Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an UNLIMITED GACHA I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World

VOL. 3

Story
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Prologue

As a nation, the Dark Elf Islands consisted of over a hundred islands—both big and small—located in the sea to the south of the mainland. The dark elves who lived on these islands devoted practically all their resources to researching magic, medicine, metallurgy, and other similar pursuits, so that as a race, they could surpass the elves, who they viewed as bitter rivals. In fact, the Dark Elf Islands' track record in research was so extensive, the nation was one of only three known to make groundbreaking discoveries and produce new technology—the others being the Principality of the Nine and the Dwarf Kingdom.

To aid this pursuit of knowledge, the authorities of the Dark Elf Islands offered generous support to its top researchers. Not only did this mean that these researchers received funding and staff, but at times, they were also granted the freedom of an entire island of facilities where they could conduct their research—the idea being that on an island, it was simple to restrict access to only authorized personnel, which would reduce the risk of leaks of sensitive information. This was something only this particular archipelago nation was capable of pulling off.

One of these top researchers was called Siophylline, who was named after a flower that only grew on the Dark Elf Islands because it had been originally cultivated there by a leading researcher. Its name meant "scientist's blossom." But when she was active in the Concord of the Tribes, "Siophylline" was too much of a mouthful, so her party called her "Sionne" for short.

Sionne's platinum blonde hair cascaded a long way down her back, but her bangs were cut in a straight and businesslike fashion just above her eyes. Like a lot of other dark elves, Sionne had tanned skin, creating an exquisite visual contrast with her hair, and although Sionne had a larger bust than her former partymate, Sasha, her waist was skinny enough to draw envious barbs from other women. And not only was Sionne the very definition of the ideal female form, her jaw-dropping looks easily surpassed those of her fellow dark elves, even though they were a race that prided themselves on their handsome features.

Slung around Sionne's hips at the top of her long legs was a pouch containing potions, poisons, spell catalysts, and other concoctions she had made herself.

"We will now commence the experiment. We must ensure we note down every observation we make," Sionne said to one of her research assistants.

"Of course, Dr. Sionne," replied the dark elf, who was clearly much older than her. He turned and gave instructions to some younger assistants before double-checking to make sure that the data would be properly recorded. While the senior assistant did all this, Sionne coolly pulled out a knife and walked toward the middle of the research lab, her high heels clacking ominously across the stone floor.

The laboratory was located on the floor furthest below ground level, and the space was as expansive as a courtyard in an aristocrat's manor. Complex magic symbols had been drawn on the floor, and sitting right in the center of these seals was an adult human male strapped tightly to a metal torture chair. The man was in his thirties, was wearing nothing but his underwear, and leather bonds meant he couldn't move his hands, feet, or head. He had a cloth gag over his mouth, and even though it prevented the man from speaking, his muffled screams rang out around the cavernous lab.

Impassive to his smothered howls, Sionne approached the man and stabbed him in the thigh without a hint of hesitation. This drew even louder screams of agony from the human, but that didn't stop Sionne calmly stabbing him in the other thigh, before inflicting a fatal wound by plunging her knife deep into his abdomen. This deed seemed to come naturally to Sionne, as if she were a butcher slaughtering a live animal. One of the younger research assistants had been busy performing a final check on the magic circles on the floor, but on witnessing the clinical dispatch of this man, he turned pale and shuddered. While dark elves certainly looked down on humans as "inferiors," most of them were perfectly capable of feeling disgusted at the needless torture of a defenseless creature.

D-Dr. Sionne is prettier than most and incredibly intelligent to boot, but I get now why no one even attempts to hit on her, thought the assistant. *Nobody in their right mind would make a pass at a woman who doesn't think twice about pulling a knife on you, regardless of how hot and smart she is!*

Sionne noticed that the research assistant was staring at her and turned to face him. “Why have you stopped working? Have you found an issue with the magic circles?”

“Oh, no! I was just...” the assistant started, but he wisely trailed off. He wasn’t about to tell her that he thought she was a total psychopath and it was a complete turn off. After a slight pause, he found a more diplomatic way of wording his feedback. “I simply wondered why we needed to stab the test subject if we are conducting research on the soul.”

“I believe you have only just recently transferred to my lab and this is the first experiment of mine that you have been a part of,” Sionne noted. “In light of that, it’s only natural that a researcher such as yourself would be curious about why I perform my tests in a certain way.”

