight crease formed in Sylphy's brow as a complex expression crossed her face. Several of the harpies I'd been involved with since winter started were pregnant now. To be honest, it was inevitable since I didn't use any sort of protection with any of the women I slept with, but the only ones who'd gotten pregnant so far were harpies. More specifically, the blue-feathered Fronte, the brown-feathered Flamme, and Pessa, who also had brown feathers.

"The Lord bestows children to us mere mortals. I do not believe there is any reason to rush," Elen whispered as she peeled some fruit.

The fact that she was in her usual saintly attire while underneath the kotatsu made for some real strange imagery, but everyone else must've been used to it by now, considering I was the only one who noticed.

"I guess that's true. It's a long winter, after all," Sylphy said.

"Indeed it is," Elen agreed.

Sylphy and Elen both gazed at me.

In other words, "good luck"?

I got where they were coming from, but it'd be nice if they eased up on me a little bit. Maybe all men dreamed about dying while having sex, but I at least wanted to see my own kids' faces before departing for the afterlife.

"Hrm? It's still light out… Are you going to start now? If so, I'll come with you." Grande, who'd been relaxing up until now, suddenly raised her head, a sparkling smile on her face.

C'mon, ladies, it's still bright out!

"Well… I'm done with my work for today, so why not?" Sylphy said with a grin.

"Good point…" Elen agreed.

"Ah, right! I forgot I promised to see, uh, Serafeeta or Ifriita," I said. I started to push Ira off my lap so I could escape, but—

"No running." At some point, Ira had woken up and was now clinging to my clothes.

Well, that was it for me. I was done for. Granted, even if Ira hadn't woken up, I was never going to be able to escape from Sylphy or Melty at this distance.

"I mean, if you really don't want to…" Sylphy said.

"I never said that," I replied.

Of course I wanted to be with them. I was just worried what would become of me tomorrow if we started this early in the day. Was I going to end up looking like a dried-out mummy?

"Worst-case scenario, you may drink some of my blood," Grande offered.

"I can also use my miracles," Elen said.

Wasn't that just a form of doping…?

Either way, I ended up letting myself get dragged into bed.

Chapter 2:
Troubling Developments in the North and Preserved Foods

THINGS TYPICALLY SLOWED DOWN during the winter, but it wasn't like I was being jumped from sunup to sundown. Okay, well, maybe *sometimes* I was, but it wasn't a constant thing.

Seriously.

Trust me!

"The defense of our borders is of pressing importance," Sir Leonard said with his arms folded, standing in front of the map spread out over the table.

His mane was looking exceptionally glossy lately. According to the rumors I'd heard, a bunch of widows had barged in on the bachelor and started taking care of him. It was finally time for him to pay the piper.

"Maintaining public order is equally as pressing. We need to handle both simultaneously," Danan said, his tone serious.

He'd started looking extremely groomed and oddly handsome lately as well. He'd always been single up until now, but he was also popular with women. Like Sir Leonard, I'd heard he'd finally been captured by the women who desired him.

This all made sense, as we'd taken back Merinard's territory and things had calmed down. I imagined they'd both rejected the advances they received before now by saying they didn't want to pursue any kind of relationship until they'd taken the kingdom back, but that excuse was gone at this point.

Good lord!

Anyhow, their circumstances were beside the point. As was the fact that they came to me for advice now, and looked upon me with great respect. Yup. Totally beside the point.

So please stop calling me "Master"! Enough!

"The problem is that we don't have enough personnel to address either issue," Sir Leonard explained.

"Indeed. Our nation's borders are long, and our territory vast. We do not have enough people to keep our eyes on everything," Danan added.

"Yeah. In which case, what we need…" I trailed off.

"Is more people?" Danan finished.

"That's one option, but I think we should come up with a system so that we can cover everything with the small number of personnel we have now," I suggested.

"That would certainly be great if possible, but…do you have anything in mind?" Sir Leonard asked.

"Of course." I nodded and whipped out a compass (not the directional kind, by the way, the sort you use to draw circles). First, I drew one circle around a fortress located on the border we shared with the Holy Kingdom, then I drew another circle within its radius and filled in the border with more circles.

"What is this?"

"It's the broadcast range for a golem communicator. Approximately 100 kilometers in radius. These circles represent its maximum range."

The first-gen golem communicators could broadcast up to four days of walking distance away—in other words, 120 kilometers. The current models had a much wider range, so even with potential obstacles considered, 100 kilometers would be well within the radius of broadcast.

Once I finished drawing those circles, I then drew even bigger circles encompassing all of the major installations within Merinard. By doing so, I was effectively drawing our communication network from the border all the way through Merinesburg, to Arichburg, to the rear base in the Omitt Badlands.

"The small circles are the broadcast range for our portable golem communicators, while the medium-and large-sized circles represent the range of our large stationary communicators and the relay communicators."

The stationary communicators had a broadcast range about five times wider than the normal units. They could effectively cover a radius of up to 600 kilometers. Obviously, I'd made modifications and installed more receiver antennas to make this possible. As for the relay broadcast stations, I'd ended up using more compact form factors that didn't stand out. I'd limited their functionality to being able to relay a broadcast from afar, which allowed me to make them small and minimize the resources necessary to build them. Even so, they were still capable of three times the broadcast distance than a standard unit.



"Then this…" Next, I set some chalk into the compass and drew a big circle.

"What does this white circle represent?" Sir Leonard asked.

"The five-hour movement range for a technical airboard. I would say it would take about eight days to cover this distance on foot. The big plus here is that rain, poor terrain, and snow have no effect on the speed," I explained.

"I thought I understood how fast your technical airboards could travel, but seeing it drawn out like this is something else entirely," Danan said, groaning at the sight of the white circle.

If you walked for five days, you could cover a radius of 240 kilometers. This was equivalent to the distance that a technical airboard could cover at a cruising speed of 50 kilometers an hour. That said, that wasn't their top speed, so the white circle was much larger. No one was going to be driving one of those things at 200 kilometers an hour, realistically, but 80 certainly felt doable. If you pushed it, you could reach the edge of the circle in something like three hours.

"We put together an early warning communications network using the golem communicators, and if it picks up any enemies, we can send out an armed airboard unit to take them out," I said. "If we have enough personnel transport vehicles, we can even send out crossbow and magic gunsmen on airboards instead of ones equipped with light machine guns. We should also look into organizing small squads to hunt down the scattered enemy units throughout the country. Let's call them…hunters."

These so-called hunters would end up being pretty different to the ones back on Earth, but in terms of their actual mission, they'd be pretty similar, right?

"Hunters, eh? Heh, not a bad name at all," Sir Leonard said.

"So their objective would be to hunt down any enemy that slips through the security network…? I see," Danan replied.

"The circles I drew here are a rough example, so work out the details with the military, okay? You guys get the gist of the system, right? You'll have to work through how to manage the communicators, light machine guns, airboards, and magic guns, as well as keeping it all under wraps," I said.

"Indeed. We also need to discuss things with R&D and figure out a way to keep this hush-hush. That being said, this plan will allow us to cut down on the number of personnel we need to allocate to border security," Danan said.

"It certainly will. If we use this system properly, it will also be useful for internal peacekeeping. The fact we can instantly share information and send in a strike force immediately is a huge plus. This will significantly change our battle tactics," I said.

"I bet."

We were throwing wireless communicators, soldier transports, machine guns, rifles, and close-range air support into battles fought with spears, bows, and swords and shields, so it was inevitable this was going to flip the script.

This was the golden age of fighting in large, clustered groups, and I was suddenly introducing modern-ish mobile warfare, so of course the Holy Kingdom was at a loss. I was sure that the top brass over there were in a panic after hearing the stories their defeated soldiers reported back to them.

"With this much power, we could easily strike back at the Holy Kingdom," Sir Leonard said.

"Are you going to invade?" I asked.

"Absolutely not. Doing that out of hatred for them would be foolish," Sir Leonard said with a shrug.

I wondered how he really felt. I shot a look at Danan, who silently shook his head.

"Our priority is to protect this nation and its people. Not strike down our sworn enemy out of hatred," Sir Leonard added.

"Yeah, though if you did decide to do that, it wouldn't be my place to stop you," I said.

I wasn't going to tell them not to use the power I gave them to get their revenge, nor could I, really. If I was going to be worried over that sort of thing, I should never have given them these weapons in the first place. At this point, I had no right to try and take the moral high ground. Plus, I'd already completed the gleaming magic jewel bomb, a weapon of mass destruction capable of killing tens of thousands of soldiers in less than an hour.

"When it comes to battle strategies involving new weapons, you're always the best person to talk to," Danan said.

"Agreed. It would be difficult for us to come up with such refined tactics without your help. Do you have any ideas for more new weapons or equipment?" Sir Leonard asked.

"I mean, not when you put me on the spot like that," I said. "You mean equipment like what you already use, Sir Leonard?"

"But of course. Your guns are indeed powerful, but they are not the types of weapons I'm most comfortable with," he replied.

"I know, but…"

Sir Leonard's preferred weaponry was the sort you could swing around in close-quarters combat. In my world, those weapons were long past their prime and basically never factored into combat tactics. The only people who used bayonets and the like were guys who sipped black tea all year round.

"Hmm… Ah!"

Staring down at the white circle on the map, a thought came to me. What about a personal booster made from the propulsion devices used on the airboards? Specifically, I was imagining the 3D maneuver gear from that one manga about fighting titans. We'd have to carefully look into whether to attach the device to the thighs or the back while developing it.

"Did you come up with something?" Danan asked anxiously.

Well, sort of.

"It'd be useful if you could close the distance between you and an enemy ten meters away in an instant, right? What about soaring over the enemy front lines to attack defenseless archers and projectile infantry, then being able to retreat just as quickly?" I asked.

"That would certainly be effective, but charging in aimlessly would only result in having one's body filled with arrows or holes from spears," Sir Leonard replied.

"A strong strategy would solve that problem, but as far as arrows are concerned, one would just have to shift around to avoid them. Maybe we could make some kind of wind magic barrier that you could use for a brief period of time," I said.

You'd only need to block the arrows for the first ten seconds or so after charging into enemy lines, so surely we could figure that out? I'd been heavily involved with magic tool development as of late, so I'd gotten a feel for how much power one could draw out of a single piece of magicite.

"You know about the propulsion devices we use on the airboards, right? The tubes? What if I made them small enough for a person to equip. Like, a mobility device that lets the wearer zoom quickly over a short distance into enemy lines?" I suggested.

"One mistake and the user would be impaled by the enemy spearmen or completely overwhelmed," Sir Leonard said.

"It might be doable if the user was well trained," Danan pointed out.

"It would significantly raise the mobility of our infantry, so I think it's worth looking into. It doesn't even necessarily have to be used in big engagements. What if we had our scouts wear them? Or even the hunters we talked about earlier? Obviously they'd need training, but I think a piece of equipment that lets a soldier move at high speeds is a pretty good idea," I pushed.

Logistically, it'd have to be pretty small, so if we used normal-sized magicite, they could probably function for at least a few days. Plus, it wouldn't be that big a deal to carry some extras.

"Hmm… Now that you mention it, I think it would be a good idea to ask R&D to look into this," Sir Leonard said.

"Agreed. It would probably be too expensive to equip everyone in our army with one, but it might be useful to use with an elite squad," Danan added.

And so, it was decided we'd move forward with the personal high-mobility device. Our test subjects would probably end up with countless injuries during the testing phase, since they'd be smashing into things at high speeds and hitting the ground hard every time they failed a landing. I didn't know who was going to end up testing the devices, but I prayed for their good fortune.

***

"Aaaaaaah!"

Heaven and earth flipped multiple times, and a sharp pain raced through my body. I had a prickly feeling in the back of my nose, and it felt like my vision was spinning. I wanted to cry.

"Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?" I asked Ira, who was looking down at me from above my position on the floor.

"No." She gently rubbed my head, which was nice and all, but I was hurt everywhere. "You didn't break any bones this time."

"Progress…" I muttered. My body trembled with pain as I put my hands on the floor and hauled my upper body up.

"Here." Ira brought a bottle of red liquid to my mouth, so I drank it.

Urgh, it's super sour and tastes awful! I thought, but I could already feel the pain fading from my body. *All hail life potions!*

"Haaah… This thing's a real bucking bronco, huh?" I said as I stood up and conked the evil object on my hips with my fist. I had a prototype high-mobility device—the very same one I'd described to Sir Leonard and Danan earlier—equipped on my person. I'd attached a pair of small propulsion devices to a metal frame in order to produce high-speed movement, but controlling it was a real pain. More than a pain, actually. It felt kind of impossible.

In the past two weeks, I'd broken my bones thirteen times, passed out eight times, and suffered an uncountable number of other injuries. If I wasn't the one testing this thing, we'd probably have produced fifty to sixty casualties by now.

"Kousuke, I honestly think it would be better to have a beastman perform the tests, as their physical abilities are superior," Ira said.

"Urgh…" I groaned as she looked up at me with concern in her eye.

At the end of the day, a human couldn't run along the ground at speeds of thirty to fifty kilometers per hour, nor could they jump high in the air. I agreed with her on that front. After all, I was living proof.

"It's almost impossible for humans match up to strength-type demi-humans and their reaction speeds, or their strength of frame and body. Sure, there are some who can, but you aren't one of them," she added.

"Uuugh…"

I hated to admit it, but Ira was right. Back when the output on this thing was unsteady, a single crash had resulted in every bone in my body creaking and my hip nearly shattering. The current prototype had the propulsion devices attached to a frame. Right now, the frame fit the body firmly from the thighs to the back, almost like armor. The first version of the thing had just had the propulsion devices attached to a simple frame, putting way too much of a burden on the back and hip bones.

"I still think it's a good idea…" I said.

"It's really interesting and fresh," Ira agreed.

"But progress on that thing seems to be going way better."

"That's because its basic technology has already been established."

Both Ira and I were looking at one of the airbikes, which were currently running flawlessly. In terms of construction, it looked a lot like an airboard. The biggest difference was that it used one medium-sized propulsion device as its main unit, then two smaller devices for changing direction. The devices would fire based on what direction you turned the handle. The prototype we were looking at used two small hover devices: one at the front and one at the rear. Other prototypes had a single hover device in the center or used large-sized ones, as the researchers were experimenting with device placement and size in order to make the ride more comfortable.

"When it's finished, it will be even more useful than our horses," she said.

"So long as we can prepare magic crystals, it'll be much less of a strain on logistics," I agreed.

The biggest boon our mechanization of military movement and transportation gave us was the lightened load on logistics. The average human soldier consumed approximately one to two kilograms of food in a single day. This was the lowest possible amount, not counting water. Demi-humans, with their superior physical abilities, consumed quite a bit as well, so it was safe to say their food intake was at least two kilograms. Meanwhile, a horse pulling a carriage packed with supplies consumed ten times more food than a human. In other words, you would need ten kilograms worth of horse feed per day of travel.

For your consideration: The average horse-drawn carriage in this world could carry somewhere around 500 kilograms of supplies. Not bad, right? This was all thanks to the axles and wheels being made from magically enhanced materials. However, a loaded

carriage moved slowly, at about the same speed as a walking human. This meant that on a good day, you could travel thirty kilometers, but if it rained and the road turned into a muddy mess, the horse-drawn carriage wouldn't be able to move. Travel speeds further declined over roads with steep inclines and declines. Plus, as I mentioned earlier, horses were heavy eaters; they needed ten kilograms of food a day.

Airboards and airbikes, on the other hand, could easily travel 400 kilometers in a day at cruising speed, and the only necessary supplies were magic crystals that only weighed a few hundred grams each.

Was that too complex? Let me present you with a more practical comparison.

Imagine having to deliver supplies to a battlefield 200 kilometers away. If you went by horse and carriage, it would take a week to get there, which would mean your horse would consume 70 kilograms of supplies on the one-way trip. The coachman and three bodyguards would also consume 28 kilograms of supplies on their own. In total, approximately 100 kilograms of food would get consumed on the way there alone. Obviously, once you delivered the supplies, you'd have to come back, so that number would be doubled. This meant you'd only be able to deliver 300 kilograms of supplies to the battlefield.

To sum it all up, a one-way trip took a week, and if you considered the full round trip, you'd be consuming 200 kilograms of food and supplies. And if we accounted for what demi-humans needed, we'd only be able to deliver a single day's worth of food for 150 people. I'm sure it's clear now just how much of a struggle resupply logistics could be.

Now then, how would things go if you used an airboard?

A single transport airboard could carry 500 kilograms of supplies while traveling at a cruising speed of 50 kilometers per hour. Unlike a horse, it didn't need to rest, so you could stay on the

road for up to eight hours straight with no problem, putting you at a total distance of 400 kilometers traveled in a single day. Plus, airboard travel wasn't influenced by poor weather or road conditions. In other words, if you wanted to, you could deliver supplies to a battlefield 200 kilometers away in half a day and be back to the supply base that night. Obviously, you'd also be delivering the full 500 kilograms worth of supplies to the front lines. And all of this was possible with a single magic crystal, the type we were producing nonstop at our rear base. I'm sure you can understand just how big of a benefit our airboards were when it comes to mechanizing—or in this case, magicizing?—our logistics.

Thus far, I had no way of measuring just how large the personal load capacity was. At this point, there didn't seem to be an upper limit. I could also make fields to produce crops in a week on the front lines. I could build fortresses and cities. Additionally, with Grande, I could travel hundreds of kilometers in a single hour. As far as supply lines went, if I were the enemy, I'd either want to recruit me or kill me as soon as possible.

Anyway, back to the airbikes. Right now, our goals were:

- Get their cruising speed to 50 kilometers per hour, then enable travel at a maximum speed of 100 kilometers per hour.
- Ensure they didn't slow down when loaded with a maximum of 60 kilograms of supplies (not counting the driver).
- Make sure they could remain operational for a minimum of two weeks without needing maintenance.
- Install a feature that let them maintain their speed even when drivers were hands-off.

These were the four things we were looking to address in the design currently being developed. As far as that last feature went, apparently the developers were looking into making it so soldiers

were able to fire weapons or magic while on the move, and even eventually putting armor on the vehicle so it could charge like a cavalryman.

I wasn't so sure how important all that was, especially when we could just mow down enemies with a light machine gun. And if they were super attached to the idea of doing something with only this world's tech, they could always use magic guns or the sorcery guns currently in development.

Sorcery guns were a different version of the magic guns we already had, but instead of firing live rounds, they shot magic instead. Though right now, R&D was having a rough time with their development; they just weren't all that efficient. Magic guns could fire off 500 rounds with a single half of a magic crystal, but sorcery guns could only fire ten shots. Apparently, their efficiency would see a boost if we either enlarged the weapon and used more complex magic circuits or made the barrel with mithril silver alloy, but then the price would skyrocket. A genius mage like Ira could shoot off efficient magic using complex techniques at the cost of a little magic power, but trying to make that possible with a magic tool was proving to be increasingly difficult.

"It can only move right now, huh?" I asked.

"Mm. Once the fine tuning on the balance is finished, R&D will be testing to see how much of a load it can carry. Then after that, we need to work toward mass production. It's a lot," Ira said.

"Well, it really is fortunate that the base technology behind the airbike is already done for the most part."

"Mm. Leave the high-mobility device testing to a healthy test subject. Sir Leonard and Danan can pick someone out."

"Unfortunately, that seems like the best idea. After all, it'll probably end up being a demi-human soldier who uses it anyway, so…"

If we tuned this thing to my specific needs, it might not even work with a beastman. With that in mind, it really was a better idea

to leave the development to a beastman or another demi-human, the people who would actually be using it on the battlefield.

"Your sacrifices won't be in vain. If nothing else, there will be a lot less risk of grave injury," Ira said.

"I made it with my blood, sweat, and tears, after all," I said.

"Nice joke."

"Wasn't a joke…" I'd seriously crunched through this test period. Ha. Ha ha. Ha. "Then I'll leave the high-mobility device development to the beastmen and—hm?"

Out of nowhere, Ira gripped my clothes with her hands. "Kousuke. Your clothes are all dirty after spending so much time on the ground. Also, I know you drank a potion, but you should really get looked at."

"Nah, I'm fine."

"No." Ira wasn't budging on this. "If you're going to be like this…" Ira glanced toward the nearby roof. I followed suit and looked at the top of the building…and saw a bunch of harpies smiling.

"Wait. Calm down. We can talk this out," I said in a panic.

"I'll listen to what you have to say in the bath," Ira said.

It almost felt like she was strengthening her body with some sort of spell; Ira began to pull at me with a kind of strength that did not match her small body. To make matters worse, a bunch of harpies landed on the ground and began to excitedly push me from behind.

H-have mercy! Don't stretch my clothes out! I have other work to do! And if I don't, I'll make some! It's still bright out!

***

"I'm thinking of going on a journey."

"Not happening."

Sensing that my life was in peril after having my nightlife and daytime encroached upon by naughty activities, I went straight to Sylphy. Unfortunately, she rejected my idea instantly.

"Look, Sylphy. I'm really moved by how much everyone loves me, but I'm reaching my limit. Specifically, I'm in pain. Everywhere," I insisted.

Yes, there were ways of overcoming limitations, such as recovery magic, miracles, alchemic concoctions, and Grande's blood. But the fact that I was overcoming them at all meant that I was putting stress on other parts of my body. At the rate we were going, I could actually end up withering away, dying emaciated due to sexual overindulgence. I wanted to avoid that, if possible.

"Um, well, it is true that we've been going a little too hard on you, even if it *is* winter…" Sylphy said.

"If things keep up, I'm willing to ask Lime and the others to let me hide out underground," I said.

"Weeeee'll proteeect yooouuu."

"If you ask, I guess we could help."

"We're going to take this very seriously."

As part of these negotiations, I'd brought the slime girls with me. And, well…when I was asleep, they apparently did all sorts of things with (to?) me, but all that aside, they never pushed me too far. That was better than nothing.

"Kousuke…" Seeing I'd brought the slime girls along, Sylphy gave me a sad look.

"Look, I just want us to keep that sort of activity to nighttime, after I've at least eaten and taken a bath. I don't want to start things up in the middle of the day, only to realize it's suddenly the next morning."

Any man would dream of being able to play around with beautiful women during the day, drinking, feasting, and sleeping, but

there were limits. If everyone attacked me because some of the harpies had gotten pregnant, I'd end up dead.

"All right," Sylphy said. "I'll talk to everyone and tell them to not do that kind of thing during the day. We'll also talk things through so as to not place such a heavy physical burden on you."

"I really, really appreciate that. I knew coming to you first was the right idea," I said.

"Kousuke…" As soon as she heard I'd gone to her first, Sylphy began to smile happily.

I'd brought the slime girls with me, but I hadn't actually explain what was going on to them, so I hadn't really lied. Lime and the others typically did whatever I asked of them no matter what, after all.

That night, the girls had a big meeting and they agreed to my terms.

I had my first peaceful evening in ages.

***

I finally regained the peaceful days I had before winter came. Okay, well, not counting my nightlife. It was around that time that the royal castle in Merinesburg received a great many visitors: the representatives of the major cities that had sworn allegiance to the New Kingdom of Merinard.

This might come as a surprise, but about 70 percent of the representatives were the same as when the kingdom was under Holy Kingdom rule. They were the ones that, after we drove out the Holy Kingdom's forces, swore allegiance to us and were allowed to continue in their current positions. Obviously, this was only temporary. If they refused to abide by our rules going forward, they'd get the axe. And depending on the circumstances, I meant that literally.

"So I'm not supposed to leave my room," I said.

"Who knows what could happen, after all," Grande replied.

I stretched my body out, buried in a stack of cushions alongside her. I'd asked Sylphy if it was all right for me to not be there to greet the representatives considering I was her spouse, but she'd told me to stay in my room and not come out no matter what. Apparently, people knew that I was technically the spouse of a great many women, so there were those among the representatives who sought to try and introduce me to their female relatives to secure their positions.

"In other words, you are essentially a princess being targeted by a bunch of hungry beasts," Grande added.

"Really makes you think about what a 'princess' even is."

The representatives at the castle were here to be thanked as vassals since Sylphy and her army had at long last taken the full breadth of Merinard's territory back. From now on, Sylphy would serve as the queen of the New Kingdom of Merinard and impose a monarchy, with me supporting her as her spouse. The problem would be how we governed over the different regions. If possible, we wanted to post people whom she trusted in the different regions to make her rule absolute, but there were a massive amount of city leaders who pledged their allegiance as well. The reasons these representatives were here varied, but they all ultimately boiled down to the same thing: Please don't kill me, I'll obey you. You can take my child as a hostage. I'll be your husband's mistress or servant, please spare us. That kind of thing.

As far as Sylphy was concerned, there was no problem leaving the cities in their hands as long as they governed and taxed them properly, rejected the Holy Kingdom's racism, and pledged to send troops during times of war. Now, obviously, she wasn't just going to completely leave the regions to them, so she was planning on dividing the territory into multiple sectors and putting overseers in each.

Danan would be stationed in Arichburg as the overseer of the southern region, and Sir Leonard would be stationed on the eastern border we shared with the Holy Kingdom as the eastern overseer. Madame Zamil would be stationed in the west, though she was reluctant to agree since it meant she wouldn't be able to protect me anymore. The eastern region was connected to the Federation of Small Nations, and beyond them was the Dragonis Mountain Nation, which had a high population of lizardmen. The western overseer would end up in close contact with them, so I felt Madame Zamil was a perfect fit.

As far as the northern sector was concerned, Sylphy would be directly ruling over it from central. Further north was one of the Holy Kingdom's vassal nations, as well as one of their allies, so it was possible it'd become a battlefield in the future. At present, we had our forces deployed on the eastern border we shared with the Holy Kingdom, but in the near future we'd have to shore up defenses in the north as well.

"Hmm…"

"What is it?" Grande asked.

"Nah, I was just thinking about how rough it's gonna be moving forward," I said.

"It certainly sounds like it, though it's really not my concern."

"I don't plan on getting you involved with our human struggles," I said. "But as Sylphy's spouse, I do want to help out."

"Hm…" Grande began to think.

Currently, the unsolved problem was how to protect the north. We had a clear idea of what to do in the east, so soon we'd be looking northward. It was possible that the Holy Kingdom might sic the nations to the north on us in order to feel out how strong we were.

What if I volunteered to be the overseer of the northern sector? I considered, but I already knew Sylphy would be against the

idea. If I went there alone and got kidnapped or assassinated, that would put Merinard in a very bad position. In that case…what if we sent one of her sisters there instead? As far as trust was concerned, they were definitely on the same level as Sir Leonard, Danan, or Madame Zamil.

I wasn't sure about Aqual or Ifriita, but considering her age and position, Doriada had almost definitely received a royal education. If Sylphy selected her, there wouldn't be any problems in terms of public support.

"If you ask me for help, I will come to your aid. I don't mind getting wrapped up in your troubles a little."

"Thanks, Grande. You're such a cutie."

"Eh heh heh, I know."

I embraced Grande—who was splayed out on top of a bunch of cushions just like me—in my arms and rubbed her head. I didn't intend on mixing her up in our conflicts, but it made me happy that she was willing to help anyway.



"Kousuke, I am famished," Grande said.

"Guess it's snack time, then," I replied.

"Indeed!" she responded excitedly.

We escaped from the cushion pile and made our way toward the table.

Now then, what kind of snack should I give her today? Maybe one of those round sweets that you can put custard and all sorts of other fillings inside of? Personally, I'm an oyaki guy.

"Kouuusukeeeee."

"Gimme a sec."

Grande tugged at my hand while I navigated my inventory. For now, I decided to focus on feeding the hungry little dragon in front of me.

***

Staying cooped up in my room the entire time the representatives were here, fostering goodwill, would have been way too boring—and, quite frankly, impossible. So I convinced Sylphy to let me hang out with R&D.

R&D had become the driving force behind the New Kingdom of Merinard's rapid progress. It was extremely important, obviously, so security around it was tight, meaning that it was unlikely I'd get caught up in the honey traps prepared for me by our visitors. Outsiders weren't allowed anywhere near R&D, after all.

I took Grande with me as my own personal bodyguard, and she was currently splayed out on some cushions I'd prepared for her in the corner of her room. Her own private relaxation space, so to speak. Other than that, everything was as it always was for me.

"The frontline soldiers have some requests for us," Ira said.

"Feedback *is* important, after all. Hit me," I replied.

“They’re tired of block cookies. They want a new portable food.”

“So that’s their angle…”

Since the days of old, field provisions and the military have always been linked. I developed the primary ration—the block cookie—back when the Liberation Army first advanced on the Omitt Badlands. Since then, I mass-produced them as standard portable provisions for the army. At this point, though, the troops needed more variety. I had proposed and developed other high-energy provisions consisting of grain, dried meats, dehydrated veggies, and seasonings, but those required cooking utensils and fire, so they weren’t exactly easy to use on the battlefield.

“So they want something quick, easy, tasty, and new for the front lines,” I surmised.

“Exactly,” Ira said. “It’s a complicated problem to solve.”

“True enough.”

I designed the block cookies after Calorie Mates—they were biscuits of a sort. I made sure they were fatty, that they tasted decent, and that they weren’t hard like a rock. People seemed to like them well enough, but I guess they’d gotten tired of them.

“What if we looked into more block cookie flavors?” I suggested.

“We already have them,” Ira reported. “There are block cookies with dried nuts and dried fruits kneaded into them, and even ones with powdered cheese mixed into them before baking.”

“Oh… In that case, they want something completely different, huh?”

“Yes. Any ideas?”

“Hmm…” I groaned and started thinking while Ira gazed at me with her big eye.

When it came to preserved foods that were tasty and easily transportable, the first things that came to mind were bottled and canned goods. But mass-producing those with the current level of tech in Merinard, as well as the current production systems, wasn't going to be easy. If there were vein hollows all around like the one at the rear base that produced endless magic power, then we could probably build a factory here, but…

"Too difficult?" Ira asked.

"Too difficult for the immediate future. In more ways than one… But I'll propose canned goods as a potential solution," I said.

First, I started explaining the concept of canned goods to Ira and the rest of R&D. "The biggest reason that food goes bad is because of the propagation of germs."

"Jeerms…?"

"They're little creatures you can't see with your eyes. They can cause all kinds of sicknesses, but let's leave that for another time. What's important is that the canning technology is basically a process that allows you to preserve foods for long periods of time by thoroughly sterilizing germs during the manufacturing process, then sealing everything in a can after sucking out all the air," I explained.

I took a piece of chalk and started jotting down a simplified version of the process on the blackboard in the room. First came the cleansing of the raw ingredients. In order to actually preserve the food, the ingredients needed to be sanitized. Then, I noted how anything not meant for eating needed to be taken out of the food. For instance, meats and fish needed their organs taken out. For fruits and vegetables, their seeds and skin needed to be removed. In order to mass-produce this stuff, we'd need a *lot* of hands, and those people would have to be sanitized as well. They had to be healthy. We couldn't have anyone coughing or sneezing into the food since, obviously, we couldn't allow any foreign substances into the process. In order to make this work, we had to be thorough with our food safety.

"That would be difficult right now," Ira said.

"Yeah, but if we can make it work, we'll have edible meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit right out of a can that won't go bad for months, even potentially years," I said.

"Hmm…" Ira went silent and narrowed her eye.

"Anyway, once the raw ingredients are clean, we stuff them into a can, which is built like…this."

To make a can, a cylindrical piece of metal had to be sealed, then the edges of the seal twisted onto the can itself to close it. This process was called "seaming." In order to make sure it was sealed nice and tight, I was considering using slime materials on the edges of the seal. I also figured I'd be able to use my golem tech to make some kind of seaming machine. I'd have to do some research on the angle of the roller for the seaming as well as the angle for the seal and can itself.

"We need to pack in the seasoning, oil, and syrup as well to eliminate any air in the can," I said. "If there's any air, it'll cause the food to go bad and break down during heat sterilization. It might be a good idea to steam meats inside of the can for a long period of time to sterilize the food before putting seasoning inside."

If I remembered correctly, meats and fish needed to be heat sterilized for a longer period of time than vegetables and fruits. At least that's what the video I'd watched said.

"Anyway, after packing in the seasoning, oil, and whatnot and sealing the can, we then heat sterilize the whole thing in steam for a long period of time. Those germs I mentioned earlier are destroyed by heat. The germ-killing process begins as we put the food in the can, when we wash it to get rid of the germs. Next we steam the food in the can for a long period of time to kill any germs that survived the washing. Then, after inserting the seasoning and other liquids, we'll have eliminated the air necessary for the germs to reproduce. We then seal the can, which prevents new germs from getting into the food. After that, we heat sterilize the entire canned

product once again to completely eliminate the germs. This is how we keep the food from going rotten, allowing it to hold for long periods of time."

For perishable goods, this treatment process needed to be done quickly. We needed an assembly line system, something like a conveyor belt, and the sealing process couldn't take too long. Considering the amount of time it took between acquiring the ingredients and processing them, it would be wise to place the factory near where we were sourcing them.

Basic research of the processing tech, designing the processing location, building it, hiring more hands, acquiring the food… There was a lot that needed to be done before we could actually begin production.

"I understand that doing this all by hand would be difficult. But right now, considering our current situation, we need to figure out how to make that happen," I said.

"Indeed. If we can preserve foods for long periods of time, we can also export them," Ira said, nodding.

"If we can stockpile perishable goods like this, we can also make it through potential crop failures," I added.

The group then quickly began to vigorously share ideas from their own unique fields on how to handle the canning process using their world's technology and magic.

"This idea of germs is absolutely fascinating. Foods with purifying magic cast on it tends to rot a lot less quickly, and purified wounds rarely get worse as well. Perhaps the magic is eliminating those invisible germs?"

"The members of the clergy have similar purifying miracles. If I remember correctly, one of the more advanced miracles is an eternal preservation miracle. Perhaps it not only eliminates germs, but also prevents additional germs from getting near?"

"If we use purifying magic tools on the processed food and the workers, we might be able to take care of the germ problem entirely. And if we have to make sure no air gets into the can, we could always make stew and thoroughly cast purifying magic on it before sealing it."

"Hmm… This seaming process is magnificent, but it sounds rather difficult. Making thin metal plates and bending them into a cylinder is easy enough, but what do we do about joining the metal together?"

"Couldn't we just use alchemic magic for that? If the metals are the same, it should be easy. The same goes for the lid. I don't think it will be all that difficult making a processing magic tool just for that."

Huh, I didn't consider that we could use purification magic to easily get rid of the germs and simplify the sanitation process. Purifying the processed food to kill the germs is definitely an option. Plus, they were talking about using alchemic magic for the sealing and can production process… It's true that that would let us completely skip the seaming step of things. I'm totally down with that.

"Man, magic is incredible…" I whispered.

Faced with how easily something I thought was difficult could be solved with the power of magic, I was in awe.

"I think your ideas and knowledge are way more incredible. The only reason we can talk over solutions like this is because you managed to explain why food goes bad, why canned goods don't, and what sort of engineering problems are inherent in can production."

"Indeed. When it comes to preserved goods, the only thing we'd come up with is toasted bread, dried meats, dried fruits, and the like. Being able to preserve cooked foods for long periods of time sounds like it would need a miracle."

"You can say that again. Even a blacksmith like me could understand the general gist of why canned goods don't go bad. Now all we need to do is actually produce some and make sure they don't rot. Oh, what should we use to make the cans? Is iron okay?" the blacksmith asked.

I reached into my memories for knowledge about can production. "I think so, but considering there might be erosion due to the contents and length of storage time, it might be best to go with coated tin. Oh, and we should probably have folks use can openers, so if you could make sure the edge of the lid juts out a bit either below or above, that'd be good. Preferably above, since that'll make stacking cans easier."

"Tin, eh? That'd be simple to make," the blacksmith said thoughtfully.

"We can use alchemic magic too. What would be best, cost-wise?" the alchemist asked.

The blacksmith and the alchemist began to discuss can-processing and tin-coating techniques. If you were just going to coat it, then the simple solution would be to dip iron plates in melted tin, but alchemic magic would be less wasteful and uneven. We already had a coating magic tool, but there were costs inherent in using magic tools for production and during practical use. They were going to be looking into what the best option was.

"Looks like things'll work out just fine," I said. "Honestly, I thought canned goods would be too difficult, so it wasn't even my first thought."

"Really?" Ira asked.

"I was actually going to recommend developing freeze-dried goods and instant noodles."

If we used magic, I figured we'd be able to make freeze-dried food pretty easily. That said, if I considered magic for canned goods production, I should have realized it'd be applicable to freeze-dried foods as well. As for instant noodles, I was inspired by instant and

cup ramen. The soup could be freeze-dried powder, and then you'd just pour hot water onto the freeze-dried processed or deep-fried noodles with the powder inside. Just like that, soldiers would be able to eat hot noodles on the front lines. Obviously, we needed to test this all out, but I'd felt it'd be much easier to actualize than mass-produced canned goods.

"That sounds fascinating. Please explain," Ira said.

"All right. I'll do just that."

I took up my piece of chalk once again and began to explain the concept of instant noodles and freeze-dried goods to the group.

Thanks to my presentations that day, R&D made significant strides in their development of canned goods, instant noodles, powdered soup, and freeze-dried foods. Sylphy and Melty were informed of this as well, and it was decided that the government would allocate funds to the projects equal to and even surpassing those used for the airboards, airbikes, high-mobility devices, magic guns, and other weapons initiatives. I was selected to head up the development of the preserved foods due to my wealth of knowledge on the subject, and I found myself busy at work for a long time.

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No way…

"Cheer up," Ira said.

It'd been three days since we started making the new canned foods. I'd used my crafting ability to make a number of samples, then sent those out to the Liberation Army stationed in Merinesburg. I then solicited feedback from the people who'd actually used can openers and ate the food, but…

"There's not enough food in there."

"The metal scent is tough to ignore."

"Opening them is a pain."

The reviews were rough, and quite frankly, I was crushed. I was currently bent double, extremely disappointed. Ira was at least patting my back in an attempt to cheer me up.

"We knew that a bunch of soldiers who are used to eating as much fresh food as they like would respond like this. This isn't anything to work up a fuss over," Ira reminded me.

The R&D development team started brainstorming again.

"As far as the serving sizes go, we can just make the cans larger. Um, if I remember correctly, if we multiply the size of the cylinder by three, the amount of food we can put inside of it will multiply by three as well."

"Indeed. And I imagine the metal scent they're referring to is a result of not heating up the food. If they did that, there'd be pretty much no smell whatsoever," added the fox beastman alchemist.

Oh, huh. So you can't just eat it as is?

"And as far as the can-opening issue goes, those people are just being lazy. The benefits to canned goods are that they can be preserved for long periods of time and easily transported. The fact that they're made of metal means they can't be easily destroyed, which is also a plus. Glass bottles break easily, and if you try to make them stronger by thickening the glass, they get too heavy."

While I was currently dejected due to the brutally honest feedback from the soldiers, the other members of R&D were approaching things much more calmly.

Man, you guys are tough cookies.

"We sent samples out to border security on the front lines and the patrol squads elsewhere in the country, right? I don't think you need to worry until we hear back from them."

"You think so…?" I asked wearily.

"I do. And heck, this stuff has been huge for us, personally."

The rest of the R&D crew nodded seriously. Many of the people here performed their work all day and night, so their eating habits were totally out of whack. Obviously, the castle had a proper kitchen and cafeteria in it, complete with excellent chefs, but the fires were all put out after dinner time. Anyone who missed that window could only get their hands on leftover bread and cheese, raw vegetables, and other uncooked foods. Some folks found even that too much of a bother, and instead turned to the block cookies, dried meats, or dried fruits they kept in the corner of the room, their eyes sunken and devoid of life.

But after we started making prototype canned goods, the situation had completely flipped. The R&D department had all manner of ways to heat up canned food, so when someone got hungry, they were now able to have a pretty delicious meal with relatively little effort.

"It is quite ironic that us R&D folks have eating habits closer to the soldiers on the front lines."

"Right…? I personally love the tomel-flavored minced meat stew. It pairs wonderfully with some toasted bread."

"Mm, that's delicious. I also like the salted meat. Goes great with some booze."

"I personally think it's a bit too salty… I prefer the spicy legumes."

"All hail canned peaches."

The members of the R&D department began to passionately share their opinions on their favorite canned goods, including Ira, who declared that canned peaches were in fact the best. She wasn't wrong that they were delicious; they even tasted good heated up. For what it's worth, the tomel-flavored minced meat stew was basically just meat sauce. You could eat it as is just fine, but you were normally supposed to put it over pasta. That said, if you spread it over some lightly toasted bread, you basically had yourself a meat pie or pizza toast.

"For now, there is no need to make any changes. We'll stay the course."

"Are you sure…? Well, if you guys say so."

I personally felt the metal scent was a pretty big issue, considering how many demi-humans we had in the Liberation Army —but if the R&D squad said it was fine, it was fine.

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A week later, the members of the R&D department got the kitchen chefs to cooperate by making us stew and pot-au-feu, which they loaded inside the cans. They used purification magic tools of different strength levels on cans with the same food inside of them while changing the amount of time each one was exposed so that we had multiple samples to compare. They were going to observe these cans for a week, a month, and three months. Obviously, we also had samples for half a year and a full year.

"By the way, who's going to test the food? Don't tell me it's gonna be us…" Ira asked cautiously.

"I asked Lime and the other slime girls to handle that," I replied.

"May I ask why?"

"They told me they can't get sick even if the food is spoiled. Plus, they can definitively confirm whether or not the food has gone bad."

"Gotcha."

It was true that they probably couldn't get sick from spoiled food, considering they didn't have stomachs to begin with. In fact, they were treating sewer water on the regular, so I doubted ingesting spoiled food would affect them.

We had ten samples produced for each category. We then had three different time periods of testing for each of the three purification tools, so that made for a total of 450 sample cans.

"All that's left is to observe the samples."

We checked over each can, just to be safe. The rabbit beastman mage with good hearing tapped lightly on them all with a metal stick. Apparently they sounded different depending on whether there was air inside of them or not, so his hearing proved valuable.

"Mm. We should be hearing back from the front lines soon. And we also need to start on the instant noodles," Ira said.

"Right, right."

I only had the vaguest of ideas on how to start on that project. According to my hazy memories, you were supposed to steam the noodles, then either dry them in high-temperature air or deep-fry them. How were we going to handle the moisture problem? Even if we did manage to make the instant noodles properly, it'd be pointless if they got wet. This world had no vinyl packaging, and if there was a substitute for it, I'd have pushed for retort pouches already.

"The moisture is going to be a problem…" I said.

"Hm? We could just draw a dryness technique into the shelf or wood box we store them in," Ira suggested.

"What?"

"We use them on that food storage shelf over there."

I tilted my head in confusion as she pulled me over to a storage shelf in the corner of the R&D lab. She then opened its door and pointed at the strange magic circle engraved in the back of it.

"That's a dryness technique drawn into the shelf with paint made from crushed magic stone," she explained.

"That's crazy useful."

If this was possible on Earth, those silica gel packet manufacturers would all go bankrupt.

"Not really. It's not particularly effective in places that have too much moisture, and they don't completely dry out the air either. Plus, it's pointless on boxes or shelves with too many openings."

"I see. But a wood box with that technique written on it would be able to keep out moisture?"

