

*13th Day, Middle Earth Month, 1 CE*

*Two Soul Eaters are in two different cities on the same route. The first Soul Eater departs at seven in the morning, travelling at thirty kilometres an hour on average. The second Soul Eater is on its return trip. It departs at eight and is travelling at twenty kilometres an hour due to poor road conditions. A two-hundred-kilometre-long road runs between the two cities. At what point on the highway do the Soul Eaters cross one another?*

Liam scratched his head as he glowered at the Soul Eater problem. A whole season had passed since he returned from his mission in the Holy Kingdom of Roble – or whatever it was now – and he was *still* trying to catch up with his schoolwork. Director Alpha was merciless: instead of being nice to him for successfully doing his job for the Sorcerous Kingdom, she just found more schoolwork for him to do. When he went to complain to Lady Zahradnik about it, she only smiled and told him that people who did good work got more, not less.

“What are you up to, kid?”

He looked up to find two familiar faces looking in on him from the side of the booth. On the left was Carmen Rizzo, a curly-haired Diviner from the Clearwater Scripture. The stern-faced man who spoke was Antonio Piciotto, a member of the Windflower Scripture. Both spies had been in E-Rantel doing spy things before Liam and his sister came from Fassett Town.

“Homework,” Liam looked back down at his problem.

Liam could feel them leaning into his booth. They probably thought it was some spy thing. Maybe they could solve the problem for him.

He did his best not to look at the generous cleavage dangled enticingly next to his head by Carmen’s flimsy garb. Mages and Priests had a reputation for dressing lightly, but he felt that they often used that expectation to get away with wearing outrageous outfits. Then again, according to the people at the temple, this was perfectly fine and even encouraged – especially if they were single adult women. Though they were spies for another country, they were also undoubtedly followers of the Six Great Gods like he was.

This made their interactions weird at times. On one hand, they considered him one of the faithful in a religion that cherished the lives of its members. They’d even act like a big brother or sister at times, displaying pride at his progress and adherence to the teachings of their gods. On the other hand, he was an agent of the country that they were supposed to be spying on. This didn’t necessarily mean that their countries were enemies, but it sure was awkward.

To Liam's relief, the two spies left. To his disappointment, they didn't solve his problem first. He watched as the two retreated to their own booth on the tavern floor of the *Midnight Mantle* to quietly discuss whatever they had seen in his homework. Nearby, spies from the Empire, Re-Estize, and several city-states in Karnassus cocked an ear to try and catch what they could of it. He wished they would come over and solve the stupid problem instead.

After staring at the blank space where the answer was supposed to go for a few more minutes, Liam gave up and put his homework away. He left the tavern and followed the meandering street until it joined with the busy road leading to the city's main plaza. Depending on how one looked at it, very little or quite a lot had changed in E-Rantel. Everything *looked* sort of the same, but it was the same in different ways.

He was pretty sure it had to do with how much space the city had. Compared to the cities in the Holy Kingdom of Roble, which tended to sprawl along the coast, E-Rantel was pretty small. To top it off, it was built as a fortress city and the design meant to impede potential invaders also impeded regular traffic. Things went from 'pretty busy' to 'no one can move' in no time at all, so the city's administration was constantly coming up with ways to keep things going.

Regular wagons drawn by livestock were prohibited from entering the common areas of the city and the southern quarters of the military district were being converted into warehouse districts. Cargo deliveries between the warehouses and the city's shops were mostly done during the quiet hours using high-capacity wagons drawn by Soul Eaters. Any other time, cargo had to be delivered by foot so the gates and streets didn't get clogged.

As a result, the streets of E-Rantel managed to stay about as full as they always had while becoming four or five times busier at the same time. The Undead could be seen at their usual posts, though they kept adding new ones to the patrols. They put in Death Assassins just before he went to the Holy Kingdom; now, there were Death Wizards, too. Aside from looking different, he wasn't sure how they differed from Elder Liches.

The enticing odour of roasted meat wafted over him as he entered the main plaza with the lunchtime crowd. It was almost overpowering, in fact. That was probably the biggest thing that had changed about the city. With the growing population of Demihumans in the city came a shift in the types of food being sold. For some reason, most of the Demihumans moving into the city were carnivorous, so the food stalls and restaurants were adjusting their offerings to match. There were even a few eateries with Demihuman employees now.

Not that he minded. The problem was that the growing population of Demihumans kept driving prices up. Demihumans, with their superior physical attributes, could put in enough work as labourers to afford it, but the average Human labourer couldn't. Meat had gone from a luxury that most Human families could afford once in a while to something that was entirely out of reach. At least bread and lentils were cheap.