Sionne resheathed her knife in a way that suggested she had bought the assistant’s little white lie. She produced a handkerchief and went about wiping the human’s blood off her hands. Because Sionne was every bit as beautiful as a handcrafted doll, the way she handled the handkerchief was so captivating, the lab assistant found himself utterly spellbound. He also mentally breathed a sigh of relief that he had somehow avoided what could have been a rather messy confrontation.

“As it happens, stabbing the subject *is* absolutely necessary,” Sionne continued her lecture as she meticulously wiped her hands. “As it is the soul that our research is concerned with, I would normally take this opportunity to fully outline what the soul actually is, but as I do not want our test subject to pass away before I’ve finished speaking, I’ll keep this brief.”

Sionne glanced across at the human who was near death before continuing. “By inflicting pain on the specimen, we are able to strongly agitate the soul through torment, anguish, and despair, with the intention of making the soul actively reify itself, so that we can more clearly observe the results. I will concede that I enjoy witnessing subjects like this one squealing like farm animals about to be slaughtered—so much so, in fact, that I often carry out the deed myself. Now, if you don’t mind, I need you to complete your final checks before the test subject dies or recovers from his mental distress.”

“S-Sorry, doctor!” the lab assistant said in response to this stinging rebuke. “I’ll wrap up shortly!”

Once the lab workers had completed their final checks, Sionne crossed her arms underneath her ample bosom and gave the signal to start the experiment. The command arrived just in time, before the man succumbed to his injuries.

“Commence the experiment,” Sionne instructed. “Discharge the mana into the magic symbols.”

“Yes, doctor!” a number of young assistants replied in unison.

The dark elves placed their hands on the lines that led to the magic symbols and saturated the runes with mana, causing the floor to glow in intricately designed light patterns. With each minute that passed, the glimmering light grew stronger, with the symbols in the center shining particularly bright. The light from the magic symbols converged on the test subject, allowing the dark elves to observe his soul. Magical liquid rose and fell in glass tubes inside machines connected to the magic runes, while scales made of rare metal with magic gems in them oscillated left and right as they measured the response of the floor symbols. The dark elves dutifully wrote down the figures from these pieces of equipment as well as some others that were in the room, and by and large, the ongoing activities resembled the type one might see in a normal research lab.

“The mana is converging too rapidly,” Sionne observed. “Mana team, decrease the infusion rate.”

“Yes, doctor.” The lab assistants lowered the amount of mana they were imbuing into the magic symbols, but the light from them continued to intensify, causing Sionne’s eyes to narrow in annoyance.

“Mana team, I believe I *specifically* instructed you to reduce the mana you are infusing,” Sionne said pointedly.

“D-Doctor, the infusion has been lessened to half its original strength,” the lead assistant said. Despite this adjustment, the magic symbols seemed to still be absorbing mana at an accelerated pace, prompting the researchers to finally acknowledge that something had gone wrong.

“Terminate the experiment!” Sionne yelled. “Mana team, cut the infusion immediately! Connect the symbols up to the gem pillars and have them absorb the excess mana!”

“Doctor, it’s not working!” the lead assistant cried. “The pillars are connected up, but they’re absorbing too much mana! We’re already well past normal tolerance levels and the pillars will breach critical capacity in a few minutes!”

Infusing magic symbols with too much mana had the potential to cause damage to a lab, or worst-case scenario, even trigger an explosion. As a safety precaution, labs like this one were equipped with what were called “magic gem pillars,” designed to absorb surplus mana. Positioned against the wall, the pillars looked like regular marble columns on the outside, but inside, they were filled with magic gems. Normally, saturating just one safety pillar with mana would be nearly impossible, but even after connecting the magic circles up to multiple pillars, all of them were on the verge of going overcapacity and the risk of an explosion was real.

Sionne’s brow furrowed as she stared at the magic symbols on the floor. “We’ve completely terminated the infusion of mana, yet inexplicably, the energy levels are still rising. What in the world is going on here?”

As if in response to Sionne’s question, the air directly above the center of the magic symbols distorted and quickly grew from a small rift into a dark, heavy mass. For everyone in the lab, this turned out to be a fateful incident.

A dragon burst out of the spatial distortion, though the effect was more like it had just crashed through a stained-glass window. Its neck was just as long as its tail, and its magnificent wingspan was easily more than ten meters wide. Each one of its reptilian feet had thick claws that could disembowel any monster that roamed the land, and its fangs resembled stone palisades. This dragon was a fearsome specimen indeed, but a closer look revealed that its body was semitransparent—though that didn’t stop it from acting like any other living creature, and a fifteen-meter-long one at that.

