

When Saralash sent spines of hardened slimes at Ange, everyone panicked to help. They couldn't. Slime glued their feet to the ground. The succubus, however, raised both hands and somehow brought them to a stop inches away from skewering her. The tips turned to ice and the length of the spines frosted over.

Ange backhanded them, shattering the spines to pieces.

While they did battle, I rushed over to check on Cresta, who had fallen despondent and in tears.

"Remmy? Where did Remmy go?" Cresta asked repeatedly, voice quivering and eyes distant. She wasn't all there, too much in grief to realize what was going on.

My hand clenched the three pieces of the core that was left of Remmy. Where was a snide remark when I needed one? Now, nothing. I was speechless, still yet to comprehend that she was gone. I'd failed Remmy.

"Akira, snap out of it!" Irapesha shouted from afar, herself and Mercutia also trapped in the same manner by pink slime. "You're the only one who can move. Find another gun and free us!"

As I searched the ground for another gun, I instead found many people with their phones whipped out. They were filming the fight between Ange and Saralash. The proof that Ange still had her magic was out of the bag now, and I was going to lose another tenant.

Everything was falling apart faster than I knew how to fix. Was ending Saralash's life... taking away another of Mercutia's family the only way?

I cursed under my breath and wrenched a rifle from the hands of an unconscious guard. When I fired at the slime encasing the netherfolks, the goo hardened. Irapesha broke out by simply flexing her legs. She freed Mercutia and Cresta by punching the now brittle entombments, but the latter had lost all will to fight.

"Cresta, I know you're mourning," Irapesha began empathetically. "We've lost so many friends during the war, but if you don't snap out of it now, then you will lose more."

"Remmy... was my *best* friend..." Cresta whimpered.

I hugged Cresta and stroked the back of her head. She sobbed harder, soaking my shoulder in tears.

"It hurts, but I need you to stay with us. If we leave things the way they are, Ange is going to be taken away, too," I said.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

A fiery explosion rocked the side of a building behind the gathering crowd. Debris plummeted over them, and many tripped trying to escape. Mercutia threw out both hands to conjure a barrier in time, but it left them buried under a mound of rubble.

"There should be a much larger task force coming to stop this soon. I need you guys to damage control and protect people. Or get them to safety. We're in a lot more trouble if innocents get hurt," I explained.

"Should we not face the source of the destruction? Saralash?" Irapesha asked.

"No. You're just going to get stuck again. I'll take care of Saralash and Ange, so Cresta..." I pressed the pieces of Remmy's core into her hand.

Cresta knew exactly what they were. She folded her fingers over the pieces and brought them close to her chest while fighting back tears.

All four of us split. Mercutia and my tenants went to help people, and I chased after Ange and Saralash who had taken their fight farther down the street. The slime woman had become like a sea urchin of thrashing spines that pierced anything they came across. Ange held her own, firing magic that easily defended herself from the ceaseless assault.

"Ange, follow me!" I yelled, racing past them and vaulting over slime appendages like a hurdle.

Puzzled at first, Ange threw caution to the wind and followed after me. Saralash was hot on our trail, forming spines into jackhammers that smashed into the asphalt behind us.

"Akira, you idiot! You're putting yourself in danger again!" Ange exclaimed.

"Scold me later! Focus on getting back to where our escorts were!"

Ange picked me up and flew us both down the street while a shower of deadly spines rained after us. Most of the operatives were down for the count, but the harpy woman from earlier was just coming to consciousness. She pulled the helmet off her head and gaped at our approach, then picked up her rifle to provide covering fire.

"Hydrant! The fire hydrant!" I pointed to the yellow protrusion on the side of the road.

We landed hard on the ground next to it, and Ange shot a bolt of magic to break open one end. A geyser shot out at Saralash, followed by the water freezing over and encasing her in a coffin of ice.

Incapacitated and unable to move, the harpy soldier turned her rifle to Ange next.

"That was magic just now, wasn't it? Professor Markel told us you should have received an anti-magic serum. Why are you still able to cast magic?" she asked.

Ange bared her fangs. I could tell by the glow in her eyes she wanted to charm the harpy. I grabbed her hand, wresting her away from making a mistake by having her look at me instead. That glow vanished.

Our respite was short-lived. Saralash's icy trap shattered. The slime woman fell on top of a car, caving in the roof. She breathed heavily and had trouble maintaining herself in humanoid form.

"It isn't over... until I or the demon... !" Saralash stopped short and panted exhaustively. Her eyes frantically searched up and down the street.

Was she looking for something?