He wandered around a bit before deciding to line up at a Lizardman stand. Partially, it was because the line looked the shortest. Mostly, it was because the Lizardman was selling grilled fish. Lady Zahradnik had asked him to help in his own little way by purchasing food from Demihuman stands, but the Demihumans weren't precisely picky about the food that they served. It wasn't limited to eating brains and eyeballs, either. Once, he had nearly eaten some variety of Beastman. Other times, he got responses like 'dunno' or 'it's meat' and those were the times when he finally thought to ask. On their part, the Demihuman vendors were only amused at how 'picky' he was.

"What'll it be, kiddo?"

Liam looked up to find a brown-scaled Lizardman staring across the stall at him. He eyed the fish on the grill.

"What kind of fish are these?" Liam asked.

"Tasty fish," the Lizardman answered.

*Right.*

He pointed to the largest fish on the grill.

"I'll take that one," Liam said.

"Good choice. One silver."

Liam fished a silver coin out of his purse. E-Rantel wasn't known for its supplies of fish and so it had always been expensive in the past, but a silver coin for one felt outright crazy. In coastal cities like Rimun, the same fish would have probably gone for two copper and that in itself was considered unreasonable compared to prices before the Holy Kingdom was invaded. Fish was still by far the cheapest type of meat in the Sorcerous Kingdom, however, as not all carnivorous Demihumans had a taste for it.

The Lizardman wrapped Liam's grilled fish in cheap brown paper and handed it to him. Once considered a commodity for Nobles and Merchants, paper had become plentiful and cheap as people tried to figure out what to do with the Sorcerous Kingdom's surplus production. The paper in particular was made from the mountains of straw left over by the absurd grain harvests.

As he made his way through the market, Liam unwrapped his lunch and inspected his fish. There wasn't anything weird looking about it, so all he could tell was that it was a fish. A tasty fish.

He slipped in behind a group of Adventurers discussing some imports from the Empire. All of them sported trainee tags, mostly iron and silver. By the time he made it to the front, they had taken off with anything useful looking. Annoyingly, the Sorcerous Kingdom's Adventurers tended to look for the same magic items that he did and drove prices up for everything. Getting his hands on personal equipment had been much easier back when he was working in the Holy Kingdom.

"Hey, Liam!"

A familiar voice called out to him from the direction of the cathedral. At the corner leading to the northern cloister, two fully armoured Squires waved at him with their helms tucked under their arms. Liam went over to join them, holding his food protectively.

"I'm not giving you any," he said.

The two boys stared at his fish. Liam stuffed the fish into his mouth.

"We barely see you anymore," one of the Squires, a rust-haired boy around Liam's age named Roland said. "You working?"

*Does homework count as work?*

While it was true he had been away over spring, most of his summer had been subject to the mercy of the merciless Director Alpha.

"I've been busy with school," Liam said. "Why are you guys in your armour?"

"We just got back from the Katze Plains," Roland said proudly. "The Undead didn't stand a chance against us."

"Don't they make it so that the training grounds are always manageable?"

"It's not as if they just stand there," Seguin, the younger Squire said. "I destroyed six Ghouls!"

Liam wondered if he could destroy a Ghoul. The two Squires felt weaker than he was, but Undead opponents were annoying for Rogues to fight. Not only were they immune to critical hits – and thus sneak attacks – but most of Liam's combat toolkit was useless against them.

"How long were you out there for? Liam asked.

“Uh...we went with a ministry team following the north bank of the river, then we stayed overnight at the village near the border on the third day. Then we spent one day in the Katze Plains before escorting the ministry team down the border for another two days. After that, we trained in the Katze Plains again for a day before escorting the ministry team west and back up the highway to E-Rantel.”

“Are they preparing you for missionary work?”

“Sister Alessia said that it’s how patrols work in Altamura,” Roland replied. “The Paladins based in Corelyn County do the same thing. I guess it could count as missionary work if we were in Wagner County. Not that the Priests there would let us.”

“Do you guys even see each other?” Liam asked.

“Not really. Bishop Austine doesn’t want us stirring up any trouble, so we don’t ever get close to their turf.”

“Oi, what are you lazy louts standing around for? Your reports are due by dinner.”

The two Squires cringed in unison as Sister Alessia appeared from the cathedral’s stables with Vicar Aspasia. The Paladin’s olive gaze went between the two boys before landing squarely on Liam.

“Oh? If it is not our apprentice Assassin.”

“I’m an Assassin Assassin now,” Liam said.

“Congratulations,” Vicar Aspasia smiled.