The dragon turned its murderous gaze on the dark elves in the lab before arching its neck backward slightly, as if preparing to breathe instant death over everyone. Sionne saw her opportunity to delve into her pouch and produce a

container, which she smashed on the ground near the dragon, releasing a spell catalyst for one of her magical attacks.

“Magic power, hear me now! Curse my foe with death’s dark vow! Black Plague!”

Sionne’s quick-thinking was the result of her many years surviving dangerous quests as an adventurer. Thanks to the accelerant she had thrown, this tactical-class spell barreled at breakneck speed toward the dragon, which simultaneously lurched its neck forward and unleashed a protracted, deafening roar that caused everyone in the lab to clap their hands over their ears. This was no ordinary roar, though. The sound ripped the souls out of all the dark elves who heard it, and their lifeless corpses crumpled to the ground. Everyone, that is, except Sionne, who was the only one left standing.

“Oh. Who would have countenanced that there existed a being who could resist my Deprivation Roar? It is barely believable,” the dragon intoned in a deep, masculine voice.

“Deprivation Roar?” Sionne queried, though the shock on her face was more down to the fact that the dragon could talk at all. After all, the translucent creature shouldn’t have been capable of speech since it lacked vocal cords. Or for that matter, any other physical body parts.

“I am the Soul Dragon, the absolute ruler of spirits!” the dragon bellowed. “All who hear my roar are robbed of their souls. Yet a small creature like you unleashed an attack that canceled out my powers. You must be very fortunate indeed.”

After commending Sionne for her good fortune, the Soul Dragon opened its mouth wide, causing the souls of the now-deceased dark elves and the human test subject to become visible above their corpses, and even though the souls glowed brightly, they seemed to be made out of the same semitranparent stuff as the dragon. The Soul Dragon then inhaled the souls, and once every last one had been gulped down, it closed its gaping mouth and licked its chops. Throughout this whole spectacle, Sionne could only stand and watch in stunned silence.

If this creature really is *the Soul Dragon, then what I just witnessed was souls*

leaving dead bodies, Sionne thought. *I hired lab assistants, drew magic symbols, and expended a huge amount of time, mana, and rare items on manufacturing these measuring implements in order to prove the existence of souls, yet this beast was able to materialize souls in an instant. This is simply unheard of!*

There were plenty of monsters who fed off mana instead of the usual flesh-and-blood diet, but there was no known creature in the world that could feed off souls. Sionne herself had been performing research into souls, and she had become something of an expert in magic attacks that affect the spirit. If Sionne had attacked the Soul Dragon with fire or ice magic, those spells wouldn't have canceled out the Deprivation Roar, but Sionne's Black Plague—when mixed with the accelerant—had the effect of eating away at an enemy's soul to cause death. All of this meant that when she used it against the Soul Dragon, the spell acted as a shield that counteracted the creature's roar.

"You are magnificent!" Sionne burst out.

Not only was she completely unafraid of the Soul Dragon, she wanted to learn more about this powerful being that could materialize souls, and she didn't care one iota that the corpses of her associates lay scattered all over the lab. In fact, Sionne felt incredibly thankful for this near-miraculous encounter with a creature who could satisfy her thirst for knowledge—to the point where she even approached the dragon like a lovestruck maiden who had just found her soulmate.

"You are a truly astonishing beast," Sionne continued. "Would it be possible for you to lend me your abilities for my research? If you work with me, I am willing to do everything in my power to do what you ask of me."

"I have killed all of your cohorts, yet you delight in my presence and feel no fear or anger whatsoever?" the Soul Dragon said. "You interest me."

Due to its nature, the Soul Dragon could easily tell if a person was lying or telling the truth based on the vibrations of their soul. If Sionne's power level had been higher than her current level of 300, she might have been able to mask her emotions from the Soul Dragon, but as it stood, the creature could see through Sionne clearly, and the only feeling filling up her heart was sheer joy at the prospect of greatly advancing her research.

Knowing that this meant it had leverage over Sionne, the Soul Dragon aired an outlandish proposal. “Then, you shall work for me by offering me souls. Do that for me and I shall work with you.”

“Souls are all you want?” asked Sionne. “Then, I accept your terms. The only thing I need to know is how many souls you desire, so that I can make proper preparations to secure them.”

There was a brief, confused pause before the Soul Dragon asked a question in return. “Are you really so unmoved by the fate of your cohorts?”