"Mm. To a certain extent. If you really want to completely keep moisture out over a long period of time, it'll come at a cost. This technique was originally designed to prevent grains and the like from getting moldy due to moisture, so it should be effective on instant noodles too."

"All right, let's give it a shot."

Thus began the development of instant noodles.

That same day, we received feedback via golem communicator on our canned goods from the front lines.

"When we heated them directly, the cans exploded and it was a catastrophe."

"Opening them was a pain, so I opened one ahead of time and ate it a few days later, then got sick."

"I couldn't open them without the can opener."

We got a decent amount of feedback about the various troubles people were having, but there were far more positive reviews from the soldiers on the front lines. A lot of people were just happy to be able to eat proper food out there, so the development of canned goods rolled on ahead.

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During my busy days of developing new preserved foods, Sylphy summoned Ira and I into the meeting room. Both of us were puzzled as to what she needed us for, and when we entered the room, we found that she'd gathered Melty, Sir Leonard, Danan, Elen, and Doriada too. It was fairly uncommon for Elen and Doriada to be present at one of these meetings.

Sitting atop the large table in the room was a map of Merinard and the surrounding area. I got the distinct feeling this meeting wasn't going to be about anything peaceful.

"Everyone is here, then. Let's begin."

"Begin what, exactly?" I asked Sylphy directly.

"The meeting regarding northern countermeasures," she replied.

Northern countermeasures.

"The Principality of Diieharte and the Kingdom of Tigris are up there, right?" I asked.

"Correct. They're both essentially vassal states of the Holy Kingdom. Diieharte is a puppet state, and Tigris's national religion is Adolism, so they might as well be a vassal state. Either way, they're both latent threats to our national security," Sylphy explained.

"Got it. Considering the suddenness of this meeting, I'm assuming something's come up?"

"Exactly. Melty, if you would."

"As you wish. Please look here."

Melty was in work mode today. She placed a number of documents on the table, a serious expression plastered on her face. The papers were divided into stacks of ten or so pages a pop. I grabbed one stack and started flipping through it.

Hmm… Seems like a list of all the goods changing hands and their prices over time.

"Doesn't seem particularly stran—wait. Hm?"

I didn't have any point of comparison, so I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed like food prices were rising. We were currently above 100 percent self-sufficiency as far as food was concerned thanks to the fields I'd made at the start of fall, and yet according to the data here, the prices were still rising. And it looked like there were a lot of purchases as well… Too many, even.

"Is it just me, or is there way too much food changing hands?" I asked.

"Indeed. It isn't particularly uncommon for food prices to go up during the winter, but that isn't the case here in Merinard," Sir Leonard said.

"Mm. Even now, we have transport airboards carrying large amounts of food over from Omitt and south of Arichburg, and our food production base is still actively producing food. Kousuke's fields are operating as usual as well," Ira agreed.

"Those fields produce food even in the winter?" Elen asked.

"*Unnatural* is the word that comes to mind," Doriada said.

Both Elen and Doriada were clearly freaked out upon hearing Ira's explanation.

Um, ladies? You've seen the medicinal herb field in the courtyard, right?

"The folks in the elf village were doing something similar, to be fair," Melty said.

So my power wasn't unnatural or anything. Okay, maybe it was, but I couldn't just let them unfairly freak out at it.

"Kousuke, that magic farm was only possible because many elves are well-versed in spirit magic. They each also have tremendous magical power. The Black Forest is a place where life spirit and plant spirit power is strong too. It wouldn't be cost-effective to operate a magic farm like that in any other country. And quite frankly, it still took an incredible amount of magic power for the elves there to produce enough food to feed just 300 people," Melty added.

"When it comes to your fields, once you make them, they produce crops with only a light additional touch. When I first saw the elves' magic farm, I thought it was incredible, but after seeing your fields, it's been completely overshadowed," Sylphy said.

"Is that so?"

I had to accept the reality of the situation. Fine, whatever. My power was unnatural. Even I had to admit that I'd made Ira widen her eyes and stare off into the distance against a backdrop of outer space.

"Does this data suggest that the northern nations are preparing for war?" I asked.

"It hardly bears mention, but you truly are talented, Kousuke. You are a man of many extraordinary abilities," Sir Leonard said.

"You have a wide breadth of knowledge, even if you do tend to be drawn toward engineering," Sylphy added.

"I just have a shallow understanding of a lot of different stuff. I don't have any professional knowledge," I said.

The actual in-depth knowledge got so deep and complicated that I'd never be able to truly comprehend it all. All I had in my mind was the information I'd learned from looking up things on the net and reading books that were within my own level of comprehension. That said, I was decently confident in my memory. Whether I could put any of that knowledge to use was another story, though. I never looked into things I didn't have an interest in, after all.

"You've been skilled in military affairs from the start," Sylphy said. "In any case, I believe it to be as Kousuke says. I sent soldiers up to one of the northern cities to investigate, and apparently merchants from Diieharte and Tigris have been buying up food in considerable amounts. They're saying that they had poor crop yields this past fall, but according to Merinard merchants doing business with both countries, that isn't the case. It's not implausible that some regions further from the border had poor harvests, but for our purposes, I believe it to be best to assume they are stocking up for war."

"I see. As a member of the R&D team, I'm against sending Kousuke northward, but I understand why it has to happen," Ira said.

"Well, if nothing else, at least we have a clear idea on how to manage the canned goods and instant noodle production lines now," I added.

We'd mostly figured out our game plan, so at this point, the job was pretty much just simple food testing: looking into what kinds of goods took best to being canned and then making prototypes. As far as the instant noodles were concerned, the team was investigating how thick to make them, how long to steam and dry them, and what flavors to go forward with. This was all going to be done via rigorous trial and error.

"Are we sending Kousuke north, then?" Ira asked.

"Obviously, I don't plan on doing so until we've come up with a plan, but we need to prepare our defenses for when they eventually launch their attack," Sylphy said.

"Makes sense, considering the actual construction work won't take very long," I said. With my abilities, I could build a massive stronghold in a single day. We had a whole month before the end of winter, so it would be more effective to wait to send me up there until we had a proper plan in place.

"We should hurry and put together a defense plan for the east too," Sir Leonard said.

"Indeed. It is possible that the Holy Kingdom will try to invade us while we're busy dealing with the north, though I imagine it would still prove to be quite difficult for them at present," Sylphy said.

At the start of the fall, the Holy Kingdom sent tens of thousands of troops into Merinard, only to have them annihilated by the rifle squad and harpy bombs. That was only a drop in the bucket in terms of the Holy Kingdom's total military might, but it still wasn't a blow they could recover from all that quickly.

"They probably want to get a grasp on what we're hiding up our sleeves. Analyze our military might too," Danan said.

"Agreed. They intend on making their vassal nations attack us in the hopes of finding any weaknesses we might have," Sylphy said.

"Figures…" I muttered.

"We need to take great care to make sure Kousuke is well guarded," Sir Leonard said.

"Mm. That's our biggest weakness," Ira said.

"It sure is," Sylphy agreed.

My very existence was the driving force behind Merinard's rapid progress, but that also made me its greatest weakness. If I were the enemy, I would do everything in my power to get me over to their side or eliminate me posthaste. Not that that'd be easy to do, but there was precedent… That fox bastard, for example.

Come spring, maybe I'll prune his fur all over again.

"Bodyguards, eh? If I could take the slime girls with me, I'd be invincible," I suggested.

"Impooossible."

"Not happening," Danan said.

"That is unfortunately impossible," agreed Sylphy.

Lime and the others oozed out of the recesses and ceiling of the room and immediately rejected my idea. Generally speaking, they couldn't leave Merinesburg—the castle, really. The sewers and the underground escape passage were kind of a loophole, but that was the extent of their mobility.

"I'll go," Ira said, raising her hand. "As the head of the court mages, guarding the prince consort is of the utmost importance. The R&D department can function for a winter without me, and if anything comes up, they can contact me via golem communicator as long as we spread the communications network northward."

"Grr… Th-then I'll go too," Sylphy said.

"Absolutely out of the question, Your Highness. And sadly, the same goes for me," Melty said, forcing Sylphy's hand down just as

she was trying to raise it in response to Ira. She sighed.

Right, there's no way either of them can leave Merinesburg right now.

"I can go," Elen volunteered, raising her hand.

"What value is there in sending more people that will need protection?" Melty said, immediately rejecting her.

"Urgh."

I did think it'd be useful to have her truth-seeing ability on hand, plus her miracles were super powerful. That said, she was even weaker than I was; if an enemy got close, she'd be done for.

"All that's left is Grande, but I'd prefer not to rope her into this sort of thing…" I said.

"That's that, this is this. I also am against dragging her into our conflict with the Holy Kingdom, but I think it would be more than fine to ask her to just protect you against threats outside of the battlefield," Melty said.

"You're being overprotective. Grande knows all too well that she'll have to engage with this kind of thing on some level simply by being involved with you. You should ask her for help," Sylphy said.

"Ugh… I'll ask her," I said, giving in.

"Please do. I'll hire some trustworthy adventurers too."

I was fairly certain that Grande would help if I explained things to her, but I didn't want to take advantage of her kindness either.

Hm… I guess I'll try bringing it up, at least.

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"Are you an idiot?"

"Ow!"

When I asked Grande to come north with me and watch my back, she got angry. Specifically, she hit me with a low kick.

Something was about to break.

"Kousuke, what am I to you?"

"Um, it's kind of embarrassing to say out loud, but you're my wife."

"Then you get it, right?!"

"Ow!"

She hit me with another low kick. Something was seriously going to break.

"Did you really think I would tell you not to get me mixed up in your human business when you are about to head somewhere unsafe? Well? Answer me."

"Ow, ow, ow, ow! Sorry, sorry! My bad!" I apologized as she punched me in the ass with her rugged hands.

"I appreciate that you do not want to involve me in your human conflicts, but I am your partner. Do partners not help one another?"

"…Yeah, you're right."

"As long as you understand. Make sure you take me with you."

"Okay, I will. Thanks a lot."

"Mm."

Grande nodded, but wouldn't let go of the grip she had on my shirttail.

"Now, since you have made me sad with your nonsense, I believe you should make it up to me."

"Of course."

After that, I doted on Grande like crazy.

Chapter 3:
Kousuke, the Prince Consort, Heads North

WITH THE GRANDE BUSINESS SETTLED, it was officially decided that I would be sent north. My objective was the immediate development of our northern defense system. In other words, I had to build a defensive fortification as quickly as possible. But this also exposed the greatest weakness of the Liberation Army, which was now known as Merinard's army.

"A box doesn't mean much if there's nothing inside of it."

I pointed out this specific problem in the same meeting room that we'd convened in a few days earlier. Present at the moment were me, Sylphy, and Danan.

Sir Leonard was busy organizing the troops for the eastern sector, and Melty and Ira both had their hands full with their usual work. Elen was absent due to church business, and Madame Zamil was still out west. Doriada was apparently hosting a guest for a tea party today.

"I am well aware of that," Danan replied, a pained look on his face.

The New Kingdom of Merinard's current weak point was that we lacked manpower. And since we had a habit of beating the odds thanks to highly confidential and powerful weapons, we couldn't just bring in more troops willy-nilly.

While it would be difficult to copy the powder-based firearms I'd made, the magic guns the R&D department came up with after examining them were another story. Those were made entirely using tech from this world, so if enemy countries ever got their hands on them, they could potentially copy them.

The crossbows suffered from the same issue. Actually, copies of them were already starting to circulate in regions south of Arichburg. They couldn't come close to our crossbows in terms of power and accuracy, but it was only a matter of time.

The folks in this world who made their living in battle were more than capable of pulling back and setting the superhard drawstrings on those things. I mean, I totally could too, using my own power, just to be clear. The currently circulating crossbows were fairly powerful, all things considered, and compared to a normal bow, they didn't require any kind of specialized training in order to hit a target. They were apparently pretty popular with adventurers. That said, the ones in circulation were still just simple, cheap copies.

Honestly, I didn't feel great about how easily our weapon intel got leaked to the public. Unfortunately, the rest of the top brass outside of myself, Ira, and Melty had all but given up on trying to keep a lid on these kinds of leaks. It wasn't hard to control the flow of information when it came to small elite units like the rifle squad, but the crossbows were standard equipment for pretty much everyone in the army. Both Sir Leonard and Danan admitted that it was impossible to control information at that scale.

Even back during the Liberation Army days, when the leaking of information had come with severe punishment, soldiers still spent time with their family and friends when they were off duty, and they drank. If there were merchants or artisans among those groups, they'd of course be interested when the conversation turned to crossbows a few drinks in. And then once they started looking into things, it wouldn't be particularly difficult for them to figure out how the crossbows worked. If they collaborated with a bow craftsman and a blacksmith, they'd be able to make copies, and it would then be the merchant's job to connect the two different workers.

That said, it looked as though figuring out how the golem tech inside of the ballistae worked or understanding the principle of leverage used to quickly draw the bow string was still a step too far for people.

"So what's the plan?"

I'd gotten sidetracked, so I asked Danan about practical solutions to our problem.

"We send you north with fifty elite soldiers, then you recruit volunteers up there and train them," he said.

"For real…?"

In other words, I'd be making the box, but most of the soldiers would be trained on-site. We wouldn't have supply issues with me there, but I could tell it was going to be a huge pain in the ass.

"What are we going to do about specializations? Do we just form a rifle squad or something?" I asked.

"That…is the plan," Danan replied.

"In other words, I'm going to be training a bunch of newbies."

What that specifically meant was that I'd be forming a mechanized squad of soldiers equipped with firearms that could drive technical airboards. It was fortunate that our small rifle squad could eliminate a massive army, but that couldn't be the standard for our entire national defense. The rifle squad was powerful, sure, but supplying them was a struggle. If I wasn't right there with them producing more bullets and maintaining their weapons, they'd lose their effectiveness in a short period of time.

"At present, it'd be really difficult to form another squad the same size as the rifle squad and maintain them. Supplying them is a big issue. Couldn't we just station the current rifle squad up north for the time being as a bit of an emergency measure?" I asked.

"We need them stationed in the east to prevent the Holy Kingdom from making any moves," Danan explained.

"Wait, wait. We know the nations up north are going to attack in the spring, so let's put them up there! Isn't that the reason we have airboards in the first place? Even if we station them up north, they'd be able to get to the eastern sector in a couple of days.

Protecting our borders is important, but I think it'd be foolish to not take advantage of the technical airboards and their mobility."

"But…"

"The harpy bombing squad is way more suited toward defending a base than the rifle squad is. We should increase the number of aerial bombs and harpies stationed at the eastern fortress, in my opinion."

The aerial bombing squad was able to operate up to its full potential as long as it was close to its resupply base. The bombs themselves were also extremely effective against large military forces, so they were perfect to use against the Holy Kingdom's army.

"I know you have superior knowledge when it comes to how to best use the rifle squad, but could you back down this time?"

"Sylphy?"

I couldn't help but turn my gaze toward her.

"We absolutely cannot allow the Holy Kingdom to invade our country again, and the rifle squad are heroes that crushed the Holy Kingdom's forces despite being outnumbered. Placing them in charge of protecting the east will work as a strong deterrent."

"Nrgh…"

I was well aware that those in the rifle squad were being celebrated as heroes within Merinard. Alongside the harpy bombing squad, they'd been able to quickly take down the enemy stronghold north of Arichburg despite being at a disadvantage in terms of numbers. They'd also taken back the capital city of Merinesburg from the Holy Kingdom's forces, saved the captive royal family, and then crushed the invading forces. They'd grown so famous they were being celebrated abroad for their immense strength. In fact, Captain Jagheera, a leopard beastman, had grown so well-known that she complained about how she could barely do anything without being surrounded by throngs of followers.

"At least post the harpy squad in the north. Having aerial firepower greatly increases the number of strategies we can use," I countered.

"All right. I can't give you everyone, but I'll send a single platoon," Sylphy said.

"Wait, just one?"

"Look, a number of the harpies are out of action because they're pregnant. Realistically, we only have three platoons that are combat-ready right now," she explained.

"Urgh…" There really wasn't any room to argue the point, and it certainly didn't help that I was basically the reason so many people were out of action.

"There are a number of harpy settlements located in the north, so try and fill in your ranks using them," Sylphy suggested.

"Hold on a sec. Wouldn't that cause all sorts of problems?" Specifically, problems concerning the lower half of my body.

The harpies had taught me all about how their communities operated. Generally speaking, since harpies could only give birth to other female harpies, they typically formed harems around a single man of another race. Even harpies living in towns and cities with other races did this fairly often, and once they formed a harem, the harem would often grow larger as more and more single harpies joined up.

"I believe in you, Kousuke," Sylphy said.

"What's that supposed to mean? You believe that I won't pursue more harpies? Or that you believe I'll be fine if they pursue me?"

"Ha! Ha ha ha!" Sylphy's dry laughter clearly signaled that she meant the latter.

"That wasn't your cue to laugh!"

"As far as the harpies are concerned, well, I let them do their own thing. I've given up already."

"Please don't."

Truth be told, there'd already been harpies in Arichburg and Merinesburg that I didn't know. I'd lost track, but the harpies themselves didn't seem to mind.

"That girl and that girl are newcomers. There'll probably be more fresh faces next time."

I couldn't believe my ears when the girls told me that after we had our fun. Their modus operandi had gotten increasingly more clever as time went on, and there were countless times when I'd realize midway through that there were more girls present than when we started. Countless. Times.

"Plus, if you think about it, the harpies are swearing their loyalty to you, not me," Sylphy said. "I'll leave the personnel acquisition and squad supply situation to you, Kousuke."

"The harpies who've been with us since the Black Forest are willing to follow our orders, but all the others, well…" Danan trailed off, a bitter look on his face.

Okay, fine. I guess I'm the harpy guy now. Sure. I guess it's time to reap what I sow, ha ha ha…

"Anyway, we've gone off topic. About the branch you want me to form over there…" In order to cling to what remained of my sanity, I steered us away from the harpy conversation.

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We talked things over and concluded that I would form a magic gun squad composed of infantrymen equipped with mass-produced magic guns. We'd already procured and sent Arichburg 500 of the mass-produced models, 30,000 rounds of ammunition, 1,500 magic crystals, 100 metal molds for round casings, and 100 of the breech plugs that served as the core of the weapon from the

rear base in Omitt via transport airboards. My job this time around was to put all that stuff into my inventory, head north, build a military stronghold, recruit volunteers, and then train them all to fight off an invasion from the northern nations. Fifty elites from the Liberation-turned-Merinard army were going to accompany me, along with a platoon of five harpies from the bombing squad, my bodyguards Ira and Grande, and—

"Yo, long time no see!"

"Been a while!"

"Good to see you again."

"Ah, so he was talking about you girls when he said 'trustworthy adventurers,' eh?"

Danan had hired Shemel, Bela, and Tozume—the three ogre girls—to accompany me north.

Shemel was a red ogre who had accompanied the Liberation Army since our days in the Black Forest, a veteran warrior who could wield a giant metal club like it was no more than a stick. She'd left the army back in Arichburg and returned to being an adventurer, but she'd been helping us out on all sorts of missions since then. She partied up with Bela and Tozume after going back to her old job. Bela was a red ogre like Shemel, and Tozume was a blue-skinned ogre with a single eye—a cyclops. Bela had equipped the mithril short bardiche I'd made for her, while Tozume was armed with the mithril alloy war hammer I crafted.

"Something wrong?" Danan asked.

"Honestly, I was worried about who you had in mind. Now, I'm feeling a whole lot better. I know for a fact I can trust you ladies," I said, relieved.

"Ah ha ha! Well, we better make sure not to betray that trust of yours," Shemel said.

"Given how well we know you now, there's no way we could ever betray you," Bela chimed in.

"Even if we did somehow cross you, I don't even want to think about what would happen to us after," Tozume added.

"Oh yeah, for sure," I said.

Even if they managed to take me out, they'd still have to deal with Sylphy, Melty, Ira, and Grande. And that wasn't even counting the harpies who would be hungry to get their magnificent revenge. That shitty fox bastard who refused to leave the embassy even now served as a pretty good example.

"So, we're gonna be protectin' you this time?" Shemel asked.

"Yup. There's been some suspicious movement up north, so I gotta head up there, make a new base, and train some fresh faces for battle. You'll be guarding me the whole way through."

"Ain't that gonna take a hell of a long time?" Bela asked.

"It's entirely possible we'll be there until spring, so we can fight back the enemy when they invade."

"That's a while…" Tozume mused.

"Aw, c'mon. Ain't a big deal. We'll have food, a place to stay, and we'll be earnin' money. Plus, it's a pretty safe gig, all things considered," Shemel said.

Bela and Tozume nodded in response. Adventurers adventured so that they could eat, drink, and make some money too. They did basic jobs like protecting merchants, slaying monsters and selling the materials they dropped, and bodyguard jobs like this one. They always had the freedom to turn down a job if they didn't want to do it.

"Listen, if you girls do get bored and want to abandon the job, we can cross that bridge when we come to it," I said. "As long as you can introduce me to some trustworthy adventurers to take over, it won't be an issue at all. You'll also be paid for your work up until then, of course."

"We'll definitely make sure to talk to you first if it gets to that point. But honestly, so long as we're with you, I doubt we'll ever get

bored," Shemel said.

"Very true. I wanna drive an airboard again!" Bela said.

"Just don't crash it," Tozume said.

"Yeah. If you get into another crash, I'll dress you in that super embarrassing outfit from before as punishment," Shemel warned.

"Urgh… I-I won't crash it, honest!"

Bela flinched for a moment, but faced with another chance to drive an airboard, there was no way she'd back down. I had no idea what was so compelling to her about the airboards. I found myself praying that the super-revealing magical girl outfit with the micro bikini that only barely hid the tips of her breasts and the super-short skirt didn't fan her flames.

"What's up with them?" Shemel asked.

She was looking at the three lines of people—seventeen, sixteen, then another seventeen—marching forward. Fifty people overall. They were all clad in sets of light armor consisting of metal helmets and breastplates and equipped with swords and bayonets, as well as the mass-produced magic guns. At the moment, they were marching along in perfect order, following their CO's orders.

"Those are the elite soldiers we'll be training to become magic gunsmen over there," I explained.

Shemel and her party had met me over at the Merinard military training grounds about an hour and half's walk east from Merinesburg. The grounds weren't anything particularly grand, just an open field.

"Are those magic gun thingies really gonna be all that useful?" Shemel asked.

"See those targets over there?" I asked, pointing at a line of wood boards about 200 meters ahead. There were easily over 100 of them, so they were hard to miss.

"Sure. What about 'em?" she asked.

"They're getting started. Just watch."

Upon hearing the CO's orders, the three lines of elite soldiers held their formation 200 meters from the targets.

"Ready, aim!"

The front seventeen soldiers raised their guns in unison.

"Fire!"

Bam, bam, bam! Seventeen magic guns went off at once, punching huge holes in the wood planks in the distance and sending them flying.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

The first line of gunsmen retreated and the second line of sixteen stepped forward and fired their guns, once again blowing the targets away.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

This time, the second line retreated backward and the third line of seventeen soldiers stepped forward and fired. As they shot, the first line of troops were finishing up reloading their guns. Unlike the muzzle-loading muskets that infantrymen used to use on Earth, the magic guns in this world required no powder. All you had to do to reload was pop the lead rounds into the muzzle and push them to the back of the gun with a ramrod. Way less cumbersome than musket reloading.

"Ready, aim, fire!"

The shots continued, and before the soldiers could cycle around a third time, all one hundred targets were scattered back on the ground, filled with holes. Some of the wood planks had been hit by multiple rounds at once, reducing them to dust.

The field of planks 200 meters away were all completely annihilated by an elite squad of fifty magic gunsmen in less than thirty seconds.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Crazy," Shemel replied.

"That's not all. Their actual firing range is multiple times longer than what you just saw."

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Nope, dead serious."

In the best-case scenario, the standard firing range for bows in this world was 100 meters. The most prized magic of the Holy Kingdom—chorus magic—had a maximum firing range of 150 meters. Bows and other projectile weapons had become more or less obsolete in this world, likely because of the prominence of magic. Because of this, there were no projectile weapons that could hit targets over 200 meters away. This time, the gunsmen were aiming at targets 200 meters away, but the maximum effective firing range of the mass-produced magic guns was actually around 500 meters. Accuracy notwithstanding, a projectile fired from a magic gun would be lethal from a distance of over 1,000 meters, easy.

These things had ended up being so powerful for a few reasons. First was that our research allowed us to heavily modify the rounds themselves as well as the rifling accuracy of the gun barrels. That let us greatly increase their range. Additionally, compared to our initial prototypes, the mass-produced models used magic power much more effectively while activating their explosion magic. This allowed them to fire fifty successive rounds without needing additional magic power. The recoil was reduced as well, and we made them effective at close range by attaching bayonets to them. In other words, the current version of the magic gun had higher specs overall than the prototype or the advanced mass-production model. A lot of people assumed that the prototype and advanced mass-production model were actually higher spec than the proper mass-production model, but the reality was that in most cases, that wasn't true. It was pretty simple, really: Mass-production models typically had all of the problems from earlier iterations ironed out, so you could argue that they were the weapons' most refined, definitive

editions. It was definitely possible that the prototype was still stronger than the first-generation product, though. For sure.

"The plan is to train 300 to 500 magic gunsmen to use these weapons."

"Ha ha… Should you really be telling us all of this?" Shemel asked.

"You're my bodyguards, so you were going to find out eventually. As long as you don't go blabbing this info to everyone you meet, it'll be fine."

Most people wouldn't be able to wrap their minds around the concept of a small, elite strike force equipped with powerful projectile weapons capable of firing at a range of 500 meters. Thus far, the people who heard the guns being fired had assumed we were some kind of massive squad of mages training with explosive magic or something.

"We'll be leaving in a week," I explained. "I'll carry our luggage the usual way, so you don't need to pack light or anything. As far as room and board over there goes, well…either we can get rooms at an inn, or I can take care of it myself. Regardless, you won't be camping outside, so no worries."

"Sounds good," Shemel said.

"Yeah. So long as we're with you, we'll probably have nice room and board anywhere we go," Bela said.

"I'm looking forward to the food!" Tozume added.

"Of course. I'll do my best."

I needed to think long and hard about the design of the military stronghold. I'd be there in person, so supplies weren't going to be a problem, but these kinds of facilities didn't run themselves. The military needed to be a complete organization, which meant there had to be people to make food, people to do the laundry, people to clean, and people to keep track of supplies and money. We needed all kinds of workers.

Melty was probably going to send some people along with us to handle supplies and money…right? Surely she wasn't going to tell me to hire personnel up there…?

Okay, now I was worried. I needed to check with her later. If she really intended on sending me up there with only fifty elites, Grande, and the ogre adventurers, I was going to die, doomed to an early grave due to a fatal dose of overwork.

"He's lookin' real pale all of a sudden," Shemel observed.

"I wonder what's wrong," Bela said.

"Who knows?"

The ogre adventurers casually commented on my ghostly appearance as I felt a shiver run down my spine.

***

A week later, we headed north to Metocerium with Bela helming the airboard. This trip called for a long-distance airboard, a model that lacked armor or weapons. As a result, it looked far less threatening than the other models the army used. The only special magic tools on board were a golem communicator and a megaphone. The lack of armor and weapons meant that the interior had more space, so the rear seats were pretty spacious…so long as you weren't an ogre.

"It's a little cramped in here," Tozume said.

"It can't be helped; you simply have large bodies. I'm in the same boat. Even though my body is fairly small, my tail takes up quite a bit of space," Grande said.

Shemel and Tozume were big, but Grande's wings and tail meant that if she wanted to stretch out and relax, she'd have to take up a whole lot of space. This modified transport airboard was built to be fairly spacious and comfortable, but it filled right up as soon as the three ogre girls, Ira, and I got on board.

"This is a nice perk," Ira said from my lap, making peace signs with her hands.

I didn't see the need for her to choose my lap as her seat, but…she was warm, so I let it slide. The airboard had a magic heater installed on board, but with so many people crammed together, we didn't need it. Lots of demi-humans had fur of some kind and generally seemed to have fewer issues with the cold compared to humans, maybe because of their basal metabolism. Our fuel efficiency was definitely suffering with this many people present, though.

"Honestly, I'm more worried about us being over the weight limit than I am about legroom," Tozume said.

"We're big, so of course we're heavy too!" Shemel replied.

"I mean, yeah, but it feels really weird agreeing with you…" Tozume said.

The ogre girls seemed to have some hang-ups about their weight. I didn't know what the BMI recommendations for ogres were, but it was clear to me that they weren't overweight or anything. Their bones and muscles were probably just heavy.

"You got any thoughts on the subject, Boss?" Shemel asked me.

"My late grandma told me to never comment on a woman's weight," I replied, gracefully dodging Shemel's land mine with a grin.

It's a change of subject, but at the moment, boy, did I not know where to look. Technically, the ogre girls should've been equipped with armor and weapons so they could protect me while we were on the airboard, but the elite soldiers had volunteered to handle security on the road to the city. As such, the girls weren't equipped with armor. And well, their indoor looks were pretty, uh, casual.



Shemel was wearing a tiny tank top and short shorts that basically screamed "As long as I hide the important bits, I'm fine, right?" And Tozume was wearing even less. Above her short shorts, she simply had her torso wrapped up rather than wearing a shirt. Bela was in the driver's seat, so I couldn't see her that well, but it looked like she was wearing a T-shirt. A thin one.

Could you ogres wear something a little more feminine? And Shemel, how about wrapping your chest a bit more too? The way the tips of her breasts pressed against her top was killing me.

"Oh, come on. It's nothing you haven't seen before. You're acting like a virgin," Shemel teased.

"I am used to it, but still." I hadn't actually gotten into that kind of relationship with the ogre girls yet. And hey, just because I had seen a few girls naked before didn't mean I suddenly had a resistance to it or something. My junk hadn't withered away or anything.

"You're quite the rare find, Boss. Most people would be scared of us ogre women," Shemel said.

"Yeaaah. I'd be over the moon if you started to consider, you know, taking our relationship to the next level," Bela added.

"…Maybe it's a little late to say this, but are you ladies really okay with that?" I asked.

Shemel and the others had approached me about this before, and they'd told me at the time Sylphy and my other wives were fine with it. For my part, I was more than willing to get intimate with them, but a part of me felt like I was, well, in over my head.

Whatever concept or virtue of monogamy I ever had was shattered into pieces ever since winter started. Aside from the harpies, I was sexually involved with seven women at the moment. If you included the harpies, well…I wasn't even sure of how many people I was tangling with. Or how many people were tangling with me, really. I assumed that I was probably involved with like twenty

or so harpies alone, maybe even thirty… I wanted to believe I hadn't hit forty yet.

"You're right. It is a little late for that. To be honest, I thought you weren't interested since you hadn't approached us since then," Bela said.

"I'm really sorry about that. I've been really busy…"

"Kousuke already had his hands pretty full," Ira said.

"A great many descended upon him and played with him, you see," Grande added.

"You say that as if you weren't part of that," Ira quipped.

"Was I?" Grande replied.

Ira narrowed her eyes at Grande as she grinned and brushed off the glare like it was nothing. The little dragon girl had a good eye for sizing up her opponents. She and Ira had awful combat compatibility. Ira's magic wasn't very effective against Grande, and Grande's incredible physical skills meant that Ira would never have the opening to cast her magic.

That said, if they ever engaged in a proper battle to the death, who would win? Ira probably had one or two—maybe more—cards up her sleeve, which was probably why Grande wasn't underestimating her.

"In any case, we approve of these three. If you have the desire to take them to bed, please do," Ira said.

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Mm. Not only are they strong close-range fighters, they're also intimidating physically. Perfect to serve as your security," Ira replied.

"Yeah, I doubt too many folks would try to rush a place the three of us were protectin'," Shemel said.

She had a point. They were all easily over two meters tall. Actually, I had to look up to make eye contact with them, so they

were probably closer to 2.3 or 2.5 meters in height. If the three of them were fully equipped for battle, most tough demi-humans—never mind humans—would give them a wide berth.

"Yeah, okay. Got it. I'll, uh, do my best," I said.

"You're not soundin' so sure," Shemel replied.

"I'm not used to initiating…" I said.

"Don't worry. At this point, seems like one of us can barely hold herself back," Bela said.

"O-oh," Tozume muttered. She was a bit of a mess. Her large eye was darting around, and she was breathing heavily while gripping and ungripping her hands in front of her chest.

She looked shifty as all hell.

"U-um, so, what am I allowed to do?" Tozume asked.

"What do you mean? I guess, uh…anything as long as it doesn't hurt?" I answered, confused by Tozume's strange tone and behavior.

I felt like I could see her large eye get clouded with excitement. It was terrifying.

"Did you just say *anything*…? You did, right?" Tozume asked.

"Pump the brakes! He's gonna get scared if you get all clingy," Shemel warned.

Shemel's interjection must have brought her back from the brink, as Tozume suddenly snapped to attention and smiled awkwardly in order to keep up appearances.

"R-right, yeah. I'm, um, not going to do anything weird. So don't worry," Tozume said.

She was lying through her teeth! For now, however, I swallowed my words. After all, I was pretty much up for anything as long as it didn't hurt or draw blood. I was, but…

"I think you should have at them as much as you please. It is not as though me, Ira, and the harpies can satisfy your urges all on our own," Grande said.

"Just what kind of sexual appetite do you think I have, Grande?"

"Common sense says that you are quite the outlier just for being able to keep company with so many women and still be so full of life."

"I'm just adapting to my environment."

Please, take it easy on me. I'm begging you.

Since I was going to be away for a while, the last three days in Merinesburg had been especially bad. I felt like I'd taken a step into the afterlife.

"If things ever started looking dangerous, I would have put a stop to it all," Grande said. "But somehow, you manage to hold out right until the breaking point. No wonder Goldy says you have the vitality of a roach."

"Excuse me?"

"Goldy" was how Grande referred to Elen. That jerk… How dare she treat me like a roach. I'd have to punish her the next time I saw her.

"In any event, you can all have your way with him whenever you want. Oh, don't worry, we've already run this by the harpies," Grande announced with a grin.

"Mm, good luck. Kousuke's a bit of a chicken, so I recommend taking charge, as if you're going to haul him over your shoulder and take him away," Ira chimed in.

"Ladies… Couldn't you have put that a little more delicately?"

"No," Ira replied bluntly.

"Absolutely not," said Grande. "You're always such a coward, so you need a push when the time comes. Or what, are you going to

start taking the initiative to ravage them yourself?”

“…Nrgh.”

I couldn’t really argue with that. There was no way I’d be able to approach the ogre girls myself. It’d be one thing if I knew them as well as I knew Sylphy and Ira, but…

“Nothing to say? Just as I thought. Ogres, do what must be done. Fear not—he won’t break easily. Go all out with him. I will allow it,” Grande said.

Shemel and Tozume replied to Grande’s frank proposal with forced smiles.

“Sure…once things settle down,” Shemel said.

“Y-yes, that sounds like a good idea,” Tozume agreed.

“Time to use the secret technique Grandma passed down to me! Woo, I can’t wait!” Bela was…Bela. Honestly, she reminded me of a husky. Or a junior-high boy in some ways. Also, wasn’t that technique she was talking about the whole thing about taking a guy into a thicket and ravaging them? I definitely wasn’t keen on the idea of getting it on out in the cold.

“Let me build us some cozy lodgings first, okay? I hate the cold,” I pleaded.

“You’re more upbeat about all this than I expected,” Ira said.

“Ira, I’m capable of learning.”

“Mm, it’s good to know when to give up.”

Ira’s body shook slightly atop my lap. She’d probably nodded.

I wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop them if the three ogres came at me all at once anyway, so I’d rather do everything in my power to make it a comfortable experience.

I liked Shemel and her party, and I trusted them. They’d protected me plenty up until now, and we’d even fought together. Personality-wise, we were a good fit too. Plus, our interests were aligned. The ogre girls were worried about raising children. This had

to do with their race. Ogre women required large quantities of food during their pregnancy, so they couldn't continue their work as adventurers at that point. As such, they sought reliable partners. In that sense, I was the perfect husband. I would be able to feed and keep them sheltered no matter where we were, no matter what.

"Hey, driver. Tell me about that secret technique of yours," Grande asked.

"Oh, it ain't nothin' complicated!" Bela said. "You rip off your partner's clothes, then hold them nude so they can't move. Eventually, they'll wanna do the nasty, and once that happens, you just go all out!"

"Are you a barbarian?"

"Most ogres in the boonies are like this! I was never cut out for that life, so I left my village. But I guess you can't fight your blood!"

Oh god. They're terrifying.

I looked toward Shemel in horror, but she jumped slightly and shook her head while covering her chest and stomach with her arms. Honestly, it was adorable.

Tozume was currently hugging her knees, doing her best to hide her body while glancing at me like crazy. The girls totally fell apart once they started thinking about me that way.

"Want me to close my eyes?" I offered.

"I-it's no big deal," Tozume stammered.

"Y-yeah."

"You all are quite the weaklings despite your massive size," Grande said with a chuckle.

She was one to talk; she wasn't so much a weakling as she was a bit of a chicken. She used to freak out around Melty before. Not so much these days, though.

"What is it, Kousuke? Have something to say?" Grande asked.

"Nope, not at all. Ow, ow! That legit hurts."

Grande prodded me with her slime-covered tail repeatedly. Was she a mind reader or something?

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"We're here!" Bela announced.

"Only took about half a day. Had I flown us, it would have taken us an hour," Grande said.

"And over a week on foot. Airboards are wild," Bela added.

"Shouldn't you be more surprised by how fast a dragon can fly?" Tozume interjected.

Bela stretched her barely covered body out. All that driving must have been hell on her back.

"More importantly, where we stayin'?" Shemel cut the conversation short, bringing us all back to earth.

"Well, I could easily whip us up some lodgings, but…" I cast my gaze toward our surroundings. We were in a massive field near Metocerium—a pasture, to be exact. There were cows, horses, sheep, and goats eating grass, walking around, and napping. Obviously they weren't all in the same fenced area; the animals were penned off in sections.

"The owner of this ranch is gonna skewer us with a pitchfork if we set up shop here without asking," I mused.

"I bet… But we don't have to do that, right? You've got some government clout, so can't you just go ask one of the hotshots in the city?" Shemel asked—and she was absolutely right.

"I guess I'll do that, then… I'll be right back."

"The heck're you talkin' about? We're your bodyguards, pal. Bela, Tozume. Straighten up," Shemel said.

"Roger that," Bela replied. "Shouldn't we get our equipment on, first?"

"Right."

Bela tilted her head in confusion while Tozume trained her big eye on me.

Right, right. I guess I should make a changing room and get their equipment out.

***

I built a changing space for the fifty elite magic gunsmen and COs—at the moment, the gender ratio in our military was 3:7—then entered Metocerium after everyone got into their formation.

We—me, Grande, and the three ogres—were at the center of the formation, surrounded by a wall of elite magic gunmen on all sides. It was the safest spot we could possibly be in.

"We'd be in trouble if a mage like Ira tossed a high-powered spell at us right now," Grande said.

"Don't worry. I'll block it," Ira assured her.

"We're basically perfectly defended with Ira and you girls here," I said.

Any close-range attacks would be handled by Shemel and the ogres, while Ira could guard against any magical attacks. We were essentially an impregnable fortress at this point. And with Grande on our team, we could easily flee from a military force of tens of thousands if necessary.

"You have a lot of nerve. Even if we weren't here, you'd be able to handle just about any kind of attack," Shemel said.

"Yeah, true. As long as I don't get done in by the first attack, I could just dig into the ground and flee that way," I explained.

The strategy was I'd build a stone wall, then dig into the ground and flee into the earth. I had a mithril shovel and pickaxe at my fingertips, so even magic wouldn't be able to get to me given my insane digging speed.

"Obviously, we ain't ever gonna let it come to that," snorted the large wolfman marching next to me, his magic gun slung over his shoulder.

This was Worg, a wolf beastman who served as Danan's right hand. Like Cuvi, he was a demi-human with lots of soft fur. We were drinking buddies, but after fall had started, we kinda lost touch… A whole lot had happened, and we couldn't hang out for a while. After all, whenever I tried to go outside on my own, I'd gotten snatched and dragged off to the bedroom…

"Do they know about the whole lodging construction thing?" I asked.

"They should," he said. "We have a golem communicator setup here, so they should've gotten orders directly from Merinesburg."

"Then that means there should be a supervisor from Merinesburg here already, right?"

"Mm, for sure. Metocerium is one of the cities that expressed their allegiance to us before the fighting started. There should be a supervisor here."

Specifically, "supervisor" meant a government official that was sent to a city that had expressed their allegiance to the New Kingdom of Merinard. The job was in the name: They supervised the city in question to make sure it was adhering to the letter of the new law. When I first heard about them, they sounded to me like secret police—a truly terrifying prospect. But Melty said that opportunists who changed allegiances based on the shifting winds of fortune needed people watching over them, otherwise they could start acting up.

"Man, we stand out big time, huh?" I said.

"Of course we do," Worg replied.

We were a group of fifty soldiers holding weapons people had never seen before, so we weren't exactly blending in. While we made our way to the lord's manor, the people of Metocerium were all

staring at us. We were gathering all kinds of attention; some of them were just curious, but many of the others looked concerned. Luckily, as far as I could tell, I didn't sense much in the way of hostility.

"What's the lord here like?" Worg asked.

"No clue. Do you know?" I asked back.

"You really think a bunch of adventurers like us would know?"

"Yeah. We're about as far removed from politics as you can get!"

"He came to Merinesburg a few weeks back. He was a normal nobleman devoted to protecting his own territory and interests."

"Gotcha."

So he was what you'd call a trueborn nobleman or influential person. Hm, was that really going to be okay? I'd never met this specific lord, but Sylphy and Melty were both in terrible moods whenever they had to deal with his ilk. They always drank and complained a whole lot more than usual. I remembered them telling me how plenty of these guys would express loyalty on the surface but clearly had axes to grind. I didn't know if this guy had an axe of his own, but if he did, this was going to be a real pain in the ass.

"I can see it now." Tozume put her hand above her eye and directed her gaze out in the distance. I couldn't see anything above the wall of soldiers, but since she was taller than most of our troops, she could apparently already see the manor. "Well, let's get this *ogre* with…"

"That's terrible. I'm gonna pay ya back for that one later. Ah! Look! The skewers at that stall look awesome! Can I go grab some?" Bela asked.

"Of course not," Shemel said.

"Ow, ow! Boss, that hurts!"

Shemel ground her fist into Bela's head as she teared up, and I sighed, watching them out of the corner of my eye. I was starting to get the feeling this was going to be a long trip.

Unfortunately, my hunches had a pretty good track record thus far.

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"We have been expecting you. Now, right this way. We have prepared rooms for your soldiers as well, of course."

The master of the plentiful servants who greeted us at the manor—more like a castle, really—was none other than the viceroy of Metocerium, Heinrich Le Metocera. He was a plump older man, and he looked pretty happy to see us. He had a head of gray hair and a stylish mustache that left quite an impression. I assumed he was a human.

"Thank you," Worg said. "But we'll be fine as long as you show us to the site…"

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "You have come so far, and I could not possibly just send you out to the wilderness without showing you some Metocerium hospitality. My pride as a member of House Metocera wouldn't allow it! Please, enjoy your stay here."