“Let us all pray that you are not an early bloomer,” Sister Alessia said. “You could very well become an Inquisitor one day.”

“How many people did you have to kill to graduate?” Seguin asked with sparkly eyes.

Seguin’s question gave Liam pause. *Did* he kill someone to graduate?

“I’m not sure,” Liam said. “I’ve lost track of how many people I’ve killed.”

“Ooooh…”

Sounds of admiration rose from the Acolytes and Squires nearby. Liam glanced at his surroundings, a sense of unease filling him over how much attention he had attracted. His instincts as a Rogue screamed at him to relocate before something happened.

“Liam!”

A girl’s voice drifted over the din of the plaza. The soles of Liam’s boots scraped over the pavement as he turned to make himself scarce.

“Liam, take responsibility!”

*Oh, sh–*

He turned to flee, but his legs swung out from under him as something snatched him by the skull and lifted him clean into the air.

“Confess,” Sister Alessia’s cold voice brushed up against the back of his neck.

*Who’s the Inquisitor now?*

Liam kicked his feet ineffectually as he dangled in place. Sister Alessia served as one of the cathedral’s poster girls, but she was undeniably a brute. The Squires and Acolytes that had just gathered to admire him backed away five steps to avoid becoming collateral damage.

Someone pushed their way past the ring of temple staff. A distressed gasp cut through the air.

“Liam! What are you doing, you crazy woman?”

“Hm? Didn’t you just say–ai!”

Liam’s body swung wide. He was jerked around several times as a scuffle broke out behind him.

“What are you doing, you crazy girl?!” Sister Alessia said as Liam’s legs continued to swing around.

“Let go of my husband, you evil Paladin!”

“*Hah?*”

His body stopped swinging around. It was an understandably confusing demand. Fallen Paladins became Dark Knights, but no one called an active Paladin evil.

“What do you mean by ‘husband’?” Sister Alessia asked, “Liam is only thirteen.”

“He’s *fourteen*,” Nat corrected the Paladin. “Don’t talk as if you know him.”

“Either way,” Vicar Aspasia said, “it’s *far* too early for Liam to be married.”

“What are you talking about?” Nat’s voice grew increasingly heated, “Liam’s married to *me*.”

Liam tested Sister Alessia’s grip on his head, but it remained as unyielding as an adamantite vice. He should have stayed in the tavern to do his homework.

With Nat facing her imminent demise at the jaws of Kali’ciel, Liam decided to bring her back to the Sorcerous Kingdom with him. The stereotypically simple-minded Frost Dragon offered no argument as her orders were to leave no witnesses behind and Liam offered to buy her a whole deer from Warden’s Vale if she gave Nat a ride.

The strange part was that Lady Shalltear, who had given Kali her orders in the first place, seemed perfectly fine with it because Nat was ‘cute’. Lord Demiurge was intrigued by Liam’s account of Nat’s talent as a Leatherworker, so Liam was tasked with securing accommodations for her.

At first, Nat was too scared to leave her lodgings in E-Rantel’s common district. Undead and Demihumans frequently strode the streets and she couldn’t even muster the courage to draw water at the local well. Three months later, that was evidently no longer the case.

“The issue of your hidden wife must be brought up with your guardian,” Sister Alessia said.

“M-My guardian?” Liam froze, “You mean Lady Zahradnik?”

“Mhm.”

“Y-Y-You can’t do that,” Liam said. “If she finds out, all that’ll be left of me is a crater!”

“Justice comes to all eventually,” the Paladin intoned.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Then what do you have to fear?” Sister Alessia smiled.

For some reason, Nat took exception to the Paladin’s smile and grabbed Liam around the waist.

“Let Liam go! I bet you’re just jealous because he didn’t marry you!”

*Does this girl ever listen?*

He couldn’t recall them having done anything to make her think that they were married. They didn’t have a wedding or even a ceremony with a Priest. All he did was pick her off of a platform and have her do stuff for him. He had even set her up to be successful once he left, though that part hadn’t gone according to plan due to the insane insurrection that set Hoburns aflame.

“Enough,” Sister Alessia said. “We’re taking this to court.”

“I’m innocent!” Liam protested.

The Paladin set him back down and gave him a poke in the back.

“Walk,” she said.

There was little he could do against an Orichalcum-rank Paladin. She marched him back out of the market and up the streets of the common district. They eventually crossed through the inner wall’s southern gate, entering the administrative centre of the city. Nat clung to his arm as they passed by the powerful Undead stationed at every office entrance and street corner. She froze entirely when they arrived at a manor with the number ‘4’ on the gate, refusing to get too close to the Death Knight standing on the left side.