The dragon had basically asked Sionne to help it massacre a whole host of dark elves—plus people of other races—so that it may eat its fill, and Sionne hadn’t hesitated to volunteer herself for the task. The creature was truly puzzled at how someone could be so heartless. In response, Sionne tilted her head to one side in a cutesy but perplexed manner.

“Why are you so surprised by that?” said Sionne. “No breakthrough in research comes without sacrifices. I see no problem with our bargain.”

The “sacrifices” in this scenario were living, breathing people, and not just from Sionne’s own race, but from the other eight sentient races too. The Soul Dragon chuckled deeply at her audacious response.

“I believe I favor you, creature,” the dragon rumbled. “Because I admire your determination, I shall share my power with you. You shall know everything there is to know about me!”

The Soul Dragon spread its wings and bathed the entire laboratory in a blinding light that penetrated Sionne and all of the surroundings.

Chapter 1: Dead or Alive

“What do you mean Sionne’s dying?” I asked my Level 9999 lieutenant Mei in my office in the Abyss after I—along with my allies—had wrapped up exacting revenge on Sasha, the elf who had been a member of the Concord of the Tribes.

As part of that operation, the Forbidden Witch, Ellie, had built a huge tower in the middle of a wild forest near the Elven Queendom, and we had used this tower to lure Sasha and the White Knights into our trap. Inside the tower, we got a number of Level 9999 and Level 7777 warriors to test their strength by battling the White Knights, and in the end, we determined that my allies were more than capable of vanquishing whole armies. I personally took care of Sasha and her fiancé Mikhael—the White Knight’s vice-commander—and got sweet revenge against one of my most hated foes.

We also managed to extract a few nuggets of information regarding Masters and Submasters from the memories of the defeated White Knights. A short time after that, Ellie single-handedly toppled the Elven Queendom, pronounced herself the “Wicked Witch of the Tower,” and extracted even more intelligence about Masters from the queen of the elves herself. Thanks to the Forbidden Witch, we had come away from the operation with the best possible outcome.

I had been in my office listening to Ellie’s debrief report when I’d received an urgent message from Mei via Telepathy, telling me that another one of my foes—the dark elf, Sionne—was reportedly on the verge of death. This news instantly took priority over the future of the Elven Queendom and any questions I’d had regarding the new intel about Masters. I immediately summoned Mei to my office, and upon arrival, the Everseeking Maid bowed and started relaying what she had heard.

“We have just received an urgent message from one of our merchants,” Mei had said. My Unlimited Gacha sometimes produced merchants and adventurers, who I dispatched to the surface world as intelligence operatives to gather information. One of these merchants had picked up news that Sionne’s laboratory had somehow turned into a dungeon. As a reward for leaving me as good as dead, the authorities of the Dark Elf Islands had given Sionne the run of

an entire island where she could perform research into souls, as well as furnishing her with an army of assistants, which showed just how much the nation valued her research.



“Back when I was an adventurer, I heard rumors about people’s houses turning into dungeons while they slept,” I recalled with a sigh. “I thought that kind of thing was ultra-rare, though. But now you’re telling me Sionne’s lab has transformed into an actual dungeon?”

Dungeons were roughly divided into two categories: one type consisted of ancient ruins designated as such due to the monsters that resided inside them, while the other type had dungeon cores, like the Abyss. The first type of dungeon did not regenerate any treasure that was inside it, so it was a case of first come, first served. These dungeons mostly remained the same size throughout their existence, though some could grow bigger depending on the type of monsters living inside. The second type was nearer to the typical definition of a dungeon, since they respawned monsters and traps. This variety of dungeon also grew bigger over time if left to its own devices.

To date, nobody had worked out for sure how dungeons were made. Even Ellie—who was an expert on all things magic—had been unable to hit upon an answer to this question, despite extensive study of the Abyss’s dungeon core. Dungeons mostly cropped up deep in mountains, or in the middle of the ocean, or at the very bottom of deep valleys, or in other places that were normally considered unreachable to the average person. Many were of the belief that the world could never be truly rid of deadly monsters because these out-of-the-way dungeons would just keep spawning them. In very rare instances, dungeons would form within already inhabited buildings, and Sionne’s lab may have been one of these unlucky few. Of course, there were a number of exceptions that fit into neither of these two categories of dungeon, but that was a story for another time.

“After Sionne’s laboratory became a dungeon, the authorities of the Dark Elf Islands mobilized a team to search for survivors, but they faced some extremely powerful monsters, and the area inside the former laboratory had become far too vast and distorted for investigators not used to questing. At first, the Dark Elf Islands considered simply abandoning Sionne’s laboratory, but after its dungeonification, labs on nearby islands started experiencing frequent tremors. Experts are growing increasingly concerned that the new dungeon will trigger the eruption of a deep-sea volcano, so they have decided to put the dungeon

out of action.”