As the man leading the fifty elite gunsmen we brought with us, Worg was dealing with Mr. Heinrich as best he could, but it wasn't going to be enough. At this rate, we were all going to end up staying at the manor. I took a moment to consider whether that would actually be a problem. It all seemed legit, but I was getting bad vibes for some reason. I doubted he'd suddenly try to poison us or send an assassin into our bedrooms, but there was no telling whether he might try to expose some of our military secrets or something. Oh well.

"Sorry, but we really are short on time. Could you please show us to the site?" I said.

"My apologies, but might I ask who you are?"

I was an average-looking human, yet I was standing right next to Worg, the CO, and had three female ogre warriors who looked to be adventurers at my beck and call. Yeah, of course he wouldn't immediately know who I was. And when he'd visited Merinesburg, I was either stuck in my room or the lab, so we'd never actually met.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, I am Kousuke. Fabled Visitor and the partner of Queen Sylphyel Danal Merinard."

"Eh?" Upon hearing my introduction, Mr. Heinrich shivered, and he turned his gaze to Worg, who then nodded clearly and backed me up.

"He tells the truth. I've been fighting at his side ever since we met in the Black Forest. By the way, Her Highness loves Sir Kousuke unequivocally, so should something happen to him, expect that you will be axed. And I mean that literally. I recommend being very careful."

"H-ha ha ha ha… Well, then." The color immediately drained from Mr. Heinrich's face. He probably thought he could swindle a group of fifty soldiers easily with his "hospitality." Little did he know that after he tried to mess up our schedule, he would make the shocking discovery that the spouse of this country's absolute leader —the prince consort—was present.

"For what it's worth, I simply wanted to give you all some respite after your long journey…" he said.

"I appreciate the kindness, but we have a schedule to stick to," I said. "If we ended up returning a day or two later than planned because we accepted your offer, who knows what Sylphy would think."

"I will dispatch someone to serve as your guide posthaste. May I have a few minutes?" His expression had gotten super serious, so I nodded.

I still wasn’t really sure about this guy. He didn’t seem to have any ill will toward us. He was also going to take us to the site for the base without issue too. For now, things were looking up.

Chapter 4:
Winter and the Usual Base Building

SO FAR, THE BASE CONSTRUCTION had been proceeding without issue. Our expeditionary force was composed of fifty magic gunsmen, their CO Worg, five civil officials to manage the base, a single platoon of five harpy aerial bombers, myself, Ira, Grande, and the three ogre girls. That made for a total of sixty-seven people.

The base I made this time around had to be large enough to comfortably house us, 300 volunteer troops, and the people who would be running the various facilities on-site. I also needed to build facilities for drills—a sports ground, a firing range, and the like—so the plot of land would have to be pretty large. Obviously, we also needed a workshop for manufacturing bullets as well as a host of other facilities required for supporting the daily lives of hundreds of people. Soldiers were people like anyone else, and they needed to eat, do their laundry, and do a whole bunch of other things. To live out normal lives, they also needed the kinds of amenities you'd find in your average town or city.

"This is less like a base and more like a town at this point," Shemel whispered while looking at the largely empty base.

"Cutting edge, right?" I said.

"I mean, yeah, but…"

"You never change, do you?"

The day after we arrived in Metocerium, I took the ogre girls and Grande with me and got to work on expanding the base's functionality. Worg and the civil officials met up with the supervisor and conducted an interview with Sir Heinrich, discussing the organization of the volunteer soldiers and the people who'd be working at the base going forward. Meanwhile, the elite gunsmen formed platoons and went out around the base to clear out any

monsters or bandits in the area. The harpy platoon said they were going to head off to the harpy communities in the area to try and recruit some fresh faces. When I asked them why they had their bombs equipped, they told me the fastest way to convince their fellow harpies was by showing them what they'd be doing in the army.

Worg said it was fine, but…was that really going to be okay?

"We've got plumbing and sewer services, indoor heating, space for the soldiers' families to live, and a fortified wall. Plus, the people inside will be protected by Merinard's powerful troops. On top of that, the plan is to have airboards running supplies and stuff back and forth from Metocerium. One helluva property if you ask me," I said.

"That's for sure," Shemel said. "If nothin' else, ain't nobody here gotta worry about getting attacked by monsters or bandits."

"Sure, but it'll be a military target once the war starts," Bela commented.

"No more than your average city. If this place wasn't here, Metocerium would be gettin' attacked anyway," Shemel pointed out.

Our base was twenty kilometers north of Metocerium. It'd take about half a day to walk the distance, which, to me, felt pretty equivalent to the time it'd take to travel between two major cities. Well, I guess in modern-day Japan you could walk for twenty kilometers and get to a different city or even prefecture, so maybe I was way off.

"In any event, I'm done with construction. Now all we need to do is see what the people who'll actually be using all of this think," I said.

I'd built a number of bases and strongholds in this world already, and I'd done tons of land readjustment in cities. I had some real know-how, so I doubted there'd need to be any major revisions this time around.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

It sounded like distant thunder.

Must be the magic guns.

The platoons of magic gunsmen were firing away out in the field. At the moment, they had their sturdy light armor equipped, and along with their bayonets, they had normal swords as well, so they wouldn't have any problem with close-range combat. No way any bandits or monsters who found themselves on the receiving end of our wall of bullets would be left in one piece. Plus, the platoon would be riding airboards and using golem communicators to share intel. They could fire while on the move too, so unless they came in contact with a dragon like Grande, they weren't going to lose anytime soon.

"It's so peaceful… All right, how about we have some tea?" I suggested.

"Sounds good to me! I was just startin' to get hungry," Bela said.

"I'd like something sweet," Tozume said.

"You people are so carefree…" Shemel looked our way, obviously exasperated.

Ha ha ha. I've gotta get my rest when I can! There's no telling how many new harpies are on their way.

***

"Hey, hey, hey. What're you up to?"

"A bomb? Is it a bomb?"

"*Sniff, sniff*… Eh heh heh."

A week later, I was at work developing a new weapon while pretty much buried underneath harpies. I was being clung to, climbed on, and sniffed by a bunch of brand-new harpies—more specifically, harpy children.

"I'm making a new weapon," I answered. "And it's not a bomb. Also there isn't any powder in it so it's not dangerous or anything, but don't touch it too much, okay? Also, hey, you? On my back? Could you give me some space?"

These were the daughters and little sisters of the new harpies that'd joined our army and were slated to join the harpy aerial bomb squad. They were still too small to fly with bombs, so they obviously weren't going to see action anytime soon. Their current job was to make sure to eat and sleep so they could grow up properly. In the meantime, my workshop had been forcibly converted into a day-care center.

The little girls probably heard that I was the nice guy who was friends with their moms and sisters—maybe they even heard I could be their new dad or big brother one day. The problem was that I couldn't leave anything dangerous around while they were present. Something really had to give.

"Do you even need bodyguards at this point?" Shemel asked.

"Nobody's gonna be able to get close to you when you're surrounded by this many harpies," Bela observed.

"I guess this is all part of the job…" Tozume said.

The three ogre women were very popular with the harpy children too. Since they were so tall, the girls were using them like launchpads to practice their flying. They'd climb up to their shoulders or heads, then glide on down. Sometimes the kids would ask for piggyback rides too. As far as I could tell, the ogre adventurers liked children and looked after them just fine. They even took the girls out to explore while I was conducting dangerous experiments, so, honestly? They were a huge help.

There were a total of eight harpy kiddos in my workshop at the moment. Twenty-seven new harpies had joined the aerial bomb squad, making for a total of thirty-five new harpies in our army. Of course, the little ones here wouldn't be joining the bomb squad for a few years.

As for my nightlife? It was peaceful for the moment… But I got the feeling it was only a matter of time. Currently though, my nights were plenty serene.

"So what are you making, anyway? One of them gun thingies?" Shemel asked.

"Nah. I'm making a mortar," I replied.

"Whazzat?"

"The name doesn't really tell us much of anything."

"Good point. Lemme see… It's a weapon capable of launching one of those harpy bombs anywhere from 100 meters to an hour's walking distance away."

"Wouldn't the usual harpy airstrikes be more useful?"

"For now, yeah. But in a few years' time, who knows?"

"Is that how weapon-making works?"

"It sure is. You don't want to make this kind of thing after you need it. You do it ahead of time."

At present, the harpies were the only airborne presence on the battlefield, but like I'd told the ogres, there was no telling what the situation would be one, two, or even three years from now. A new threat could appear that could take air supremacy away from the harpies. These mortars could combat whatever that threat might be.

Strengthening their equipment was also a priority. Right now, the harpies gripped the bombs with their feet, flew above the enemy, and then released their payload, so loading them up with heavy explosive equipment, armor, or weapons for airborne combat would weigh them down too much to fly. I needed to think up a way to upgrade their payload, equip them with some kind of powered-up armor, and give them a way to defend themselves. I had a few ideas, but I didn't know if I could actually execute them. The harpies flew on pure instinct, after all. Not a single harpy could explain the actual mechanics behind their flight. Trying to uncover a secret that even they didn't understand, then thinking up a way to use that

knowledge to strengthen their equipment, was no easy feat. That said, I did have the beginnings of a theory based on the process Ira and I used to apply wind magic to the recoil propulsion devices.

Honestly, it was going to prove difficult to help the harpies out with my knowledge of modern weaponry, so my only real option was to tell Ira my general ideas and have her and R&D develop stuff the slow and steady way. Their equipment was likely to turn out more science-fiction-y than my modern weapons did, anyway. Well, to be accurate, their powered-up equipment would be more fantasy than sci-fi, since the way the harpies flew—not to mention their very existence—was magical.

"He's lost in thought."

"Bet he's thinking up something really violent and awful."

"For sure."

"You girls are terrible," I said to the harpy girls gathered around me. They weren't wrong, though. "All right, I'm done for today! Let's go for a walk."

"Yay! A walk!"

"I'm going too!"

"Woo-hoo!"

I put all of the mortar parts into my inventory and took the little harpy girls on a stroll through the base, which was slowly filling up with people. It wasn't good for these kids to be cooped up all the time, after all.

***

It'd been a week since I constructed the base, and it was finally starting to feel lively. The first ones to arrive were the harpies—a bunch came flying over the day after I built this place. They were followed by citizens from Metocerium, and then folks from the surrounding towns came too.

"Going for a walk, Lord Kousuke?"

"Yeah. I don't want the girls being cooped up all day."

A bunch of people who worked at the base greeted me as I walked by. Most of them were young demi-human women, and some appeared to be pregnant. They were smiling right now, but when they arrived three days ago, they were in tatters, both physically and mentally. For as much as they claimed that demi-humans were sinners from birth, Adolists sure were obsessed with directing their sexual desires at young demi-human women. Disgusting.

Huh? Am I one to talk? How rude. I take responsibility for my actions, and I treat all of my partners with the utmost respect. If anything, I'm the object of *their* desires… Yeah, okay. No more thinking about this. I'm going to hurt my own heart.

The best I could do for these women was offer them work, warm food, beds, and proper medical treatment that would hopefully bring peace to their hearts. We had demi-human men volunteering here too, though right now they were off scouting the area under the guise of training. Personally, I truly prayed that these women might be able to start happy, loving families with some of those guys.

You might have already noticed at this point, but most of the people here were demi-humans. The reason was simple: Now that Merinard was out from under the foot of the Holy Kingdom, the slave system had been done away with. The greedy bastards who used demi-human slaves for their own personal gain were either driven out or eliminated, and the former slaves were now free of their painful past lives.

In a children's fairy tale, this was how it would all end, but reality wasn't so kind. We chased out the vicious slave owners and traders, sure, but that didn't suddenly mean the former slaves were going to live happily ever after. That simply wasn't realistic. Humans and demi-humans both had to work in order to eat, so while the

former slaves had freedom now from their cruel and awful former masters, they'd also lost what livelihoods they had. Providing these demi-humans with work opportunities was an unresolved problem here in Merinard, but this base was one small way we could work to fix it, even though there was much more to do.

Small steps were important too.

"Ah! It's Kousuke! Let's play hunter!"

"After I finish doing the rounds, okay? Get everyone together in the plaza, will you?"

"Woo-hoo! It's a promise!"

The harpy girls weren't the only children in the base now. There were, well, the children of the young demi-human women from before, their little brothers and sisters, and the younger siblings of the men-in-training who were off-base at the moment. The kids were pretty anxious the first few days here, but once I invited them to go on a walk with me and the harpies, they opened right up.

By the way, the "hunter" game they were referring to was essentially just tag. And lemme tell you, playing tag with a bunch of demi-human children with superhuman abilities was no cakewalk… It felt like I was actually being pursued by real hunters. They were way too fast.

But the kids weren't just playing all day. In this world, children were considered a proper labor force. In the morning, they went around washing the soldiers' and trainees' clothing, helped tend the field I made in the corner of the base, and even looked after the younger kids. They were quite busy. The rule was that they could only play after they worked in the morning and had a proper lunch.

After parting ways with the excited children, I made my way toward the field. Obviously, I'd created the field using my farming blocks. Crops grew quickly here, resulting in delicious vegetables. The veggies planted at the moment were ones I was raising myself, and it was almost harvest time. They'd probably be ready tomorrow-

ish. The crops grown here were consumed on the base, and the workers here took turns tending to them.

For the first crop, I'd planted a bunch of tomel and cabbaj, since they were nutritious and could be used in all kinds of dishes. But what about next time? We had a lot of kids on base, so maybe apples, because they could be preserved? Grapes could be nice too, since they could be turned into raisins and wine. Tubers were also a decent choice, as they could be turned into a staple food quickly and could be canned as well.

With that on my mind, I checked the water-sprinkling magic device for any problems, then used my double jump to get up to the midair waterway to check if there were any foreign objects mixed in.

"Heeey, try not to go anywhere we can't get to, okay?" Shemel called out.

"He always looks so gross and creepy when he does that…" Bela grumbled.

"Shhh, he'll hear you," Shemel scolded.

"I already can!"

I'm going to secretly give Bela a way smaller snack today. Ugh, no. I have to be the mature one. Food-based grudges are terrifying things.

After making my rounds, I went to play with the kids—and Grande, as she'd joined up with them while I was away. As promised, we played, had snack time, and ended the day as peacefully as always.

Except…we didn't.

"We're gonna drink."

"You'll be joining us, right?"

"Just give up, bud."

"I don't mind."

That night, after finishing dinner and taking turns bathing, I was settling in for some shut-eye when the ogre girls suddenly invited me to drink with them. Of course, I was going to be the one providing the alcohol and snacks.

We had gotten an exchange up and running on base, primarily operated by the civil officials and former merchant demi-humans. This exchange sold not only daily necessities, but also luxury grocery items like alcohol and snacks. That said, most of the people on base didn't have much in the way of cash at the moment, so sales weren't exactly spectacular. After talking things over with Base Commander Worg and the civil officials, we were in the process of getting their first payments delivered early by operating on a weekly system.

"Talk about a disappointment. We'd assumed we'd be protecting you from bunches of assassins and junk, but there's been nothin'," Shemel lamented.

"That's a good thing, I'll have you know," I said.

"Exactly. We get to eat, drink, and get paid without putting our lives on the line. Ain't no job better than that. Still, don't be lettin' your guards down," Bela said.

"I know. It'd be real bad if we messed up and somethin' happened to our brother here, after all," Shemel said.

"You calling me brother now?" I asked.

"Sure. Or would you prefer 'master' or somethin'?" Shemel replied.

"I'm fine with either but… Ah. Wait. Is today about you-know-what?"

Shemel and Bela exchanged looks and nodded. As for Tozume, well, she was tense even before we'd even started drinking. That's what had tipped me off.

"Yeah, well, asking us to set the mood for that sorta thing was never really gonna pan out, y'know?" Shemel said as she extended her hands toward me.

She picked me up and sat me down on her lap. She was wearing ratty casual wear today, so I felt something lovely pressing up against the back of my head.

"Right, right. I really don't get that kinda thing. If I was ever interested in a guy, I'd just drag him into a bush somewhere and have my way with him."

"That's terrifying," I replied.

"Ah, don't get me wrong. I've never actually done nothin' like that before. I'm still in mint condition."

"Wow, you really don't sugarcoat it, do you?"

"'Sugarcoat'? What's that mean?"

Right, right. Of course they wouldn't know what sugarcoating meant in this world.

"Is Tozume all right?"

She was so nervous that her large eye was spinning in circles. I got the impression she was extremely not okay.

"Ah… She might be too far gone. Let's pin her down while we've still got the energy," Shemel said.

"Good idea. I'll get her right arm and right leg," Bela offered.

"Then I'll handle her left side…"

"Whoa, whoa, hold up!" I said. "The mental image you're painting sounds more like a crime than anything."

I positioned myself in front of the frozen Tozume in order to stop the other two from moving forward with their plan. This idea they'd come up with was crazy. Hell, if you only heard what they were discussing, you'd think they were mountain bandits or someth —

Woosh!

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped themselves around me from behind and drew me in with terrifying strength.

"Grah?!"

Yet again, the back of my head was graced with a delightfully soft sensation. Now was absolutely not the time to be focusing on that, though. The arms were wrapped so tightly around me that it was hard to breathe. I couldn't even struggle.

"Haaah, haaaah!!!"

"Eeek…!"

The hot nasal breath brushing against the back of my neck caused me to tremble. Given the current situation, there was only one person who could be holding me right now.

"Aaah, that's why we were gonna try and pin her down…" Bela said.

"Too late…" Shemel lamented.

"Hold on! Wait! Don't rip my clothes off! Calm down! We can talk things out!"

I turned around and found my face reflected in a single large eye that almost looked like it had a heart mark inside of it. Yup. I was toast. No doubt about it.

"Just give up," Shemel said.

"You're not goin' nowhere. If you try to break free, you might get hurt, Boss," Bela advised.

I'd looked to Shemel and Bela for help, but was instead greeted with their pitiless replies.

Fine, I give up. Just please, be gentle.

***

I was currently the filling in a very soft and very warm sandwich. I opened my heavy eyelids amid the oppressive atmosphere and was immediately greeted by red skin. But that wasn't all; I was buried—sandwiched. There was a soft, warm, joyous texture pressing against my back at the moment.

I tried to break free from this happy sandwich, but the soft sensations currently engulfing my body simply boinged along, changing form and preventing me from making any progress. I wasn't going to be breaking free anytime soon.

Even worse, the more I struggled, the more extremely powerful and weighty arms and legs tangled themselves around me from both sides, completely cutting off any escape route.

"Hrm…"



Sometime during one of my failed efforts to get away, someone extended a helping hand. More specifically, someone put their arm under my right side and gently picked me up like I was some kind of broken object, pulling me out from the soft, warm space.

"…G'morning."

"Um… Yeah, good…morning."

The person who'd freed me was a large woman with a single big eye—Tozume.

Her beautiful red body was covered up by a single white sheet, and after gazing at me, she looked down at my lower body—which was currently completely uncovered—and turned an even brighter shade of red.

"…Y-you still haven't had your fill?!" she stammered.

"Ah, this is uh, a natural physical response. I swear," I replied.

Last night, despite being locked in battle with three ogre women much larger than myself, I'd emerged victorious. This morning, in addition to my body doing what bodies tended to do, I was also confronted with an incredibly joyous situation upon waking up. Despite my own intentions, my little guy was currently asserting his presence.

"Could you just put me down and pretend you didn't see anything?" I asked.

"A-ah, okay. Of course."

Tozume's eye was starting to spin again, but I managed to calm her down and get her to place me on the floor. Yeah, there was something relaxing about having both feet on land. I just didn't feel at ease being held like a cat or a dog, body all stretched out. Especially in the buff.

"Anyhow… Let's uh, clean up."

"R-right."

Since Sylphy and Elen weren't around, we couldn't just clean the room using magic or miracles. In other words, we had to do it the old-fashioned way: using water and cleaning rags.

"For now, how about we wake the others up?"

"G-good idea. Let's, um, do that."

I somehow managed to keep Tozume—who was still acting a bit erratic—calm, then went on to get the other two ogre girls to help clean up. They looked surprisingly cute when they were sleeping…

In any event, the room was a spectacular disaster, and they shared the blame. Of course they had to help.

***

"Whew, so this is what they mean by 'afterglow,'" Bela said.

"Doesn't look like you're glowing to me…" Shemel replied. "But, yeah. I still feel like there's something in between my legs."

"Ah, I totally get that feeling."

"You girls sure don't mince words, do you?"

The two red ogre girls were eating boiled wieners, big loaves of bread, sour sauerkraut, and pickles while discussing their impressions of last night like it was some kind of postmortem. Tozume, having been the first to lose herself and fall before my might, was bright red and trying not to stand out as she ate breakfast. That said, no amount of curling up into a ball was going to make her invisible. After all, she was gigantic.

"Why so mopey? What're you so embarrassed about?" I asked.

"Yeah. In the end, both me and Shemel got put in our place by our bro here. Whew, I guess I shouldn't be so surprised considering how many women he's made squeal!" Bela said.

"Can't you at least try to have, like, a little more shame? Just a little?" I asked.

Considering she kept bouncing back and forth between the two, Bela seemingly couldn't decide whether to call me "bro" or "boss."

"You really think that kinda thing would suit me?" Bela replied with a frown.

She had a point, honestly.

"I suppose that's more Tozume and Shemel's thing," I conceded.

"I mean, if you want that sorta behavior from us, we'll give it a shot, but…I really don't think that's who we are. Well, except Tozume," Shemel said.

"Unlike us, she's pretty dainty and sensitive. She actually loves cute stuff," Bela said.

"I see…"

I turned my gaze toward Tozume, who jumped in surprise and started to tremble.

Hmm… Hearing that makes me want to try dressing her up in all sorts of frills and lace… Maybe I'll talk to her about it later.

***

Anyway, I wasn't just engaging in raunchy antics day after day. I didn't come all the way north to just deepen my bonds with the ogre girls or endure the harpies' fierce attacks. I was here to build facilities and train the soldiers we needed in order to fight back the invasion from the north that would come in the spring.

That said, the invasion would come in the form of infantrymen equipped with spears, shields, swords, and bows. They'd probably have cavalrymen and mages, but not many. The wars in this world were a numbers game. In other words, the enemy was going to try and put together as large a fighting force as they could, as many resources as they could, and march at us all at once.

If they had golem communicators like us, they'd be able to share information in real time, which would allow them to split their forces into smaller units and invade different locations simultaneously. Unfortunately for them, their current means of communication were shabby at best. Their fastest communiqués came in the form of flying familiars controlled by mages, and then further down the line were messengers on horseback. Smoke signals were also an option, but there was a pretty hard upper limit as to how much information could be conveyed that way, making it unsuitable for sharing information across dispersed units.

Additionally, carriages loaded with supplies had an extremely hard time getting through steep mountains or deep forests, and really, going down any trackless path was a near-impossibility. That being the case, any invasion routes would be confined to proper roads, so for the side being attacked, all they had to do was keep an eye on the roads and quickly place the necessary forces at locations where they were needed.

When it came to speed, our troop-transport airboards had an overwhelming advantage, and our communications system was superior in both speed and range. In terms of surveillance, we had the harpies in the sky.

Gah ha ha, victory is ours!

"You know, that way of thinking never leads anywhere good," Worg cautioned.

"Mm, for sure. Never underestimate the enemy," Ira agreed.

"Yeah. Nothing good ever comes from being overconfident," I said.

Both Ira and Worg nodded in agreement. Our military tech greatly surpassed the enemy's, so it was natural to think that we could never lose. But there were no absolutes. No matter how much of a technical advantage we had, if our soldiers were impaled by spears on the front line, cut with swords, or faced a shower of arrows, they would die.

Our enemies to the north received some measure of intel about us from the Holy Kingdom, so it was safe to assume that they'd come up with countermeasures against our guns and aerial bombs. The Holy Kingdom was supposedly a deeply proud nation, so I didn't know if they'd go out of their way to share all of the details of their devastating loss with Diieharte and Tigris, but I found it hard to believe that they'd just throw them at us without a plan.

"What are they plotting? Maybe they'll set up a bunch of superthick shields?" Ira asked.

"They might be able to block our guns with those, but they'd be defenseless against aerial bombs. It's not exactly a perfect strategy," I said.

"Yeah, you're right," Worg said. "It'd be difficult to ready the heavy shields in time to protect themselves from the bombs, and even if they managed it, their formation would collapse, making them perfect targets for our magic guns. On their own, though, they'd still be an effective defense against the guns."

"They'd have to make them heavy and thick without completely sacrificing mobility… Sounds reasonable. But that won't be enough to completely defend against our magic guns' piercing power," I said.

Both Ira and Worg nodded once again. I had no choice but to declare that any shield that allowed its wielder to still be relatively mobile wouldn't be strong enough to repel our bullets. Obviously, that wasn't a sure thing, especially if they used special materials like black steel, which was harder and tougher than normal steel or iron, but could they really get their hands on vast quantities of the stuff? Probably not, even if I had been able to.

"They won't have magic guns, so I imagine they'll come at us with long-range bows," I said.

"That wouldn't be enough. Bows with firing ranges large enough to hit our harpies are hard to come by, as are archers who even have the skill to use them," Ira said.

"Additionally, archery isn't a skill you can instantly acquire," Worg said. "Your crossbows and guns are an abnormality in that the wielder can master them in a short period of time. Normally, it's quite difficult to find a group of skilled archers. Plus, they don't have you on their side, which means they can't just increase a bow's effectiveness with the snap of a finger. Even if they somehow could, they wouldn't be able to train people to use them in a single winter."

"So if increasing their bows' effectiveness is a dead-end, as is increasing the number of archers they have, what if they modified the arrows somehow? For example, what if they made a special arrow that uses wind magic or something?" I asked.

"It's possible. But then you run into the problem of whether they can be mass-produced or not," Ira replied.

"But they could be made, right? Which means they could have a way to deal with the harpies, mass-producible or not. We should be careful. They've got the Holy Kingdom behind them, so it's possible they could prepare the materials for that kind of thing. Maybe we should give the harpies a way to defend themselves… Oh, back to the magic gun conversation—they might have their earth mages make dirt walls or something. Or maybe a magic tool that can do the same thing. After all, we're working on a tool like that too."

R&D had started work on a magic tool that could quickly and easily dig trenches and create dirt walls, and the plan was to have an effective prototype made during the winter using the mithril copper alloy that I supplied.

"That's very possible," Worg said. "However, I don't believe they'll be able to get enough people or tools to be effective. Also, they won't be able to march forward if they use a tool like that. If they don't have projectile weapons with longer ranges than our magic guns, they simply won't be able to attack us at all."

"True enough. If push comes to shove, we can just circle them with our airboards and attack them from behind with our guns," I said.

"Right. It might be wise to train our men to be able to fire their guns while on the airboards. Ah, what if we had the airboards scatter the enemy lines as a way to oppose their archers?"

"Like some kind of armored vehicle? Yeah, I considered that. I could either modify the airboards, or make something from scratch…"

If we wanted to defend against arrows the normal way, just adding thick iron plates over the wooden ones would be more than enough. The metal armor would also make it resistant to flame arrows. The airboards were designed to have a lot carrying capacity weight-wise, so putting armor on them wouldn't pose a problem.

"I think we'd be fine if we just stayed out of their range, but armor would give people peace of mind. Please come up with something," Worg said.

"All right. Now we just have to figure out where to place our surveillance bases along the invasion route…"

Our discussion in the strategy room continued, and since we needed to finish preparing before the end of winter, we didn't have time to spare.

I wish I could live a more peaceful life… Oh well.

***

As far as the harpies' reinforced equipment was concerned—specifically the magic tool designed to ward off arrows using wind magic barriers—I'd already given R&D in Merinesburg my idea. I told them to prepare fifty units for me by the spring. As for the heavy bombing equipment and armor, I couldn't figure it out on my own, so I sent a bunch of documents with my ideas on them to the Merinesburg lab to have them look into it.

I had a few ideas regarding the heavy bomber equipment. The first was miniaturizing the aerial bombs themselves and creating a pylon system that the harpies could equip on their legs or bodies. At

the moment, we were having the harpies physically hold the bombs, which were attached to a fuse wrapped around their legs. When they dropped the bombs, the fuse would light and the bomb would blow. Since they were actually grabbing the bombs, they could only carry two at a time, but if we miniaturized them, we'd be able to equip the pylons with multiple explosives, massively increasing the amount of destruction the harpies could cause in one trip. If we succeeded in miniaturizing the bombs without decreasing their total strength, then equipped each leg with three bombs, a single harpy's destructive capability would increase threefold.

"I'd like you to help me develop the new bombs and a pylon support system."

"Okay!" the harpies responded enthusiastically.

I appreciated the enthusiasm, but there were way too many of them here at the moment; at least ten. I guess the more samples the better?

"Um, first I'd like you to show me your legs. Are they all shaped the same?" I asked.

"Hmm? I wonder. I've never really thought about it," replied Pessa the brown-feathered harpy as she cast her gaze down to her own legs.

They were just like the bird legs from my world, only much larger. The harpies' legs supported their bodies on four toes each—three toes in the front, then one in the back. And when they grabbed things, they used all four.

"Can you move them freely?"

"Hm… You mean like this?"

Pessa opened and closed her toes like she was grabbing something. I didn't know if this was how actual birds moved, but if nothing else, the harpies could clearly move each digit as they wished. Extremely delicately, I might add.

"Mm-hmm. I see. Could you try grabbing my arm?"

"Sure."

I knelt down next to her and extended my arm. Pessa spread her wings to maintain her balance, then deftly stood on one foot and used the other to grab my arm.

"Can you put a little power into it?"

"Okay. If it starts to hurt, let me know, okay?"

Pessa began to grip my arm more strongly.

Ooh, she's pretty strong. Though I guess that makes sense considering she and the others are flying around carrying bombs.

"Perfect. Next, I'm going to touch your toes. I want you to see if you can put strength into them individually, okay?"

"Gotcha."

I touched each individual toe of the foot grabbing my arm, and she managed to tighten them individually no problem.

"Great. Which toe did you find it easiest to tighten?"

"This one."

She indicated the toe closest to her body's center. The center-toe, so to speak.

"Is that the case for everyone else? Wait. Why are you all surrounding me?"

I came out of this experience—a strange ritual of all the harpies grabbing me with their feet and squeezing me like some kind of plushie—with a few new pieces of knowledge. Much to my surprise, the harpies were extremely dexterous and their grip was powerful. Considering they could spend an entire night clinging to a tree branch, that shouldn't have shocked me so much.

"Hmm, in that case, it'd probably be best if I designed a trigger mechanism."

If the harpies could pull a trigger with their toes, making the bomb-release device a trigger system would work out just fine. As

for the actual design…

"This is the simple version."

"It looks kind of lame," Pessa commented.

"Man, it really stings to hear you say that so casually…"

I drew a square metal frame with four small bombs surrounding a grip with a trigger. Looking at the grip and frame from above, it resembled the Japanese character "ìí." You equipped the top, bottom, left, and right with bombs, then by pulling the trigger, the payload was released clockwise.

"If we go this route, I'm going to end up using something like a garter belt to support your legs and hips. But wait, if the weight distribution gets all out of whack because you've got multiple bombs equipped, you might be bottom-heavy instead of top-heavy, if that makes any sense. In that case, it might be better to have the release device trigger-based, then attach the bombs to the outside of your thighs."

"Like how?" Capri, another brown-feathered harpy, asked with a tilt of her head.

It was hard to tell if Capri simply had a good upbringing or if she was from a far-off land, but she spoke with something resembling a Kansai accent. Almost like she was from Kyoto. Of course, this was just me applying my own bias to how she spoke. Kyoto dialect was generally different from Kansai, right? I didn't really know for sure.

"I was thinking of attaching three to four bombs to the outside of your thighs. They'd be about this size."

I placed a 500-milliliter bottle against Capri's thigh.

"And for this one you'd put four like this?" she asked.

"Yeah. Which would be easier for you to carry?" I replied.

"Hm… I think it might be easier for us to fly if they were attached to our thighs," Pessa suggested.

"Yeah. I reckon flyin'd be much easier with the heavy bombs strapped tight to my thighs 'stead of danglin' from my feet."

The other harpies chimed in, agreeing.

"All right. Then we can have a metal frame or rail hanging from a belt at your hips, then fix that to your thighs with another belt. We can then attach between three to four of the new bombs to the rail, and by pulling the trigger with your feet, you can release a single bomb. We can fix the wind magic arrow ward to your hip belts too."

I didn't know how said tool was going to work or how big it was going to be, but if we were equipping them on the harpies, they couldn't be overly large. We'd be able to attach it to the front of the belt—either in the ventral area or by their hips.

"Yeah, yeah. This is way cooler!" Capri said.

"I doubt the mass-production model is going to be much different," I said.

It would be simpler to make three to four triggers that could release the bombs one at a time than it would be to make a single trigger in charge of all them. Going that route wouldn't require that much more metal, and most importantly, it wouldn't require any bending or melding, making everything easier to mass-produce.

"Okay, we'll go with this for the pylon. All that's left are the new bombs…"

I was really racking my brain over this. Destructive power relied entirely on how much explosive was in a single bomb. In other words, the larger the bomb, the bigger the explosion. Making a bomb smaller usually resulted in less destructive force, so the idea of trying to miniaturize a bomb without losing any power was going to be difficult right from the start.

"If the harpies can carry a payload six to eight times larger than before, the total destructive power will still increase even if I shrink the bombs," I thought aloud.

At the moment, because the harpies could only carry two bombs, I made them as large and destructive as possible. In terms of anti-personnel use, the current aerial bombs were kind of overkill.

The current munitions were definitely effective against buildings and transport vehicles, but eight bombs that could kill three to four people on impact while injuring fifteen others were more effective for enemy suppression than two large bombs that could completely vaporize ten people while injuring twenty others.

"I was thinking of going with this for the new aerial bombs," I said.

"That's pretty different from the current design, ain't it?" Capri asked.

"I was thinking of reappropriating the shells from another new weapon of mine."

This would be a modified version of the mortar I designed for anti-personnel use the other day. I took out the propulsion powder from the mortar, then made the warhead fuse activation much simpler; all you had to do was pull a pin from the warhead, then drop it down on the enemy. The second it made contact with the ground or the target, it would immediately explode. I was able to use all the mortar parts basically as is.

I was pretty proud of myself, honestly.

"The current aerial bombs are about four kilograms each, after making heavy modifications on top of other changes. These new bombs are about one point three kilograms a pop. You could equip three on each leg and it'd still be the same weight you used to carry. The pylons will let you carry a few more than that, but since the frame supports your lower body, it'll actually feel a lot lighter overall than before."

"Ahh, gotcha… They're a lil' dinky, but we'll be able to carry a whole load more. That's a major bonus," Capri said.

"It's cool we can carry three to four times more bombs! When can we get started?" Pessa asked.

"Ah, er, I'm still in the planning stages…"

When it came to the harpies' bombs, I was in charge of everything from development to construction. If I wanted to, I could make them right now—Pessa and Capri, veterans of the harpy squad, knew that all too well.

"Okay, okay. I'll get right on it. All right?" I said.

"Yaaay! I can't wait!" Pessa cheered.

"Pessa and I ain't the hugest harpies around, but I bet the bigguns'd be able to carry even more bombs," Capri said.

"Good point. Maybe we should make different pylons for the medium-sized and larger harpies! Everyone is gonna wanna go *boom boom* as much as possible!"

Okay, okay. I'd have to make modifications to the release device, but it wouldn't increase the cost much to have one trigger alternatively activating two hard-points. As far as the rail was concerned, I could just extend it.

This was how the northern aerial bomber harpy squad ended up equipped with new anti-personnel bombs and heavy bomber frames. Among the harpies, this came to be known as the "Stylish Fit." For the smaller harpies, this meant their anti-personnel firepower more than doubled. For the medium-sized and large harpies, their destructive capability more than quadrupled.

Chapter 5:
The Mysterious Voice and the True Power of the Bestowing Workbench

HAVING ACCOMPLISHED MY GOAL of powering up the harpies, I was faced with yet another fundamental problem for the army—and it was a doozy.

"How in the world are we going to get ourselves a stable supply of munitions…?"

I was currently the only one who could supply the metal casings for the bullets the rifle squad used, and I was also the only person who could make the harpy bombs. Fortunately, that wasn't the case for the magic guns, but that didn't help much.

"What am I supposed to do…?"

It was near impossible to make the metal casings using this world's tech. We lacked the scientific knowledge to compound the powder and detonator, and we didn't even have the manufacturing power to mass-produce the casings in the first place.

As far as the aerial bombs were concerned, we might have been able to make that work, but we were going to hit a bottleneck dealing with the powder and detonators. Assuming we could make something similar to powder using black powder, the detonators were still going to pose a problem. Could I maybe whip something up using scrap magic stones or chunks? If I could manage that, I'd be able to lower the hurdle for making casings for the bullets.

I decided to toss my plans for making detonators and aerial bombs to R&D for the time being. I mostly remembered the mixing ratio for the black powder, so I'd probably be able to make it with a little trial and error.

What was it…? If it's 10 to 20 percent charcoal and 15 to 25 percent sulfur, then like 60 to 70 percent saltpeter?

Why did I remember all of this? Didn't *you* learn it when you were in junior high? Huh? No? Oh… Well, whatever. You know how it goes. I was, uh, going through a "phase" back then. Ha. Ha ha ha.

In any event, I could substitute the standard powder with black powder, and I'd be able to make the casings. If we could somehow come up with the detonators, we might actually be able to get this done. If we used magic stones or magic crystals, we could use a technique to activate explosion magic, and we could potentially raise their destructive power while also making them lighter. Though at that point, it'd probably be way too expensive.

The question was how we'd get our hands on sulfur and saltpeter. Was there a place nearby where we could mine for the stuff? I didn't recall hearing anything about volcanoes or hot springs in the area… As far as the sulfur was concerned, we could extract that from the bat dung in the caves nearby… I guess this'd be a job for the alchemists. Even if we didn't extract the sulfur from bat crap, as long as we had a place we could dig it up, we'd be all good. There was no need to get hung up on bats.

I decided to hand over some sulfur and saltpeter samples I made using my abilities. If they could come up with anything similar, that'd be more than good enough. I also produced black powder samples as well. Every time I tried to make gunpowder, it always came out as this vague "powder" stuff, but when I used my item creation, I could produce pure black powder.

That said, the vague powder performed overwhelmingly better. I could use it for ammunition *and* explosives, after all. Seriously, what was this stuff?

I jotted down all of my notes regarding the bombs and munitions so I could send it to R&D in Merinesburg. It'd be best to have them decide whether it'd be more cost-effective to use black powder, magic stones, or magic crystals. It was important that this

stuff could be manufactured using this country's own resources, so I also jotted down that we should avoid a situation where we had to rely on another country's exports.

"Grande?"

"Hrm? What is it?"

"This is a super-duper confidential document. Sorry, but could you get this directly into either Sylphy or Melty's hands?"

"Mm, of course. You owe me one, though."

"No problemo. Ask me for anything, so long as it's within my power."

"Excellent. You better not forget."

Grande grinned, took the box with the documents and samples inside of it, and exited my lab. If she flew, she'd be able to get this stuff to Merinesburg super quickly, and I knew there was zero risk of her leaking the information, so in a sense, she was the safest courier method we had.

"Haaah… Next up is…"

The mortar was designed as a surface-control weapon that consumed large amounts of ammunition, so it put a huge strain on logistics. This was the problem with modern weapons that were dependent on large resupply operations. They were designed with the backing of a large machine industry in mind, one that could produce huge quantities of mass-produced munitions so the weapons could exert their full power on the battlefield. This was why using the guns I produced as standard equipment was such a big issue: I'd have to provide the munitions.

Meanwhile, the magic guns were manufactured entirely with technology from this world, and their munitions were magic stones, crystals, and magicite, so resupplying them was comparatively easy. The guns were overwhelmingly more useful as weapons, but they'd be completely useless if I ever lost my powers.

"Okay, no. No. Enough of that."

Recently, I had found myself thinking about lethal weapons whenever I had time on my hands. It was like a sickness. I felt like it'd be bad if I didn't make time to do a little R&D on something completely frivolous, like a beam to make the ogre girls smaller, or a soup that'd make me bigger than them. Maybe an ointment to extend the length of my "son." You know, jokey kinds of concoctions.

"That's the face he makes whenever he's up to something shifty," Ira said.

"Kinda wicked," Bela said.

"Maybe I should go for a walk…" I groaned.

"Huh?! That's so unfair!" Shemel protested.

Ira and the ogre girls were being loud, but the stuff I thought up just now was the domain of alchemists and mages. I felt like my abilities weren't really designed for making those sorts of absurd items. Maybe I just lacked imagination? If I used my bestowing workbench, I could probably make something funny. I really hadn't fiddled with that one much.

All right, you know what? Let me mess with it a little bit. Maybe I'll come up with something fun.

I pulled it out of my inventory and set it up in the lab.

This thing was basically built for adding effects to pre-existing items. The problem was that it typically resulted in items with super broken specs, so if I used it too much, I could really mess up the balance of the entire world. Whoopsie!

"What the heck's that?" Shemel asked.

"My bestowing workbench. It can mix all sorts of objects with magic crystals, stones, magicite, and other types of magically powered stuff to add additional effects to an object," I explained.

"Can you pick the effects?"

"I looked into that, and as far as I can tell, no. Seems like what type of effect you get is based on the qualities of the original item to

some degree. For example, I can't increase the sharpness of a hammer."

"Huh… But you could make a blade sharper or a blunt object more destructive?" Ira asked.

"Basically, yeah."

I didn't have many magic crystals on hand at the moment. I didn't have a safe place to store gleaming magic jewels, so I kept those in my inventory, but…

Ira. I hope the light in your eyes doesn't go out when you look at this thing.

"What about that gun of yours, bro? How about adding an effect to that?" Bela suggested.

"Huh?"

"Whuh?"

I never even considered that. In my head, magic enhancements and buffs were things you gave to swords, spears, armor, and shields, so I'd never tested it out on a gun.

"You've never tried it?" Bela asked.

"…Nope."

Stop it! Stop looking at me like that Ira, it hurts. And listen, I get where you're coming from, but I can tell you're totally thinking, "This is going to be bad news."

"Look, there's a reason for that. The first time I used this thing in R&D, I ended up making an item with completely broken specs, as well as something so dangerous that I couldn't ever let it out into the world. So in my head, this workbench has been categorized as something I shouldn't ever use."

"It'd be a waste not to use all the tools at your disposal," Shemel said.

"Is there a point to holding back?" Bela asked.

"Less thinking, more doin'!" Shemel said.

Urgh, they were the sorts who threw out common sense and lived their lives on the edge. Adventurers through and through. The truth of the matter was that after making gleaming magic jewel bombs, everyone was so terrified that they'd silently pressured me into never using it again… Okay, yeah, I was just making excuses.

"What say you, Ira?"

"Who knows what could happen?" she replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if you made something that upset the natural laws of the world. Okay, no. I lied. I guess I *would* be surprised." Her eye started to get cloudy. She must have remembered something pretty dark.