The footman on the right gave each one of them a glance before nodding at the Vicar respectfully.



“Vicar Aspasia,” he said. “I hope the day finds you well.”

“Blessings of The Six be upon you, Terrence,” the Cleric replied. “We’ve come to speak with Baroness Zahradnik about a personal matter.”

“Unfortunately,” Terrence replied, “my lady is not in the city at the moment.”

Liam breathed a sigh of relief. It appeared that he had been granted a stay of execution.

“Is that so?” Vicar Aspasia said, “Does that mean she’s back in Warden’s Vale? Or perhaps the trade exposition in Corelyn Harbour..”

“Lady Zahradnik has gone to visit her liege’s territory,” the footman replied. “She’s been away for a while now and we haven’t received word on when she will return.”

The Cleric thanked the footman before they went back the way that they came. Unfortunately, the way Sister Alessia hovered behind him suggested that they weren’t done with him yet.

“Can I go now?” Liam asked.

“Of course not,” the Paladin answered. “The Dominia may not be around, but you have another guardian with whom we can discuss your indiscretions.”

“What indiscretions?”

“That’s right,” Nat said. “We’re a married couple. Nothing we do together is an ‘indiscretion’.”

Liam sighed as he was escorted to a wagon. Hopefully, he would be assigned on a mission soon that would send him far away from homework and girls.

“Liam,” Nat whispered, “where are these horrible death worshippers taking us?”

“To Corelyn Harbour,” Liam replied. “You need to be on your best behaviour. The person we’re being taken to is a High Noble.”

Nat turned pale and swallowed.

“Your guardian is a *High Noble*? I didn’t know you were such an important person...”

Liam stared out the window as their wagon rolled through the vineyards south of the city. Nat’s ‘Liam sickness’ only ever seemed to get worse. He could probably butcher an entire city at this point and she would only consider it an achievement by her ‘husband’.

“Somebody’s in trouble...”

A light, mocking voice greeted him as he disembarked at the gardens of Castle Corelyn. He turned his voice to catch an Ijaniya agent working undercover as a Maid giving him a mischievous look.

“Vicar Aspasia,” a footman in the livery of House Corelyn bowed, “I hope the day finds you well.”

“Blessings of The Six be upon you,” the Cleric replied. “We’re here to discuss a private matter with Countess Corelyn.”

“Your timing is fortunate,” the footman said. “My lady is between tours for lunch at the moment. This way, please.”

Rather than guide them into the massive palace at the end of the garden, they walked around it to the garden on the other side. There, they found Countess Corelyn standing in a gazebo that had been repurposed into an office. To Liam’s surprise, the figure standing across from her wasn’t one of the many imperial aristocrats that had visited over the summer, but a hulking Ocelo Lord.

Nat let out an utterly terrified noise and hid behind him, but the Ocelo Lord seemed entirely preoccupied with staring at the documents spread out over the table. Countess Corelyn looked up from her work, her golden hair glittering in the sunlight as she emerged to greet the Vicar with a graceful curtsy.

“Vicar Aspasia. I hope the day finds you well.”

“Blessings of The Six be upon you, Countess Corelyn,” the Cleric replied with a ritual gesture. “Our apologies for interrupting your busy schedule, but a matter of grave concern has been brought to our awareness.”

“What might that be?” The Countess asked.

“This girl here claims that Liam is her husband,” Sister Alessia said.

*Don't just throw it out there all of the sudden!*

"It's not a *claim*," Nat countered. "Liam *is* my husband! We've been married since spring."

Liam silently wondered whether any protests on his part would make things worse or not. Lady Corelyn's amethyst gaze seemed to harden as it fell upon him.

"Would you care to explain, Liam?"

"I..."

He didn't want to hurt Nat's feelings, but he couldn't figure out a way to explain what was going on without doing so. Making things clear from the start might have helped, but he couldn't do so without putting his mission at risk. It was embarrassing to think that he thought himself clever for finding such an 'elegant solution' at the time.

"It was...I mean, I *did* meet her in the spring," Liam said. "But it's not as simple as it sounds."

"Go on..."

"I was working in Hoburns and the people I got in with expected me to have a girl after I distinguished myself. Not having one would've probably affected my standing with everyone, so I sorta went along with it."

"Getting married does not sound like 'sorta'," Sister Alessia growled.

"And how did you end up with..."

"Nat, my lady," Liam said. "You see, the way the camp worked, there were a lot of men from the south. Spares and such that the Nobles could afford to bring along with them to help maintain order in the north. Most weren't married when they came in, so they set up a, um...*program* where women would be brought in and offered to the men. They even spent a few weeks educating them to be proper wives for members of a Noble's retinue."