A volcanic eruption of that kind would cause untold damage to the archipelago, so a party of adventurers with a strong track record of successfully clearing out dungeons was hired through the guild to go on a quest to utterly destroy Sionne’s lab. This party—known as the Blade of the Isles—was made up entirely of A-rank dark elves and was considered to be one of the best around. But it would be impossible for a single party to remove a dungeon from the map in the short time frame they were asking, no matter how new the dungeon was, so the Dark Elf Islands had decided to spare no expense in recruiting other parties for the task. One of my merchants had heard about the quest and had immediately relayed the information back to the Abyss.

“I’m very glad we’ve caught wind of this valuable bit of info,” I said to Mei. “My party should apply to go on this quest as soon as possible and find out if Sionne is dead or alive. If she’s still breathing, I will do whatever it takes to exact my revenge on her. I’m not about to let some dungeon monster take that away from me.”

The very thought of a monster killing Sionne before I could get my hands on her made me shudder with rage. While I of course wanted her to pay for her betrayal with her life, I didn’t want her to die a quick death without feeling the same misery and despair that I had gone through first.

Ellie interjected to calm me down a little by giving me a bit of positive news regarding my covert adventuring party, the Black Fools. “I guarantee the Dark Elf Islands guild will immediately accept your party for this laboratory dungeon quest. Your team made quite a name for itself by solving the serial killings in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, and by fighting monsters at the Elven Queendom’s behest.”

“Thank you for the confidence booster, Ellie,” I said. “But even if they do refuse my party for whatever reason, we’ll just get the Elven Queendom to put in a good word for us. The dark elves may see the elves as their sworn rivals, but there’s next to no chance that they’ll refuse a *royal* recommendation from them.”

“Of course, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said with a smile, seemingly pleased that

I'd given her an assignment. "I'll have a little 'chat' with the queen and make sure your party gets hired for this quest."

After nodding my approval, I headed out of my office and started making preparations for another trip to the surface. Mei followed on behind to assist me in getting ready, while Ellie started prepping for her "audience" with the queen of the elves.

I won't let Sionne leave this world before she's paid the ultimate price for betraying me, I thought as Mei helped me to prepare. *I* will *get my revenge on her, no matter what it takes.*

☆☆☆

Unlike most other nations, the Dark Elf Islands weren't governed by a single recognized head of state, since the geographical reality of the archipelago prevented a unitary government from taking charge. Instead, the islands were ruled by four sizable clans, and the leaders of these four clans made up a council that usually only met either to resolve large, state-level problems or convened at the start of each year to set the national agenda. One of these clan bosses known as Gighis was in a meeting with Yude, the leader of the Blade of the Isles, with the two dark elves seated on sofas opposite each other.

"Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to see me," Gighis began.

"Not at all. You've done a hell of a lot for me, and this dungeon's a huge fiasco for me too," Yude admitted. "Pardon me for asking this, but are you getting enough sleep? The bags under your eyes have bags."

Gighis reflexively stroked his beard at this remark. His beard was the same color as his long hair, which was tied into a ponytail just below his neckline and fell all the way down to the small of his back. He wore a habit—the traditional garb of the dark elves—though despite its looseness, Yude knew Gighis was hiding a slender, muscular physique underneath. The clan chief was normally extremely attentive, his eyes usually resembling those of a sly predator, and he tended to have the air of a man who was always scheming about one thing or another, while taking special care to never reveal any weaknesses to those who might want to exploit them. But at this particular moment in time, Gighis

looked like he hadn't slept a wink in days. Not only did he have dark circles around his eyes, his cheeks looked gaunt and his muscular frame seemed deflated. In fact, Gighis looked *so* haggard, the normally disinterested Yude felt the need to remark on his appearance.

Gighis rubbed his eyes. "The other three clans are using this blasted dungeon crisis as an opportunity to undermine my authority," he grumbled. "What's more, I have to shell out to get some of the locals evacuated, deal with the Adventurers' Guild, and handle a bunch of other things I'd rather I wasn't being bothered with right now. The workload has left me with absolutely no time for sleep."

The dungeonification of Sionne's lab was turning out to be one of the worst things that had ever happened to Gighis. "The fact that you've agreed to accept this quest is a huge weight off my shoulders," said Gighis. "So you can imagine my relief at knowing the world-famous 'Magic Gatherer' is on the case! This dungeon crisis is as good as solved!"