Through my experimentation, I learned that the effects would scale depending on the strength of the catalyst, so there was no point in using a weak one. I decided to start off with a gleaming magic jewel.

"Eenie meenie miny moe…"

Among the guns I had on me… Well, there were many, but I decided to go with the assault rifle, one of the most common weapons in the world because of its reliability. Mine was a modified model with a straight stock and a diagonally cut muzzle.

"I choose you."

I set the rifle and the gleaming magic jewel onto the workbench and initiated the process. It'd be funny if I got an error and the whole thing crashed—no, it was actually terrifying to think about what could happen if I got an error and the whole client crashed.

Please, just don't crash and cause an apocalypse or anything…

The moment the process finished, the entire world froze over.

This wasn't a figure of speech. Quite literally everything around me lost all of its color, and the three ogre girls who were looking at

the workbench with great fascination were frozen. Ira, who had her eye narrowed at the device, was also frozen still.

"Oho? Finally! Man, I was so tired of waiting."

Crap!

Just as I started to panic and cold sweat ran down my back, There was something strange about it, almost as if the room itself was speaking to me. I instinctively pulled out the submachine gun I had on my hotbar and gripped it while looking around.

"Who's there?!"

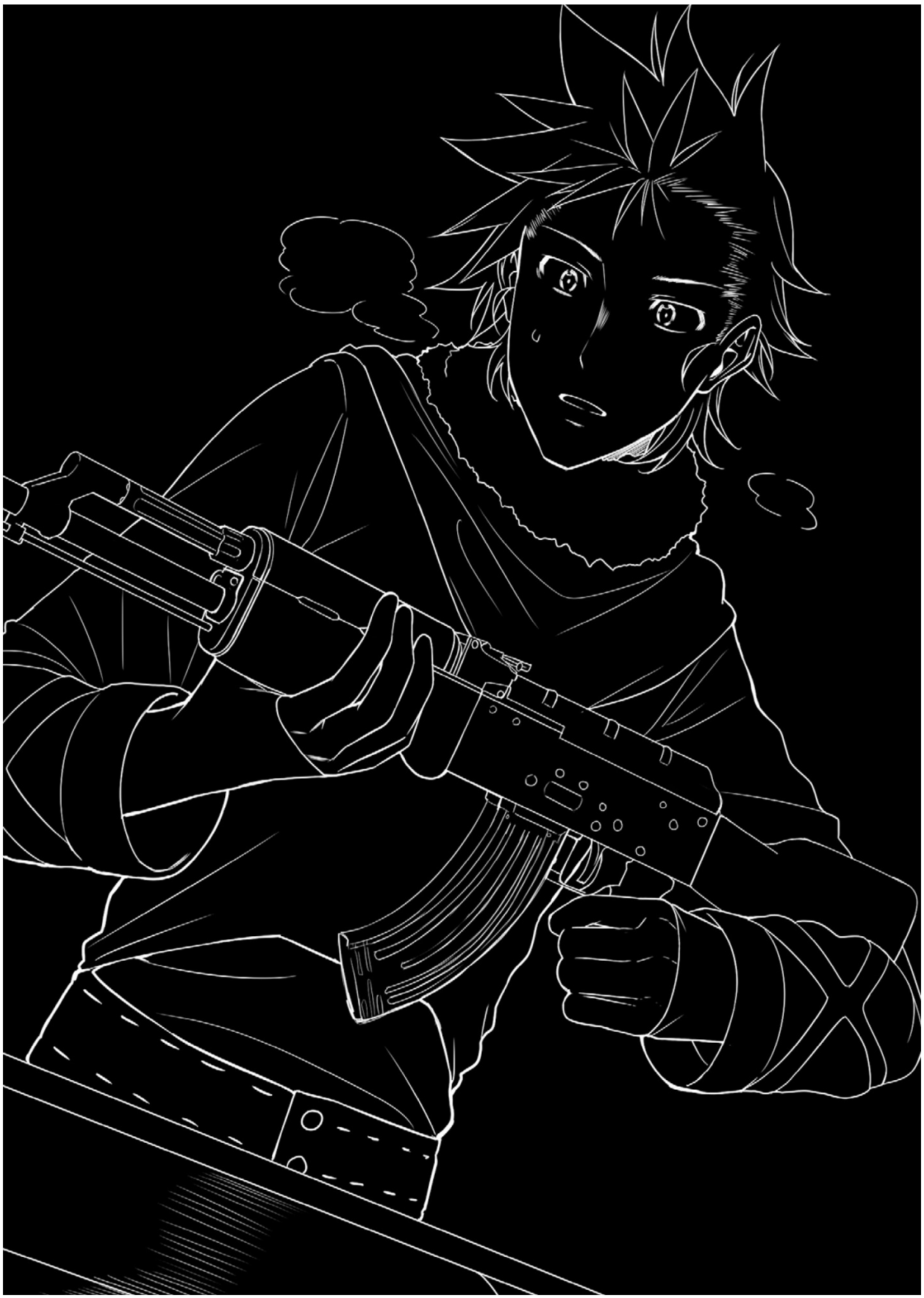
"Good question. Who do you think? You must have a rough idea."

"Like hell I do!"

For now, I assumed that whoever this person was, they were bad news. I quickly surrounded the ogres and Ira with a wall of stone blocks. I was capable of making strong stone shelters in an instant, so this didn't take any effort.

"Hm, hm... How very like you to immediately move to protect the women. Maybe I should've picked someone more aggressive? Or perhaps I should have had your starting point be where the saint was instead? But if I did that, you most likely would have died protecting her..."

"You…"



I didn’t know exactly who they were, but their words just now had made one thing very clear to me.

“You’re the one who brought me to this world, aren’t you?”

“So close! You’re almost there.”

I couldn’t see their face, but I got the feeling they were grinning. Dammit, if I could see them, I’d punch them square in the jaw.

“‘Close’ means you’re the one playing games with my achievements? Or are you the one who gave me these powers?”

“You’re mostly on the mark, but who cares about me? I want to talk about you.”

“*I* care, but whatever. What are you talking about?”

“Why are you holding back so much?”

The mysterious being caused me to choke on my words.

“Hmmm? Why are you ignoring me all of a sudden? I’m asking you why you’re acting like a nice guy and putting all these restrictions on yourself.”

I paused. I had no answer, in part because I didn’t know what they were after.

“You can keep quiet, but that isn’t going to help much. I know exactly what you’ve been using your abilities to make. Golem cores sure are useful, huh?”

They really could see right through me. Dammit. Maybe I could kill them with a gleaming magic jewel bomb?

“See? You can do it if you just apply yourself! I really don’t get you.”

And they were reading my thoughts to boot. This creep was crazy.

“I’ve got lots of questions, but no one likes it when you answer a question with a question, so here’s an answer for you. There’d be

no point in solving every single problem myself. I believe that the problems of this world should largely be solved by the people who live here. I'm just lending my help to the people I believe in."

"Hm? What, are you one of *those* guys? The type to grin and watch game NPCs fight against one another in order to survive? You're quite the psychopath."

"That's real goddamn rich coming from you."

"You got that right!"

The mysterious being proceeded to let out a sickening cackle. I didn't want to hear something like that from the jackass who kidnapped me, took me to another world, gave me a bunch of strange powers, and then spied on me the entire time.

"Why are you making me do all of this?"

"A combination of entertainment and benefit. It's basically my job, in a sense."

"So someone else wanted me brought here, and you gave me these abilities to make things 'fun.' Or maybe you were part of the selection process for who to bring here? You decided on my starting point so… You're basically the mastermind!"

"Oho, finally figured it out? I'm responsible for most things, but I'm not the mastermind. I'm, uh, well… **Let's just say I'm a subcontractor."**

The mysterious being burst out into insincere laughter.

"I never thought you'd be such a lady's man, and I *really* didn't expect you to take a step back and support the woman you love in order to give her a chance to shine. If you took charge of things and used your abilities freely, the Holy Kingdom would be gone by now."

They weren't wrong. If I stopped holding myself back and made a bunch of workbenches, mined the mountains until there was nothing left, and then cut down the forests, any supply problems would be a thing of the past. If I used my mithril tools to their

maximum potential, I could turn a mountain into a stockpile of materials in an hour.

The golem core creep mentioned earlier was the bottleneck. I could make them with my workbench now, and they allowed me to make any kind of golem. Normally, you had to write the appropriate techniques and input detailed settings into a golem core to make them work properly; they had to match the use-case of the golem itself.

But my workbench didn't require any of that. As long as I had a golem core and the necessary materials, I could make any golem I wanted. Convenient was an understatement.

Consider this: I could take a wooden canteen, put some natural water in it, run it over flames, and have bottled drinking water. I could create all-purpose powder from the excrement of people and animals by mixing in a few materials. In the face of that sort of power, the technique inscribed on a golem core was a trifling matter. I also had a superstrong magic power resource in the form of gleaming magic jewels. In other words, I was capable of making an army of iron golems equipped with heavy machine guns and cannons if I so chose. I could also make tanks powered by golem engines, and I could probably make golem jets powered by wind magic propulsion devices. In fact, I'd already made multiple prototype heavily armed iron golems. If I deployed those in battle, we'd be able to put an end to any invasion from the north easily.

"What's your goal? What are you trying to make me do?"

"Nothing really, at the moment. It's just been annoying watching you is all. I gotta admit, though, you're doing pretty good so far."

In other words, this creep's master—or the mastermind that gave them this job, wanted me to drive out the main sect of Adolists? If that was their goal, was it really okay for everything to go according to plan?

“Oho, you don’t have to worry about that. My personal hobbies aside, they’re just distressed over the prejudice and mistreatment of demi-humans. There’s no ill will there. Truly, it’s 100 percent good intentions on that front. Affection, even. They want to punish those who caused all of this misfortune too.”

“You talk of affection and then immediately follow that up by justifying war in the name of punishment. Completely nonsensical.”

“Not so. There can be no self-reflection without pain. That’s just how people are. A savior appears to extend a hand to those less fortunate, then punishes the evildoers. People need heroic tales, though this might be hard to imagine for someone from a world without a god. People hold reverence for their savior and the one who sent them, and they learn self-reflection and morality from those who are put to death for their actions. That’s how the world is supposed to work.”

The mysterious voice had begun to wax poetic. Something about their tone made it sound like they were being sarcastic, which made them impossible to trust.

“How cruel. But it matters little if you believe me or not. The gears that have been put into motion will not stop, and if you do not struggle against them, your country will be destroyed and the women you love will face misfortune. Or do you plan on betraying them and switching sides, perhaps? That would be entertaining for sure, but you won’t. In fact, you can’t.”

“Tch.”

I clicked my tongue in response. They were right. I wasn’t going to betray Sylphy and the others at this point. Like hell I would. What would I have to gain from that?

“So why are you talking to me now? Surely you didn’t do all of this just to have a chat?”

Having judged I wasn't in danger, I pulled my mithril pickaxe from my inventory and began to destroy the stone wall surrounding the girls. They'd be shocked if we got back to reality and there was suddenly a wall around them.

"Oh, no reason in particular. I just made it so that when you put a high-level enchantment on a gun, we'd have a chance to chat. You just took so long to do it that I was getting anxious."

"My bad. I was holding myself back because this workbench is so busted. Anything else?"

"Not really. Everything's going as planned, after all. If I had a request, it'd be to speed things up, because watching you can be very frustrating."

"I have my own way of doing things. Trump cards are meant to be used as a last resort."

"Betcha you won't end up using it at all."

Oh. Shut. Up.

Not having to use my trump card would be the best-case scenario! I'd be an idiot not to use it if doing so meant preventing more casualties. But right now, our magic gunsmen were training hard, and at our current pace we'd have no problems beating back the nations from the north.

"I hope that's true."

"What the hell are you trying to say?"

"Nothing, really. If anything does happen, I'm sure you'll handle it."

The mysterious being cackled ominously.

God, can you be more annoying? Mind blowing up and dying?

"If anything, you're the one who's going to explode and die. Seriously, well done getting so much action every single night."

"Shitty peeping toms like you need to just drop dead."

I threw all of my bloodlust at the cackling creep. I really wanted to lay into them with my fists, but it was clear they weren't someone to be trifled with, as much as it pained me to admit.

"Well, you have those powers, so I hope you use them well and have a good time. Feels good to trample over these uncivilized barbarians with your overwhelming technical prowess, right?"

"You're disgusting, you know that? That's not why I'm lending Sylphy and the others my knowledge at all."

"Now, now. Didn't your mother teach you that lying is bad? Are you really going to tell me that a part of you doesn't feel that way?"

"…You piece of shit."

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it. I did. Whenever I stuck it to those Holy Kingdom assholes with my weapons and tactics, I simultaneously felt like I'd gone too far while also feeling relieved.

"Exactly! Just admit it and have fun. It'd be a waste not to, right? The stage is all yours, after all! Hee hee hee. Bah ha ha ha. Gah ha ha ha ha ha!"

The mysterious being pointlessly divided their laughter into three different types, and soon I felt their presence grow distant. Simultaneously, color returned to the world and time began to move again.

"Hrm?"

"Hm?"

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Ira and the ogre girls must've felt something, as they all wore quizzical looks on their faces. I was glad I'd destroyed the stone wall ahead of time.

"What's up?" I asked. After thinking things over, I'd decided to feign ignorance. I'd only confuse them if I told them what happened just now.

"Er, somethin' felt off, but maybe I'm just imagining things," Shemel said.

"You too? Somethin' felt all weird to me too!" Bela said.

"It better not be because of that workbench," Tozume said sharply.

I shrugged my shoulders and brushed her off…but I couldn't hide from Ira's piercing gaze.

"I sense the remnants of a massive miracle," she said.

"You're imagining things," I replied.

"…Well, let's leave it at that for now, then." Ira clearly wasn't satisfied with my answer, but she seemed to understand my intentions and chose not to pursue her line of questioning any further.

I silently expressed my gratitude toward her and took a look at the finished item on the bestowing workbench.

"Looks the same as before," Ira said.

"It does, but… Oh." I placed the weapon into my inventory, and upon checking its specs, was completely gobsmacked. Though honestly, I'd had a feeling something like this might happen.

Modified Assault Rifle + 9 (Self Repair, Infinite Ammo, Enhanced Piercing 3)

This thing was *bad news*.

***

I had tons of gleaming magic jewels on me, so I used them primarily to strengthen my easy-to-use guns and the ones with high ammunition costs. More specifically, the light machine guns the rifle squad used, the six-round grenade launcher, the famous anti-tank rocket launcher, the automatic grenade launcher, and the heavy machine gun.

"This is bad… This is so bad…" I moaned.

"Now he's gone all pale and is holding his head," Shemel said.

"Talk about emotional instability…" Bela added.

"Let's keep watching," Tozume said.

I could hear the ogre girls whispering to one another, worried about my mental state.

Infinite ammo. Infinite ammo! I might as well be giving our logistics problem the middle finger!

And because these things could self-repair, you could fire them full auto without stopping because they wouldn't ever overheat! This was the sort of bullshit balance issue that shortened the life of a video game!

You idiot! You big idiot!

"Kousuke, what kind of enchantment did you get?" Ira asked.

"…Self repair, infinite ammo, enhanced piercing," I mumbled.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that. Can you say it one more time?"

"Self-repair, infinite ammo, and enhanced piercing! Argh! Mr. Law of Conservation of Mass, Mr. Law of Conservation of Energy, are you guys still with us? Hello?!"

Ira looked at me in shocked silence.

I looked up and made double peace signs at the sky. I'd just fully lost it. On the other hand, Ira's eye was wide-open, standing stock-still. I totally understood her reaction. Where were these infinite bullets coming from? Where was the generated heat going?

What about the abrasion for the gun barrel itself? If I started thinking about all of this, I wouldn't be able to sleep.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked no one in particular.

I gently let the solidified Ira be and went quiet in thought.

If I equipped our men with these, they would be an invincible army, a fighting force with powerful weapons that never ran out of ammunition. Weapons on the battlefield broke quickly. Even sturdy metal swords and shields could shatter and crumble if overused. That's why spare weapons and armor were included among the plentiful supplies one had to prepare when going to war. You also needed supplies to maintain said weapons.

But what if that became unnecessary? The amount of supplies you'd have to prepare would overwhelmingly decrease. Additionally, the use of such powerful weapons would lead to one-sided massacres that would shorten the length of battle multiple times over.

The reality was that modern weapons—guns that used powder—were very delicate machines. They weren't so weak that they'd break after being dropped on the ground, but they needed to be checked and serviced on a daily basis, and considering the parts needed to repair them and the mass quantity of munitions they ate through, they put a huge burden on logistics. Swords, spears, and arrows didn't even come close.

Not having to worry about any of that was massive. Too massive, even.

"That creep…"

I was starting to see how that mysterious being from earlier wanted me to use my powers to shake things up. If I could make something like this, I could most certainly deploy even greater numbers of firearms. It didn't take me much time or materials to make a gun, and I could make gleaming magic jewels whenever I wanted.

The reason I couldn't currently equip all of our men with firearms boiled down to supply and maintenance issues, but the gleaming magic jewels and the bestowing workbench solved those problems, allowing me to deploy as many as I wanted. Obviously, it'd be bad if the enemy got their hand on these weapons, so they'd have to be handled even more carefully than before.

"Something's definitely wrong."

"Hmmm… I wonder what's up?"

"Mom told me that if your man's lost in thought, this always works!"

The numbskull known as Bela held me from behind and placed her heavy, soft mounds on top of my head.

Dammit, these are marvelous!

"Let's all push up on him!" Bela said.

"But then we're going to end up in front of him," Tozume said.

"What're you gettin' all bashful for? Little late for that," Bela countered.

"Yup. You ain't innocent no more, so you gotta woman up!" Shemel said.

Shemel came up to me and lifted me into her arms, pressing her chest against my face while Bela pressed up against me from behind. At the moment, I was completely sandwiched between breasts.

This is ho—wait, I can't breathe. Seriously! It hurts!

I tapped out on Shemel's arm to get her to free me.

"I thought I was going to die!" I gasped.

"Oh, please. Drama queen," Bela chastised.

"You'd understand if you ever got buried in Shemel's boobs."

I gently pushed Bela toward Shemel, who grinned and smooshed her chest into her. Bela held on valiantly for a time, but

eventually, she tapped out too.

"That's dangerous. Her boobs're are soft and feel great, but I could see my life flash before my eyes," Bela said with wonder in her voice.

"Right?"

"What are you people doing?" Tozume narrowed her eyes at us. She just didn't get it. Yes, big boobs were great, but it was dangerous to have that kind of volume pushed up in your face. That sort of thing would send you to heaven—figuratively *and* literally.

"…Anyway, this isn't the kind of thing I can work out on my own. I'll have to get in touch with Merinesburg later," I said.

"So what actually happened?" Shemel asked.

"Remember the weapon I used at the ruins a little while back?"

"Yeah. That thing was nuts! Of course I remember."

"When I enhanced it, not only did it get more powerful, now I can shoot it without running out of ammo or having it break down."

"…Ain't that kinda crazy?"

"For real."

"Are you saying all the weapons you pulled out just now are like that?"

"All of them."

"That's… Yeah, that's crazy."

Shemel and the others had seen how powerful my weapons were up close and personal back when we were searching for the old Adolism scriptures in Omitt. Back then, I told them all about how they sucked up ammo, had overheating issues, and how the parts could suffer from wear and tear. They of all people could understand how terrifying these weapons could be if those problems disappeared.

"I doubt you girls will tell anyone about this, but, uh, please don't."

"We won't be sayin' nothin'. Plus, if we did, how many people would even understand?" Shemel assured me.

"Ah, er, what's his face! You know, the fox guy who got strung up in the fall? Maybe he'd understand," Bela said.

"Ah, I remember that guy. Is he even still alive?" Shemel asked.

"Probably. If it wasn't for his position, I'd probably have—er, well, someone else'd probably have killed him by now," Bela speculated.

Instead of being strung up by his body, he would've been hanging by his neck.

"I should probably seal this workbench away… No, no…" I said.

That strange being was definitely not happy with how I held myself back. If I crossed them too badly, there was no telling what they might do. I needed to at least go far enough that I'd keep them from acting out.

"And they knew about my golems, so…"

This was my biggest concern. Quite frankly, the Holy Kingdom and the nations to the north weren't a threat to me. If I just wanted to wipe them off the map, I could load some gleaming jewel bombs onto golems that moved using the same mechanisms as the airboards, then send them into a city in the Holy Kingdom and blow it all up.

If we flattened three or four of their cities, the Holy Kingdom would come begging for our forgiveness, but I didn't feel great about slaughtering tens of thousands—maybe even hundreds of thousands—of innocent civilians, so I wasn't going to resort to that unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Hm… Making a peaceful world is tough work…" I mused.

"Oh, now he's talkin' all weird," Shemel said.

"Maybe because your boobs almost killed him," Bela said.

"Sure did…"

"I mean, when you start sayin' stuff like that, of course we're gonna worry," Shemel said.

"Right, right. If you're gonna think about all that tough stuff, you should go outside and get some fresh air," Bela said before hoisting me up in her arms and beginning to walk.

Man, she's so much bigger and stronger than I am. I'm a pretty average height for a man, and I'm not exactly a weakling, but she's handling me like I'm a child.

"Oh, hey. Ain't today when the merchants from Metocerium are s'posed to be droppin' by? Maybe the exchange's gotten some new stuff in," Bela said.

"Good point. Maybe they've got some booze we've never had before," Shemel said hopefully.

"Let me carry him next!" Tozume said.

And so they paraded me around the base, keeping me from ever taking a single step myself. Instead, the ogre girls carried me in their arms or hoisted me over their shoulders. If nothing else, I guess it was a nice change of pace.

After that little break, I returned to the lab. Now that Ira was back to normal, she threatened me into taking out all of my infinite ammo weapons and letting her analyze them.

***

"Now this is interesting," Ira said.

I'd managed to reboot Ira from her space-cat state, and after checking to see what new goods the merchants brought, stumbled upon a certain crop.

"What is it?" Tozume asked.

"Bamboo?" I guessed.

Bela and Tozume both tilted their heads while looking at the crop in my hand.

"Sugarcain. You can peel the skin and eat it. It's sweet," Ira explained and took the sugarcain into her own hands in order to present it.

"It's more slender than the stuff I'm familiar with," I said. "We called it sugarcane, and it was a bit thicker—well, maybe there were slender kinds too?"

The type that served as the raw material for refined Japanese sugar might've been the slender type. I vaguely remembered reading something about that when I looked up how sugar was refined… But that wasn't important at the moment.

"It's the basis for sugar, but it can't be grown in places that get too cold," Ira said. "Normally, you'd cultivate it in places like the Black Forest and the Omitt Badlands, but at least in the latter's case, that's not really possible anymore. Normal plants can't be grown there due to magic power contamination or a lack of spirit energy… I wonder where this came from, then. Somewhere south of the Federation of Small Nations out west? Huh."

The boy—he was definitely young enough to still be called a boy—in charge of the shop at the moment explained things, and I bought as much sugarcain as I could. When I packed it all in my inventory, he was shocked. Of course he was, after seeing all that stuff just disappear into thin air. I made a note to be more careful.

"Why did you buy so much?" Shemel asked quietly, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

I could hardly focus on her question when she was pushing such an incredible mass up against my cheek. Since we weren't going to be leaving the base today, she wasn't wearing armor. I could feel *everything*.

Ooh, how wonderful.

"I can use my ability to make it now. We'll be able to munch on sugarcain any time we want," I told her.

Ira poked her head out from under my armpit and included herself in our conversation. "And if we process it, we can make sugar and syrup. The bagasse can be used as fertilizer and fuel too. We can also use the syrup to make alcohol."

I'd known she would understand my true objective.

"Nothin' but positives from what you're sayin'… So you're gonna do it, right?" Shemel asked.

"Damn right I am," I said. "Can never have enough sugar and booze."

"Confectioneries are a wonderful thing," Ira said.

Shemel, Ira, and I exchanged looks and smiled at one another.

"They've got evil looks on their faces…" Tozume said.

"They certainly do…" Bela agreed.

Thus, we made our way to the farming section of the base.

"Oh, Lord Kousuke. And everyone else too. Are you on patrol?"

"Nah. Found a fun new crop today, so we're gonna experiment a little."

"Oh?"

The girl who'd answered me—a cow beastwoman who managed the crops—tilted her head in confusion. She must have been wondering what I meant by experiment.

"I was thinking of making an experimental automatic harvesting crop field."

"What does that mean?" Ira asked, puzzled by this string of words she'd never heard spoken together before. It made sense, considering I'd never made a field that could automatically harvest its own crops. But now, things were different.

"It's pretty simple. I'll plant some sugarcain into one of my farm blocks, then build a golem arm that can automatically harvest the crops when they're ready," I explained.

"…Oh." The light in her eye faded as she put together what I was up to.

Yup, that checks out.

If this went well, we'd be able to harvest sugarcain—the main ingredient for making sugar—extremely effectively.

"Let me give it a shot."

First, I lightly dug into the ground, then set up a storage box to hold the harvested crops. Something I'd realized recently was that the storage boxes I set up had properties similar to my inventory. In other words, they could hold a certain preset number of the same kind of items inside of them, regardless of size or mass.

"And then I'll put this on…"

I attached a metal collection device on the back—essentially a hopper—then dug a canal to the side of it. The sugarcain that would come running down this canal would then flow right into the hopper.

I placed a farm block parallel to the canal, then planted sugarcain inside of it. I also set up a golem arm for crop collection and a golem sensor to measure when it was time to harvest the sugarcain.

Additionally, I installed a gleaming magic lamp capable of semipermanently projecting light thanks to the gleaming magic jewel used to power it. I then put a water source in the canal and directed the water toward the hopper. This water would serve the dual purpose of carrying the sugarcain to the hopper and giving the crops the water necessary to grow.

Finally, I surrounded the whole thing with a thick glass block to keep out pests, inclement weather, and such while also letting us see what was happening inside. Done.

"Da da-da daaah! Say hello to the Automatic Sugarcain Harvesting Field!" I announced proudly.

"Don't 'da da-da daaah' me. What is this thing?" Tozume was staring at the autoharvester like it was some sort of monstrosity.

It was surprisingly large. At least five or so meters tall, actually.

"The sugarcain is going to grow, right? When that happens, the golem sensor will detect it, causing the golem arm to harvest the sugarcain and wash it down the canal. That sugarcain will then end up in the storage box via the hopper," I explained.

"Look, I get the logic, but…where is that water even coming from? And where is it disappearing to?" Bela asked.

"If the water isn't drawn into a bucket or something, it disappears eight meters away."

"Huh???" I could almost see the question marks floating above Bela's head; I'd never seen her look so confused.

Hm? What was Ira doing? The second I'd installed the water source, the light completely vanished from her eye. The gaze she'd directed at my newest creation was an empty one.

"Just consider it a miracle of sorts. I registered the blueprint, so if this goes well, I can make a bunch of these and increase the efficiency," I said.

"We'd probably be able to quickly make alcohol using your brewing barrel too. Can't wait!" Shemel was the only one who completely accepted what was happening. She really was an experienced adventurer; none of the insane things I did seemed to shake her on any level. Except for anything involving heights.

Once I confirmed the Automatic Sugarcain Harvesting Field worked as planned, I was in such a good mood I placed down a bunch more of them without really thinking about it. The end result was that the northern base became more of a sugar and rum

production facility than a military installation… But that was a story for another time.

***

"These tubers are delicious."

"The cabbaj is too."

"Sausages are my fave."

A few days after parading around the base in the arms of the ogre girls and setting up the Automatic Sugarcain Harvesting Field, Ira, Sylphy, and Melty and I were sitting around a pot-au-feu together.

The ogre girls ate a lot—one of them could eat an entire pot of this stuff on their own—so I had them sitting at the table next to us with a stockpot.

"Didn't expect you girls to come out here," I said.

"Of course we'd come to check on things now that the base is finished and stuff is at least somewhat operational," Sylphy said while munching on some boiled cabbaj.

The look on her face screamed, "Why would you not expect this?"

"Plus, how could we not be worried after what you told us?" she added.

"You're interested in the enchantments too, right?"

"Obviously, yes. Elen wanted to tag along after hearing that you might have heard the voice of God. She was very frustrated that the timing didn't work out."

"Ah, makes sense that Elen would want to hear all about this, yeah."

The mysterious being was someone I didn't want to let my guard down around, but they were definitely some kind of

supernatural being. They'd stopped time for everyone but me, and heavily implied they were the reason I had my powers.

And then there was that one thing they said…

"But if I did that, you most likely would have died protecting her…"

That wasn't something they'd be able to say unless they had some way of accurately predicting the future. It was entirely possible that whoever or whatever this being was, they transcended time and space.

"But in the end, they want you to stay the course, right?" Sylphy asked.

"Yeah, sounds like it. I guess," I answered.

It all seemed incredibly shady to me, but they had said they wanted me to crush the Holy Kingdom for discriminating against demi-humans. They would just have preferred I went hog wild with my powers.

"I don't think there's any reason to think so seriously about this," Sylphy said.

"If I'm being perfectly honest, I'm finding it difficult to express just how shady and insincere they were," I replied.

"That's that, this is this. If they aren't hostile toward us, leave them be. If anything, they're helping us, because they sent you to us and gave you your powers. It would be unwise to provoke them if it isn't necessary."

"Let sleeping dogs lie, eh?"

"Basically. There's no point in stepping on the tail of a sleeping dragon," Sylphy said, directing her gaze at Grande, who was asleep and buried in the pile of pillows in the corner of the room.

After returning from Merinesburg with Sylphy and the others, I'd fed Grande a bunch of cheeseburgers and pancakes, and now she was sleeping soundly.

"In any case, show us everything tomorrow. Everything."

"Yeah, yeah. You got it."

***

The next day rolled around.

"This is awful."

"Do we really need anything else?"

We used the airboard to head out to a forest an hour west of the base. Or more specifically, a place where we could see said forest.

This forest was home to a plethora of monsters, and it was said to be so dangerous that the only people who dared step foot inside of it were adventurers in need of some fast cash.

"ROOOOOOOAR!!!"

And at the moment, three giants made of black steel were trampling down everything in their path as if they wanted to completely flatten the forest. Each black steel giant held two heavy machine guns in each hand and was unleashing a storm of large caliber bullets at both the monsters and trees, mowing down everything that stood in their way. Since there were three giants, that made for a total of twelve heavy machine guns. Plus, the automatic grenade launchers on their shoulders allowed them to mercilessly blow anything in front of them away. They trampled over any monsters that managed to get near, and the few that latched onto them were ripped away by the giants' arms and crushed under their feet.

"That's kind of…a lot," I said.

"Does anyone stand a chance against these things?" Bela asked.

"It'd take a dragon goin' all out, I bet," Shemel said.

“Nrgh… Even I am unsure if I could win in a one-on-one fight,” Grande replied.

The ogre girls and Grande were taken aback by the black steel giants’ rampage, lamenting their apparent superiority. I figured that Grande might’ve had a chance if she used her laser-like dragon breath like that one time, but the problem was that the surface armor on these giants was made of black steel and their internals were made of magically enhanced mithril copper alloy, so they had high defense against magic. One blast of Grande’s breath might not be enough to take them down.

“Those golems are pretty sprightly, all things considered…” Ira commented.

“I used good materials to make them, so…” I said.

“Like?”

“Mithril copper alloy.”

Ira once again turned into the space cat.

“Also, what is with this forest?” Grande asked. “The monsters just keep coming.”

“Well, they’re being drawn out because of all the ruckus the giants are causing… The sounds and the scent of blood are luring monsters from throughout the forest,” Ira said.

“Gotcha. Blood begets blood, in a sense.”

As we marveled, the flow of monsters slowed down. The fact that I could tell because of the sound of gunshots left me feeling a bit conflicted. Not long after, the monsters were no more, leaving behind only three unharmed black steel titans in their wake. We took our airboards over to collect the heavily armed titans as well as the massive number of monster carcasses.

“Wow, I can’t believe we’ve got all these monster materials! Should we make ground meat from them every day?” Grande asked.

Since we slaughtered the monsters with infinite ammo guns, it basically cost us nothing. I mean, yes, there were production costs, but I digress.

"There's no way we can get any useful materials from these corpses. Look at them," Ira said.

"That's where my abilities come in," I countered.

"That is so unfair…" Shemel lamented.

"I'm jealous…" Bela said.

From an adventurer's perspective, it must have stung to see that I could completely annihilate a monster's body and still be able to collect its parts. Adventurers needed to be careful about how they defeated monsters if they wanted usable materials from them. Though I guess hunters were in the same boat too. Now that I thought about it, Sylphy would always aim for their joints or decapitate gizma when she hunted them. It was almost like she was dissecting their bodies.

"I can't believe you were hiding those things…" Grande said.

"Secret weapons are useful because they're secret. And really, they're only this powerful because of the infinite ammo guns," I explained.

"Even without them, they're pretty irregular. They could wipe out a large army corps just with their arms and legs," Sylphy said.

"And no one would normally be able to make those things… The amount of materials needed to create a single titan made from a mass of magically enhanced mithril copper alloy would be enough to destroy the economy of an entire nation…" Ira said, gazing off into the distance.

I wondered how she'd react if I told her I had high-mobility titans made of mithril silver alloy in my inventory. She'd either pass out or tell me to disassemble them so she could use the parts… Probably the latter.

Yeah, let's keep that on a need-to-know basis.

"Maybe it would've been better if we never saw these… Their existence is going to have a negative effect on my decision-making," Sylphy said with a pained smile.

It was true that swords, spears, and arrows would have no effect on the titans. In the face of their black steel and mithril copper build, even magic wouldn't be all that effective. Plus, they could shoot lethal bullets in a consistent, nonstop stream.

Even the armed forces of my previous world would struggle against these things. Infantrymen wouldn't be able to get close, and lightly equipped vehicles would probably get demolished too. You'd have to deploy either tanks, anti-ground helicopters, aerial bombers, or long-range cannons. There were also plenty of other realistic ways to destroy them. Guided missiles, anti-air, close-proximity defense… Well, okay. Maybe there *were* ways to defeat them. Let's start with the missiles…

Oops, got lost in my thoughts.

"If things get bad, I plan on immediately deploying them, so feel free to rely on them if need be. Plus, if we don't use the stuff I've made, there's no telling when that being might do something," I said.

"The voice you heard, eh…? Well, I'll make it a point not to rely on these things too much either way. Like you said before, secret weapons have value because they are secret. Like those bombs," Sylphy said.

"Yeah. That said, a show of strength might be worth it…" I said.

"I think the golems would be best fit for that. The bombs are a little too shock-and-awe, I think," Sylphy said.

"Mm, agreed. I plan on doing further golem soldier research at R&D," Ira said.

"Please do," Sylphy said. "Considering our lack of manpower, the golem soldiers could become an optimal way to cover our

weaknesses."

A golem army, huh…? I suspected Sir Leonard and Madame Zamil wouldn't be too thrilled about the idea. They both devoted themselves wholeheartedly to training their bodies and improving their skills.

"Our magic gunsmen are in training, and we've also made progress on upgrading the harpy bomb squad's equipment, so I'd say we're ready for the battle in the spring. But that still leaves the question of how we handle the Holy Kingdom next fall," I said.

"Indeed. It all depends on what they do…" Sylphy agreed.

If we managed to push back the invading force from the north come spring, the Holy Kingdom would hesitate to try and invade us again. Right now, it was essential that we take the wind out of their sails.

***

The long winter finally came to an end.

The climate being what it was, it didn't snow much here, but there was something unnatural about the way the comfortable weather lingered. I'd started to think that this world had some sort of spiritual origin, partially due to my earlier encounter with the mysterious being. When I thought about why the climate was so convenient for the people who lived here, I began suspecting that the beings who created this planet's environment and life-forms possessed advanced biotechnology and terraforming tech.

"Good morning. You are looking rather sloppy today. As usual."

"Good morning. The exalted saint is looking as beautiful as ever."

"…Stating the obvious will get you no reward," she said, blushing bright red as she cut a large piece of cheese for me.

I loved that about her.

Our breakfast this morning consisted of cheese, freshly baked bread, and milk. The trick to living a peaceful life in this world was to not think about where the milk came from. Sometimes it came from goats, cows, or horses, but the majority of it came from beastfolk women who produced breast milk despite not being pregnant. From what I'd heard, their breasts would start to swell painfully if they didn't lactate. It'd apparently even stain their clothes.

Sounded rough.

Hm? Why was Elen at the northern base? Well, Her Highness proved that traveling between Merinesburg and Metocerium via airboard was a simple task, so at this point, half of my week was spent with visitors from Merinesburg.

"How does he not die from sexual emaciation?" Tozume wondered.

"He has incredible vitality," Bela said.

"I guess that makes sense, considering he can handle the three of us all at once…" Shemel said.

The ogre girls were at their own table eating breakfast and whispering about me, but they weren't exactly being subtle.

"Look, it's almost spring, so I think you should probably hold back on coming here for the time being. Who knows what could happen," I said. We were taking out enemy scouts as they appeared in the area, so Elen would probably be fine, but there was no such thing as complete safety in this world.

"Fear not. We are here too, and no cavalrymen would ever be able to keep up with the speeds of our airboard."

"We always make sure to have an Adolism flag raised when we are traveling, so I do not believe we will be ambushed."

Belta and Amalie brushed aside my concerns. Both women were serving as Elen's bodyguards.

"You think you won't be attacked because you're part of the church?" I asked.

"No, knowing that, I don't believe anyone would willingly attack us. If they did, they could receive divine punishment," Amalie said.

"You mean like the miracles you girls can cast?" I asked.

"In a sense, yes. In the past, some bandits attacked a group of the clergymen who were on a pilgrimage and immediately died excruciatingly painful deaths. There was also a nobleman who tried to sexually assault a nun, only for his entire family to die under mysterious circumstances."

"Eeek…"

Terrifying!

Could that actually be some kind of negative side of the miracles they used? Like their miracles that purified, healed, cast light, and all that were reversed via the power of these grudges, transforming into curses? I'd have to ask Ira about this later.

"You'll be fine, Kousuke," Elen assured me.

"Are you sure? I've been killing a whole lot of Holy Kingdom soldiers these days."

"Divine punishment is not applied to war."

"Isn't that a bit of a double standard?"

"They're our Lord's miracles, after all."

So double standards were allowed if it was God at the wheel? I didn't really have a retort to that. It was all giving me a headache.

"Even so, who knows what could happen. Just stay alert, okay? I'm worried about you," I said.

"If you are going to be like that, I am more worried about *you* considering you're stationed at a frontline base," Elen countered.

"I do not think it's right to shut one's eyes to their own situation," Berta chimed in.

Elen and Berta were tag-teaming me. I looked to Amalie for aid, but she just gazed at us, uninterested in helping me out.

"I can't leave, ladies. It's my job to deploy our secret weapons if they're needed on the field. You need to be reasonab—"

But before I could finish, something flew in from the window… No, more accurately, something landed on the window frame with incredible speed. Nobody in the room was fazed, though. Harpies did this kind of thing all of the time.

I was about to ask what was up, but the harpy on the window frame beat me to the punch.

"We've received a report that there's been movement at the Diieharte frontline base near the border!" she announced. "Worg requests your presence at HQ immediately!"

"Oh… Guess we don't have time for a leisurely breakfast. All right, thanks."

I grabbed some candy we'd made from the honey we were using to make mead and put it in the harpy's mouth. She was one of the new girls who joined up during the winter, and she wasn't big enough to fly with bombs yet, so she was working as a messenger.

I watched her fly away, then turned around to see Elen staring straight at me.

"What, do you want some too?"

"I shall have some later. I am in the middle of breakfast at the moment."

Oh, so she wanted me to feed her the same way I fed the harpy. Okay, then.

***

I tossed a large hunk of cheese into my mouth and quickly made my way to the strategy room, where I found Base Commander

Worg and the COs of the various units already present. The people not yet present would arrive shortly.

"G'morning," I greeted them. "So, movement at the enemy's frontline base, yeah?"

"Correct, though that isn't to say they have begun their march yet," Worg said, casting his gaze down at the map open over the table. "A line of carriages we suspect to be their transport corps arrived at Diieharte's fortress in the north. It also appears as though they've been carrying supplies into the storehouses they expanded during the winter."

"Hmm. A supply assemblage, then?"

"I am not so sure. It is located too close to this fortress for it to be a large-scale assemblage…"

"Pardon my rudeness, but I believe your frame of reference is a bit twisted. By carriage, it would take three days to get to that fortress from here. And multiple times longer than that on foot. While I understand that it is within a few hours' distance of our airboards, by normal standards, it is still quite far away."

This response came from a large rabbit beastman. He wasn't the type who mostly looked human but had rabbit ears; he instead resembled a certain large rabbit that usually stood upright. In other words, the one from that country where black tea was the norm. To make matters more absurd, his name was Peter. I remembered him immediately.

"I suppose you are right. In a way, Kousuke's advanced equipment has become a bit of a liability," Worg said.

"Nya ha ha ha… It's already plenty abnormal that we know how the enemy is moving from so far away, so quickly."

The person laughing was a black cat standing upright with fluffy fur, just like Peter. She was also a company commander of one of the magic gun companies, and her name was Noir. Sadly, she was not wearing high-heeled boots.

A single squad of magic gunsmen was made up of ten people, and five squads made up a platoon of fifty. Four platoons made up a single company of two hundred, and then two companies of four hundred made up a battalion. At present, our fighting force was made up of one battalion of magic gunsmen, a platoon of fifty elite magic gunsmen, and fifty harpy bombers, for a total of five hundred troops on base. Peter and Noir were company commanders, and Worg was the battalion commander as well as the overall commander of the base.

"If they're getting materials together, that means they're going to be coming for us soon, right?" I asked.

"Most likely," Noir said. "We stopped the flow of goods going out of Merinard, but with spring basically here, it is only a matter of time before they harvest any crops they were growing throughout the winter."

"Honestly, to me, the very idea of growing crops through the winter is hard to believe," Peter commented.

"What're mew talking about? Kousuke's farms are way crazier than that."

"Fair enough," Peter replied with a chuckle.

I had no ground to stand on when it came to them calling my farms crazy or abnormal. I grew tons of delicious summer vegetables in the middle of the winter, making for some lovely meals. In fact, at a certain point, I started growing vegetables you absolutely would never try to grow during the winter, just to see if I could. We ended up taking some of those vegetables into Metocerium to make quick cash, did some advantageous trading for other foods, and even held little dinner parties. When we gave some off-season veggies and fruits to the viceroy in Metocerium, the confused look on his face had been absolutely priceless.



"Everyone needs to be aware that our enemies have begun to make their moves. Make sure you maintain your weapons and keep tabs on your stocks of bullets, magic stones, and magicite. Also, beware of injuries during training. I don't want anyone to be out of action when the fighting starts," I said.

"Understood," Peter said with a nod.

"Roger that, mreow."

"Got it. Just to be safe, I'll make some more bullets," Worg said.

"Please do. Make sure to report to the head of supplies how many you make in total," I said.

"Will do."

The supplies I had in my inventory weren't included among the base's stockpile, at least not on paper. But if my stuff was going to be used as emergency backup, we'd need exact numbers.

"It is almost time to show our enemies the fruits of our training. Everyone, stay alert," I said.