Multiple armored vehicles barreled through, stealing Saralash from her desperate search. A flock of airborne netherfolks, harpies and magically levitating elves, readied spells in their hands. The cavalry was finally here.

"Weapons hot on the slime netherfolk!"

Outnumbered and outmatched, I thought Saralash would just surrender. Instead, the slime woman rendered herself amorphous and drained into the curbside sewer grate.

The operatives were stunned.

Saralash was gone. Just now, she was looking for something. But what? When I thought back to Remmy, my heart was heavy but an idea came to me. Could it be... milk?

"Ange, take us to the nearest convenience store. Now!" I exclaimed.

"Wait! I'm not done with you—"

We ignored the harpy, and Ange picked me up high into the sky. We found the closest convenience store first, a 7-11 at the corner of the street. With a swarm of flying netherfolks on our tail, Ange booked it as fast as she could, but they were gaining.

"Why a convenience store?" Ange asked.

"Just a hunch, but..."

"Stop!" One of the operatives caught up, at least until he smashed his face into a barrier.

Down below, Mercutia raised barrier after barrier to trap the swarm behind us.

"Saralash is inside, isn't she?" Mercutia asked.

"I think so." I nodded.

Mercutia erected another barrier, this one much larger that shrouded the entire convenience store. Some of the soldiers fired into the barrier to little success, but she was able to walk right in. Ange and I traded looks, then walked in ourselves.

Behind us, numerous human and netherfolk soldiers gathered in an attempt to break through.

"My barrier has held off entire demon sieges. They aren't getting through unless I let them," Mercutia assured us.

The automatic doors rolled open, and a bell chimed from above. Something rustled at the back of the store, so we followed the sound until we found Saralash in the beverage aisle. The lower half of her body was a puddle. Only her upper half remained humanoid. She was desperately pouring milk over herself.

The ivory nectar mostly flowed away from her, but some absorbed into the slime body.

"I'll end her," Ange growled, but I grabbed her shoulder and shook my head. "Why? She killed Remmy!"

"Because we're not murderers. And I'm sure Mercutia wants to speak with her," I said.

Ange bit down on her lip until she drew blood.

Saralash reached for another carton, but Mercutia trapped her in a barrier to keep her from getting it. I almost pitied the slime woman. She looked so sad when her appendages bumped desperately for milk that was so close.

"Mercutia... Why do you help them? Aren't we family?" Saralash asked weakly.

"Because you've hurt their family. Can't you see how hurt they were to see Remmy killed?" Mercutia fired back.

"We were doing this for you!" she shouted so angrily that her voice echoed in the mostly empty store.

Mercutia was taken aback.

"Me...? What do you mean"

"It was... Captain Clarissa told us not to tell you, but it was the plan all along. To ensure that you can live safely in this world without fear of demons. The rest of us, Thane and Jeriah, too, agreed to do everything we can protect you—"

"I never wanted any of you to protect me!" Mercutia cried. "Thane's gone. Jeriah's in the hospital, and he's going to be gone. There's an army waiting outside to take you away. I didn't want that at all... You're going to end up leaving me all alone... because you thought I needed *protecting?*"

Ashamed, Saralash avoided looking Mercutia in the eyes.

"Mercutia... demons are a plague on—"

"No! That might have been true once, but the demon you're talking about now has a name. It's Angeline. She... She bought me this dress. See? Isn't it cute? She's not dangerous like you make her out to be..."

"Mercutia begged me to help you. I'm sorry I couldn't do more." I kneeled down beside the slime woman, just behind the barrier.

Saralash scoffed. "*You're* apologizing to *me*? After I killed that girl? Save your apologies, human. If you turn me in, they will no doubt confine me in Weyera. I'll not be caged again like I once was. There is only one way this ends: I die here."

"What? No! There has to be another way!" Mercutia dropped the barrier to fall into Saralash's arms. She responded by lifting a slime appendage to wipe her tears away, then turned to me.

"Remmy is not dead," she said.

"What?" Ange and I choked.

"A slime is not truly dead until the magic is completely gone from the core. Have you ever wondered why she and I are attracted to milk? It is calcium. It regenerates our cores and allows us to take forms. Submerge her pieces in a bath of milk, and siphon the magic from my core to make her whole again. The succubus can do it. Taking lifeforce is their speciality after all."

Ange looked away.

"But what... will happen to you?" Mercutia asked tearfully.

"I will be put to rest, along with this agony I've carried for years. I don't do this for them. It has always been for you." Saralash forced the faceted crystalline core from her chest until the last tethers of slime fully snapped from the body.