"Could you please not call me by that nickname?" Yude muttered. "You *know* it makes me sound like some lowly scrub who can't get by without the help of magic items."

"Oh, sorry," Gighis said. "Blame it on my lack of sleep. I didn't mean to insult you."

Under normal circumstances, Gighis would never have dreamed of calling Yude "Magic Gatherer," but that just served to show how much his insomnia had dulled his faculties. Yude's appearance had also played a role in this slip of the tongue. He was 180 centimeters tall with short red hair and several body piercings, and in addition to the breastplate and boots that were normal fare for adventurers, a necklace dangled in front of his throat. This outfit wasn't some kind of fashion statement by Yude, though. No, everything he was wearing was a magic item that he had obtained in one way or another. Top adventurers were expected to keep a few magic items about their person, but no quester was in possession of quite as many high-quality magic items as Yude. The dark elf leaders hadn't just summoned the Blade of the Isles due to their proficiency as adventurers; they needed this particular party for their expertise of exploring dungeons, which had been finely honed by years of searching for

magic items the world over. This activity had earned Yude a reputation as the "Magic Gatherer," though it certainly wasn't by choice.

By this point, the Blade of the Isles were famous enough and had built up enough of a fortune that they no longer needed to risk their lives by questing in dangerous dungeons, yet still they persisted in their search for magic items—a fact that Gighis touched upon while he stroked his beard.

"With all those magic items you have, I doubt even the White Knights would be a match for you," Gighis stated, looking to change the subject and lighten the mood a little. "Your dad would be mighty proud if he could see you now."

"Back up. Me and my party are *plenty* strong enough to cross swords with the White Knights on equal footing—and then some—with or *without* these items," Yude said pointedly. "These things are nothing more than insurance. They give me an edge in a fight, but that's all."

Both of Yude's parents had once been adventurers who had teamed up with other dark elves to form the Spear of the Isles, a party renowned for its exploits. But during one quest, the Spear of the Isles had clashed with the White Knights, the Elven Queendom's strongest fighting force. Luckily, nobody died in the battle, but the White Knights emerged practically unscathed, while several of the Spear of the Isles' members suffered grave injuries. To avoid the hostilities escalating into a full-blown war in the aftermath of this battle, elf and dark elf officials entered into talks and reached a deal that was acceptable to both sides. However, the outcome of the battle with the White Knights came as a major shock to the dark elf leaders. The clan leaders had naturally heard of this Elven Queendom order, but they never believed the knights could so thoroughly trounce their own jewel in the dark elf crown, the Spear of the Isles.

At the time, the Elven Queendom had just appointed Hardy as the commander of the White Knights, with Mikhael as his vice-commander. Hardy was yet to become known as "Hardy the Silent," but during the battle, no one in the Spear of the Isles was able to so much as draw a drop of blood from the lead knight. In fact, Hardy walked away from the battle without even a nick or a stain on his armor. This forced the dark elf leaders to maneuver in the background so that no other nation could catch wind of this setback, but that was another story altogether. As a result of this loss to the White Knights, the

Spear of the Isles disbanded. Yude's parents ended up marrying, and it was then that they had their son. When an older Yude displayed an extraordinary gift for fighting, his parents bequeathed upon him the task of taking down their bitter enemies, the White Knights.

Both of Yude's parents eventually passed away, but seeking a strong opponent worthy of his abilities, Yude decided to carry on his parents' legacy by forming a party of his own and naming it the Blade of the Isles, in homage to his parents' former party. Yude led his party on dungeon quests in search of magic items that would boost their collective strength, but he didn't stop at dungeons. No, once he'd attained A-rank, he gained access to exclusive shops and auctions, and made connections with some well-known collectors in order to get his hands on even more magic items. Occasionally, he would fund research that produced items, spells, and so on, with the ultimate goal of adding them to his party's arsenal. As a result of all this, Yude soon became one of the strongest adventurers in the known world.

The subject of the White Knights jogged Gighis's memory about a piece of news he'd happened across. "You heard about the Elven Queendom? Apparently, this human calling herself the Wicked Witch of the Tower has founded a whole new nation right on their doorstep, and the queendom now has full diplomatic relations with them."

"And it's not the Human Kingdom?" Yude queried.

"Nope, it's a whole separate nation, even though it's also made up of humans. And on top of that, the witch has supposedly declared that 'absolute autonomy be granted to humans,' of all things."