"Roger that," everyone replied.

It was time to fight.

Chapter 6:
Spring and Departure

IT HAD BEEN TWO WEEKS since our scouts detected the enemy's initial moves, and now they were beginning to prepare in earnest for their march on our territory. Not long after Diieharte stirred, so too did Tigris, and we caught wind of the fact that they were both sending messengers on horseback to and fro to synchronize their actions.

"It's kind of surprising they're not enemies despite being neighbors," I said. "I mean, sure, I know they're both basically Holy Kingdom vassal states, but still."

"They were originally fairly hostile toward one another, but Diieharte bent the knee to the Holy Kingdom and became its puppet. The Kingdom of Tigris witnessed firsthand the tragedy of the former Kingdom of Merinard, so they surrendered unconditionally. As such, the Holy Kingdom began its reign over both nations, leaving them as little more than their vanguard. They even find themselves standing side by side on battlefields fairly often," Ira said.

"The pains of being a weaker country, eh? Not gonna lie, hearing that makes me hesitate to riddle them with holes."

"It is what it is. We have no choice but to meet their invasion with force."

"Isn't there some way we can try to resolve this diplomatically…? I guess not, considering who we're talking about…"

Over the last two weeks, I'd been in touch with Sylphy via golem communicator multiple times, and according to her, there'd been no diplomatic contact from Diieharte or Tigris. Apparently, there was no custom of sending a final warning or making a public declaration of war in this world.

"The Holy Kingdom still refuses to acknowledge the New Kingdom of Merinard as an actual nation, so according to them, their vassal states, and their allies, this is still the Holy Kingdom's vassal nation. We're essentially just a bunch of bandits who've thrown this place into chaos," Ira said.

"I wish they'd face reality. Bunch of damn drunks."

I didn't mean they were alcoholics or anything, just that the people running the Holy Kingdom were drunk on their religion and their own ideals. Though to be honest, those corrupt priests were probably also literally drunk on alcohol and all sorts of other vices.

"Either way, if our enemy makes a move, we must respond in kind. How are our preparations?"

"Perfect. We can launch our counterattack at any time, and we've got eyes on them. Ah, speak of the devil."

A call came in on the golem communicator in the strategy room, and Worg picked up the receiver and began to talk.

"Understood. Continue monitoring them. If anything else happens, contact us immediately," he said, then placed the receiver down. "There's been movement. Time to move out."

"They're already making moves after only just getting their men together? Are they panicking?" I asked.

"Both countries imported a great deal of foodstuffs from Merinard back when it was still a vassal nation, so I'm sure they're eager to put us in our place so they can get more cheap food," Worg replied.

We continued to talk things over as we exited the room.

***

"Dammit, they're flying overhead again."

Antonius Ders Gilanzam, Commander of the Principality of Diieharte, bathed in the warm spring sunlight while looking up at the

sky and cursing. Flying above was the shadow of a large bird, far out of range of any bow. No, it was no bird; the shadow was far too large. More terrifyingly, it was not shaped like a bird.

The creature soaring through the air was a flying demi-human known as a harpy. Their arms and legs were like a bird's, and their entire race was made up of women. According to reports, they'd been passing near the border fortress two to three times a day every day since winter of last year. But two weeks ago—when provisions started being carried to the base—they'd begun flying around the base and monitoring it nonstop.

Our sharp-eyed archers said the harpies had some kind of magic tool with them, but no one knew what exactly it did. Whatever it was, it wasn't good news for us. Those cursed shitbirds were scouting us out.

"Lord Antonius, we have received a message from Tigris," a messenger reported. "The top brass want us to march."

"…Tch. Our enemy knows our every move, and we barely have the means to protect ourselves against their unconventional weaponry. They might as well be ordering us to die."

We have a plan for their weapons, but we don't know how effective it will be, or whether it'll work at all… I have no choice but to admit that I don't have high hopes.

"Our men will need food if they continue to stay here, and that food is not infinite…" the messenger said. "We're really between a rock and a hard place."

Antonius sighed and scratched his head. He was a general in charge of 8,000 of Diieharte's troops, and even he had no choice but to march to his death if those above him ordered it.

"Inform our men that we will begin our march on the Kingdom of Merinard," Antonius commanded. "Our objective is the military installation they built during the winter."

"Yes, sir!"

The messenger ran off to inform the thousands of soldiers gathered at the border fortress of their next orders.

"Damn it all. I hope our anti-shitbird tactics work, at least."

From what he'd heard, the harpies dropped explosives with incredible destructive power out of the sky, far from the range of his archers. How exactly were they supposed to defend against that? Were their only options to equip thick black steel armor or carry around thick, black steel shields? Antonius sighed again.

"It is what it is… If nothing else, I need to make sure we use our trump card when the time is right."

***

We received reports from the front lines that both Diieharte and Tigris were on the move, so we deployed a battalion of magic gunsmen—400 soldiers—from our border fortress. We were planning to deploy our harpy bomb squad when the enemy crossed the border, then have them wait on standby in the air. When the timing was right, we'd have them begin their bombing runs.

The elite magic gunsmen in charge of training the newbies had been stationed at the base to defend it this time around. It'd be bad news if we let the place get taken, after all. I set up infinite ammo heavy machine guns on the fortress walls just in case, so they'd be fine no matter what.

"Now then, what's their move?" I asked.

"According to our harpy scout, both armies have archers with some sort of additional equipment," Ira reported.

"It'd be a safe bet to assume it's some sort of anti-harpy device. Maybe some kind of arrow? Probably wind magic enchanted, just like we discussed," I speculated.

"Mm, you're probably correct. If the Holy Kingdom supplied those arrows, then it is possible they are far more powerful than

anything we've seen before. We should be careful." Ira said with a nod, offering her cautious take.

It was certainly possible that these arrows were more powerful than anything Worg or Ira knew about. There was nothing wrong with playing it safe.

"I'm glad the anti-arrow barrier tools were finished in time," I said.

"They are specifically tuned to attenuate physical attacks and wind magic, so I think they'll work well."

The barrier magic tools I placed an order with R&D for arrived last week—just in the nick of time—and they were well worth the wait. R&D had done a helluva job. As a bonus for their hard work, I sent them pure refined mithril for their research, and they were extremely pleased.

I had already finished handing out the barrier magic tools to the harpies, and they were all equipped with their Stylish Fits. The official names were the Harpy Bomb Suspension System Version One (for the smaller harpies), and Version Two (for the medium to larger harpies), but… Eh, they could call them what they wanted since they were the ones using them.

"How effective do you think the arrows will be?" I asked Worg.

"Generally speaking, they're used to attack monsters rapidly descending in order to attack, like wyverns and griffons," he replied.

"In other words, we don't really have to worry about our harpies getting shot down so long as they're carpet bombing the battlefield from high in the sky?"

"I believe that to be the case."

Worg and I discussed things while we looked out at our side of the border, watching the magic gunsmen who were fortifying the field. They were equipped with magic tools that could use hole-digging earth magic, so it looked like things were going swimmingly.

Our magic gunsmen were trained for close-range combat if it was ever necessary, but their real strength came from their impressive marksmanship. They'd be in trouble if fast cavalrymen took them by surprise, so I'd ordered them to construct a simple fortified field that would eliminate that risk.

"The enemy is going to be surprised when they see this place," I commented.

"I wonder. Maybe not, considering they spotted our harpies already," Worg said.

"Ah, good point."

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"Whoa, whoa. What the hell?"

Four days after Diieharte's forces began their march, Antonius arrived at the border and widened his eyes at the simple fortified field on Merinard's territory. It wasn't as grand as a fortress, but it was very clearly constructed to intercept them.

"Your Excellency, they don't have the numbers to be a threat."

"They appear to have only around 400 men."

"Sure, but…"

Antonius had a bad feeling from looking at the fortified field ahead of him. According to rumors, a fighting force of only a few dozen men had fought back the tens of thousands of soldiers the Holy Kingdom deployed to eliminate them. When he'd first heard the tale, he'd laughed at the absurdity of it all.

He resisted the urge to make his feelings known, however. A general could never voice such concerns in front of his men.

"Tell Tigris that they can lead the charge, and that since we have more archers, we'll handle the harpies," he ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

He had a strategy in place to mitigate Diieharte casualties, but he still couldn't shake the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

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"Another signpost? You sure do love your signposts, huh?" Worg said.

"It's like a greeting of sorts. Also, it'll really help me sleep better at night knowing I at least tried," I explained.

"There's no way a sign like that could make a whole army stop… See? They kicked it over." Worg sighed as he used a pair of binoculars to look at the enemy. Next to him, I was doing the same.

I mean, I'd known this was how things were going to turn out from the start.

"Looks like the vanguard force belongs to Tigris?"

"Indeed. About 8,000 men," Worg said, then gave orders to our forces. "Attention! As soon as the enemy enters range, open fire."

"First Company reporting. Yes, sir!"

"Second Company reporting. Understood, mreow."

The enemy's vanguard was marching forward ever so slowly with giant shields at the ready. They were big, yes, but would they be able to protect against 15mm magic bullets? According to the data we'd gathered, it'd be impossible unless they were so thick and heavy that they could barely carry them.

In contrast to the slow-moving Tigris army, our magic gunsmen battalion was watching patiently. The front row of enemy troops was well within firing range, but if they started shooting now, they'd only be able to hit a tiny chunk of their total forces.

The moment approximately half of the enemy troops entered our firing range, around a hundred magic guns went off all at once.

Tigris's soldiers fell over one after another, followed by the sounds of roaring thunder. The gunfire continued again, again, and yet again as groups of a hundred men took turns firing lethal rounds at the enemy army, completely eradicating them.

"This is awful."

"It's so one-sided."

When our men opened fire, there was about 200 meters between the front row of the enemy army and our fortified field. There were a lot of humans in this world who were far more physically gifted than the humans of my old world, but with all that thick armor on and those big heavy shields, it'd take them at least a minute to reach our forces even at full sprint.

Just a minute. Seriously. Maybe if they'd been ordered from the start to sprint at us, our four cycles of a hundred gunsmen wouldn't have been able to put them down in time and we'd have been crushed by pure numbers, but…

"Well, I figured it'd go down like this."

"Right."

After all, they were humans too. Okay, well, maybe there were some demi-humans in their army as well, but that wasn't really the point.

Their frontline troops had suddenly keeled over out of nowhere due to some strange weapon, even though they were holding massive shields. Not only that, but their fellow countrymen had gotten massive holes blown through their armor-protected bodies, and arms and legs were flying all over the place—few people could resist falling into a panic with all of that happening around them.

"Aaaaaah!"

In the blink of an eye, the hailstorm of bullets caused morale among the enemy front line to collapse, and they began to flee. Unfortunately for them, there were lines of soldiers behind them,

preventing them from getting very far. They ended up stopping in their tracks, making their backs prime targets for further gunfire.

"Oho, now it's time to crush them while they flee."

The harpies who were on standby in the sky began to release their anti-infantry bomb payloads on the enemy's rear flank. Each bomb was less powerful than before, but now that the harpies had their Stylish Fits, they each had over two to four times more firepower.

"Horrendous."

"Complete annihilation doesn't even begin to describe this."

It took only ten minutes for the 8,000 soldiers of the Principality of Tigris to suffer an 80 percent loss in personnel and retreat back to their territory in confusion.

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"This isn't what we discussed!"

"Sir Makrit, please calm down."

"Antonius! How can I possibly calm down?! I had 8,000 men, *my men*! And over 6,000 of them were mercilessly slaughtered! We deployed men on the front lines with heavy shields because we were told they would protect against the enemy's attacks, even if it meant lower mobility. And look what happened! We would have had a better chance if we went with my initial plan and equipped the soldiers with light armor so they could sprint at the enemy!"

The man speaking, who was covered in blood and dirt, was the commanding officer of the Kingdom of Tigris's forces, Sir Makrit Jean Nicklaus. His armor was covered in small chips, and the shoulder part was so crushed that it no longer served a purpose. Apparently, he'd gotten hit with one of the enemy's first volleys—likely a stray projectile that grazed his shoulder armor.

That kind of damage, even though Sir Makrit was at the rear? No heavy shield a human could carry was going to do anything

against that. If he'd been less lucky, it'd be a corpse standing before me right now.

"And what about those shitty birds?! It was annoying enough that back in the day they used to throw shit at us from up in the sky, out of our reach, but now?! Now it's *so* much worse! What in the hell are those explosive weapons of theirs?! They're just like a mage's explosion magic! What are we supposed to do when they're showering us with those?! Our wind-magic-enchanted arrows didn't stand a chance!"

"Sir Makrit, please calm down. You're going to hurt yourself."

Sir Makrit was on the older side, so it was entirely possible he could get himself so riled up that he'd die in a fit of anger. Judging by his temperament, I suspected that Tigris's morale was in shambles, and who could say how many knights were still alive? I had no intention of looking after Tigris's men if they lost their commanding officer.

"I…have no choice but to admit that the enemy's forces have slightly exceeded our expectations." another man said solemnly after weathering Sir Makrit's reproach. His name was Steiner Hiltz, and he was with the Holy Kingdom's military authorities. He was the person primarily responsible for the invasion into Merinard.

"Slightly…? *Slightly*, you say?! A mere four hundred soldiers annihilated twenty times as many men! I heard rumors that a few dozen of their soldiers crushed a subjugation squad of tens of thousands of your soldiers! Or what, are you saying you used us as bait so you could analyze their forces?!"

Steiner's comment caused Sir Makrit to turn red with rage. He looked like an erupting volcano, actually. I was starting to get nervous that he might actually die.

"Not at all. More importantly, perhaps if Diieharte participated and rushed the enemy with you, things would not have turned out this way. As far as I can tell, they cannot continuously fire those strange weapons of theirs. They attack with a hundred at a time,

then another hundred attacks, and then they rotate. This means they need time to prepare for the next attack. If we pressed them hard and fast with superior numbers, we could crush them. If anything, I would argue that Tigris's casualties stem from Diieharte's lack of cooperation."

This son of a… He was trying to place the blame on us. Sir Makrit glared my way.

"You have a lot of nerve trying to pass the buck like that. There is no way anyone could have predicted taking such heavy losses when Tigris had twenty times the combat force as the enemy. And in the first place, Sir Steiner, were you not the one that said enchanted anti-air equipment and heavy shields for the frontliners would be more than enough? Sir Makrit has far more experience in battle than I do, and Tigris's army is far better trained and has more men. That was why I let them serve as the vanguard, and both of you must have felt the same since you agreed to it. Don't even try to push the responsibility for what happened on us. Oh, and by the way? The only reason your wounded have been evacuated from the battlefield and are being healed is because we were waiting at the rear to save them."

I insisted we were not at fault, and reiterated that everything that happened because it was all due to Steiner misjudging the enemy's combat strength so poorly. This managed to turn Sir Makrit's rage away from me.

Wipe your own damn ass. Stop trying to put the blame on me, you crafty asshole.

While we were arguing, one of Diieharte's messengers came running over from the front lines.

"An envoy for the enemy army has appeared and is requesting a ceasefire!" he reported.

"A ceasefire…? Now?" I asked.

The Kingdom of Tigris's army was largely wiped out, but our forces were still fine. What were they thinking by requesting a

ceasefire?

"Yes. They called out to us from that strange floating vehicle of theirs. What should we do?" the messenger asked.

"Good question," I said, turning to Sir Makrit. "Our forces are still intact, but I doubt yours can continue to fight."

"…I hate to admit it, but you are right. And those who still have their limbs are no longer in any mental condition to fight," Sir Makrit agreed through gritted teeth.

Of course his surviving men couldn't fight. How could they maintain their fighting spirit after being attacked by those bizarre weapons? I couldn't help but wonder how many of them would actually return to the battlefield right now even if they were ordered to. Though I suppose my own troops were in the same boat.

In order to get Sir Makrit off my back earlier, I'd said that Tigris's forces were better trained, but the reality was that there wasn't much of a difference between our armies beyond the fact that they had a numbers advantage. And yet, every single one of my soldiers saw them get eradicated by the enemy. It was safe to say that troop morale among my men was as bad as it could get. If I ordered them to take to the battlefield, they'd do it begrudgingly, but as soon as they came under threat, it was likely they would lose what remaining morale they had and flee in a stampede.

"Wait. Are you implying you intend to accept this ceasefire? The Diieharte army has yet to even take to the field of battle," Steiner said.

"Neither has mine at this point!" Sir Makrit added. "We got our asses handed to us before we even got there! Or what, do you want us to return to the battlefield with no plan, only to be slaughtered mercilessly?!"

Sir Makrit turned his ire toward Steiner once again. I understood where he was coming from, but now wasn't the time or place. If we didn't accept their ceasefire, those shitbirds could start dropping explosives on our heads.

"Sir Makrit, let us leave the questioning of Sir Steiner for later," I said. "Right now, we should focus on the ceasefire negotiations."

"Nrgh… Sir Steiner, I intend to make a formal report about this to His Majesty the King."

The fact that Sir Makrit was willing to hear me out despite his anger spoke to how talented of a general he was. If I was in his position, I might have already either stabbed this crafty asshole or choked him to death.

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"Boss, couldn't we just march on 'em and crush 'em without offering a ceasefire?" Shemel asked.

"Sure, but those wind-magic-enchanted arrows are pretty scary," I said. "Fortunately, our harpies can fly well out of their range, limiting their effectiveness, and their new magic tools let them defend against them just fine, but if we had the harpies dive bomb the enemy, there might've been casualties."

"And if the enemy charged us head-on while our airboards were damaged, there'd be no way to avoid casualties," Bela added.

"I don't even want to think about what would happen if the enemy got their hands on our magic guns or airboards. It would be foolish to leave our position to attack them," I said.

"In that case, why not have the harpies drop bombs on 'em? No danger there," Shemel suggested.

"That's certainly an option if negotiations break down. My heavy iron golems are a bit overkill in this case, I think. I guess I could always sic a rock golem corps on them," I pondered aloud.

"I think that'd be worse," Ira said.

My rock golems were exactly as advertised: They weren't equipped with any weapons beyond their stone bodies. That said, you definitely couldn't underestimate them. They were as dangerous as a high-tier adventurer like Shemel—maybe even more so. And

because they were made of stone, their whole body was a weapon. Plus, that stone construction gave them high defensive properties. One swing of an arm could smash a person like a tomato. I had about fifty of them in my inventory, so if I needed to, I could deploy them whenever.

Normally, enemy recognition would be an issue, but just like in a video game, when I took the golems out of my inventory, they immediately recognized friend from enemy based on my own perception. Viva convenience! God, or whoever is up there, certainly had some gnarly miracles. Honestly, I didn't mind, given how useful they were. I only stood to gain from that being's gifts—at least for now.

While we discussed things, I got a call from Worg over my golem communicator.

"Kousuke, they've agreed to ceasefire negotiations. We'll be taking things over to the side of the battlefield, where there's clear visibility. What will you do?"

"I guess I'll come too. I am technically the highest-ranking member of the government present, right?"

"Yeah."

"Probably."

"I'd imagine."

"Mm-hmm."

"For sure. All right, will we head over by airboard?"

"Let's. It'll be a tight fit, but taking the airboard should be fine, Worg."

"Understood. I'll be waiting for you here," he replied, ending the call.

It was time to get a good look at our enemy.

***

A number of cavalrymen bearing white flags appeared shortly after we arrived at the meeting place. For the record, we also were flying a white flag on our airboard. It was interesting to me that while this world didn't have a custom around how to declare war and such, it did, however, have white flags. It was odd, but there was no point thinking about it too hard.

"Six in all, eh? I'm guessing the two guys in imposing armor are the commanders," I said.

"Mm, probably. Important people tend to want to look important. For a military officer, that means armor," Ira replied.

"I figured. The older knight with damaged armor must be Tigris's CO."

Which meant the one with undamaged armor was Diieharte's. He looked fairly young. Younger than Sir Leonard, for sure. Maybe about as old as Danan? He was definitely a generation above me, if nothing else.

It would be awkward to conduct our negotiations while standing, so I pulled out chairs for all of us and set them up on the ground. The approaching party looked startled by the way I pulled chairs out of nowhere.

"Are two chairs fine?"

"Y-yes…"

I took my seat.

I called them chairs, but really they were just simple X frames with cloth on top of them. I made them based on the sorts of chairs you saw the elderly sit on when they were fishing at a wharf or something. I think I also saw generals in old period flicks sitting on these sorts of chairs.

"Now then, how should we begin? Should we start with introductions?" I said.

"Mm, it would be good to know where we all stand. I am Worg, the battalion commander of the Kingdom of Merinard's

northern magic gun corps. I am also the commanding officer of the northern base."

"I'm Ira. Chief court mage of the Kingdom of Merinard."

"I'm Kousuke. Oh, er, I guess I'm not technically an officer in the army."

"Correct. It would be most accurate to introduce yourself as the prince consort."

"Right, right. Let me try this again. I'm Kousuke, spouse of Queen Sylphyel Danal Merinard, and the prince consort. Just consider me the tactician or adviser here. Apparently, I rank higher than Worg."

"Well, you're the prince consort. Of course you do," Worg said before turning to the commanders. "And you are?"

The commanders watched our back-and-forth absentmindedly before snapping to attention and clearing their throats, collecting themselves.

"I am Marquis Makrit Jean Nicklaus, commander of the Kingdom of Tigris's army."

"And I am Marquis Antonius Ders Gilanzam, commander of the Principality of Diieharte's army."

So, the older man was Sir Makrit, and the younger one was Sir Antonius.

"Then let's cut straight to the chase. Our conditions are that you collect your injured and dead, then return to your respective border fortresses. We'll wait a week—wait, is that enough time? Okay, two weeks. We demand you abandon said fortresses within two weeks. Regardless of whether you do so or not, we will use force to completely obliterate both fortresses once that time is up."

Both of the commanders' eyes widened. Of course, they were shocked. If I was in their position, I would be too. There was no way they could agree to something like this out of nowhere. And more

importantly, neither of them had the authority to abandon their respective fortresses.

"How could we ever accept conditions like those?!" shouted Makrit, his face bright red with rage.

"Surely you understand how absurd this is," Antonius replied, a pained smile on his face.

That expression screamed that he thought I was an idiot. I mean, in a sense, he wasn't wrong.

"Look, you don't have to accept these conditions. We're going to blow those fortresses away whether or not there are people inside of them," I said bluntly.

Both men once again looked shocked. Sir Makrit was still bright red, and I was starting to worry about his health. It'd be bad if he just dropped dead on me.

"I know I called them conditions, but they're more like orders—or, well, not exactly," I said. "I guess we're just notifying you of what's set in stone. We will be destroying those fortresses in two weeks, so if you don't want to suffer casualties, retreat. In other words, this is our way of punishing both nations for invading our territory for no reason and without notification."

"A punishment…? You certainly seem to be underestimating us. How do you plan on destroying our fortifications without ever leaving your own?" Sir Antonius asked, glaring at me with a deathly serious look.

Oooh, scary.

"I don't feel the need to explain that to you," I said. "The fact remains that, in two weeks, we will destroy the fortresses near the border. If you don't want the blood of your men on your hands, pull them out. We won't be launching any more assaults during this two-week period, so we'll allow you to collect the wounded and dead still on the battlefield. However, should you attempt to invade Merinard in that period, we will annihilate both armies immediately and

destroy the fortresses regardless of this two-week grace period. I suggest you both coordinate carefully to make sure you don't make any poor decisions."

"You're certainly confident. We still have 10,000 troops, and you only have 400. Those strange weapons of yours do not change the fact that we outnumber you," Sir Makrit retorted.

"Wanna test that theory? Personally, I don't think your men's morale will hold. Either way, if you try anything right now, we'll destroy both fortresses right after we've killed you," I said, responding to Sir Makrit's threat with a smile. "You don't have a choice. Either you obey and keep casualties at a minimum, or you don't and get annihilated in battle. Surely you understand that we have been holding back, right?"

Both enemy commanders went silent.

At the moment, Diieharte's army was well within range of the harpies. If I gave them an order via golem communicator, they could rain their payload down on the enemy forces right now.

"Personally, I'd like to get along with our neighbors, but if you're going to come at us, we'll have to hit back, and do it in a way that drives it home what'll happen if you ever try it again. Whether or not we can shake hands and get along after that is up to you. And for what it's worth, we realize that the corrupt priests of the Holy Kingdom are probably pulling your strings on this whole battle."

Their demeanor didn't change at all. It was probably hard for both of them to admit that another country was mobilizing their armies, even if it was a suzerain state.

"We've said our piece. If you have anything else to say, the floor is yours."

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The man looked at us like a bored schoolchild.

Who in the hell is this man? I wondered, perplexed. *It was surprising when he pulled camp stools out of nowhere, but you're telling me that this unthreatening man is not only the enemy's commander, but also the prince consort? Is it a custom in Merinard for people that important to head to the battlefield themselves?*

Either way, nothing about this was normal. I had no clue how to appraise the man.

First, his conditions were insane. He was going to let us collect our wounded and dead. Okay, that made sense. But the next step would normally be for the winning army to request a cession of territory or reparations. Why was he instead asking for us to abandon our border fortresses? Such installations were the keystones of a nation's defense. We were each leading our respective army's forces—in my case, my territory's forces were here too. And while we both had some considerable authority, we certainly weren't able to make the call to abandon those fortresses. We might not even be able to make it back to our capitals to negotiate for that in under two weeks.

"I cannot agree to this," I said. "And I do not even have the authority to do so."

"Likewise," Sir Makrit said. "It will prove difficult to negotiate for this in only two weeks."

It wasn't *impossible*, but I found it doubtful that the higher-ups in the capital would agree to abandoning our border base. If I surrendered without even crossing swords with the enemy, they'd brand me as useless and either demote me or strip me of my territory and title—the worst possible punishment.

That said, I also had no intention of leading my men on a suicide mission.

"As I said before, you can do what you wish with my warning. We're going to destroy the bases regardless," the man replied nonchalantly.

"…Are you even here to negotiate at all?" Sir Makrit asked, the blood vessels on his red face bulging. "You're just shoving your conditions in our faces and—"

"Am I here to negotiate? Nope!" replied the prince consort—the man named Kousuke—cutting Sir Makrit off.

"Explain to me why we should negotiate with a bunch of people who invaded us without warning and then got their asses kicked? If you were in my position, would you? No, right? If you tried to solve things diplomatically, explained the reasons behind your invasion, and made a formal declaration of war, sure, we'd listen. But you secretly bought up provisions and charged in without so much as a word. So why should we listen to anything you have to say? Before questioning my common sense and decorum, maybe you should reflect on your own damn actions."

I had no response. He was right. He and his people had no obligation to hear us out considering we were the invaders. However, the fact remained that what he asked of us was near impossible.

"But—"

"But nothing. I told you, this isn't a condition or a request. We're just telling you what is going to happen, and warning you never to mess with us ever again. We will not compromise, and we're going to proceed this way no matter what. If you choose to resist, then those fortresses will become your coffins. That's all."

In other words, we were completely helpless.

Knowing this, I tried everything in my power to get him to give us more than two weeks, but Sir Kousuke didn't budge.

Dammit.

***

In the end, both commanders left, agreeing to at least retrieve their wounded and dead, then retreat.

"Are you sure?" Ira asked.

"Yeah. Sylphy told me to be uncompromising about this invasion, so… Taking prisoners would be a pain too," I replied.

"I see," Ira said with a nod.

Truth be told, there were a few reasons we didn't take prisoners this time around. The first was that it'd be a lot of work, and the second was that we didn't have the numbers at the base to keep tabs on all of them. Even if we got people from Metocerium to help, the numbers wouldn't quite add up. If we managed to take some high-ranking knights or nobility as hostages, we could maybe make some money, but it really didn't seem worth it.

"So are you truly going to destroy their fortresses?" Ira asked.

"Yup," I said. "I'll be handling that myself, so we won't need to send out our magic gun battalion."

"Really?"

"Like I said, I'm going to blow them off the map. Though if anyone wants to observe from afar, that's fine."

My plan was to take half the elite magic gunsmen and harpies with me, as well as Shemel and the other ogres as bodyguards. It'd probably be wise to take Worg and at least one company commander with me as well.

"All right, we can open the mission up to people interested in tagging along, but only as many as can fit on a single airboard. And make sure they know that if things go bad, they are to flee immediately. Leave behind someone to take command of the base while we're gone," I said.

"Understood," Worg replied with a nod. "We'll be ready in two weeks."

Maybe I should have the harpies head out and drop warning notes if anyone's still around by then. Hopefully they retreat…

The commander from Diieharte struck me as someone who knew better than to stick around, but I wasn't so sure about the older man from Tigris. I got the distinct feeling that I would end up having to blow him away.

***

It had been thirteen days since we fought back Diieharte and Tigris. Tomorrow was X-day. At noon, we would blow up Diieharte's fort. At sunset the same day, we'd destroy Tigris's.

As for the method, I was planning to use rock golems with built-in gleaming jewel bombs. Each bomb golem would have three rock golems as bodyguards, and they would charge the enemy fortresses, break through their gates, then explode.

Gleaming magic jewel bomb rock golems—okay, way too much of a mouthful. "Self-destructing golems" works fine. Anyway, self-destructing golems had a few activation conditions programmed into them. The first was their arrival at the designated target, the second was if they were disabled after having their legs destroyed, and the last was if the golem core was ever destroyed. If the gleaming magic jewel bomb itself was destroyed, it could be rendered useless, but it was nearly impossible to accomplish since you'd have to destroy a rock golem in a single blow, so I wasn't too concerned about that. Maybe Grande or Melty could manage such a feat, but if they made one teeny mistake, they'd be caught up in the ensuing explosion. I wasn't even sure if *I* could stop one. If I had the newest battle tank, maybe…? Either that or a powerful flying bomb? Regardless, it'd be tough.

An anti-tank exploding projectile could do the trick, but it was close to impossible to snipe the bomb itself with one of those. And if the tank misjudged the range, it would be caught in the explosion too. Yeah, that wasn't happening.

Additionally, the bomb would probably ignite if it was destroyed with magic. The only reason I wasn't completely sure of

that was it was too dangerous to actually test it firsthand. That's just what would theoretically happen, according to Ira. Grande could unload her dragon breath from far away, so maybe I'd run tests with her later. Experimentation was important.

"I'm back!"

Pessa—who'd been off doing recon at the two fortresses while delivering warning notices to the enemy—returned while I was holed up in the crafting room working on some stuff. She was supposed to have a metal cylinder equipped to her Stylish Fit that housed the warning notices, but it was gone. In other words, she had delivered the notices to the opposing army.

"They still there?"

"Yup, still there," she reported. "I figured that one commander would have the good sense to get out of dodge, but I guess not? Or maybe he got demoted from his post and replaced with someone else."

I gently rubbed Pessa's head as she trotted over from the window she'd entered from. Tigris had suffered the largest number of casualties in that last battle, so maybe their higher-ups realized we'd actually make good on our promise. By the same token, since Diieharte didn't lose a single man, so maybe their higher-ups thought we were bluffing? I mean, there was no way that the soldiers who witnessed that battle would still have their morale in one piece. Jeez.

"It's sad, but this is war," I said.

"You're so kind. They're the ones who invaded us, and you even gave them two weeks of grace. I don't think you've got anything to fret about."

Pessa expressed this extreme viewpoint as I rubbed her head. She was a small-sized harpy, so despite her tiny childlike body, she was actually a full-grown adult. She was also a veteran soldier who had been with us since the very beginning of our struggle. Usually

she was quite immature, but when it came to matters of war, she tended to be rather severe.

"Isn't there any way we can solve this more peacefully?" she asked.

"The Holy Kingdom and its allies will make that pretty tough."

Pessa climbed atop my knees and sat herself down. Her feathers were so soft and comfy, and she was super light. Grande was surprisingly heavy despite her small stature, but in contrast, the harpies were all exactly as light as they looked. Maybe their bone structure and density was different than hers?

"Are you sad?" she asked.

"Not quite, but I'm certainly not thrilled with all this. It's always best to keep casualties at a minimum when possible."

"Yeah, that's true." Pessa nodded, gently caressing my cheek with her wing.

Mm, this probably looked really bad considering her appearance, but there was no point fretting over that considering all we'd done together.

"For now, I guess I'll contact all the relevant divisions. Hey, Pessa, come with?"

"Sure."

I put in an order with my golem workbench, let Pessa off my lap, and took her with me out of the room—but on my way, I stopped by the ogre sofa in the corner of the room and whapped Bela awake from her slumber. Some bodyguard, huh?

***

The next day, we hopped on the airboard and left the base. We proceeded north quickly and began our invasion into the area near Diieharte's base.

"Don't see no enemy soldiers," Bela said.

"Nah, look at the red smoke coming up from the rear. They must've left some folks here to monitor the situation," I said.

"What's the move, Kousuke?"

"Leave them be. According to the harpies, there's no one around to try and ambush us. They're probably just there to report our arrival to their boss."

If they left men behind to ambush us while we were on the move, we'd be forced to fight. I'd had the harpies scout out ahead and monitor the situation, though, so we were in no danger. Normally, it would make sense to hole up inside the fortress and wait for us to arrive, considering how well-protected they'd usually be in there. Usually.

But we were equipped with long-range weapons that could pierce shields and armor, so the right choice would be to take cover behind a structure incredibly defensibly sound. If they launched an ambush on us, they'd be abandoning their protection.

After proceeding forward and ignoring the smoke, a man-made structure came into view up ahead.

"Enemy submarine sighted!" I called out.

"Sub… Mareen…?" Ira asked.

"Don't worry about it. Everyone, halt!"

I used my golem communicator to update the rest of our airboards, then we came to a stop. I could just barely make out the structure, so… Hm, it was probably about five kilometers away? On Earth, from a human's perspective, the horizon was always five kilometers or so away, but there was no guaranteeing that this planet had the same diameter as Earth.

"About how long would it take to walk to that fortress?"

"Hm? For me, less than an hour? For a normal human, probably an hour-ish," Shemel said.

"I see… You girls do have long strides. I think we'll be fine at this distance."

Chunks of the fortress or golems could go flying, so we'd need a bunker to keep us safe from shrapnel. I got in touch with the harpies in the air.

"Pessa, this is Kousuke. Give me your report on Diieharte's forces. Over."

"Roger thaaat! Pessa here. It looks like their forces are preparing to attack. Over!"

"Roger. If it looks like they're about to leave, let me know. Over."

"Understooood! Over and out!"

"Kousuke, are we going to set up shop here?" Bela asked.

"Mreow, aren't we a little far away?"

After signing off with Pessa, Noir—the magic gun company commander—appeared along with Worg. Both Peter and Noir had gotten into a bit of a tussle over who would get to tag along today, but in the end Noir won out. I didn't know how they'd settled the matter, but Peter's depressed visage was burned into my brain.

"We'll get caught in the blast if we're too close," I explained.

"Is this secret weapon of yours really that incredible?" Worg asked.

"We could completely annihilate the Holy Kingdom if we deployed a bunch of them. Remember, I can mass-produce them."

"If that's possible, why nyat just do that? Blow 'em all up?"

"It'd be bad if we just started indiscriminately using weapons of mass destruction to murder soldiers and civilians… Plus, the entire impact zone ends up suffering from pretty intense magic power contamination."

"That *is* bad…" Noir looked put off after hearing how strong these weapons were, as well as what their weak point was.

It wasn’t all bad news. Magic power contamination didn’t have immediate repercussions on the human body. And magically contaminated areas were good for growing special plants—medicinal herbs that could be used to make magic power recovery potions. They also increased the rate of magic power recovery for mages.

On the flip side, they also caused abnormal behavior in magic tools, and being exposed to magic power contamination could cause magic sickness. You also couldn’t grow normal plants, which made areas affected by magic power contamination no good for building communities to live in. I still didn’t know how long the half-life period was for the stuff. My current running theory was that magic power contamination was caused by the gleaming magic jewel being reduced to tiny particles.

“In any case, let’s get ready. First, I need to build a bunker to keep us safe from debris. Ira, ogres, watch my back. Worg, you take command of the elite magic gunsmen and prepare for battle.”

“Mm, on it.”

“Aye.”

“Understood.”

***

“What are they up to?”

“Some kind of magic? It appears they are building a defensive structure.”

“Hmph. That coward Antonius claimed that their commanding officer bragged about blowing our fortress away, but look at them now.”

The current commander of Diieharte’s army—Lesnius Olaf Wintaria—contorted his face in worry as he gazed into the telescope.

After finishing ceasefire negotiations with Kousuke, Antonius had gone to the capital himself to inform the prince of the situation, stressing his recommendation that they abandon the fortress. This

enraged the prince and resulted in his immediate demotion. Lesnius was his successor as Diieharte's commander, and he'd been given control of the border fortress.

"What would you like us to do?" his soldier asked.

"Keep your guard up and observe them. There's no way that new weapon of theirs will reach us," Lesnius ordered.

"Yes, sir… Hm?"

"What is it?"

Concerned by his soldier's odd reaction, Lesnius took another look with the telescope and saw a human figure in front of the enemy's defensive fortifications. They were equipped in armor and had a large mace and shield…

No, it wasn't a person.

"Wh-what is that?!" Lesnius asked.

"Could it be…a golem, sir?"

"*That's* a golem…?"

Apparently, golems were moving puppets that alchemists made, but making golems combat-ready required a wealth of resources. Very rarely, they were used to guard some ancient ruins.

"This wasn't in the report."

"That can't be—?!"

"Wha?!"

More human figures—golems—appeared in front of the enemy's fortifications. Judging by the size of the structure, the golems had to be over three meters tall. If they attacked Diieharte's fortress, the gates wouldn't hold.

"Wh-wh-what should we do?! We don't stand a chance against those numbers!" the soldier asked in a panic.

"I-I don't know."

Lesnius's adjutant was incoherent, but even Lesnius had no idea how to deal with those stone titans. Diieharte's soldiers were a skilled bunch, but they usually did battle with other humanoids and small to medium-sized monsters threatening the roads. They weren't trained to deal with giant stone titans.

"Urgh… I know!" Lesnius said as a thought struck him. "The battering rams! Prepare the battering rams at once! Set them up at the southern gate, and when the golems enter, beat them back!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Lesnius was starting to sound out of his depth, but he still was quick on his feet, as to be expected of a commander. It was regrettable, then, that because of his foolish pride, he didn't choose that very moment to retreat. Had he and his men fled the fortress from the northern gate the moment Kousuke's golems began their march, they might have been able to avoid the tragedy that was to come.

Chapter 7:
Kousuke Gets "Serious"

"THIS IS PESSA. There's movement in the fortress, over."

"What are they up to? Over."

"They're probably preparing battering rams, over."

"Roger that. Keep an eye on them. Over."

"Understood! Over and out!"

Battering rams, eh? They must intend to use them against my golems. Not a bad strategy, but they aren't stupid enough to get hit by battering rams. If they try to use them, the golems' maces will bash them to splinters.

"Wouldn't the golems be more than enough to flatten the fortress?" Bela asked.

"Probably, but we need to make an example of them. We need to show everybody what happens if they underestimate the Kingdom of Merinard."

"Ah, gotcha," Bela said and nodded earnestly.

From next to her, Worg and Noir both seemed lost in thought.

"Thinking about how to take down a golem?" I asked.

"Mm, yes. Basically," Worg said.

"Ultimately, they're made of stone, so if you can focus your magic gunfire around their core, I think you'd have a decent chance. You could also focus your fire on their knees and disable their legs. I think you could destroy them with the original aerial bombs the harpies used too."

"Makes sense, considering they can even destroy a fortress gate. You're right."

While Worg and I chatted, the three golems walked right up to the gate of the enemy fortress, self-destruct golem in tow. They were now smashing at the gate with their giant maces, and we could hear the impacts from all the way out here.

"This is Kousuke. All harpies, retreat and take cover in our defensive fortifications."

"Understood! Harpies, falling back!"

The self-destruct golem was about to enter the fortress and detonate, so I'd called the harpies back. It'd be bad news if they got caught in the shock wave and knocked out of the sky. Plus, there was shrapnel to worry about.

"We're back!"

"Good t' see ya!"

Pessa and Capri returned, followed by the rest of the harpies. I'd ordered everyone else to take cover inside as well, so I took headcount to make sure we were all present. Fortunately, everyone was safe and accounted for.

"It's almost time," Ira said.

"Yeah… Ah, the gate collapsed inward," Tozume said.

"Mm, they're entering now."

Tozume was watching with her bare eye, and Ira was sitting on her shoulders doing the same. It was crazy that they could see everything at this distance. Tozume usually used a hammer in combat, but it struck me that she could make a killer sniper. I wanted to get her a large caliber rifle that'd match her body size.

"All hands, prepare for the blast wave!" I yelled out.

Ten seconds later, a blinding light engulfed the fortress.

A massive blast and shock wave followed shortly after.

Just like that, Diieharte's base and all the men stationed there were wiped from the face of the planet.

***

"Do a roll call and make sure there aren't any injured."

"R-right… Got it."

Worg was stunned, but he soon collected himself and began taking attendance.

"That was way crazier than I expected."

"The whole fortress is just…gone."

"There's no way anyone could survive that thing."

The ogre girls were gazing at ground zero from the viewing window, watching the massive dust cloud rising into the air. They were less shaken by this than I'd expected.

"We're adventurers, y'know. If we lost our shit at every single strange or crazy thing that happened, we'd be doomed," Shemel said.

"Though that *was* pretty surprising," Bela added.

"Now I totally get why you can't use these too much," Tozume said.

"You adventurers are amazing," I responded.

They really did have a kind of composure that normal folks lacked, but maybe that was just these three in particular.

It took about ten minutes to count heads, and after making sure everyone was okay, we all got on our airboards and headed out to ground zero, where Diieharte's fortress once stood.

"The airboards may malfunction due to the magic power in the area. If anything seems off, stop immediately and remove the magic crystals."

"Roger that."

After using the golem communicator to issue orders to everyone, I patted the back of Bela's driver's seat and had her move us out.

"I doubt anyone survived, but keep your eyes open just in case," I advised.

"Sure, best to be safe. Though I think little Grande or you are the only people who could survive something like that," Shemel replied.

"What kind of powers do you think I have, Shemel…?"

I couldn't shoot a beam out of my mouth.

"Look, Boss. It's just that you kinda feel like the type of guy who could take an attack head-on and survive, long as it ain't a surprise attack."

"Be honest," Bela said. "If you knew that thing was going to explode near you, could you make it out alive?"

"I think if I built a defense wall two meters thick made of black steel and mithril blocks, maybe?" I replied. I mean, if it was just me, I could *probably* save myself.

"See?" Bela said.

"The fact that you can just whip out a black steel and meter-thick mithril wall already puts you on Grande's level," Shemel said.

"You both certainly break the mold."

"I've already given up on your common sense being at all useful, Kousuke."

How could that be?!

Oh, and just to be clear, Grande would probably be safe if she dug underground. Sylphy and Melty might have a rough time of it… If Melty had at least ten seconds before the blast, she could probably move fast enough to get out of the instant-death zone. As for Sylphy… I'd never really seen her fighting at full strength. She

had spirit magic, so if she coupled that with her on-foot speed, maybe she could retreat and use her magic to dig underground.