"I've read the reports," Lady Corelyn said. "How did you end up with Nat in particular?"

The official reports probably didn't render Liam's girl problems in any degree of detail. As he mentally summarised the event in question and the rationale behind his actions, Nat spoke up.

"He picked me," she said proudly. "When it was my turn on the platform, he took my hand and he started making a home for our family right away!"

"Is that so?" Lady Corelyn raised an eyebrow, "What were the circumstances that led to you entering the camp?"

"Living in the city became super expensive," Nat replied. "My family built up a big debt, so they had to sell me."

The slightest of frowns turned the corner of the Countess' lip.

"Liam, doesn't that mean she's a *slave*?"

"Uh...technically? I didn't buy her or anything though. She was working the entire time we were together, so she's probably done enough to pay off her family's debt a few times over."

"How much did your family owe, Nat?" Countess Corelyn asked.

"I don't know," Nat answered.

"Then do you have any record of the transaction between your family and the...camp?"

"No."

"The reports mention that these camps utilised their own scrip rather than any internationally recognised currency," Lady Corelyn said. "I take it that you weren't able to exchange any of it for something of value before coming here?"

Nat shook her head. The Countess turned her attention back to Liam.

"Summarise her circumstances since arriving in the Sorcerous Kingdom."

“I found her a job in the city after registering her with the Guilds,” Liam said. “It was pretty easy with the demand for skilled labour. She’s working as a journeyman at a Cobbler’s shop and staying upstairs. I haven’t seen her much since then.”

He could almost feel Nat’s dissatisfaction as he related her situation in the city. Lady Corelyn crossed her arms as she scrutinised the brown-haired girl.

“So she’s a Leatherworker.”

“Yes, my lady,” Liam said. “That’s why I chose her in the first place. Well, sort of. First, I asked the girls on the platform who could read and she was the only one who could. After that, I found out she was from a family of Leatherworkers, so I set up a workshop for her in the camp. She’s *really* talented: her stuff is consistently good enough to serve as a base for enchantment.”

“So you encouraged and supported her growth while having her act as a component of your profile in the Holy Kingdom.”

“I wasn’t *acting!*” Nat protested, “I’m Liam’s wife and I love him more than anything else in the world!”

To his side, Vicar Aspasia shook her head.

“I’m happy to hear that you’ve followed the scriptures and acted to help Nat realise her potential,” she said, “but, at the same time…”

“A sinner,” Sister Alessia said. “This boy is dangerous.”

“I fear for young Liam’s future, Lady Corelyn,” the Cleric nodded in agreement. “As well as for the future of Nat.”

The Countess uncrossed her arms, tapping her finger lightly against her hip.

“Perhaps some time apart will help,” she said. “Liam can’t afford any interruptions to his studies or his work and it sounds like Nat still has plenty of room for professional development. Warden’s Vale would welcome someone with her capabilities.”

“W-Warden?” Nat clutched at Liam’s sleeve, “I don’t want to go to prison! Loving Liam isn’t a crime!”

“Warden’s Vale isn’t a prison,” Countess Corelyn told her with an amused smile. “It’s actually a very nice place. Liam’s house is there—”

“I’ll go,” Nat said.

“Are you certain? Warden’s Vale isn’t a place where just anyone can live.”

“If Liam lives there, then I’m living there.”

“I see.”

Women were incomprehensible creatures. At least he would be dealing with one less in the city.

As Countess Corelyn made arrangements for Nat’s move, Liam spotted Countess Wagner walking into the garden out of the corner of his eye.

*Not walking, slinking.*

He furrowed her brow as he followed her strange entrance, watching as the Noblewoman silently made her way to the gazebo. Then, for some strange reason, she pulled a big cucumber out of her dress and put it on the floor behind the Beastman before backing away. The Ocelo Lord’s ears swivelled at the sound of swishing skirts. She twisted her body partway before leaping into the air.

“GYAAAH!!!”

The Ocelo Lord’s head struck the ceiling of the gazebo and she hit the ground at a run, sprinting on all fours to disappear into a nearby clump of bushes. Lady Wagner burst out into laughter; as did Sister Alessia. Countess Corelyn, however, turned on the younger Noblewoman with a cross look.

“Liane! Lady Xoc is already on edge being in a strange place. How could you treat her like some sort of...*cat*?”

“I was curious,” Lady Wagner shrugged. “Anyway, I just got back from speaking with Her Excellency. Things are about to get hella busy.”

“What did she say?”

“A bunch of things,” Lady Wagner said as she scanned through the people present. “Oh, Liam – great timing. You’ve got a new mission.”