"Is it even *possible* for those prideful elves to be friendly with people like that?" said Yude, his eyes growing wide with shock. He was trying to wrap his head around how the queendom could have allowed a breakaway nation of humans freed from bondage to establish itself right in its backyard, let alone to then engage with this new nation on an equal footing.

"I've been too busy with this lab dungeon to find the time to look over all the information about it, but it seems like the elves have indeed formed diplomatic ties with this new nation," Gighis said as he rubbed his sleep-deprived eyes

once more. “Don’t ask me why the hell the elves would stoop to that level. I’ve already got too much on my plate as it is, thank you very much.”

“But the elves have the White Knights,” Yude pointed out. “This whole thing *must* be part of some grand strategy of theirs.” Because Yude viewed the White Knights as near-invincible rivals, the possibility of the entire order already being defeated and put to death never so much as entered his mind. Instead, Yude saw an opportunity to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“We can’t say for sure if this new nation *really* shares diplomatic ties with the queendom, but this ‘Wicked Witch’ must have a Gift,” Yude speculated. “It’s the only way an inferior could be powerful enough for us to even hear about them.”

“Inferiors are usually about as worthless as day-old garbage, but on rare occasions, some get granted Gifts from the heavens,” said Gighis. “These Gifts either make them pretty powerful, or they come in the form of Appraisal or other useful abilities like that. The head researcher of the dungeonified lab seemed to think Gifts were attached to the soul, and that there should be some way to strip them out of their hosts and transfer them to members of other races.”

“That was precisely why I poured funds into their research,” Yude said circumspectly. “Who would have thought that their lab would get turned into a dungeon? I really don’t want all of that research going down the drain.”

“So *that’s* why the dungeon is such a huge fiasco for you,” Gighis said, nodding his understanding.

“Well, I’m here volunteering for the quest, aren’t I?” said Yude with an innocent shrug. “By the way, I heard talk of there being special Gifted inferiors called ‘Masters.’ Would you happen to know anything about them?”

“Nope, never heard of them,” Gighis said almost instantly.

“Sorry, that was a dumb question. Forget I asked,” Yude said. “Anyway, I think it’s about time you gave me all the info you have on the dungeon so I can devise a plan of attack. Always better to know what you’re dealing with—at least, if you’re the safe and efficient type, like I am. I’ll also give you my latest intel before I forget.”

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver,” said Gighis, taking Yude’s report. “You have no idea how much I owe you for doing this.”

“I scratch your back, and all that,” Yude said, taking the documents on the dungeon from Gighis. “I’ll be looking to you for help the next time I need to get my hands on a valuable item, bit of info, or piece of tech.”

“Of course. I got you covered!” Gighis stated. “Hell, given this kind of active intel you’re always bringing me, I only wish I could do more for you.”

Gighis read Yude’s report with an air of excitement that belied his frazzled, sleepless state. The document contained info from all corners of the world, since the Blade of the Isles took advantage of their positions as A-ranked adventurers to do a bit of espionage on the side. This was all possible because A-ranked questers enjoyed access to places that were normally closed off to the wider public, and the party regularly jotted down every nugget of information they read or overheard in these exclusive places, then compiled it all into intelligence reports that they handed over to the authorities of the Dark Elf Islands. In return for this intel, the authorities were contractually obligated to share the latest tech, items, and information with the Blade of the Isles. This agreement had been brokered between the two solely for the purpose of making the party as powerful as possible, so that they could one day defeat the White Knights.

Yude pretended to read the document in his hands while silently reflecting on the conversation he had just had with Gighis. *Thanks to this little chit-chat, I now know for sure that Masters really do exist,* thought Yude. *However...*

Yude glanced up from the pages in his hand to look at Gighis, only to be met with the exact same stare from the clan leader. The dark elves took this momentary locking of eyes as an opportunity to continue their friendly banter, and the pair swapped opinions on their respective documents.

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After wrapping up his meeting with Gighis, Yude returned to the inn he and his partymates had selected to stay at in the island city within Gighis’s fiefdom. The party was due to travel to the lab-turned-dungeon on a ship that would be filled to the brim with cargo, but until it was time to set sail, the party had

chosen to reserve the finest suite in the finest inn in town. When Yude got to his suite, the sound of him opening the door and walking inside made two beautiful dark elves poke their heads out of their rooms within the suite.

"Goodness. I didn't expect you to be back so soon, Lord Yude," said one of the young women.

"Welcome back, Lord Yude," the younger of the two said.