Speaking of which, Grande wasn't accompanying us this time around. I'd had her stay back at the base just in case anything happened. She didn't seem particularly interested in anything that was going on. My bet was she was sunbathing right about now.

"Mm?" Bela's voice broke my thoughts.

"What's up?"

"It feels like we're going faster even though I haven't increased our speed."

"Stop right now. All units, stop your airboards and remove their magic crystals. We've detected an unintentional increase in power output."

Just to be safe, all airboards had safety circuits in their levitation and wind magic propulsion devices that allowed for excessive magic power output, but there was no need to test their endurance right now. We were only ten minutes away from ground zero on foot, so we could just walk.

"Whoa… The magic power here is thick. I feel like I'm gonna be sick," Tozume said.

"Makes me feel all…urgggh," Ira groaned.

"Mm, I'm fine," Shemel said.

"I'm a-okay too," Bela said.

"I don't have any magic power, so I can't feel anything. It is a little hot, though," I commented.

Both Tozume and Ira looked worn out as we approached ground zero. I knew that Ira was sensitive to magic power, but maybe Tozume had an aptitude for magic as well? Both Shemel, Bela, and I were totally fine.

"Man, that trump card of yours is powerful…" Worg marveled.

"Right? But at the same time, this one single bomb erased anywhere from a thousand to ten thousand men. I'm not exactly about to celebrate," I said.

"Really…?" Worg tilted his head, confused. "Personally, I'm glad to have you on our side."

This was war, so you eliminated your enemy. It was a simple truth, and it was one I believed in. After all, it was a little late to have regrets. I'd already used my weapons to kill tens of thousands of Holy Kingdom troops. Why should I worry about one measly fortress?

No…I couldn't think that way. I couldn't allow myself to get numb to this feeling. I wondered how the weapons developers of my old world dealt with this guilt. Did they justify it by saying they were doing it for their nation? To protect their nation's troops?

When I took a moment to think about it, I realized how arrogant I was being. You could say that I was looking down on the people of this world. Somewhere deep down, I saw the people here as uncivilized barbarians, and felt shame for slaughtering them with my advanced weapons.

I hated myself for that.

"What's up? You don't seem too thrilled," Bela asked.

"I've got a lot on my mind."

"I bet. I really don't think you should feel bad for the enemy, though. If you hadn't done this, the people at the base and in Metocerium would've been slaughtered instead," she said.

"Who gives a toss about the dead?" Shemel said. "Don't let them hold you down from beyond the grave. It's pointless."

"Pointless? Look—"

"It is though, right?" she pushed. "Dwellin' on it ain't gonna fix nothin'. You ain't gonna bring 'em back from the dead. They were weak, so they died. That's all there is to it. Now we climb over their dead bodies. End of story."

"That's a pretty…dry way of looking at things."

"I think *you're* just too wet. Am I wrong? Twenty years ago, we were weak, so we got done in by the Holy Kingdom. Now we're doin' the same to them. That's all it is."

"Really…?"

They had a straightforward way of looking at things. In a struggle for existence, the strongest survived. It was that simple. How easy would it be to have that mindset? I didn't mind descending to hell at this point, but when I committed one-sided slaughters like this, it affected my conscience… I guess all I could do was get used to battle without becoming entirely numb to all the murder.

"You're thinking too hard," Ira said, wrapping her small hand around mine. I must have gotten chilly at some point, because I could feel the warmth of her touch.

"Am I…?"

"You've saved many people. If nothing else, you saved me." Ira looked me in the eye, wrapping her other hand around mine.

"Likewise. If it wasn't for you, I'd have been food for the gizma in the Black Forest," Shemel said.

"Same," Bela chimed in. "I'd never go down without a fight, but if the Holy Kingdom's men managed to corner me, well…"

"It might have been the same for me too," Tozume said.

Both Bela and Tozume lived in a secret demi-human settlement not too far away from a human town, where they spent their time fighting monsters. If me, Sylphy, and everyone else hadn't taken Merinard back from the Holy Kingdom, they might never have made it.

"…I guess I can't let myself lose heart. Okay, gotta get fired up!"

If things got to be too much for me, I decided I'd let someone else dote on me.

That'd keep me from being crushed under the weight of my own dark thoughts.

***

After we investigated the smoldering crater to make sure there were no survivors, we left the remnants of Diieharte's border fortress behind. There were signs of an underground structure near the center of the crater, but when I tried digging it up, the whole thing was basically gone. The heat must have turned most of it into glass. I couldn't find any survivors.

That said, I did learn something important from the scene: If you made a shelter deep underground, you could potentially survive this blast. I figured it might be better to install the golems with bombs on the top and bottom, then have the bottom half detach itself and burrow underground before exploding while the upper half stayed behind and exploded in tandem.

A tandem anti-personnel self-destruct golem.

But was there a point to all that when I could just bury them alive in the shelter?

On another note, what if royalty or something had managed to evade the blast? I mean, the sewer beneath Merinesburg Castle was basically an underground escape route. It was possible that other countries—for example, the Holy Kingdom—had escape routes of their own. Just to be safe, I decided to talk to Ira once we got back and look into it.

"We blowin' away Tigris's fortress the same way?" Shemel asked.

"The very same way," I answered.

"Emergency! We've spotted ambush troops on the path heading to Tigris's fortress. Approximately 5,000 men!"

We received an urgent message from the harpy we sent ahead to keep an eye on things.

Huh, so the plan was to make it look like they'd abandoned the fortress as requested while they were actually making arrangements to ambush us. And the harpies didn't discover those troops this morning because… Ah, I had them investigate the road from our base to Tigris's, but I didn't have them look into the road running from Diieharte's to Tigris's. Big mistake on my part.

"What's the plan? I know your elites and harpies know what they're doing, but I don't think they can face a fighting force a hundred times larger with no prep."

At present, I had fifty elite magic gunsmen and half of the harpy bomb squad, plus Worg and an airboard of magic gunsmen. If we used our reserve magic crystals, we could probably just barely squeeze out a win, but…

"Mm, it'd be tough. But nothing we can't handle."

If I made a small defensive fortification in view of the enemy, had the elites protect it, then sent the harpies to bomb the hidden enemy, they'd likely come right to us given their superior numbers.

And if they did that, it'd be over for them.

"We'll come out on top," I said.

Indeed, as long as we could draw them into our kitchen, we'd come out on top. We had all sorts of ways to cook up ambushing troops once we knew where they were.

Doubly so, now that I'd stopped holding back.

***

"It's time to teach that boy a lesson…"

I, Tigris's commander Makrit Jean Nicklaus whispered to myself while looking down the road connecting Diieharte and Tigris.

The 5,000 troops I had scraped together over the last two weeks were already in position, and they were prepared to launch their attack. The archers barely got to use the wind-enchanted arrows they were equipped with in the last battle, so they had more than enough stock.

"Vehicles faster than horses? Powerful weapons with a longer range than bows? Hmph, all that will come to naught in the face of our sheer manpower," I scoffed.

The Holy Kingdom's meddling during the last battle meant that our forces had suffered heavy casualties before we could even engage the enemy. Now that we knew how the enemy fought, we could take advantage of their weaknesses.

Those vehicles were fast, yes, but they didn't appear to have the same defensive capabilities as heavy cavalry. They were most certainly complex magic tools, so if we could break them using wind-enchanted arrows, we could render them useless.

As for their impossible-to-see high-speed projectiles, they were definitely powerful. But if we could flush them out of their cover as we focused our attack on them, we'd be able to put them down. As far as I could tell, they didn't appear to be equipped with powerful armor or anything of the kind.

At the end of the day, no matter how strong a weapon was, a human being had to wield it. If an attacker were to be shot with an arrow, they'd be wounded, and if they were cut down with a sword, they would be fatally injured. Once an enemy entered our attack range, they were nothing more than flesh and bone. Here, that went double, considering how few in number they were. If we could get in close, we could crush them easily.

The last problem we had to deal with was those shitbirds and their explosives, but unfortunately, I couldn't come up with a solution. That said, we were far from their base, so there'd be a limit to how many explosives they could carry with them. Our forces

would suffer casualties, yes, but once the birds ran out of explosives, they would be helpless.

"…They're here."

It wasn't easy maneuvering 5,000 people into position for an ambush without being detected by the enemy's alert network. It would've been over if those shitbirds spotted them while they were en route, so I'd made sure our forces moved at night to avoid detection. My surviving subordinates led a few hundred people each into position.

All of this would be for naught if the enemy didn't take this road, but my gamble had paid off.

"Urgh, they spotted us?"

But one step before they fell right into our trap, they stopped. Apparently the enemy scouts—those shitbirds—had located our ambush units. They really were evil little creatures. We wouldn't ever be able to launch surprise attacks unless we found a way to handle them; they could see our entire formation.

"Don't give them time to react! Ring the assault gong!" I ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

My subordinate immediately began to signal the attack. With the enemy stopped just ahead of our trap, our wind-enchanted arrows could…still just barely reach them?

"Ngh…?! Impossible!"

I'd glanced away from the enemy for just a fleeting moment. A single moment! But when I looked back at them, they had suddenly constructed a robust stone fortification around themselves. What kind of sick joke was this?! Our wind-enchanted arrows had no chance!

"Magic? No, but…"

This was the stuff of fairy tales and heroic stories.

"But… That won't be enough."

Of course I couldn't deny my shock at the tough stone fort the enemy had created, but in the face of a battalion 5,000 strong, it would only serve to buy them a little time. As far as I could tell, they had a mere 100 soldiers. If we rushed them with our superior numbers, we could crush them. We obviously hadn't prepared for a siege battle, but given the height of the enemy wall, we could use earth magic, hastily assemble ladders, or use rope to scale it.

"They've simply delayed the inevitable."

I, Makrit, the commander of Tigris's forces, disdain Kousuke, the young man who calls himself the prince consort of the Kingdom of Merinard.

He'd looked down on us. Acted as though we wouldn't be worth his time if he weren't holding back. That he could kill all of us if he so chose. He'd claimed he only gave us two weeks to flee out of mercy.

"You will pay with your life for underestimating us."

The punishment for insulting Makrit Jean Nicklaus—the greatest general in Tigris—was a heavy one indeed. I would take his head, salt it, and deliver it to the feet of Merinard's witch myself.

***

Upon taking up formation at the edge of the enemy's attack range, a gong sounded.

"Oh, my line is the classic 'impossible?!' or something, right?" I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about. At this rate, we'll be crushed," Bela said.

"Should we turn tail and run?" Shemel asked.

"Nah," I said and poked my head out of the roof of the airboard. After securing visibility, I'd set up a castle wall made of

stone around all our airboards. It hadn't taken much work since I'd had a template saved up.

Once we were safe, I grabbed the golem communicator receiver attached to the vehicle. "Harpies, take your positions at high altitude and keep an eye out for wind-enchanted arrows. I want all magic gunsmen to climb the wall and prepare for battle. Commanding officers, should the enemy enter our attack range, fire away. I'll leave command to you, Worg."

"Understooood!"

"Roger that."

"I'm going ahead," I announced.

"Wh-what?! Wait up!" Shemel protested.

"Kousuke!" Ira cried out.

As Shemel and Ira panicked, I leaped out of the airboard's open roof, then used my command jump to ensure I'd be the first to reach the top of the wall. Oho! Our enemy was already pouring out from the forest and rocky areas flanking us. They were serious about taking us down.

"Sorry. I don't plan on dying here," I said as I pulled three golems out of my inventory and placed them in front of the fort. These weren't the bodyguard golems I had defending the self-destruct golem earlier. No, these were heavily equipped golems with black steel armor protecting their mithril copper alloy bodies, infinite ammo heavy machine guns, and automatic grenade launchers.

"Begin the attack. Wipe out the enemy," I commanded.

"VOOOOOOO!"

The golems let out their battle cries (?) and creaked into action, firing the 12.7mm heavy machine guns attached to both arms, for a total of four on each golem. The 40mm automatic grenade launchers attached to both shoulders had infinite ammo too, so explosives were being continuously hurled into the enemy

throngs in spectacular fashion. My golems were certainly in a good mood today.

"…What in the hell?"

"…Mreow."

Worg and Noir finally arrived at the top of the wall, followed shortly by the rest of the magic gunsmen. Upon seeing the golems rampaging through the enemy, they were all rendered speechless. Ira and Shemel had seen them already, so they weren't surprised, but all four of them had, well…telling expressions on their faces.

"This is awful."

"I pity Tigris's forces…"

"There ain't nothin' they can do against those things."

"I don't think the word 'outrageous' has ever been so applicable."

Thin steel plates and leather armor stood no chance in the face of 12.7mm caliber heavy machine gun rounds; they might as well have been made of paper. A single heavy machine gun could fire ten rounds in a single second, which meant they could fire 600 rounds in a minute. Each golem was equipped with four of these weapons, and there were three golems in total. If you did the math, between all three golems, it added up to around 7,000 machine gun rounds per minute.

Not to mention, the bullets were still plenty lethal after passing through the human body. It was possible for a single round to kill multiple people…

"…Whoa now."

"…This is awful, mreow."

In less than three minutes, the Tigris battalion—5,000 soldiers strong—was annihilated. There may have been people who managed to flee into the forest or rocky area, but they hardly posed a threat.

"What should we do about the cleanup?" Ira asked.

"Can't we just leave it as is? I'm sure animals or monsters'll do the cleaning for us," Bela suggested.

"Some of them are gonna end up zombifying, but this ain't Merinard territory, so that's not our problem," Shemel said.

"I don't think that's acceptable at all, but… Well, I guess we should decide on whether to rummage through the aftermath for spoils," Ira said.

Was she really suggesting we'd dig through this sea of flesh and entrails for spoils?

"I'm not sure that's realistic…" I said. We were still pretty far from the carnage, but I was fully confident that if I got up close and personal with the hellscape my golems created, I'd be emptying my stomach out. "What do you think, Battalion Commander Worg?"

I decided to pass the buck to him instead. Personally, I wanted to leave this place as it was and continue on, but it was important to hear my comrades out. Ha ha ha.

"Are you seriously putting this on me?" Worg asked. "Let's move on. There's nothing to be gained from rummaging through… that."

"Mreow…"

Everyone listening in on our conversation—Noir and the magic gunsmen—nodded, looking quite serious.

"All right, we're withdrawing! Let's clear this stuff away and move out!" I ordered. I called back the golems and stuffed them back into my inventory, then issued orders to the harpies to scout out the surrounding area again. I then used my mithril pickaxe to dismantle the castle wall. "I don't think we can expect any more surprises, but make sure to be careful when scouting things out. The only way we could lose is if we get ambushed out of nowhere."

"Gotcha!"

Pessa saluted with her wings and flew back into the sky with her subordinates.

We purposely ignored scouting the area where the gong noises came from. Would seeing this hellscape only fuel their desire for battle, or would it break their spirits? I felt like there was a 90 percent chance of the latter, but time would tell.

***

After annihilating Tigris's ambush force, we packed our things and moved on, leaving the battlefield unattended.

Upon arriving at the border fortress, I used a self-destruct golem to wipe it off the map, just like I had before. There were a few people present when we arrived, but as soon as they saw us, they fled from the northern gate on horseback as fast as they could. They must've been given orders ahead of time to do so.

"And that's that," I said.

"We're done."

"Yeah."

"So…why'd you use such a roundabout method against the enemy?" Bela asked, leaving me confused.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, if you got serious from the get-go, this could've been way easier. You wouldn't have needed to build this base or even form a magic gun battalion."

"I guess so."

Bela had a valid point. Even putting aside my unexpected discovery of infinite ammo weapons, she was right that I could have pushed back both armies by myself. If I sicced a hundred armored golems equipped with maces on the enemy, I could have easily crushed both armies.

"Plus, you purposely baited Tigris into ambushing us, right? You might as well have been telling 'em to ambush us when you gave them two weeks to prepare."

"I mean, yeah, but…"

Maybe it was rude to say this, but I was surprised that Bela had such a strong grasp on my strategy. I looked at Shemel, who grinned at me. I was honestly even more taken aback that she seemed unsurprised by Bela's comments. Tozume, for her part, wore a pained smile on her face.

"I think I've got a pretty good idea of your image of Bela, but trust me. This is just business as usual for her," Tozume said.

"Seriously?"

"Hey, what're you tryin' to say?" Bela responded indignantly.

I mean, up until now she was pretty much the dummy of the group. How was I supposed to react when suddenly she was all, "I've seen through your plan!"?

"So what was the point of all of this? For Merinard, I mean," she asked me.

"Ah, I'm unclear about that too," Tozume said.

"Saaame. I've got a pretty good read on the boss's powers, but I really ain't got no clue what the people running Merinard are thinkin'," Shemel said.

"Um… Basically, Merinard got greedy," I explained.

All the factions—putting it this way was a bit of an exaggeration—were involved with the events that led to this trip.

Most importantly, we had to fight back the invasion from the north. If we let Diieharte and Tigris invade our nation, the northern region of Merinard would be laid to waste or taken from us outright. If that happened, we ran the risk of being seen as weak by neighboring countries. We'd look like a doormat. This would put us at a complete disadvantage. We could be invaded by other countries, and even ones that couldn't directly invade us due to geographic distance would have a leg up over us in diplomatic negotiations. We needed to avoid that at all costs, which was why I was sent out to handle the invasion.

"In that case, it really sounds like you could've just handled it all on your own, bro. Why'd you go out of your way to build a base and train magic gunsmen?" Bela asked.

"That's what the military and R&D wanted. As far as the military is concerned, they wanted an installation in the north that would deter any invading forces, and they also wanted a combat unit capable of making military gains without relying entirely on my ability to supply weapons and ammunition. We also needed to test the new magic guns. The fact that we were able to employ a ton of demi-humans to run the base was a secondary bonus," I explained.

"In other words, if the magic guns were less effective than anticipated, you would've handled this problem yourself?" Tozume asked.

"I figured we'd be fine, but there's nothing wrong with having a little insurance."

"As far as R&D is concerned, the moment we obliterated Tigris's forces at the start of all of this, we proved the magic guns would be more than viable," Ira added.

"Yeah. After all, we completely crushed an army twenty times larger than ours with a simple field fortification."

We'd enlisted the harpies to find the enemy faster than they could find us, set up a field fortification, then pulverized them before they could act. We'd gotten exactly the results we expected using the exact tactics we planned from the beginning, and nothing had gone wrong. As a test run for the new weapons, we couldn't have asked for better results.

"That was preeeetty one-sided. I don't think we could use those tactics for adventurin', though," Bela said.

"Doesn't really work without the numbers, yeah. Plus, those weapons are so loud that they'd be bad for huntin'," Shemel pointed out.

That checked out. *Should I propose developing silencers?* I could have R&D look into a magic solution if the only problem was making the guns silent.

"Okay, so what about annihilating the fortresses and using the golems?" Bela asked.

"That was a demonstration. Our magic guns are more than enough of a threat to the enemy, but they lack impact, right? We wanted to show our enemies that not only do we have new weapons, we have a means of erasing fortresses instantly. That we have black steel golems that could easily wipe out an army. This served as a warning not to mess with us, basically. One of the reasons we let those witnesses flee was so that they could spread word of what they saw."

"Gotcha. I think I finally get what this was all about. Long story short, this whole invasion thing was never *actually* a threat. Merinard was never in any real danger," Bela surmised.

"Exactly. Though it is a fact that we're still dealing with a personnel issue."

Honestly, if it didn't matter how we fought off the invading northern nations, we could've just sent in rifle squad airboards equipped with light machine guns. Hell, we could have just used the gleaming jewel bombs from the start.

Sir Leonard wanted the rifle squad positioned to the east to keep the Holy Kingdom back, but with our airboards' mobility and the golem communicator's information transmission speeds, we could've completely outflanked an army that was sharing information via messengers on horseback. Plus, their only means of travel was on foot, by carriage, or by horse.

"Y'know, international warfare is way less noble than I thought. It's more like a bunch of punks havin' it out in a back alley," Bela said.

"…Really?"

"Really. Basically, the Holy Kingdom is the big boss, and they told their two lackeys—Tigris and Diieharte—to pick a fight with Merinard. But then Merinard kicked their asses to send a message all like 'Don't go messin' with us.'"

"…I guess you're not wrong."

Y'punks pickin' a fight with the wrong people? HAH?! Obviously, it wasn't a 1:1 analogy, but Bela was basically on the money.

"So we headin' back to Merinesburg soon?"

"Yeah, that's the idea. Neither of the northern nations can continue fighting at this point, and at present, Merinard has no plans to expand, meaning this little war is over for now. We've done our job; the rest is on Sylphy and the others."

She'd probably be taking reparations from both countries. If they choose not to play nice, then we—well, I—might get sent out again.

"Either way, I think we'll get a chance to relax for a bit. At least until we see how the aftermath plays out," I said.

"Niiice. Time to drink!" Shemel cheered.

"Before we start partying, I need to butter Grande up a bit since she kept watch for us."

Thus, we returned to the northern base.

***

Upon our arrival, we were greeted with warm welcomes from the soldiers and residents of the base.

"It was a complete success. Lord Kousuke's secret weapon annihilated both enemies' border fortresses. Diieharte failed to abandon their base, and the explosion resulted in massive casualties. Tigris, on the other hand, attempted an ambush on us, only to have their 5,000-strong battalion made into mincemeat by

Lord Kousuke's second secret weapon." Worg had the task of explaining the mission to Noir and Peter, their two platoon commanders, and the elite magic gunsmen platoon commander we'd taken with us from Merinesburg.

By the way, the only reason Worg was referring to me as "lord" was because he was acting as a military officer at the moment, not a friend in private.

"What exactly were Lord Kousuke's secret weapons…?" asked Peter, the large rabbit beastman who commanded the magic gun company.

An obvious question, for sure. He hadn't been there to see what happened, after all, so of course he wouldn't be able to wrap his head around everything.

"…Can I tell him?" Worg asked.

"Ah… Good question. The details are top secret, right?" I asked.

As Worg looked toward me, I subsequently shot my gaze toward Ira. She always knew what to do in situations like these.

"Mm. Yes. They're our trump cards, after all. Though you're a trump card too, Kousuke," she said.

"Yeah, right. Ah, I can't give you the specifics, but they're golems, basically. I equipped a golem with a bomb powerful enough to blow up a base. I sent it with some golem bodyguards to the front gate of the enemy's border base, had them break through, and then…*boom*!" I whispered, opening my fist quickly.

Judging by the increasingly somber expressions they wore, Peter and the magic gunsmen must've realized the implications of what I was saying.

"Lord Kousuke, your golems can run, yes?" Peter asked.

"Yup. They're tall enough that you gotta look up at them, but they can still run."

I'd actually been using lightly armed human-sized golems as training partners for the magic gunsmen up until now, so they had a pretty good idea of what they were and what they were capable of.

"And they explode if you don't stop them… Sounds like a nightmare," he said, trembling.

Peter knew all too well that golems didn't feel pain and wouldn't stop unless either the golem core at their heart was pierced or their legs were destroyed.

"I feel the same way. The giant golems we used to slaughter those ambush troops were made from mithril alloy instead of stone. I equipped them with black steel armor and four heavy machine guns each, weapons that fire rounds four times more powerful than the ones the rifle squad uses. Each of the three golems also had two automatic grenade launchers equipped to their shoulders, capable of raining down explosives like the harpies do."

"Wait just a second. That's way too much information all at once. Mithril alloy? Heavy machine guns? Automatic grenade launchers?" Peter was clearly shaken.

"The enemy's 5,000 men were literally blown to smithereens, mreow… Honestly, I had nightmares last night and almost wet mreowself," Noir whispered, the effects of seeing the hellscape firsthand visible in her thousand-yard stare.

Was it really that bad…? Man, Noir was more sensitive than I thought. Or maybe I was just growing numb to it all.

"Anyway, that's what happened. Both nations' border forces have effectively been annihilated. I doubt we're going to see any large-scale attacks on us coming from them within the year, but there's a decent chance they'll launch smaller, more irregular attacks. We should anticipate information warfare as well. Since we couldn't clean up the battlefield, there will likely be an increase in monsters too. Make sure to keep your wits about you," Worg explained.

The two company commanders and their respective platoon commanders responded in the affirmative, and the debriefing came

to an end.

Man, I was exhausted. I was looking forward to getting a good rest today.

***

However, fate had other plans.

"It is a wife's duty to heal her husband's exhausted body."

Upon returning to my room, I found Ira sprawled out on the bed. She was dressed in something like a micro bikini. It barely covered anything at all.

"…Aren't you cold?"

It was still the middle of winter, and the heater in the room wasn't on. Hell, I was properly bundled up, and I was still a little chilly.

"I deployed a temperature-regulation technique around the bed, so it's quite comfortable. Hurry up and join me."

"Yes, ma'am."

I enthusiastically agreed and approached the bed. Lo and behold, it was quite comfortable. In fact, I was actually feeling a little toasty with all these winter clothes on. Magic was incredible.

"I'll undress you."

"Hey, I can handle that myself."

"Hush."

Ira started stripping my clothes off of me in pure devotion. She was clearly being stubborn, so I let her do as she pleased, but…

Ah, of course. My pants, eh? Wait, my shirt too? Do you really want me to just be in my underwear…?

I did my best to at least keep my skivvies on, but I got the feeling that wouldn't last for long.

"I heard that sunbathing and body warmth is a good remedy for when you're feeling discouraged."

"I see…?"

Was that true? While I thought it over, Ira started whispering something and then projected a number of balls of light from her fingertips, which she then set in the center of the room. Combined with the warmth of the technique she deployed earlier, I was starting to feel like I was sunbathing on the beach during the summer.

"Does this really count as sunbathing?"

"Don't sweat the details. The important thing is that you feel good."

"I see."

Ira pressed her barely covered body up against mine, and as she embraced me in her arms, she stared straight into my eyes. I felt like her one eye was looking deep inside of me.

"You look distressed."

"Do I?"

I tried touching my face, but it didn't give me any answers. Ira brought her small hands to my cheeks, gently caressing them and massaging the area around my eyebrows. Did I have wrinkles or something?

"Kousuke, you…"

"Hm?"

"…No, it's nothing."

Ira swallowed her words. I never figured out what she was going to say, but she was tender with me from that moment until the end of the day.

***

Three days after I contacted Sylphy and the others in Merinesburg to inform them that we destroyed the border fortresses —

"I'm here!"

"Yup, sure are…"

She was acting like a little prankster, but the woman here with an adorable smile on her face was actually the previous queen of Merinard, as well as Sylphy's mother.

In other words, she was my stepmother.

I didn't know why she was so fond of me, but she was now very frank about her intentions toward me, even though not much time had passed since she'd lost her husband. Or wait, was that even the case here? Male and female relationships in this world were fairly different from the ones in my old world, and were complicated in ways I couldn't wrap my head around.

It was possible that something I'd done had caused her affection for me to go off the rails, but…I really didn't know how to deal with her. It was clear she was Sylphy's mother in more ways than one: She was a beautiful older woman, basically an orthodox elf, so to speak. Ah, I didn't just say that because she had large breasts!

"Gosh… Just where are you looking?"

"Er, uh… My bad."

"It's okay. Men certainly do love breasts, after all."

Serafeeta put her right hand against her cheek, then used her left arm to lift her breasts while she smiled at me. Urgh… She knew exactly what she was doing!

The other day, Poiso had given her medicine that caused her to be "honest with her true feelings," and it was quite the mess. For several days afterward, she kept approaching me, and when that came to an end, she locked herself up in her room for about a week. Something about that ordeal must've helped her sort through her

feelings, because since then, she had made no attempts to hide her affection for me, instead opting to approach me head-on.

What was I supposed to do?

"Mother is in a difficult position… Please, keep her company."

That was Sylphy's roundabout way of telling me to accept her into my bed.

"If that's okay for Mother, then surely the same goes for me?" Doriada had added. The question was met with heavy silence.

"What?"

"Nothing!"

"Agh, it burns! Hey, stop it!"

At that point, Ifriita angrily shot tiny little balls of fire at me.

"You're indecent," Aqual had added, looking at me like I was a pile of trash.

In other words, of the four sisters, two were in favor of the plan, one was against, and one had…abstained.

As far as Ifriita went, her reaction less implied a for or against, and more… Well, maybe I was being too self-important, but it kind of felt like she was jealous…? Hrm.

"…She's the former queen, right?" Tozume asked.

"Yup," Bela replied.

"I really shouldn't be surprised at this point, but I can't help it after seeing all this firsthand," Shemel said.

The ogre girls were gossiping among themselves, eavesdropping over my back-and-forth with Serafeeta.

You know I can hear you girls, right?

"What brings you here, Lady Serafeeta?" Ira asked in confusion.

The former queen responded with a confident smile.

"I am to be Kousuke's adviser, of course."

"My adviser?"

"Yes. For the diplomatic negotiations that will be required to bring this conflict to a true end," Serafeeta explained with a sweet smile.

Huh…? But why? Isn't that Sylphy's responsibility since she's the queen?

"I'll make sure to ask Sylphy for a proper explanation later."

"Oh, please do. The secret to a happy marriage is open communication with your partner."

***

"Could you just please explain what is happening?"

"Mm... Well..."

From the other side of the golem communicator, I could tell Sylphy was being rather evasive.

If I were to summarize her scattered thoughts: The current Kingdom of Merinard had a massive shortage of manpower when it came to diplomats we could send abroad.

Essentially, we didn't have any.

In this world, danger was a constant in the job description of any diplomat. Depending on the situation, one could be captured or even executed, so usually they were sent to their respective objectives with a security detail, and the diplomat themselves would be expected to be fairly capable in combat.

Generally speaking, the value system in this world was fairly misogynist. The current top brass in Merinard was largely made up of women, and our military force also leaned heavily toward female soldiers, but in other countries, it was usually men who filled high-ranking positions. As far as soldiers were concerned, in most places it was the standard for men to slide into those slots as well.

For instance, every commander we encountered in the Holy Kingdom and its vassal states, Diieharte and Tigris, was a man. Plus, 80 percent of the visiting diplomats from the Varyag Empire were men. The delegation from the Dragonis Mountain Nation was also made up of men. In a world with this kind of value system, finding diplomatic work as a woman was a hard ask.

"What about Sir Leonard or Danan? We've got other nobility in Merinard, don't we?"

"Sir Leonard or Danan cannot be moved from their eastern and southern posts, and Worg doesn't have a high enough ranking for this work. The diplomat needs to be a man, have high social standing, be capable of defending themselves, and also be someone I can trust to act alone. You're the only one who fits the bill."

Sylphy sounded like she was swallowing a particularly bitter pill.

"I initially considered sending Mother or my one of sisters out as diplomats, but the Holy Kingdom is seeking elven women with strong magic powers even now. If I dispatched them, they could be abducted."

"But, I mean, I'm in the same boat too, right? The Nostalgia sect has designated me a saint, and I'm the lynchpin in Merinard's logistics. There's a strong chance they would abduct or assassinate me too. I mean, look. I don't mind going to other countries as a diplomat if I need to, but considering the risks, is that really the best idea?"

"You're right, but..." Sylphy hesitated.

"Though I guess the flip side of that is since I can survive pretty much anything as long as I don't get ambushed, I might be perfect for the job."

Sylphy's silence in response served as agreement. After a moment, she spoke again.

"I-it's not like I *want* to send you someplace dangerous…" I could hear her sniffling on the other side.

"I know, I know. Don't cry."

"Whatever we do, we're going to have to prioritize training some diplomats. The fact that the only people we have for the job are all people it would be devastating to lose is not good."

"Agreed. Melty's already chosen some candidates and started training them. It'll just take a while…"

"Yeah. It's not like we can just harvest ready-made personnel out of a field or something."

Being a diplomat required a high level of knowledge and experience, and in this world, it also necessitated that the person in question hold a respectable station in society. I was a rookie, but since Sylphy was my partner, I had pretty high status, as well as the power to protect myself and anyone in my group. Serafeeta possessed the know-how and intelligence to communicate with people from other countries, and she had the social status that came with being the previous queen. What she lacked was the power to protect herself. And a Y chromosome.

But if we were to combine both of our talents, we'd make for a competent diplomat. As protection, we'd have the three ogre girls and Grande with us, plus fifty elite magic gunsmen and a handful of harpies—more than enough to keep any dangerous forces at bay. As long as we had some personnel to take care of Serafeeta and a few civil officials, we'd have cobbled together a more-than-adequate diplomatic delegation.

"All right, understood. Though I kinda assumed if we were doing negotiation stuff, Melty would be the one coming."

"We originally planned to send her, but Mother volunteered… She explained that Melty still had a lot of work to do in Merinesburg, while she, on the other hand, had nothing but free time on her hands. She also said she

was more than capable of doing the job, and there wouldn't be a huge problem if she was assassinated."

"What? Of course that'd be a huge problem."

"I mean, it would be a big deal, yes, but she's right that it wouldn't shake the current foundation of Merinard much. Melty is, in fact, very busy, and it works better for us to have her here in Merinesburg. If she were ever kidnapped or assassinated, Merinard could totally collapse."

"I have a hard time picturing either of those things ever happening to her."

"Likewise."

She could easily break free from iron shackles. I'd also seen her pierce through and tear apart a thick explosion-proof door in the past as well.

"So I guess I'm in charge of stuff here up to the very end. Got it. What's the plan? Reparations? We don't want their territory, do we?"

"Correct. Right now we need to focus our attention inward. We've still got plenty of land here that needs cultivating. But if we're going to talk about this right now, shouldn't Mother be here?"

"Good point. I'll go get her."

"Thanks."

I went to fetch Serafeeta, and the three of us took our time discussing the direction we should take negotiations with the two northern nations.

***

It had been one day since Serafeeta, Sylphy, Melty and I discussed our diplomatic strategy over golem communicator.

"I'm here."

"You suuure are…"

Sylphy had brought Melty, Elen, and the others with her to the northern base, which meant Merinesburg was completely empty. That was bad, right? We still had the Varyag folks at their embassy, and we couldn't exactly let our guard down with them around. This whole thing was sudden, which served as a nice reminder that Sylphy was definitely Serafeeta's daughter. The apple really didn't fall far from the tree.

"So what's with the surprise visit?" I asked. "I thought we talked over our diplomatic strategy yesterday?"

Sylphy suddenly started to tear up. No, she was actively weeping.

"Whoa, wait, hold on! What's happening?!"

"Waaaaah!!!" Sylphy sobbed.

What the hell? What am I supposed to do here?!

Sylphy's adorable—actually, more like beautiful—face was a snotty, tear-stained mess.

"Oomph?!"

Sylphy leaped into my arms faster than I could blink and gripped me powerfully.

"Noooooooo! Don't abwandon meeeee!"

"What's going on?! Hold on, you're squeezing too tight! You're gonna snap my spine!"

"Waaaaaah!!!"

"Auuuuggggghhh?!"

It took thirty minutes for her calm down.

"So, someone wanna explain?"

Melty had quickly extracted me from Sylphy's bear hug, sparing me from a tragic end. As for the culprit herself, after nearly crushing my bones into a fine powder, she was now sniffling and

getting her head patted by Serafeeta. I glanced at her, then looked over at Melty and Elen, who were both wearing awkward expressions.

"Um… This all started because of something I said… I didn't mean any harm."

It was Melty who spoke first. According to her, after our discussion wrapped up yesterday, she'd made an offhand remark.

"We only got to talk about work today…"

And Sylphy couldn't help but be curious.



A part of the problem was that I was too obedient. I always listened to whatever Sylphy said without voicing my own concerns. I never whined about not being able to see her, or wanting to relax in Merinesburg, or any of that. And it was that lack of complaining that caused Sylphy to start to worry that perhaps I was perfectly happy being apart from her.

My inaction had planted the seeds of doubt.

For my part, I was not okay at all with being away from her. I genuinely just felt that, given the current situation, I needed to stay at the northern base for the time being and play at being a diplomat with Serafeeta. That was the only reason I didn't complain. I figured if I did, I'd just be making things more difficult for Sylphy, but apparently she didn't see it that way.

Ira was here, the ogre girls were here, Grande was here, we had a bunch of new harpies, and now Serafeeta was with us as well. I had a harem of beautiful, adorable women who had affection for me. And to make matters worse, in her mind, Sylphy was putting a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders, sending me all throughout the country on vital missions. She must have felt she was relying heavily on my powers without really rewarding me for my actions.

That only caused the anxiety and frustration in her heart to grow. Melty had noticed the doubt creeping into Sylphy's face, but she was busy working to make our plans come to fruition, so she'd left her alone.

That was a mistake.

Struggling over what to do, Sylphy went to Elen for advice. Unfortunately, the way she broached the topic was…less than ideal.

"Eleanora…is it true that no matter your relationship with someone, they should be rewarded properly for their work…?"

"But of course. If you exploit and overwork someone just because they are family, they will grow discontent. And if that treatment continues, eventually they will move on from you, family

or not. In the end, it will grind away whatever love they had for you."

Elen had no way of knowing that Sylphy was talking about me, so she simply offered the common opinion on the subject. Elen's eyes allowed her to see the truth behind someone's words, but they did not give her the ability to read someone's heart.

"It'll grind away the love they have…"

Elen wasn't wrong. Just because I was her ally—her spouse—didn't mean that I wouldn't get pissed if I was forced into hard labor without ever being praised. If that kind of treatment continued, I'd probably stop loving her. But at present, that wasn't even remotely the case. And by the way, if it was, I'd share my concerns with Sylphy honestly. There was no point keeping that kind of thing bottled up. It was unproductive expecting people to be able to read minds.

But what Elen innocently offered next was the final nail in the coffin for Sylphy.

"Sylphyel, isn't it about time you call Kousuke back to Merinesburg? If he spends too much time out there, he's going to end up forgetting you. There are many women out there who love him too, after all."

"F-forgetting me…?"

Her anxiety got so bad she couldn't sleep. Sylphy had just sat atop her bed, hugging her knees close to her chest. Melty discovered her in this state and asked her what had happened, which led to them coming here.

"Well, um… Sylphy?"

I said her name and gently patted my lap, which prompted Sylphy to rush over to me from Serafeeta with amazing speed. She then let me dote on her while both Ira and Serafeeta watched on, jealousy apparent on their faces.

Ladies, show some self-restraint. Well, wait, Serafeeta? You're jealous because you can't dote on your daughter anymore, yeah? Not because you want to be in her position…right?

"Um… So what should we do? Should we hold off on sending me to the northern nations?" I asked.

"No, we can't do that," Sylphy said. "It'd be one thing if Lady Serafeeta and I swapped positions, but we have nobody who can replace you, Kousuke… Well, Sir Leonard might be able to, but…"

"I mean, he can be pretty tenacious. It could work."

"Yes, but you actually participated in the battle against the northern nations. You are the one best suited for the job."

"Yeah, that checks out."

"I could accompany Kousuke to reinforce his authority. We could use this as an opportunity to show off how well Merinard and Adolism are cooperating with each other." Elen volunteered herself for the mission casually. She was a saint, so having her with me would serve as a plus for us with other Adolist nations.

"Mrm…" Sylphy ground her face into my stomach as she listened to the conversation.

Yes, I know. Show some self-restraint, Your Highness. If you calm down, I'll give you some nice head pats.

Where was this immaturity coming from? Well, I guess it made a bit of sense. She was actually the youngest of her sisters. Hell, despite their looks, she was actually younger than Aqual.

"Hey," I said. "Once work slows down, let's both take some time off and travel somewhere. We could go to the Black Forest, Dragonis, or even Varyag. I bet if we asked Grande, she'd be more than happy to fly us anywhere in a heartbeat. And if we decide to go somewhere longer than a day away, we can always make camp somewhere and relax. The only thing I want as a reward for my hard work is time together with you. That's all."

"Okay… I love you, Kousuke." Sylphy wrapped her arms around my waist.

Ha ha ha, she sure is adorable.

"Unfair."

"I want a reward like that too."

"Ditto."

Ira, Melty, and Elen all chimed in. Meanwhile, Serafeeta was looking at me, her ears twitching rapidly.

"Adjust your schedules, okay? Sylphy goes first."

"All right."

"I'll get it done."

"I'm fine whenever."

Elen really had too much free time on her hands. She was basically the head of the nostalgia sect, and she wasn't tied down by any responsibilities to the country, so she had an easier time opening up her schedule than the others.

"Just so you know, I'm not remotely discontent right now. I am sad that I can't spend more time with you, Sylphy, but I work hard knowing that once I get through this, we'll be able to be together."

Sylphy nodded, her face still buried in my stomach. Her mental state could become unstable like this every now and then, but the reality was that the dauntless personality she put forward wasn't her normal self. Given her actual age as an elf, the way she was acting now was understandable. The serious look on Serafeeta's face told me she must have had the same thought.

"By the way, is it really such a good idea to have all of you out of Merinesburg at the same time?" Sylphy asked.

"We should be fine for three days or so. We can always get in touch via golem communicator, and if worse comes to worst, we can take an airboard back," I assured her.

"I see… Well then, enjoy your time here."

"We shall. I plan on writing up the diplomatic papers we will be sending to Diieharte and Tigris while talking over their contents with Lady Serafeeta," Melty said, beaming.

Ah, mm-hmm. Well, I hope she doesn't drive them into a corner so bad that their only choice is to fight to the bitter end. Please. For real.

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As promised, Sylphy and the others stuck around for three days before heading back to Merinesburg.

"No, no, no, no! I wanna spend more time with Kousuke."

"Yes, yes. But you have work, so it's time to go home."

In the end, Melty dragged the flailing Sylphy from the bed to take her back to Merinesburg. No mercy, I guess.

"She's the queen of a whole country? You've gotta be kidding," Elen said.

"Well, any queen is a person too. A woman. She is simply acting her age," Serafeeta replied.

"Say what…?" Elen was puzzled by Serafeeta's reply, so Ira chimed in to clear up her confusion.

"Elves live for approximately five-hundred years. Sylphy is currently thirty-seven. In a normal situation, she'd still be living as a child."

"Indeed. But because of the environment she was raised in, she's had to grow up fast," Serafeeta added.

If you did the math, she'd be somewhere around six to seven years old in human years. That said, elves and humans aged differently both physically and mentally, so trying to make an equal comparison was pretty much nonsense to begin with.

After hearing Ira and Serafeeta explain, Elen looked at me with disgust in her eyes.

Stop it, Elen. That hurts.

"I had no idea… I mean, she looks like an adult woman," I said in my defense.

"I suppose that's true."

Elen accepted my reasoning and stopped looking at me like I was some sort of criminal. I'd managed to protect my dignity, thank goodness.

"Sylphy and the others have returned to Merinesburg, so we should get in contact with the northern nations. Is it standard protocol for us to deploy an envoy?"

"Indeed. Usually we send envoys to the other countries to discuss the location the negotiations will take place, then we all meet there," Serafeeta replied with a nod.

Both Ira and Elen nodded next to her. The Holy Kingdom and Merinard must have had the same customs.

"The terms of the diplomatic papers were pretty brutal, huh?" I said.

"Indeed. In the event they fail to completely and totally surrender, apologize, pay reparations, and hand over their slaves, we will begin to annihilate their cities near the border one by one," Serafeeta said.

"And you're saying it's up to me whether or not we actually do that…"

To be honest, I didn't want that kind of heavy burden on my shoulders, but the fact remained that I was the second most powerful person in Merinard. Sylphy, Melty, and Ira all felt that I should be the one to make the call. Serafeeta also agreed, and while Elen said nothing, her facial expression made her thoughts clear as day.