It dropped to the floor with a thud and rolled away.

Like with Remmy, Saralash couldn't hold her form. The bottommost part of her body began to harden and crumble like a wet sand castle. Mercutia cried uncontrollably, trying to put her friend back together.

"I love you, Mercutia. As does everyone, and especially Captain Clarissa. You were a beacon of light in the depths of our black hearts," Saralash said.

"I love you, too... " Mercutia whispered back.

Saralash leaned back as the rest of her body caved in on itself. She stared at the flickering ceiling light.

"Playing video games, she said. That didn't sound... so bad... at all." Saralash chuckled before finally dissolving away.

Mercutia, clutching tightly to Saralash's core, buried her face into Ange's chest and wailed. The succubus cradled her until there were no more tears to shed.

"It doesn't have to end this way. We can also submerge Saralash's core in milk, right?" I asked.

"No... I want to stand by her wishes," Mercutia answered me with resolve.

We walked out to dozens of armed operatives and their guns trained on us. As soon as Mercutia dropped the barrier, screams to get on the ground assailed our ears. Cresta and Irapesha were racing up from behind them.

"Cresta! We can revive Remmy!" I shouted.

"Y-You can?" Cresta stammered in disbelief.

"I said get on the ground!" an officer yelled.

In the span of two blinks, Cresta shredded every gun in the area. Their broken weapons clattered to the ground. She scampered to us, eyes filling with hope.

"You're not lying? Please, tell me you can bring Remmy back!" Cresta pleaded.

"Ange, can you...?" Mercutia asked her, revealing Saralash's slime core.

"Very well, dear." Ange winced at the sight of it, but she agreed out of respect for both of them.

As she hovered a palm over each of the cores, the soldiers surrounding us grew tense.

"The succubus is using magic!" the officer hollered to the airborne netherfolk operatives. "Don't just watch— do something!"

The mages in flight were about to channel spells until Irapesha glared up at them.

"Stand down!" Irapesha ordered.

And they did so out of instinct. After all, Irapesha served at the highest post of the Empire of Granieda's united military force.

Meanwhile, Ange conducted a spell to absorb the magic from Saralash's core in one hand, then transfer it to Remmy's smaller and broken pieces. As the last flowing tendrils of magic that coiled through her arms waned, the crystalline core in Mercutia's hands cracked. The luster had all but dulled.

Mercutia curled her fingers over the core, collapsed to her knees, and wept again. Ange kneeled down to hold the mourning girl. Disarmed and helpless, they relented to standing by to watch.

In Cresta's hands, Remmy's core pieces had lit up like a lamp bulb. It was the color and life that Saralash gave up.

With the carton of milk I picked up within the store, I poured a little onto Cresta's palm. Very tiny, fuzz-like blue tendrils emerged from the pieces and wriggled towards each other.

"Remmy!" Cresta cried with relief.

"It worked. It really worked." I sighed.

The squad of operatives parted as a black sedan rolled in. Two people, an Asian man and Caucasian woman dressed in suits, their eyes shielded by sunglasses, surveyed us and the destruction. They were both young. Compared to Professor Markel at least. But they were still older than me.

"Is Saralash inside?" the woman asked, then gestured to someone nearby to hurry inside and check.

The other man marched up to us and produced a device that looked like a temperature gun, pointed it at Ange, and frowned.

"Wait! Ange is harmless. You're after the wrong netherfolk!" I stood firm to guard her.

"Sorry, my man. I don't make the rules. Least I can do is let you put this on. Until further notice, Angeline Varcaz is under house arrest and may not leave the dormitory premise under any circumstances. Is that understood?" he asked, handing me a golden armlet with a green jewel embedded into the outer cuff.

Ange nodded and stuck out her right arm for me to put it on. When I did, the band constricted until it fit snug just below the deltoid.

The operative who entered the convenience store returned and whispered something into the woman's ear. She nodded to dismiss him.

"Who exactly are you two?" I asked.

"Old coot didn't tell you? Name's Reginald." He shook my hand with a powerful grip, then thumbed over his shoulder. "That's Grace. We're the interns— well, not anymore. With Professor Markel deepthroating a respirator, we're going to be your new handlers from now on. Nice to meet you, Akira! By the way, big fan. I am anyway. Grace? Ehh... Not so much."

Reginald slinked away as the woman named Grace stormed up to me.

"Akira, you're under arrest. Until we get this bureaucratic mess sorted out, a substitute caretaker will be assigned to your dorm. Turn around and put your hand behind your back," Grace ordered.

"Oh, joy." I groaned.