“If we’re going to go to extremes, let’s not hold back,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Elen asked.

“Instead of gunboat diplomacy, we’ll go with golem diplomacy.”

Both Serafeeta and Elen tilted their heads simultaneously.

Chapter 8:
Gunboat Diplomacy, Only It's Golem Diplomacy

THOSE THINGS APPEARED EXACTLY a week after a fierce flash of light was seen around the border fortress and the soldiers stationed there fled to the city of Brynjolf.

"Wh-what are those…?"

That day, the guard stationed at the southern gate of the city —Iranos—spotted a massive figure walking toward the city from the south. It was clad in thick armor with a black luster, and it was dragging some sort of horseless carriage with it. It was abnormally large as well. He rubbed his eyes multiple times and shook his head in an effort to suss out what exactly was approaching the city.

He assumed it was a person at first, but it most certainly was not. Not at that size. Even an ogre or a larger demi-human could never grow to be that large. Regardless of what it was, the fact that it was approaching from the south left little doubt whether or not it was friendly. As a guard, Iranos had been informed about the attempted winter invasion of Merinard in the south. He didn't know how exactly everything had played out, but he could draw his own conclusions based on the fleeing soldiers that'd arrived here a week ago. He'd also heard that while he was off duty, some important general fled the front lines as well.

In short, it was very likely that a combat squad from Merinard was approaching. Iranos made the call and began to ring the alert gong.

"Alert, alert! There is an unknown group approaching from the south! They have a massive armored soldier of some kind, as tall as a wall, and it is carrying a horseless vehicle!"

The city of Brynjolf was immediately thrown into a panic.

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"This is what you meant by golem diplomacy?"

"Yup. Pretty intimidating, right?"

Our delegation had invaded Tigris and was just about to hit the biggest border city of the bunch: Brynjolf. We set up formation a reasonable distance away, and using my ability, I quickly built a small fortress. In addition to the three heavily armed golems I had leading the charge, I busted out twelve additional golem warriors—close-range attack golems equipped with special-made steel weapons and shields—and strengthened our defenses.

I then raised our flag high into the air, where it flapped proudly in the wind. Now there'd be no mistaking our affiliation.

"This is quite handy. I can see much farther into the distance," Elen said excitedly, peering at Brynjolf through a pair of binoculars.

Next to her, Ira had her big eye trained on the city. At this distance, she apparently didn't need any tools to see it.

We could hear an alarm bell being rung intermittently from within the city limits. It was unmistakable given the direction we were coming from and what had happened previously that we were connected to Merinard. Made sense they'd freak out.

To drive our message home, I went and built a fortress in an instant and pulled twelve giant golems from out of nowhere. To be honest, I could bring down the walls of their city completely with the golems alone.

"This is Capri. Master, they've got soldiers gathering on the top of Brynjolf's southern wall."

"Stay at a safe altitude and continue monitoring the situation from up high. Let me know if there are any changes."

“Got it… Ah, Master? They just sent out five men on horseback bearing white flags.”

“Roger that. Let me know if anything else happens.”

“Roger that!”

I had the brown-feathered Capri accompany our delegation this time around. Compared with the other harpies, she had uncommonly great night vision, so I’d decided to bring her along in case someone tried to assassinate me after sunset. We could end up schlepping all the way to the capital of Tigris during this trip, after all. I assigned Pessa to hold down the fort back home.

“Do you even need us here?” Bela asked.

“The golems can’t enter buildings, remember?” I said.

“Sure, but we’re big too, y’know. I don’t make a habit of going into any buildings with low ceilings,” Bela said.

Obviously, I had the ogre girls with me as well. Golems were great for war, but they weren’t really the best for bodyguard work.

“Kousuke, I am famished.”

“I brought sandwiches, Lady Grande.”

“Mm… I shall have some.”

With impeccable timing, Amalie appeared to feed Grande before she could start complaining. She’d come along with us as Elen’s attendant—or maybe more accurately, her caretaker—but it felt like she’d been exclusively taking care of Grande.

In case you were wondering, Elen’s other attendant, Belta, was staying in Metocerium to “look after” the main-sect Adolists with the other nostalgia-sect clergymen. Apparently the Metocerium Adolists were…“out.” A creepy smile crept along her face when she realized that, for the first time in a long time, she was going to have to work as an inquisitor.

Elen’s truth-seeing eyes let her see the authenticity in what people said, but they were ill-suited to drawing out specific pieces of

information. Once it was concluded that the clergy in Metocerium were untrustworthy, it was Belta's job as an inquisitor to get information out of them. When I asked out of curiosity how she would be doing this, well…

"Do you really want to know? If you'd like, you can experience it for yourself?" she had replied with a smile, so I'd politely turned her down.

Please don't tell anyone I nearly pissed my pants.

"Kousuke, the group on horseback has gotten close. They're almost here," Serafeeta said.

"Lemme see… Ah, him."

Among the envoys from Tigris was a familiar sight: that Makrit guy who'd led the invasion into Merinard. His face was pale and he was looking a lot more dejected than before, but it was definitely him.

"An acquaintance?"

"Yeah. The commander who led the invasion force. If he's here, things should progress quickly."

"I see… So then he's well aware of how terrifying you can truly be."

Serafeeta, you're making me out to be some kind of evil force. I'm just a pacifist with a strong moral code who is trying to survive. Umm, is it just me, or can I hear someone saying "Hmm…is that so?"?

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"Heyo, Sir Makrit. Since you guys never sent envoys to apologize and surrender, we just figured we'd save you the trip!" I said, looking down from the balcony of the fortress at Sir Makrit approaching on horseback.

I had golem warriors flanking them on both sides, and some were positioned at the rear as well. If I issued the order, they'd flatten them. Obviously, Sir Makrit and the others fully understood this, as they looked completely pale. Deathly pale, even.

"Sir Kousuke. We would like to know your intentions at this time."

"Our intentions haven't changed. We seek an apology, reparations for your cowardly invasion, and last but not least, your complete and total surrender. If you refuse, we will be forced to destroy, pillage, and burn all of the villages and cities on the way to the capital."

It was a bluff. I had no intention of destroying cities and villages filled with innocent civilians that were unable to put up any resistance. I was willing to at least destroy their gates, walls, and military installations to send a message, though.

"Th-that is unforgivable!"

"What a strange thing to say. Both Tigris and Diieharte conspired to invade Merinard, did you not? If we hadn't held you off, you were going to do the same exact thing to us, no? You must have been prepared for us to retaliate in kind. Am I wrong?" I replied, looking down at him.

Sir Makrit fell silent. Mm-hmm, of course. If they'd waged war on us with the genuine desire to invade us, slaughter and pillaging was part and parcel of that. That's just how this world worked.

"Honestly, we don't have the time to be playing with you guys," I said. "So you have two choices, but really it's just one."

"What do you mean…?"

"Your first option is obvious: completely obey our demands, pay reparations, sign a non-aggression pact and treaty of commerce with us, and hand over some hostages—Oops, I misspoke. I meant to say that you'll send us over some study abroad students."

We'd written everything in the diplomatic papers we'd prepared beforehand. I'll spare you the specifics, but in terms of reparations, we were asking for a quantity that could very well sink Tigris completely. Non-aggression pact aside, the treaty of commerce we'd written up appeared to leave them at a huge disadvantage at first glance, but the reality was actually quite different. We'd be discussing all that with them later on.

Needless to say, we had no intention of making them accept our first offer. In exchange for softening our conditions, we planned on starting negotiations on another issue.

For one, we wanted to discuss setting up embassies in our respective nations. Our envoys and diplomats' rights would be recognized in an extraterritorial fashion. On their end, they would send us the sons and or daughters of their royalty and influential people such as envoys and diplomats. They and others would be accepted into Merinard as "study abroad students." However, in their case, we would not recognize their extraterritorial rights.

As for reparations, I'd learned via the long history of my own world that forcing the opposing party to pay an impossible sum of money never led to anything worthwhile, so the idea was to drop the number down to something more reasonable over time while instead forcing them to accept other more favorable conditions for us. For example, allowing us to build a nostalgia-sect Adolism temple on their land, or forcing them to gradually excommunicate the main sect. Hell, if they were willing to genuinely align with us in our desire to get rid of main-sect Adolism, we'd be more than willing to provide them all kinds of support.

We knew that this invasion was prompted by the Holy Kingdom, so I had to assume that these border cities were quite displeased with their masters at the moment. When faced with our military might, if they felt they wanted to switch sides, I was more than willing to offer them some extra incentives to do so. After all, we'd found ourselves in the very same situation Tigris was in not too long ago.

"…What is our other option?"

"You ignore our demands and resist until the bitter end. This would be a huge pain in the ass for us, mind you. If you went that route, our first order of business would be to flatten Brynjolf like we did the border fortress. After that, we'd march our way to the capital and wipe it off the map completely. On our way there, we'd raze every urban center we passed by to the ground. But this time, there would be no evacuation warning. We'd destroy each city and village with its citizenry trapped inside. If anyone got in the way of our military's march, they'd be pulverized. At some point, I'm sure eventually you'd throw your hands up in surrender, but that wouldn't stop us. We'd keep going until everyone was dead."

Sir Makrit turned even more pale than he already was.

This was our hardline policy, but it was one that I really didn't want to take if at all possible. Were Tigris to gather their forces and try to attack us, it was possible our hand would be forced, but honestly, it was extremely unlikely. After the failed initial invasion and subsequent ambush, their troops were severely depleted. Sir Makrit knew exactly how dangerous we were, so he'd likely never make any moves that would risk a repeat of what had just happened.

"Y-you can't possibly do that! You're bluffing!" one of the men accompanying Sir Makrit—a middle-aged guy who had the air of a nobleman—screamed, tossing his greasy sweat all over the place.

"If you really think it's a bluff, then do what you believe is best. Of course, if it isn't, it will be the people of Brynjolf who will pay for your folly with their blood. Should I assume you've made your choice, then? Personally, I find this all to be very unfortunate."

I shrugged my shoulders, pulling three self-destruct golems out of my inventory. From the envoys' perspective, they would have appeared out of thin air. I doubted they realized these were self-destruct golems, but… Ah, wait, maybe Sir Makrit had received the report?

"W-wait! No, please wait! We cannot make this decision ourselves! Additionally, we cannot agree to your conditions without knowing all the details!" Sir Makrit said, his expression changing rapidly. The hand he was extending at me wordlessly screamed, "Calm down, we can still talk!"

"True enough. Capri?"

"Yes, sir!"

I handed the diplomatic papers to Capri, who leaped off the fortress wall with them under her arm and floated down to the ground. She handed the documents to Sir Makrit, then quickly returned to the wall.

"I'd prefer if we could get an answer by tomorrow, but…"

"Impossible! Even if we use our fastest messengers, it will take at least four days to get this to the capital!" Sir Makrit yelled in desperation.

Hrm, four days, eh?

"All right, then we'll give you ten days. That's the time limit," I said. "If we don't have a proper answer by then, we'll put our plan into action. Should you make any hostile moves toward us during that time, we will immediately launch an attack on Brynjolf. Take care, all right? Don't sour my mood."

"I-I understand. Or rather, we understand. I only ask that we all handle this peacefully," Sir Markit said.

"Honestly, that depends entirely on you guys. I'm already pretty peeved at how much you've made me wait. Oh, and if you don't mind, could you share all of this with Diieharte too? We plan on heading there next."

"U-understood… Then we'll be taking these documents back with us."

"Please do."

I jerked my chin, and the golem warriors that were blocking their retreat opened the path for them. Sir Makrit and the others turned their horses around and scurried back to Brynjolf.

I watched them leave, and as they disappeared over the horizon, Capri spoke.

"That was awesome, Master… You gave me chills."

"Mm, totally."

"Huh?"

Ira nodded in full agreement, and I couldn't help but look at the two in confusion. What the heck was up with their reaction? Was this some kind of gap moe thing?

"I love how kind you usually are, but the way you were so manly just now was great too," Ira said.

"Pretty cheeky of you, Kousuke," Elen piped up, after having been quiet all this time. Then she delivered a kick to my Achilles tendon.

Hey, ow! That actually hurt!

"Hee hee! I think you would make a fine king, Sir Kousuke," Serafeeta said.

"Please. I'm just a small fry trying to act big."

"Are you? To me, it looked like you were a pro," Bela said.

"Easily more impressive than your common punk," Shemel said.

"Please don't compare me to common punks…"

Serafeeta and the ogre girls were praising me…right?

"Hmph, compared to me, you still have a long way to go," Grande said.

"Ha, true enough."

It was hard to take Grande seriously, considering she'd been buried in cushions behind us this whole time, completely out of sight

of Sir Makrit and the others.

"What? Got something to say?"

"Don't confuse majesty with intimidation," Bela interjected as Grande started smacking the stone floor with her slime-covered tail.

Yeah, keep at her! Draw Grande's aggro so she'll stop jabbing me with her tail! Do your job as my bodyguard!

"Either way, I think we can take it easy for now. What should we do for the next ten days?"

If Tigris had golem communicators, we wouldn't have to wait so long, but there was nothing we could do about that. All we could do was make sure we relaxed out of sight. After all, we didn't want them to take us lightly.

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And so, we suddenly found ourselves with ten days of free time (even though we had planned for it). We needed to pass the time as discreetly as possible so as to not cause the enemy to underestimate us.

Our delegation this time around was composed of myself, Elen, Amalie (the Adolist nostalgia-sect leader and Elen's attendant), Serafeeta (my adviser), Ira, the ogre girls, and Grande (my bodyguards and…bodyguard?), Capri and the harpies (both recon and bombers), and twenty elite magic gunsmen. We weren't a large group, but I'd made more golems to fill in the gaps. We had more than enough firepower. Plus, the fortress I built near Brynjolf was pretty big, which meant we had more than enough space for everyone to live comfortably. We had an unlimited water source, and I went and made a small field out of the extra land. I planted seeds directly into the farm blocks so we'd be able to harvest the crops before leaving.

That was all well and good, but none of that was particularly pressing. There was a lot more on my mind at the moment.

"Phew…"

I looked at the city of Brynjolf from atop the fortress wall. I didn't know its exact population, but it seemed like a reasonably sized city. Maybe a little smaller than Arichburg, which was about 10,000 strong. This must have been around the same size, give or take.

"I killed an entire city's worth of people…"

The number of soldiers I slaughtered in the battle against Diieharte and Tigris eclipsed the population of the city I was looking at. It hadn't felt real up until now since I'd been thinking about it in terms of numbers. But when I thought about how I killed more people than lived in that city, I felt my chest tighten.

I was prepared to descend to hell with Sylphy, ready to trample on people important to others if it meant protecting myself and those I cared about. But looking at the sight before me, I couldn't help but question if I was doing the right thing. I was faced with the uncomfortable realization that I was the type of person who was willing to stomp on the happiness of others if it meant obtaining happiness for me and mine.

"How did the heroes of yore deal with this kind of thing?"

Did they simply say, "War is war. It is what it is"? Did they drown themselves in booze and women to forget about everything? Did they simply embrace it? What could I do?

"Kousuke."

"Oh, Elen?"

I turned around and found myself face-to-face with Elen, her deep crimson eyes locked on me.

"What are you doing, acting all pensive? It isn't like you."

"Don't be cruel. Even I have to wax philosophical every now and then."

Elen walked up next to me, so the two of us gazed out at Brynjolf together.

"So, what is on your mind? As a clergywoman, I suppose I wouldn't mind lending you my ear."

"How high and mighty of you… Er, I guess you literally *are* pretty high and mighty, huh? You're a saint, after all."

"Indeed I am. As the Great Saint, I am both high and mighty."

"Who do you think's more high and mighty between the two of us? I'm a saint and the prince consort, after all."

"Regardless of your status, I believe it safe to say that you will never be above me," the saint responded, stone-faced.

Though she didn't say it outright, her expression screamed, "Isn't the answer obvious?"

"That so…? Anyway, you're willing to lend me an ear, right?"

"Yes. My kindhearted lost lamb, I shall endeavor to guide you," Elen said, puffing her chest out with a self-satisfied look on her face.

It was hard to tell through her holy garb, but she was certainly well-endowed. She must have noticed my wandering eyes, though, as she quickly delivered a kick to my shin.

Fine, sorry. I'm sorry! Please stop, that seriously hurts.

"I swear, you are so profane. For a saint, you have far too many worldly desires."

"My apologies, Lady Saint. I'll work on that."

"Please do. So, what is on your mind?"

Elen would see through any lies I told, so I blurted out everything that was on my mind. How, although I felt I had been ready to descend to hell with Sylphy long ago, I'd been feeling guilt over my actions.

"I see… These are genuine anxieties. I am a little surprised that you of all people have been concerned with such things," she

said.

"Come on, that's kind of mean."

"Hee hee. I am joking. That being said, this is a difficult problem to solve. Many clergymen and women would tell you that you did what was necessary. They would console you, offering justification for what you have done," Elen said before closing her eyes, then went deep into thought. It looked as if she was praying.

She really was quite beautiful. I had been completely lost in my thoughts up until a moment ago, but now that I was faced with her beauty, I found I could think about nothing but her. If nothing else, it was proof positive that I truly was enraptured with the charms of the opposite sex.

"You possess an incredible power. Whether it was God or someone else who gave you that power, as long as you have it, you will continue to have a huge influence on a great many people. As someone who has been given this power, that is your fate," Elen said, her deep crimson eyes staring straight at me.

She had been gifted the power to see through lies from a higher force, so her words carried a great weight. It was incredibly convincing to hear this from someone like her.

"Right now, you are lamenting the fact that you used your power to take many lives and spread great misfortune. That alone is proof that you still have a heart capable of sympathy and empathy. You must not lose that," she added.

"True, but that doesn't make this any less painful."

The fact was, I'd blown away a fortress with the Holy Kingdom's soldiers still inside of it. Most of the survivors were devoured in the darkness by gizma.

Then I'd made guns, bombs, airboards, and golems, all to kill the "enemy." I'd ordered others to kill them too. Those dead soldiers surely had lovers, children, fathers, mothers, husbands, and wives.

I'd killed them. I'd had others kill them. I'd certainly spread misfortune.

I had helped Sylphy take Merinard back, and we subsequently freed the demi-human slaves. But that also meant destroying the lives of the people in the Holy Kingdom who'd used them for labor.

There were still plenty of less fortunate people in Merinard at the moment. From our perspective, the people who enslaved demi-humans were horrible people who deserved punishment, but from their perspective, they were simply living their lives according to what was right within their world. If nothing else, that had been the case in the Merinard under the Holy Kingdom. I'd helped to destroy those "good" people's lives.

And now there was this northern invasion. The nations to the north had attempted to invade our lands, but did they actually want to? I had a hard time believing their hand wasn't forced. If nothing else, the Holy Kingdom definitely goaded them into taking action. Neither country would have been able to turn down a direct request from a suzerain state with such overwhelming political power.

And I had mercilessly slaughtered them. With my magic guns, my aerial bombs, my golems, and my gleaming jewel bomb's radiant light.

With overwhelming violence.

Obviously, I had not made any of these moves lightly. I'd gone out of my way to crush the enemy's fighting spirit with superior force in order to keep this battle from being dragged out. That was why I'd opted to show no mercy.

I believed that the only thing capable of acting as a sure deterrent for violence was violence in a stronger form. Maybe others disagreed, but this was what I believed. As for why? Well, the history of Earth proved me right.

It's not worth it to stir up trouble with them.

My belief was that making the enemy think that way was the only real path to stop the cycle of violence.

There was no room for negotiating with an opposition that attacked you the first chance they got. And if diplomacy was out, the best move was to strike back with superior and overwhelming force. It was only after being dealt a strong blow that words would get through to them. Obviously, it was best to try and talk things out with someone first if they were open to it, but the world wasn't soft that way. There were simply too many people who believed it was faster to kill and take what you wanted.

That was why I let my hands be stained in blood. Rather than participating in a protracted war of attrition, I felt that this strategy would result in fewer casualties in the long term.

I was sure of it.

"You must never justify your sins, Kousuke."

Elen's words stabbed deep at my heart as I lost myself in thought. That one sentence was enough to freeze my entire brain over instantly. "You must shoulder the sins you have committed. You must not simply rationalize them as inevitabilities. Your hands are indeed stained in blood. You have created great misfortune."

Elen overlapped her hand with my own, then entwined her fingers with mine. I could feel her warmth through her soft hand. "But your hands do not just create death and misfortune, and I know you know this. In order to atone for your sins, you must create more life and good fortune. Enough to eclipse the pain you have caused. If you kill 10,000 people and spread misfortune to 30,000 others, then you must save 100,000 and make 300,000 others happy. It is a task I know you can complete, Kousuke."

"You're really not mincing words, huh?"

"Of course not. It would be easy to simply comfort you. 'Don't worry, you did this all for me. There is nothing to fret over.' Sure, I could say all of that to you. But that would be nothing more than self-interested kindness. Sweet poison, so to speak." Her crimson

eyes were locked on to me. “I have no intention of coddling you in this way. Sins are sins. We must recognize them as such and properly repent. That is the correct way of doing things.”

“Can I atone for my sins if I save ten times more people than those I kill or thrust into misfortune?”

“Only God knows. Considering who you are, I believe you could make twenty to thirty times more people happy. Do everything you can to make that happen.”

“That’s a tough ask.”

“Of course it is. I gave you everything that I am, so I expect you to take this seriously,” Elen said, untangling her hand from mine and stepping away. “We must all struggle with the weight of our actions and reflect on them. But there is no need to do it alone. You have many people in your life who you can lean on.”

“Sure, but…”

I knew that everyone else would offer me words of comfort. I got the feeling that no one else would rebuke me like Elen did. Perhaps that would help me forget my troubles, momentarily, at least.

“I swear, you really are useless without me,” Elen said. “Fine. If you ever find yourself burdened with worries like these again, I shall show you the path forward. Make sure you come to me, understand?”

“All right.” I nodded earnestly.

After getting lectured by Elen, my chest felt lighter than before. She made things feel so simple: I needed to make more people happy than I hurt.

“Good boy. Now then, it’s dinner time. Amalie cooked for us today.”

“Oh, now that’s good news. Her cooking is on the simple side, but it’s always delicious.”

"Personally, I wish she served a little more meat. Oh, and something sweet." The clergywoman shared her questionable culinary opinions and went on ahead, so I followed after her.

I got the feeling I was going to sleep well tonight.

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"…What's this all about?"

"Since I relieved your aching heart, I resolved to provide comfort to your body as well."

Any response I had got stuck in my throat.

That night, Elen came to my bedroom accompanied by Amalie. They were both in their usual lavish saintly and sisterly robes respectively. Well, on closer inspection, no. This was anything but the usual.

"Hey, you're not wearing anything under there, are you…?" I asked.

"It is as you suspect."

Elen leaned into me while I sat on the bed, and I could feel her supple body beneath her clothes. On the opposite side, Amalie pressed her own soft body up against my back, and I could feel my brain shorting out. Neither of them had anything at all on beneath their robes.

"You can have your way with me. Or…would you prefer for me to have my way with you?" Elen whispered alluringly into my ear, causing me to tremble.

Where did she learn that move?

"I…want you to have your way with me," Amalie whispered surreptitiously from the other side.

I glanced at her and saw her eyes filled with expectation, her cheeks flushed. Her warm breath tickled my cheek.

My sense of reason flew out the window.

***

Ten days took longer to pass than you might think. We were basically quarantined in the fortress, which didn't leave us much to do. We spent our time either exercising, sprucing up our equipment, barbecuing, or doing airboard drills.

Huh? My nightlife? Well, I kept things reasonable. Okay, sure, losing all reason and leaping on Elen and Amalie that night wasn't that reasonable, and well, every night since, we'd been doing the deed. Sorry, I guess I lied.

"You smell like other women…" Serafeeta's terrifying voice crept into my ear. She was holding me in her arms from behind as I stood in front of my golem workbench.

"Where did you learn lines like that?"



"It's a phrase often used in palace romance novels," she said, continuing to hold me as she sniffed.

Could you please…not? Also, could you please stop nuzzling me? Are you marking me or something? This is terrifying.

"Listen, I have something I want to ask you, Sir Kousuke."

"Yes?"

At some point, she had started addressing me as "sir." Before, we were much more casual with one another when we spoke.

"Why won't you take me to bed?"

"Boy, you sure are direct, huh?"

I stopped fidgeting with the crafting menu and looked up at the ceiling. Things had been touch and go, but I'd still managed to avoid ever crossing the line with Serafeeta. In fact, I'd yet to cross the line with any of Sylphy's family. As for why, well, old habits died hard. My Earthen sense of ethics wasn't quite dead, and it had managed to keep me grounded. *"You can't possibly do that!"* You know?

"If I'm being perfectly honest, there is no deep reason for it. In my old world, this kind of thing would be really questionable, I guess. And that's holding me back from making any moves," I explained.

"Ah, Sylphy told me about that. In your home world, monogamy was the norm, right? My understanding is that it was considered immoral to be with another person when you already had a partner, yes?"

"Yeah, um, basically."

"Is it not a little late for those types of thoughts?"

"Yeaaah…"

Serafeeta hit me where it hurt. It'd be one thing if I only ever slept with Sylphy, but at this point I was with Ira, the harpies, Melty,

Grande, Elen and Amalie, and the ogre girls with great frequency, so to her, this just wasn't a legitimate excuse.

She had a point.

"You're so indecisive."

"Mad irritating."

"You're overthinkin' things, bro."

"You really shouldn't sweat the details."

The peanut gallery sitting in the corner of the room on the "sofa that makes ogres totally useless" offered their unwelcome thoughts.

"You should just take him down yourself, Serafeeta."

"Yeah! Master is susceptible to that kinda thing."

Wait, they were recommending *she* take me down? Not the opposite?!

"How long do I have to watch this farce?"

"Lady Eleonora, now is the time to quietly observe."

Elen and Amalie were having tea, watching my back-and-forth with Serafeeta. These women were certainly asking for a lot, considering I wasn't even alone with her at the moment.

"I understand," Serafeeta said. "Personally, I wanted Sir Kousuke to take action himself, but I suppose I have no choice. I will have to act."

"What do you mean, 'I understand'?! Don't be so easily influenced!"

Serafeeta began to drag me to the bedroom, her arms still wrapped around me from behind. I tried to hold onto my workbench and put up what little resistance I could, but my back was so happy at the moment from her embrace that it was about to sabotage me by removing the strength from my arms.

"It'd be one thing if Lady Serafeeta were still hung up on her late husband, but if she ain't, just go for it!" Bela said.

"Yeah, yeah! Ain't gonna change much, takin' a few more partners. Hell, take ten," Shemel said.

"That many would leave me bone-dry! Not to mention, probably dead!" I protested.

"Aw, you big baby. If you can handle the three of us at the same time, you'll be fine," Tozume teased.

The ogre girls grinned at me, unmoved by my desperate cries.

I'm not going to forget this, ladies. Instead of your usual breakfast, I'm gonna feed you super spicy sausages instead and you won't see it coming!

"I suppose I have no choice. Heed my call, light spirits."

"Wha—"

Serafeeta was shining or something! There was light coming from behind me! Wait, did she suddenly get stronger?

"Uwoh!"

I was ripped away from my workbench.

"Good luck," Ira said, waving her small hand at me.

Why wasn't she saving me?!

My resistance proved to be futile, as Serafeeta successfully dragged me into the bedroom.

***

I had nothing to say. My physical specs were exceedingly average, so I didn't stand a chance against most of the women of this world. Once again, that hypothesis was proven to be true. It was that simple. The tranquility of my heart had to be slightly disturbed for Serafeeta to gain some tranquility of her own.

More importantly, how was it, you ask? Well, uh, no comment.

It was said that elves had a hard time conceiving children, but Serafeeta was someone who'd given birth to not one, but four girls. Suffice it to say that this whole experience served as a stark reminder of that fact. I thought my hips were going to give out.

"Hee hee hee… "

After what transpired, Serafeeta was in a spectacularly good mood. Pretty much everyone watched over her tepidly, save for one individual.

"Aren't you two a little too close?" Elen asked.

"Aren't you the one who told me to make more people happy?" I shot back.

"Grr… That's that, this is this," Elen frowned, holding tightly on to my arm.

On the opposite side, Serafeeta was smiling brightly holding on to my other arm. Yes, I had flowers on both sides, but I could hardly take the time to enjoy it.

"Why are you being so antagonistic toward Serafeeta?" I asked.

"Our light-affinity characters overlap," Elen explained.

"Wait, that's all?"



It was true that Serafeeta wielded light spirit magic and Elen used divine miracles as a saint of Adolism. Frankly, they both were light characters, so she wasn't totally wrong.

"Okay, sure, but I don't think there's any other character overlap," Capri said.

"You're just using that as an excuse to try to get Kousuke to dote on you, no? You're simply jealous of how Serafeeta is earnestly letting herself enjoy Kousuke," Grande added.

"Eleonora sure is a cutie," Capri said.

"Shut up, both of you," Elen barked at Grande and Capri.

The fact that she could even act this way toward Grande spoke to Elen's power. Granted, Grande would never get angry over something like this.

And so, I spent ten full days leisurely hanging out with the women in my life.

When I first hooked up with Elen, Amalie, and the ogre girls, I'd told myself I wouldn't waste time fretting over my relationships anymore, but… Well, it was a hard habit to shake. Realistically, at least. After all, this was my wife's mother.

My own mother-in-law.

I couldn't help but feel strangely guilty, because it seemed like my achievements and Poiso's little prank led up to all of this. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd completely twisted Serafeeta into someone she wasn't. At the same time, if I pushed her away, it really felt like she might have taken her own life. Maybe I was just being vain, but I was almost certain that she would have done something drastic if I hadn't stepped in.

Maybe this was the right move after all.

"Sir Kousuke, is something the matter?" Serafeeta asked.

"Nah. I was just thinking about how beautiful you are."

"Gosh, flattery will get you nowhere," she said, blushing, placing a hand against her cheek and happily smiling.

Yup. Us guys were simple creatures. This was really all it took. Or maybe I was just uncommonly lewd? That was probably the case. Yeah.

I was gazing at Serafeeta while waiting for my workbench order to finish when someone suddenly landed silently at the window. It was the brown-feathered harpy, Capri.

"Master, we've got a group bearing white flags headed this way," she reported.

"The delegation from this morning's report, eh? So they came riding in after taking a break to fill their stomachs."

As of today, ten days had passed since I'd given Tigris our diplomatic papers. Our harpy security network noticed this morning that some sort of delegation had arrived in Brynjolf.

"Technically, we're the ones who came riding in," Capri said.

"Good point."

We were the ones who traveled all the way out here to Tigris, so yeah. That checked out.

In any event, it was time to go say hello.

In the most extravagant way possible.

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When I started moving my golems, the delegation froze on the spot. They probably had their guards up. The opposing delegation was made up of about thirty people in total, including their bodyguards.

"Serafeeta, Ira, Elen, and I will be sitting down for negotiations. Sound okay?"

"I believe that will be fine. I also believe it would be wise to have the three adventurers and a number of soldiers behind us to

match theirs. Let's have Grande watch over things from the fortress," Elen suggested.

Both Ira and Serafeeta nodded in agreement, so we decided to go with that strategy. We split our group across four airboards and flew out to meet the delegation.

"Sir Makrit's here."

"He's looking thinner by the day."

"Anxiety'll do that to a guy."

I knew I was most definitely the cause of said anxiety. But, whatever. I wasn't planning on doing anything at the moment. I just needed him to hold out through this negotiation before kicking the bucket on me.

"What should I say at a time like this?" I asked Serafeeta.

"I believe it would be best to introduce yourself and then ask for their names," she said.

"Gotcha."

I told Bela to stop our airboard about twenty meters away from the delegation. As soon as we stopped, I opened the roof, grabbed my voice amplifier, and called out to them.

"This is Queen Sylphyel Danal Merinard's prince consort speaking. My name is Kousuke. I have been given complete authority over all diplomatic matters concerning the conflict with the Kingdom of Tigris. Am I correct in assuming you are the delegation from Tigris, and that you have been granted similar authority?"

The group stirred for a bit, but not long after, two knights stepped forward.

One of them was Sir Makrit, and the other was an older man I didn't recognize. He was considerably well-dressed, so he was probably a high-ranking nobleman—likely a diplomat of some sort with a fair amount of authority.

"Sir Kousuke, it is I, Makrit Jean Nicklaus. This is Marquis Nelson Gai Deracotta. He has been given full authority by His Majesty in these negotiations."

"I-I am Nelson…"

Sir Makrit looked as pale as always, but Sir Nelson looked even worse for wear. *Hmm, did he not believe my golems existed until he saw them with his own two eyes?*

"I see," I said. "I will now be setting up the venue, so could you please step back?"

"A-ah, the venue…?" Sir Makrit said as he turned his horse back, confusion etched across his face, and took Sir Nelson back to his delegation.

Once I was sure they were far enough away, I set some stone blocks on the ground and built a temporary venue for our negotiations. I laid down stone steps to lead into the building, and also put down a long table (the type you'd see in a nobleman's mansion) as well as some chairs from my inventory.

"This look about right?" I asked everyone.

"Perhaps you could also prepare a pitcher of water and some glasses?" Serafeeta said.

"Good idea."

I did as Serafeeta suggested and pulled out a glass water pitcher and some drinking glasses to go with it. Amalie volunteered to serve everyone, and though she was one of ours, she was clad in Adolism nun robes, so they'd be less likely to think she'd poison them.

Once we were ready, I waved the group from Tigris over, and they slowly approached. They must've still had their guards up. Just for the record, Serafeeta, Ira, Elen, and I would be sitting at the negotiations table, and we had five civil officials there to record the proceedings.

"Wh-what is all of this…?"

"Lord Deracotta, please keep calm."

Sir Makrit brought a very puzzled Sir Nelson and the rest of their group up to the venue. They left their horses with the soldiers who wouldn't be joining us inside. Their group was composed of Sir Makrit, Sir Nelson, two people who were likely civil officials, and five bodyguards.

"Shemel."

"Aye."

I signaled to her with my eyes, and she, Bela, Tozume, and two elite magic gunsmen took up their positions as our bodyguards.

"Now that we're all here, let's get started," I said.

"Mm… First, what if we all reintroduce ourselves?" Ira suggested.

"Good idea. I'll start. My name is Kousuke. I'm the Fabled Visitor, and I am also the prince consort of the current queen of the Kingdom of Merinard, Sylphyel Danal Merinard. Her Majesty has given me full authority over the protection of the north, as well as negotiations with both Tigris and Diieharte. This is Serafeeta Danal Merinard, the former queen. This is the head of our court mages, Ira, and this is the Adolism Saint of Truth, Lady Eleonora."

"I am Serafeeta. Lord Deracotta, it has been quite some time."

"I-indeed it has, Lady Serafeeta. Your beauty remains vivid and unfaded, just like a gemstone," Sir Nelson said, beads of sweat rolling down his face.

Okay, so they knew each other. What position was Sir Nelson in when Serafeeta fell into her slumber twenty years ago? I had no idea, but I hoped their acquaintance would work positively for us. Honestly, this guy was sweating so hard that I had to wonder if Serafeeta had dirt on him or something. Was he going to be okay?

"I am Ira, head of the court mages and Kousuke's counselor. I am also his bodyguard," she said, turning her large eye toward Sir Makrit and Sir Nelson.

Sir Nelson must have been intimidated by her gaze, as he trembled in fear.

"I am Eleonora. I have been granted the power to see through lies by Lord Adol. It is a pleasure to meet you," Elen said, casting her crimson gaze over the delegation.

If anyone among them lied during our negotiations, she was going to poke my knee. This kind of power really was OP when it came to diplomatic talks.

"I-I am Marquis Nelson Gai Deracotta. His Majesty has given me all authority regarding these diplomatic negotiations."

"I am Marquis Makrit Jean Nicklaus. I was the commander during our battle. I am here as Lord Deracotta's adviser."

Our respective civil officials also introduced themselves to one another, then Amalie poured water for everyone present, and the civil officials began to record the proceedings. We were now ready to begin the negotiations in earnest.

I found myself wondering how Tigris would respond to our demands, but first, it was time to hear them out.

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"We would like to start by confirming your demands. First, the non-aggression pact. In other words, reconciliation between our nations and mutual non-aggression for some number of years, correct?" Sir Makrit started out after taking a sip of cold water to calm his nerves.

"Broadly speaking, yes," I confirmed. "But obviously those details won't get ironed out until you accept our other demands."

"Understood. I simply wanted to confirm that ultimately you wished for reconciliation and an end to this conflict."

"Gotcha. Well, none of this would be happening if you hadn't launched an attack on us in the first place, so…" I hammered home the point that this conflict was initiated by Tigris, but Sir Nelson was

unfazed. It was clear why he'd been chosen to head up the negotiations: Once he regained his composure, he appeared to be a tough opponent indeed.

"I think we should start by talking through the reparations. If you plan on saying something insane like you're not going to pay up, remember that I'll have to sic my golems on Brynjolf and destroy it," I warned.

"Wha…?! Is this your attempt at intimidation tactics?!"

"We're still at war. If negotiations fall through, the ceasefire ends immediately. As such, I see no problem with launching an attack on Brynjolf," I said, shrugging at Sir Nelson as he panicked and rattled on, sputtering all over the place.

"Sir Nelson, we—no, *I'm* quite fed up with the current situation," I said. "Listen, I don't want to waste a single second on this stupid war. We have all manner of problems that need solving domestically, and there's a lot of land that needs to be developed. If you and Diieharte hadn't come at us, I would've been able to focus on the various matters that need attention while staying by Her Highness's side. So if I'm being perfectly honest, my impression of both countries could not be worse right now. As the Fabled Visitor, it is my opinion that it would be less of a pain in the ass to just flatten all of your cities, burn your capital to the ground, and destroy Tigris instead of wasting time on negotiations and reconciliation. However, Her Highness wants peace for this world, so here I am, hard at work. I need you to understand that."

"…In other words, you ask that we accept every single one of your conditions and demands?" Sir Nelson asked.

"No, not really. Sure, it'd be less work if you simply accepted everything, but Her Highness told me that, should I see fit, I am allowed to be flexible. To a certain extent, I honestly am willing to hear you out. Personally, I'd just be happy if I got to go home to Merinesburg. That's why I want to handle the reparations problem first."

The amount of money we were requesting from Tigris amounted to a year of its national budget; in other words, a year of the royal family's earnings. It wasn't an impossible sum, but it *would* be impossible to pay all at once. Considering that they had to pay compensation for those who died in the war as well as the large chunk of their workforce they lost, this number was absurd. According to Melty and the other civil officials, just dealing with the huge number of men they'd lost would put their economy in the gutter. Asking for a year of their national budget all at once was a pretty harsh request.

"Depending on the conditions, you are willing to negotiate, then?" Sir Nelson asked.

"Yeah. Depending on my mood, that is."

Honestly, we didn't really need the money. Obviously, it was never bad having more money, so we'd take what we could get, but the reality was that I could craft gems, mithril alloy, and all kinds of other magic metals whenever. Plus, the products from the elves in the Black Forest were skyrocketing in price, so we had a lot of flexibility regarding our budget. We were also anticipating tax yields from the various villages, cities, and mines, so despite being a newborn nation, our economy was doing pretty well.

"Then we shall give you slaves," Sir Nelson offered. "Please reduce the amount of reparations accordingly."

I narrowed my eyes at Sir Nelson's proposal. Was he planning on selling his own citizens as slaves to protect his own country?

"Please do not get the wrong idea. I have no intention of selling my citizenry into slavery to a foreign nation. I am saying that we will hand over the demi-human slaves that have entered our country from Merinard since the war twenty years ago. Their children as well. We're returning them, so to speak," Sir Nelson clarified.

"…Oho."

Now I understood. They would return our citizens to us, and in exchange, they wanted us to decrease the amount of money we were asking of them. I did find myself questioning the morality of bartering money against human lives, but if I rejected this offer, the demi-humans in Tigris would never be able to find happiness for themselves. Additionally, were I to request that they give us back our citizens for free, it would only cause them to dig their heels in harder. The right move here was to agree.

"A fascinating proposal," I commended him. "You've clearly done your research on our motivations. I can't help but be sympathetic to the fact that you had to go to war at all."

Sir Nelson and Sir Makrit didn't visibly react to my words. Were there Holy Kingdom sympathizers present?

"Very well. I believe your proposal to be of merit, but if we are going to move ahead here, I need you to be thorough. You shall find every single slave, take them into custody, and return them to us. Should we discover that any demi-human slaves remain in Tigris after the fact, I will be forced to assume you have rendered our terms null and void. You understand what that would mean, yes?"

"O-of course," Sir Nelson said, nodding gravely.

After discussing things further, it was decided that they would pay half of our initial requested reparations, paid out over a term of ten years. This would be equivalent to about five percent of their yearly budget each year, but given what the future would look like, these payments would end up being a lot less demanding as their revenue started to go up again.

Huh? Were we letting them off too lightly? Of course we were. That was the point. Remember, if we imposed super high reparations on them, their government and economy would begin to crumble, and we'd be the ones who ended up with an influx of refugees. The right move was to squeeze them just enough that they couldn't bare their fangs against us, rather than completely cripple them. It was

better for us if our neighbors were both politically and economically stable to some degree.

"Since we've agreed on reparations, next up is the non-aggression pact and everything that it entails," I said.

This one was simple. For now, we'd sign a mutual five-year non-aggression pact and announce it to other nations. Should this pact be broken, other countries would reproach the aggressor, and they'd lose diplomatic trust in the international community, making any kind of diplomatic negotiations that much more difficult. Additionally, whether we would protract or shorten the length of the pact would be discussed after five years had passed.

"I have no issues with the contents of the pact. However…" Sir Nelson turned his gaze down at the "miscellaneous" section of the document we handed him and furrowed his brows. "A study abroad system, yes? Would it not be more accurate to describe this as a hostage system?"

"I believe it's important to have a proper public stance," I said. "The implication behind using this term is that we don't plan on having any diplomats locked away under house arrest."

"Should I be grateful…?"

He was looking at me, thinking that we were going to "re-educate" these study abroad students. I simply looked back at him with an expression that said, "Yeah, so what?" We didn't plan on doing anything that would cause anybody distress or suffering, but we did intend to make sure that they abided by our laws against demi-human prejudice.

"Next up is establishing embassies. I trust you have no objections to this?" I asked.

"No objections here. But are you certain you are okay with this?" Sir Nelson replied.

"You mean regarding your request for mutual extraterritoriality as opposed to our initial conditions? Of course. Both of our nations

are civilized. I believe it would be best for everybody if we acted discreetly rather than rushing to exercise these rights."

"You are absolutely right," Sir Nelson agreed.

I was glad he was so quick on the uptake.

"Next is the treaty of commerce…"

"No tariff autonomy, right?"

"Correct. However, to be clear, we're not trying to bleed your wallets dry. If anything, it's to protect your businesses."

"Say what?" Sir Nelson looked doubtful. Of course he did. I was telling him that they couldn't freely decide tariffs, so it made sense that he'd think this was designed so that we could cheaply export high quantities of goods, cornering the market and decimating their businesses.

"Obviously we plan on profiting to some degree. However, our food production is rapidly improving. If we continue at our current pace, our food self-sufficiency will surpass 400 percent by this fall. We might even go higher than that," I explained.

"400 percent… Wait, 400 percent?! Did you just say over 400 percent?!" Sir Nelson was astonished, which, yeah. Understandable.

But I wasn't lying. If anything, 400 percent was lowballing it… It depended on the crop we planted in the farm blocks, of course, but we were able to harvest crops from them in two to four weeks even without my involvement. Imagine what would happen if we modified all the farms in the nation to run off of farm blocks? Granted, that wasn't in the cards just yet, but still.

In all honesty, the value of food was actually on the decline because of how overstocked we were, and it was causing problems for traditional farmers. That's why we'd rushed to develop canned goods and instant foods using dried noodles. We needed to raise domestic demand.

"We've also developed a number of high-quality and advanced magic tools," I said, continuing my explanation. "If we were to

export cheap foods and these tools into your country, it could theoretically throw your economy into chaos. That's not something we want to happen. We have much more to gain from a relationship of mutually beneficial coexistence and prosperity. Right now, the nobility with territory on the border are able to unilaterally adjust tariffs, right? What we're proposing is that we adjust the tariffs together instead."

"I see… That would weaken the local nobility while strengthening the authority of the royal family. It would certainly set a precedent," Sir Nelson said with a nod, then fell into thought.

The fact that he was sent here meant he was a nobleman trusted by the royal family.

"However… Forgive us, but this seems a little too good to be true. It might seem odd coming from us, but to be frank, we tried to invade your country, entirely unprovoked, then got beaten back."

"You're not wrong, but you've already paid a heavy blood price for that. Also, to be candid with you in kind, it would be bad for us if our neighboring countries became lawless nations of battling warlords. That would result in bandits and refugees flowing into Merinard. If we imposed harsh sanctions on you purely based on our emotions, we'd be the ones losing out."

There was an old saying: You must lose a fly to catch a trout. This was exactly that. I could probably get better conditions out of Tigris by threatening them with my golem army, but that would result in Tigris collapsing into some sort of civil war. Then, border cities like Metocerium would be vulnerable to bandits and the like. Either that, or they'd see an immediate influx of refugees. None of that would bode well for us.

As far as Merinard was concerned, what was important was to maintain our superior position while also gently prodding Holy Kingdom-allied nations to come to our side. If we could make some profit on the way there, well, that was icing on the cake.

"Shall we discuss the specifics of the products that will be taxed, as well as their rates?" I asked.

"…Yes. We need to iron out the details before we accept your conditions."

It felt to me like Sir Nelson was more than open to the conditions we'd put forward. All we needed to do now was hammer out the specifics so we could reach an agreement.

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We discussed the details with the civil officials as well, and after nailing down the conditions, we all decided to leave the venue behind to talk things over with our respective groups. We returned to our fortress, and the folks from Tigris returned to the barracks they'd hastily set up outside of Brynjolf.

"Is it just me, or are you kinda being a doormat? We won, you know? So why don't we like…"

"It's not as simple as forcing them to acquiesce."

"…'Kay," Bela said, nodding earnestly.

Her strategy would've been fine if we were talking about a back-alley fight between thugs. All you had to do was beat your enemy up, then take their money. What happened after didn't really matter.

"Conflicts between two nations don't really work that way," I said. "If we put harsh sanctions on them and ask for heavy reparations, worst-case scenario, their country ends up collapsing. And if that happens, bandits run rampant. Remember how I said earlier that that'd be a problem?"

"Right, right. But if we just crushed 'em all now, wouldn't that eliminate any future troubles?" Bela asked with a tilt of her head.

I shook my head in response.

"Not necessarily. It'd be one thing if we were going to be absorbing Tigris and governing their lands, but if we aren't, crushing them would mean their entire territory would turn into a lawless land. A place where violence reigns supreme."

"The kind of place we'd have no problems livin'!"

Bela winked awkwardly. Next to her, Shemel and Tozume both seemed to agree.

Et tu?

"Sure, but think about everyone else! If other countries decided they didn't want that land either, someone would eventually rise up to consolidate all that chaotic power. Could be the head of the bandits, or it could be someone of noble blood from the original nation. Now, imagine what would happen if Tigris rose from the ashes because of that? How do you think they'd feel about us?"

"Not great! They'd definitely wanna come kill us all!"

"Right? And most people can't just up and leave their homes or territory to go somewhere else. In other words, we'd have people next door who have deep grudges against us, and it'd be all our fault. I want to avoid that at all costs."

"I get it," Bela said. "So you're tryin' to placate 'em with lighter demands."

"Wow, you know what 'placate' means?" Elen quipped.

"Lady Saint, don't be so mean!" Bela complained in response to Elen's jab, but honestly, given the flow of the current conversation, she shouldn't have been surprised.

"Bela, we came here to put an end to this war. Fortunately, the casualties on our side are practically nonexistent, so we should negotiate where we can and try to get Tigris to break away from the Holy Kingdom."

"Is that even possible? They're a vassal state, ain't they?"

"I don't think it's impossible. Recently, I think the Holy Kingdom's influence within Tigris has plummeted. They failed to take Merinard back, then they forced both Tigris and Diieharte into a failed assault, resulting in both nations taking huge casualties. I imagine the people who helped create this situation by backing the Holy Kingdom's decision are currently being made examples of."

"Unlike Diieharte, Tigris became a vassal state because they yielded to the Holy Kingdom's pressure," Serafeeta added. "Their neighboring nation, Merinard, was annihilated and occupied, and then Diieharte had its royal family swapped out for the Holy Kingdom's bloodline. The king was reduced to being an archduke, and Diieharte was subsequently turned into a principality and a vassal state. After seeing what happened to them, Tigris's only chance to find some measure of stability was to bend the knee themselves."

"That all sounds super tough, and I don't really understand!" Bela responded with complete seriousness to Serafeeta's explanation.

"Long story short, Tigris is more than likely not all that buddy-buddy with the Holy Kingdom in the first place, and physically speaking, they're pretty far away from one another, which means it would be easier for us to turn them into an ally. If we told them that we'd send reinforcements to help should the Holy Kingdom attack, we'd have a good chance of getting them on our side," Ira explained, and I nodded in agreement.

After all, we'd taken out the Holy Kingdom's subjugation forces. If we promised to help protect Tigris, it wouldn't be shocking if they yielded to us.

"I see! Diieharte got its leader swapped out, but since Tigris is just following orders, we might be able to get 'em to betray the Holy Kingdom."

"Yeah, basically."

It was more complex than that, but she had the gist of it. Our main objective was to avoid having Diieharte and Tigris as constant threats. If Tigris allied with us, it would make it hard for Diieharte to attack, considering both nations were on a similar standing in terms of national power.

The Kingdom of Tigris was far from the Holy Kingdom, so if anything happened, we could support them. Additionally, if they served as a trade window to the rest of the northern continent, both of our countries could benefit. Nothing but positives!

Well, that is, as long as things went as planned.

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An hour later, both groups reconvened at the negotiation venue.

"Thank you for giving us the time to discuss, Sir Kousuke," Sir Nelson said.

"I just hope this second half of negotiations ends up being worthwhile for both of us. So, did you come to an answer?" I asked.

The final proposal we ended with was that, on the condition that they hand over all of their demi-human slaves, they would have to pay only what amounted to half of one year's national budget to us, spread over a ten-year period. In exchange for getting rid of those slaves, depending on the number of demi-human slaves handed over, we would give them an exemption on penalties should any missed demi-humans be discovered after the fact.

However, if we found out that any demi-humans were being intentionally hidden away, they would have to be unconditionally handed over to us, and Tigris would be responsible for severely punishing the people who'd hidden the slave. Regarding this condition, we also requested that Merinard would be able to dispatch an investigator as well.

Regarding the study abroad students made up of the children of the royal family and nobility, we would allow them to return home once or twice a year should they please. When they did go home, we would escort them. On their return to Merinard from Tigris, their people would escort them back here. As far as their education was concerned, however, we would be calling all of the shots. The Kingdom of Tigris had the right to make suggestions, but the curriculum would ultimately be up to us.

Then, as for the mutual non-aggression pact, if we reconciled, we decided to shift from a five-year period to a ten-year period to match the reparation payments. After that, we could discuss whether to change our relationship altogether. Depending on how things went, that could happen before the end of the ten-year period as well.

Next up was the treaty of commerce and our condition for them to give up their tariff autonomy. Generally speaking, they agreed to the proposed conditions that would put us in an economically advantageous position, but at the end of the day, we didn't intend on bleeding Tigris dry. We included a clause in the treaty that said that we would re-examine the terms of the tariff autonomy agreement every five years, as a concession for Tigris.

"We wish to accept the general details of your proposal," Sir Nelson said.

"The general details?" I asked.

"Yes. We have no objections to the reparations or the handing over of slaves, but the study abroad and treaty of commerce clauses both affect not only the royal family, but many other noblemen and women. We will need to adjust things internally, so all we can say for now is that our intention is to accept your proposals."

"I see…"

"The Kingdom of Tigris suffered massive losses in this war, so if we simply accept your reconciliation proposals unilaterally without making adjustments, it could cause a major rift in the country."

"Ah, I understand."

There would certainly be nobility who would be staunchly opposed to sending their heirs to Merinard, as well as nobility who would not accept restrictions on being able to tax and tariff products traveling throughout their territory. If we used a hardline policy on those types, it was entirely possible that we could cause some sort of secession.

"Keep in mind that if you do not fulfill your end of the bargain, we'll be forced to take fairly severe actions."

Sir Nelson suddenly grew pale.

"If I may be allowed to speak frankly, our goal is to be on good terms with the Kingdom of Tigris," I said.

"…Huh?"

Both Sir Nelson, Sir Makrit, and the rest of the Tigris officials present looked stunned. They probably couldn't understand how I could say something like that one sentence after I had threatened them with violence. They were a vassal state of the Holy Kingdom as well, after all.

"Regardless of how much power we as a nation possess, people need to see our power for themselves in order to believe in it. So I ask you this: As people who have seen it firsthand, do you still doubt our strength?"

"N-no, it…would be impossible for us to doubt you at this point," Sir Nelson said, as Sir Makrit shook his head with a stern look on his face.

"We have no intention of forging a friendship with the enemy. Comrades, on the other hand… Do you understand where I'm going with this?" I asked.

"Y-you mean…?!" Sir Nelson's eyes widened and his body trembled.

"If our comrades were to be put in danger, we would be able to provide them with support both directly and indirectly. We're not

like the Holy Kingdom, after all. We would never tell our comrades to stand in the direct line of fire for us. At the very least, we would have the guts to stand shoulder to shoulder with our comrades against a shared enemy. At the end of the day, all we want is comrades who can watch our backs. We don't need them to fight against all our enemies with us."

At that, Sir Nelson went silent, sweat trailing down his face. Sir Makrit, on the other hand, simply kept silent. Had I pushed too hard?

"In any case, it seems we've come to an agreement," I said. "For our part, I believe this ceasefire is now official and no longer temporary. How about you guys?"

"Y-yes! Of course. Of course we feel the same! We agree completely!" Sir Nelson extended his hand, and I shook it.

The ceasefire and peace treaty we all signed was extremely complex. To put it all in broad terms, the ceasefire period would last until three months from today, and during that period, Tigris would strive to fulfill the promises that we'd both agreed to. Should they fail to comply in that period of time, or should either side break the ceasefire with military action, combat would resume.

And so, both nations signed the ceasefire agreement and peace treaty, putting an end to this war. For the time being, anyway.

"Next is Diieharte… They're gonna be a pain in the ass." I sighed.

"Sir Kousuke, let's both do our best for Sylphy," Serafeeta said, trying to cheer me up.

I was already losing heart, though. I just wanted to go home.

Epilogue:
An Unexpected Response

"LONG TIME NO SEE, Sir Kousuke."

The day after finishing our negotiations with Tigris, the delegation from the Principality of Diieharte visited our little fortress. The folks from Tigris must have sent a messenger to Diieharte like we asked.

"Ah… Sir Antonius, right?"

"I'm honored you remember me," he said, the relief in his voice clearly audible.

This was the man who'd commanded Diieharte's army when we first faced off. A different commander was calling the shots when we destroyed their border fortress, so I'd figured he had been demoted or something. Now he was being sent here to head up negotiations, probably because we'd already met.

"You've come this far by yourself? I take it you got Tigris's permission, yeah?" I asked.

"But of course. Hey, uh, this is starting to hurt my neck…"

Hrm… I guess we couldn't very well talk things out while I looked down at him from the top of the wall.

"You know where our venue is, right? Wait for me there," I instructed.

"Understood."

The Diieharte delegation reined in their horses and rode off toward the venue from yesterday.

"…Well, this certainly speeds things up a fair bit."

"Indeed. You won't have to intimidate them with golems or build another fortress over there," Ira said.

"Well, that's not a sure thing yet. It all depends on what moves they make. We have to create a big impact right off the bat."

At the end of the day, the threat of violence was always the best way to make others listen to what you had to say. Whether we actually followed through with said violence was a different matter altogether, but we had to at least look like we weren't bluffing. We needed our opponent to recognize that we were on their level or above them, or else negotiations would fall through.

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We headed for the venue with the same group as yesterday, except Grande was with us this time. That said, she had no intention of sitting at the negotiation table. She'd just be bored back in the fortress, so I guess she'd tagged along just to watch us go at it.

In her usual reclined position, no less.

"Before we begin, might I ask who she is…?" Sir Antonius pointed at Grande, who was lying on a pile of cushions and yawning. Yeah, of course he'd ask.

"She's a dragon. You don't have to take my word for it, but I'd suggest not making her angry. She's strong enough to reduce our fortress to rubble in an instant," I explained.

"A dragon…? You mean, a *dragon* dragon? The kind that flies in the sky and breathes dragon breath…?" he asked incredulously.

"Exactly," I said with a nod. "She's in humanoid form thanks to a magic dragon ritual. She's not actually part of our forces, she and I just have a personal relationship. That said, she is close with Her Highness and the top brass, so it's probably best to consider her as being very tight with Merinard."

"I…see?"

Sir Antonius stared at Grande for a bit while she lay around doing nothing, but in the end, he decided not to pay her any mind. He probably thought that, given what I'd said, there was no point dwelling on her presence. Unfortunately, he seemed to be the only one in his group that thought that way…

"What are you thinking, bringing a young child like that to a meeting like this?"

"This is not a game! Do you not intend on taking this seriously?"

All the delegates from Diieharte aside from Sir Antonius were deeply dissatisfied with her presence. And honestly, I kinda understood why.

"Now, now. Let's calm down, shall we?" Sir Antonius said. "If she's a dragon, even if she does have connections to Merinard, she's basically a neutral party. And if she's willing to watch over the proceedings, I see nothing wrong with her presence. Plus, there is reason to believe that he speaks the truth about who she is."

"Excuse me? Just look at her. You ask me to believe all that?" a well-dressed middle-aged man said as he pointed at Grande lazing about on the cushions, the veins in his head bulging.

"You've heard how the Dragonis Mountain Nation has approached Merinard, yes? Do you really think they would back another nation for unrelated reasons?"

"Nrgh…"

The man went silent. Oho.

"Considering everything, I believe it would be dangerous to get on her bad side. Right now, we are accusing a dragon right in front of us of being a fake. What if she decided to prove that she is in fact a dragon? That would be extremely bad for us," Sir Antonius cautioned.

The other complainers went silent. This guy really had a way with words.

"Sorry for all the trouble. Just treat her like a dangerous ornament of sorts," I said.

"Ha ha ha. I only ask that you spare us any more of your dangerous ornaments," Sir Antonius said, laughing nervously as he glanced at the golems towering over the venue.

I did have heavily armed golem warriors lined up on our side, and they were intimidating as all hell.

"Now that we're all warmed up, I think it's time we got started. Should we begin by introducing ourselves?" Sir Antonius said with a laugh, promptly taking his seat. It was ironic that he said we were all warmed up, considering everyone else in his party looked frozen over like they were at a wake. Not that I personally cared.

We quickly took our seats.

"Now then, allow me to introduce myself. I am Antonius Ders Gilanzam, commander of the Principality of Diieharte's armies and the eldest son of Count Gilanzam. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Sir Antonius was the first to introduce himself, followed by their minister of foreign affairs and interior secretary. Once they were finished, it was our turn. There were five of us at the table: myself, Serafeeta, Ira, Elen, and a winged civil official working as a secretary.

"I must apologize for my rude behavior. I had no idea I was in the presence of the former queen," Sir Antonius added.

"Queen Sylphyel is the sovereign now, and Sir Kousuke outranks me as the prince consort. As of now, I am just an elven woman with no particular rank," Serafeeta said.

Despite what she'd said, she still carried herself with a royal aura that time hadn't diminished in the slightest. There was a class about her that was difficult to put into words, something Sylphy lacked, considering she'd been running throughout the woods alone up until fairly recently. That said, Sylphy possessed the kind of

intimidating aura one would expect from a warrior lord. Not that I ever sensed it myself, mind you.

"I am quite shocked to find that the Lady Saint of Adolism is present as well. Sir Kousuke, you certainly seem to enjoy surprising us."

"Variety is the spice of life, no?"

"That is quite the joke. I would personally appreciate it if you maybe scaled back on the variety. Ha ha ha."

"Sorry, but this is just how I am." I shrugged. "I don't think I'll be able to change anytime soon. Ha ha ha. Anyway, these documents contain our demands. Please read them over."

I pulled the documents out of my inventory, then slid them over the table to Sir Antonius. He took them and began to read their contents, furrowing his brows.

"As I expected…"

They must have asked Tigris what kind of demands we'd made of them. Generally speaking, the demands were the same for both countries. There were some differences regarding the reparations, but we had the same clauses regarding the definitely-not-hostage-study-abroad-students, the non-aggression pact, and the treaty of commerce.

There was a key difference with the commerce treaty, however. Diieharte bordered the Holy Kingdom and had someone of their bloodline at the top of the nation. If we traded with them, there was a risk of our funds and goods making their way into the Holy Kingdom. Because of that, our treaty of commerce with Diieharte was much more strict.

The idea was to treat Tigris favorably while purposely treating Diieharte worse. It would be best if we could all get along, but the reality of the situation didn't really allow for that. By creating a discrepancy between how we handled both countries, we would create a fissure between them. Apparently the Holy Kingdom treated

Diieharte better, so we were going to use that to our advantage during negotiations.

Sir Antonius looked up. "Aren't these conditions a bit severe?"

"They have to be. I don't really need to explain why, do I?" I said.

Their royal family had the blood of the Holy Kingdom's leader coursing through it, which essentially turned them into a branch family. Trying to get them to come to our side was going to be difficult. In other words, without something massive changing, they were going to be close allies of the Holy Kingdom for the foreseeable future. That was our thinking, at least.

"I can't possibly see why you're being so harsh…" Sir Antonius replied, causing Elen to poke my knee.

This was a sign we'd discussed beforehand: He was lying.

We'd had Tigris dancing in the palm of our hand from start to finish, so they'd never had the chance to lie, but Sir Antonius showed no signs of yielding to our threats. We were going to have to tread carefully.

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"We cannot accept these conditions."

"Do you think you're in any position to refuse?"

Something was off about how confidently Sir Antonius was acting. We'd annihilated his nation's forces along with their border fortress, so where was this attitude of his coming from?

"Kousuke, we know what your trump card is now. We have a great deal of talented mages in our country, you see. That magic device of yours uses gleaming magic jewels, yes? Well, I guess I should call it a magic weapon instead?"

"…Oho." I was surprised. They must have investigated the remains of the fortress and managed to figure out that we did it with

a bomb made from a gleaming magic jewel. "Assuming that were the case, I still don't understand where this attitude of yours is coming from."

"A magic weapon made of gleaming magic jewels is not something you can simply mass-produce. In other words, now that we know how those weapons are made, they do not actually pose that much of a threat. You do not have the personnel to occupy our cities and maintain control over them, and that is why your tactic is to use small elite squads equipped with advanced weaponry. Think about it from our perspective: Why would we accept your conditions when we know you barely have enough people to sustain this war?"

Ahhhh, I get it now. Because they know how we make the bombs, they're confident that we can't mass-produce them. They think we have already played our trump card, so they don't consider us a threat anymore.

"I see, I see. Ha ha ha. Gleaming magic jewels are indeed hard to come by, so even though we annihilated your fortress, that doesn't mean we can do the same to your villages and cities. You're not scared of us because you know we lack manpower. Do I have that right?"

Sir Antonius and his people must have sensed something was off given how casually I was laughing and speaking. They looked on uneasily.

Ha ha ha. Time to leave them flabbergasted.

"Speaking of which, Sir Antonius, have you ever seen a gleaming magic jewel in person? What about the rest of you guys?"

I extended my hand toward the table and produced a bunch of gleaming magic jewels from my inventory. They came in a variety of sizes: Some were as small as the tip of my pinkie, others were as big as ping-pong balls.

"Wh-what?!" he looked at the jewels in astonishment.

"I can't let you keep them, but feel free to pick them up and inspect them. Take a look and confirm for yourself exactly what they are."

Without hesitation, I pushed the pile of jewels forward toward them. Sir Antonius trembled as he reached out and grabbed one, inspecting it in his hand. The jewel naturally absorbed magic power, amplified it, and produced light. All of the stones were completely unpolished and had no techniques carved into them.

"I-impossible… This… This can't be…"

"And yet, it is your reality. I suggest you accept it for what it is. Let me put this as bluntly as possible: It's true that we lack personnel. However, that doesn't mean we cannot destroy your country. In order to protect ourselves from future threats, we have the option of killing tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—even millions of people."

"B-but then why…?!"

"Why don't we just get on with it and destroy you? Or why don't we just destroy the Holy Kingdom, you mean?"

Or both. Sir Antonius didn't reply to me, staying silent as cold sweat ran down his face. He very cautiously returned the jewel in his hand to the pile.

"All we ever wanted was to get our country and brethren back and live in peace," I said. "That was why we fought to take back our territory, and that is why we will show no mercy to those who try to invade our lands. We don't want revenge. Is this a good enough answer for you?"

"…Yes, I understand. Sorry, but could you allow us a moment to talk things over among ourselves?" Sir Antonius asked.

"Be my guest."

Sir Antonius took the rest of the delegation out of the venue. They had a camp set up in the same place that Tigris had yesterday, so they probably intended to discuss things there.

"Sir Kousuke, are you sure about this?" Serafeeta asked.

"Eventually they were going to learn about my peculiarities, so I might as well make a grand show of it. If we can do something about Tigris and Diieharte now, we'll be able to completely focus our attention on the Holy Kingdom."

To the south were Omitt, which we basically had control of, and the Black Forest where the elves and Grande's family lived. The Federation of Small Nations was out west, which we definitely couldn't ignore, and the Dragonis Mountain Nation was further west. They were friendly toward us, but we couldn't trust them the same way we could trust the elves of the Black Forest. That said, as long as Grande and I were in Merinard, they probably wouldn't do anything hostile anytime soon.

In short, if we managed to sign non-aggression pacts with both countries to the north, we'd be good to go. Honestly, if we managed to bring Tigris over to our side to serve as a check against Diieharte, we'd have accomplished our objective. Worst-case scenario, we could annihilate their major cities, preventing them from going to war for at least the next decade, but…I really didn't want it to come to that.

"Shouldn't we have kept pressing them without giving them a chance to breathe?" Ira asked.

"That's an option, but that Antonius guy seems like a very careful person. He's smart. I think after seeing that pile of jewels, he'll understand how badly we've outflanked them."

Gleaming magic jewels were more than just strategic resources with incredible abilities; they were also precious stones that were insanely valuable. A tiny piece the size of my pinkie would be enough to pay for the construction of an entire mansion, and I had pieces the size of ping-pong balls, completely unscarred. Imagine how much something like that would be worth. The fact that I had enough to produce a pile of them didn't just mean they had strategic

value as magic tools, but also monetary value. He would probably understand the economic threat I'd made by showing them off.

In fact, he might read even more deeply into it, theorizing that we had stockpiled even more jewels, and maybe even other secrets up our sleeves. Well, he'd be right. I possessed massive quantities of mithril, magic iron, magic steel, and black steel, among other valuable alloys. Our vein hollows gave us an endless supply of magic crystals. We also had a ton of other precious stones in storage.

"I feel like this'll work out very well for us."

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"Our original plan of rejecting their conditions outright isn't going to work. If we make that kind of move, they really might annihilate our cities and fortresses," I said.

"Wha…?! That's impossible! We can't possibly accept their conditions!" yelled Lord Anthem, the interior secretary, veins building on his forehead as his face turned bright red.

Ugh, you don't even know how I feel, so how about shutting the hell up?

"You saw that pile of gleaming magic jewels too, right? That means they have more than enough to flatten our military installations. They'd only need a jewel half the size of my pinkie tip to make that happen. They have enough to annihilate every single city in the principality and still have plenty left over. Hell, there's no telling how many they actually have stockpiled."

"But that doesn't mean—"

"Look, listen to me. How much do you think those jewels are worth?"

"Huh? You can't possibly put a price on that! They have enough to buy our entire country multiple times ove—ah, I see!"

"Exactly."

In other words, Merinard wasn't struggling for money. More specifically, they didn't *want* money. The fact that there was no cession of territory in their conditions also meant they weren't looking to expand. In that case, it was safe to assume their intentions were genuine, and that they truly wanted to sign a non-aggression pact and a treaty of commerce.

"They plan on actually taking up arms against the Holy Kingdom. That's why they want to make sure they don't have any other threats to contend with here."

"Then the reason our conditions are more severe than Tigris's…"

I nodded at Lord Liddell, our minister of foreign affairs, and continued his sentence.

"…Is because they want to get Tigris on their side and keep us in check by giving them favorable treatment."

To delve even deeper, they probably believed we'd be loyal to the Holy Kingdom until the bitter end. Our current royal family had Holy Kingdom blood flowing through them, so it made sense that they'd assume as much.

"…It would appear that they don't know much about our internal affairs," Lord Liddell surmised.

"Well, they are an emerging nation, after all. Not even a full year has passed for them, so they probably couldn't investigate us thoroughly," I said.

Which made sense, considering that beautiful elven woman—Serafeeta—had been asleep for twenty full years. Her knowledge on world affairs was out of date, and they likely didn't have the surplus energy to extend outside the country's borders while they had so many internal issues to deal with. That would explain why their military and financial strength were so well honed. They certainly had odd priorities.

"Our best bet is to draw out as many concessions as possible and get them to settle things peacefully," I said.

"Do we have any trump cards?" Lord Liddell asked.

"We could always hand over our demi-human slaves like Tigris did, but…"

"The damage that would do to our agricultural and mining industries is immeasurable. If I remember correctly, Tigris is allowed to pay their reparations over a period of ten years, yes?" Lord Anthem said.

"That seems to be the case," Lord Liddell said.

"Then in the worst-case scenario, if we can just get them to let us pay out the current amount over ten years… And instead of handing over all the slaves at once like Tigris, maybe we could ask them to let us do it gradually as well?" I suggested.

"Do you really think they'll agree to that?"

Having now gotten everyone else to agree to try settling things as peacefully as possible instead of our original plan of turning down all of their conditions, we brainstormed a way to best protect Diieharte's national interests.

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Like Tigris's envoy, the folks from Diieharte wrapped their discussion up in about an hour before returning to the venue. During that time, we weren't just enjoying a spot of tea and relaxing. Instead, we discussed what kind of moves our opponent would make and what they might have assumed given our words and actions.

"Have you decided how to reply to our demands?" I asked.

"Well, yes. We understand that you have a lot to deal with. Given the situation, do you mind if we speak frankly?"

Sir Antonius' words caused my eyebrow to twitch. *Speak frankly.* That was the same term I'd used with Sir Nelson. Apparently, both countries shared much more specific information than I'd assumed.

"Frankly, eh? In other words, you want us to discuss things directly? No lies?" I asked.

"Yes, correct."

"You say that knowing full well that the Saint of Truth is present?" I reiterated, clarifying that any lies would immediately be seen right through.

"Yes, of course."

"Hm. Fascinating. Let's hear it, then." I urged him to talk, and after exchanging looks with the minister of foreign affairs and the interior secretary, all three men nodded.

"You want to rid yourself of any future threats, correct? Worst-case scenario, you get Tigris to switch sides so they can keep us in check and you can focus on the Holy Kingdom to the east, yes?"

"Even a child could figure that out. And?"

"We would like to propose a ten-year non-aggression pact and the incremental return of all demi-human slaves. In exchange, we'd like to pay reparations over a ten-year period."

"Incremental? And what about the treaty of commerce?"

"Now, now. No need to rush. Let's take care of things one step at a time. First, the incremental return of slaves. Were we to hand them over all at once, our agricultural production and mining industry would collapse. It would be bad enough to split the country. I'm sure you don't want that."

I glanced toward Elen, who shook her head. In other words, Sir Antonius was telling the truth; Diieharte could very well fracture.

"Go on."

"Truth be told, we have an agreement in place with the Adolists. Were we to decide to immediately hand over all of our demi-human slaves, it's very possible that the Holy Kingdom would begin meddling with our affairs even more strongly than they already have been. We want to avoid that. Our defeat in this war has weakened their influence within Diieharte, so instead of rushing things, I would like to incrementally hand over the demi-human slaves and gradually squeeze the Holy Kingdom sympathizers in the nation out."

"…Oh, now things are getting interesting." I leaned forward. "Continue."

"In all reality, the archduke and his family—actually, the royal family—is anti-Holy Kingdom," Sir Antonius said.

"That can't be true. Doesn't the Archduke's family have the Holy Kingdom's blood flowing through their veins?"

"Yes, but the circumstances behind that are…complicated. I am sure the Lady Saint there can confirm that I am telling the truth."

Everyone's gaze turned toward Elen, not just mine and Sir Antonius's.

"If nothing else, you truly believe that to be the case," Elen said.

"I see. So he's not lying?" I asked.

"He's telling the truth."

"He speaks the truth."

Both the minister of foreign affairs and the interior secretary chimed in before Elen nodded to confirm.

"Hm, if the commander in charge of diplomatic negotiations, the minister of foreign affairs, and the interior secretary are all saying so, then it's probably true…" I said. I folded my arms and sank into thought. This was a bit unexpected. We'd assumed that we would be unable to break Diieharte's support of the Holy Kingdom, so I was relatively unprepared to deal with this new information.

“I’m not going to ask why the archduke’s family—Diieharte’s royal family—is anti-Holy Kingdom. The circumstances there aren’t important to us.”

“Yes, of course.”

“What is important is that anti-Holy Kingdom sentiment in your nation is on the rise, and the Holy Kingdom’s influence is falling. There’s a saying: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I know things aren’t actually that simple in practice, but if neither of our countries have amicable relations with the Holy Kingdom, surely there is space for cooperation.”

True friendship could never exist between countries, but cooperation against a common foe was possible.

“I understand the circumstances surrounding the gradual slave handover. How about the treaty of commerce?” I asked.

“Actually, I was hoping to use that to chip away at the Holy Kingdom faction’s power,” Sir Antonius answered.

“I see. So you intend to take full advantage of our power and have us put disadvantageous conditions on Diieharte?” This would lead the Holy Kingdom faction to take losses while we profited. “We’re fine with the ten-year payment plan. However, while we’re willing to go along with the gradual handover of slaves, we request that they not be sent anywhere other than Merinard, that all sales cease immediately, and that all labor conditions are improved posthaste. As for the study abroad program…”

“We’re willing to completely accept those conditions. We have no objections.”

“That’s rather sudden.”

“We have our own circumstances to deal with, you see,” Sir Antonius said with a shrug of his shoulders.

Hmm. Maybe they had a reason to distance the royal family and nobility’s children from the Holy Kingdom faction?

After that, we finished ironing out the details of the deal and came to an overall agreement, putting an end to the negotiations. At long last, this whole northern invasion situation was at an end.

Whew, that sure did take a while. But now I can finally go home to Merinesburg!

***

Having finally reached an agreement with everyone involved in the northern invasion, at long last I returned to Merinesburg.

Except I didn't. I still had some final business to attend to.

I had to set up checkpoints on the border near Diieharte and Tigris, place substations for diplomats in Metocerium, the closest city to the border, and build a reception hall for hosting delegations and high-ranking study abroad students from each country.

Considering the danger and urgency involved, I wasted no time building checkpoints on the border. But as far as the reception hall was concerned, I had to commission local artisans and carpenters to construct it. I'd be robbing people of work if I did that myself. I was someone who needed to be creating more jobs.

"We'll cover the expenses, so go all out. If you don't have enough room within the city, I'm willing to expand," I instructed.

"Leave everything to me. We shall build an extravagant reception hall that showcases the totality of Merinard's majesty and grace!" replied Heinrich Le Metocera—viceroy of Metocerium—nodding, a confident expression on his face.

"Will do. Make sure it's lavish but not vulgar, if that makes any sense. Use this to fund the construction." I pulled out a bag filled with polished gems of all sorts, then poured its contents out on the tablecloth.

"M-my word…!"

"As embarrassing as it is to admit, I'm a bit short on cash at the moment, so please exchange these for funds. Oh, and here, this

is a token of gratitude to you for taking over all this busywork," I explained before pulling out a large ruby, emerald, and sapphire from my inventory, then handing it to Sir Heinrich.

"O-oooh…?! Are you really bestowing such treasures to someone as lowly as myself?"

"Yeah. You really took great pains to help us out with the northern base. Merinard is lucky to have a viceroy so loyal, honest, and diligent. I hope you continue to give your all toward bettering our great nation," I said with a smile.

And I wasn't blowing smoke either. He really had been very helpful throughout this entire ordeal. He'd handled the operation of the communications carriages running between the northern base and Metocerium, recruitment within the city, and the hiring of helping hands. This kind of under-the-table payout was important. People needed to be rewarded for their hard work.

"I am truly grateful for your kind words," he said. "I swear upon House Metocera that we shall forever be loyal to you and the Kingdom of Merinard, Lord Kousuke." Sir Heinrich put a hand on his chest and lowered his head. He sure was making a big deal over three measly gems.

"If you need more funding for the reception hall, just let me know. I'll be commissioning some art from the elves of the Black Forest that we'll use to furnish the hall."

"Understood."

For now, the reception hall and diplomat substation business was all done. All we had left was to station an inspector there and we'd be good to go. Actually, whatever diplomat we put there could end up acting as an inspector as well. I'd leave that to Sylphy and Melty.

***

"I would appreciate it if you helped to fund the church too," Elen said, a serious look on her face.

After discussing things with Sir Heinrich, I'd returned to the northern base and explained what had transpired to Serafeeta, Ira, and Elen.

"I mean, personally, I don't mind, but are things really that tight for you guys?" I asked.

"As embarrassing as it is to admit, yes," Elen replied. "Adolism's influence within Merinard is exceedingly low now that the Holy Kingdom's forces have been eliminated. Additionally, the primary contributors to the church were mostly people who exploited demi-humans as slaves."

"In other words, we drove out your main source of funding, and everyone else is avoiding Adolism like the plague."

"Precisely. We're only staying operational now by using the funds that the previous corrupt clergymen stashed away. But at this rate, things are going to get a bit difficult for us."

"Hmm…"

I folded my arms and started to think, shooting a glance at Serafeeta.

"It would be very easy for you to provide the church with financial assistance, but that would only be a stopgap fix, yes? Unless we take preventative measures, the church will find itself in a similar situation again in the future," Serafeeta explained, having read my intentions.

Yeah, I was thinking the exact same thing. It would be a simple matter to fund the church, but I couldn't just keep feeding them money forever.

"You're absolutely right, Serafeeta," I said. "In the future, the church is going to reach a deadlock if they can't earn money without my aid. Still, there's nothing strange about a country providing financial assistance to an organization that offers miracles to heal

the wounded and ill. There'd be no problem if I contributed to them as an individual, right?"

"Of course not. It is the duty of those with power to support these efforts," Serafeeta said.

"All right, then I'll be funding you guys for the time being, and I'll discuss things with Sylphy so that Merinard itself can also provide financial aid. In exchange, I would like you guys to figure out a way to be mostly independent."

"We'll try to brainstorm a solution, but…"

"You're asking for a lot, telling her and her people to suddenly come up with a way to fund all of Adolism within Merinard by themselves," Ira said.

Elen's expression darkened, and Ira narrowed her eyes at me. She wasn't wrong. I didn't have a firm grasp on how many churches were in operation or how many people made up the Adolist church in Merinard at the moment, but I knew it was more than a few dozen.

"Aren't you a saint too, Kousuke? You need to give proper attention to your organization," Ira said.

"I mean, yeah, but… Ah, wait a second. Adolist clergymen can use light magic—er, purifying miracles, right?"

"Purification miracles are an extremely basic type of miracle, so anyone who has mastered miracles can use them."

"Then what if we had the church participate in the preserved foods project that just got off the ground in Merinesburg?" I suggested. "We need purification magic to make canned goods and dried noodles. We plan on selling those products to other countries as well, so the more we can make, the more we can sell." This world fundamentally had a shortage of food, so food manufacturing was a safe and secure industry. "It might also be a good idea to put Adolism's crest on the cans or boxes of food. Make it into a brand of

sorts. Then again, it'd be fatal for the church if the food is bad or the quality drops."

"I see… How about we discuss things further upon return to Merinesburg?" Elen said.

"Of course. If we're going to do this, I'll take responsibility."

Elen's crimson eyes relaxed in relief. I guess she found my answer acceptable.

But, hmm… Even as we got our outward appearance together, at the end of the day, we still needed money to make things work properly. Up until now, we had exchanged weapons, food, and resources directly, but in order to operate in a region that already had a defined economic bloc, we needed actual cash, not just polished gems, raw ore, and magic metals we could convert.

"Money, huh…? I need to find a way to get some actual cash," I mused.

"Um, Sir Kousuke? If possible, please discuss such matters with Sylphyel and Melty first, okay?" Serafeeta said.

"If you mess up, it's going to cause problems for everyone. You need to show some self-restraint," Ira said.

"You definitely need to talk to Melty first," Elen added.

"Why don't you guys trust me…?"

I unconsciously tilted my head. I didn't recall ever acting like some high roller in front of any of them.

"It would be very difficult to apply a price to the gems you gave the viceroy earlier," Elen said.

"Who knows how much a single gem that size costs…" Ira mused.

"Those will end up being family heirlooms for generations to come," Serafeeta added.

Elen looked at me seriously, Serafeeta wore a troubled smile, and Ira narrowed her eye at me. The gems I'd gifted Sir Heinrich

were all either ping-pong-ball-sized or a little bigger. I'd just handed him some random ones I picked out, but I hadn't really given much thought to how much they might have been worth.

"I mean, those were on the smaller size of the ones I have," I said, pulling out a ruby, sapphire, and emerald the size of my fist.

After staring at the gems momentarily, the girls closed their eyes, covered them with their hands, and sighed up toward the ceiling.

"This is exactly what we're talking about."

"I was so surprised that I almost forgot to breathe."

"I'm used to this and even I was shocked."

"Ha ha ha, I was just teasing you guys a little. Listen, I won't say these are like rocks to me, but you gotta understand that I come by these things so often that they really only register as rare stones to me."

I could get my hands on gems easily just by taking my pickaxe to some rocks or a mountain. That said, resources in this world didn't respawn, so if I didn't show some self-restraint, the entire world would eventually be bled dry.

"Actually, we got some gems from Kousuke not too long ago," Tozume said.

"We exchanged some of 'em for cash, but we kept the ones we really liked," Bela said.

"You don't really get many opportunities to wear gems as accessories when you work as an adventurer," Shemel added.

Huh, in that case, maybe I'd make them some accessories with some practical effects applied to them.

"I still have the pendant you gifted me…" Elen gripped the pendant at her chest, her heart visibly calming.

Serafeeta didn't say anything. Though her expression remained unchanged, I could feel a vague sense of sadness coming off her.

"Since you're a clergywoman, I doubt you can wear any gaudy gems, but I'll make you a nice accessory sometime soon. I'll use mithril and everything."

"…Are you sure?"

"Of course. And Serafeeta, you'll probably be accompanying me on further diplomatic missions going forward, so I'll make you a suitable dress and accessories to go with it."

"Thank you very much, Sir Kousuke."

Both Elen and Serafeeta smiled warmly. Someone had tried to assassinate Elen with a poison knife once, and Serafeeta could be in danger in the future if she was going to be present at diplomatic discussions. It was in everyone's best interests if I hurried and made them some protective accessories.

I'd make it a point to talk to Ira about gems and their effects in the near future. Even back on Earth, there were people who believed in power stones—gems and ore that had some kind of -effect on the human body. In a world with actual magic, I wouldn't be surprised if people had done actual research into that kind of thing.

In any event, time ticked on by as I handled odd jobs and took on more responsibilities in between dealing with visiting diplomats from Tigris and Diieharte who had arrived. It wasn't until the beginning of summer that we finally managed to make our way back to Merinesburg.

Afterword

THANK YOU SO MUCH for picking up Volume 8 of *Survival in Another World With My Mistress*!

Volume 8. I can't believe it! Thanks to all of you, this series continues onward!

I moved recently, and let me tell you, my body is sore all over. I really need to exercise more… I'm a big guy, but I'm not very strong. I used to think I was like a Hokkaido brown bear, but maybe I'm more like a sunfish…

Anyway, time to talk about what games I've been playing recently.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I became a scoundrel thief girl and knocked out a bunch of guys with white buckets on their heads with my bare hands. Look, I get that they're small fry in the movies, but are they really so weak that a slender young girl can knock them out even when they have helmets on?! People didn't seem crazy about this game, but personally? I had a blast!

I also played a game where I became a girl working for a PMC in a dystopian future, struggling against taxes and invoices. Is there relief for this poor girl? No? Oh…

Now, this is unrelated to games, but I recently started writing a new novel: *Faceless Dropout*. If you're interested, please take a look!

The page count is pretty tight for this volume, so I don't really have the space to go super hard on explaining lore, so I'll try to keep this brief and focus on the life span of the various races.

The average human in this world lives up to around eighty years. Obviously, this can vary based on their diet and health, but

assuming they aren't ill, they can live anywhere from fifty to eighty years.

The long-lived races with shorter lifespans can live up to 300 years, while the ones with longer lifespans can live as long as 2,000 years. This varies wildly based on the individual, but generally speaking, the more magic power they have, the longer they can live. Elves, cyclops, and overlords fit into that category.

Beast demi-humans have slightly shorter lifespans than humans, usually around sixty years. On the flip side, they mature much more quickly; by twelve, their bodies are almost entirely done growing.

Harpies are shorter lived, with their maximum lifespan hovering around fifty years. They mature even more quickly than beast demi-humans, with their bodies reaching full maturity at six to eight years old. If they have a spouse, they give birth many times over the course of their life.

Ogres, dwarves, and lizardmen can live anywhere from fifty to a hundred years old. They simply have a lot of vitality.

There are others as well, but I think that's about enough for this volume.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to O-san from GC Novels, Yappen who handled the illustrations, everyone related to the publishing of this volume, and most importantly, everyone who picked up this book.

If possible, I hope we meet again in the next volume!

—Ryuto



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