The first woman was nearly 170 centimeters tall and had long hair that hid her left eye from sight and cascaded all the way down her back. She was sporting a magic item shaped like an imitation rose that was attached to her right ear as if it were an earring, and she was wearing a strapless black-and-red dress that showed off her ample cleavage. A large number of cute frills adorned the skirt, which often made onlookers wonder if the dress was too heavy to wear comfortably. It didn't help matters that her waist was so slender, it looked like she might break in half at any moment. In other words, this woman looked like the living embodiment of a rose, though this illusion was broken slightly by the stole she wore around her neck to keep warm.

The girl beside her appeared to be a shorter, quieter, and decidedly less-developed version of the woman. Yet her large eyes, rose-pink lips, and shortish hair that curved in toward her chin made her look like a doll in a museum that had been crafted by a master artisan who had dedicated his entire life to this one piece of art. The kind of men drawn to her body type would *definitely* want to lay claim to this girl if they caught a glimpse of her, even if it meant committing a crime to do so.

Despite being confronted with the pair's stunning beauty, Yude greeted them by casually giving an order. "Eyrah, Rayeh, the ship to the dungeon will be leaving in a few days. You'd better be ready with our supplies by then."

"Of course we will, Lord Yude," said Eyrah, the elder of the two, and she smiled at her party leader.

"I for one will let my sister make a list of all the supplies we'll need," said Rayeh.

"Rayeh, I *insist* that you help me to write the list too," Eyrah admonished her younger sister. "Do you ever think about maybe lessening my workload at all?"

“It is far more efficient to assign duties to the people who can perform them,” Rayeh retorted as she huffily turned her head away from Eyrah. “My duties will be to carry the luggage, fight enemies, and assist Lord Yude.”

Yude, Eyrah, and Rayeh were the only three members of the Blade of the Isles, but just because the latter two were sisters by blood questing together in a small, tight-knit party, that didn’t mean they actually *liked* each other.

“You shrimpy musclehead,” Eyrah said, wrinkling her nose. “You always give me more work while you just take it easy and devote all of your free time to trying to win Lord Yude’s affection. In any case, do you seriously think your little twig-like body will satisfy our leader?”



“I for one suggest you watch what you say, sister,” Rayeh muttered, narrowing her innocent-looking eyes. “Otherwise I might need to shut you up by slicing off both of those oversized udders of yours.”

These spiteful comments caused murderous sparks to fly between Eyrah and Rayeh. Fed up with all the sniping, Yude threaded his way in between the two young women and took a seat on a sofa.

“Honestly, don’t you two ever get along? Where’s the sisterly love?” Yude groaned.

“It’s only natural for a woman to desire the favor of a talented man,” Rayeh said. “It doesn’t matter if my rival happens to be my sister.”

“She’s most certainly right on that,” Eyrah agreed. “I suppose the vitriol is stronger the closer the two women are to each other. It’s still sort of ironic that we both want the same man, despite being totally different in the looks and personality department.”

Yude shrugged his shoulders in annoyance and plonked his feet down loudly on the coffee table in front of him. “Rayeh, stop being a stupid little brat and help your sister. And Eyrah, stop letting her provoke you into flying into a homicidal rage. I really need this favor from Gighis, so we can’t let *anything* get in the way of us completing this quest.”

“Does this mean you’ve hit upon some information on Masters?” Rayeh asked.

“Nope. At least, not yet,” Yude corrected himself. “But when I asked Gighis about Masters, he pretended he didn’t know jack about them. Judging from his reaction, he definitely knows something.” Yude grinned fiendishly as he recalled his conversation with Gighis. “You see, normally, if someone asked you what a ‘master’ was, you’d speculate it was some kind of title or rank or something like that. But not old Gighis. No, not *him*. He told me straight away that he had no clue what that simple little word meant to him. He didn’t even think about it. Zero hesitation at all.”

“Well, your logic on that certainly follows,” said Eyrah. “You’re so clever, Lord Yude.”

“At first, I thought the idea of inferiors being these all-powerful ‘Masters’ smelled kind of fishy, but Gighis’s fake denial all but confirms that it’s true,” Yude said as he basked in the ego boost Eyrah had given him. “Now I want to know why Gighis would go as far as lying to my face about these superbeings. I mean, if some inferior can get so freakishly powerful, what’s to stop us from becoming ‘Masters’ ourselves and finally beating the White Knights?”

Simply put, Yude needed to succeed in this upcoming dungeon quest so that Gighis would owe him a huge favor. Then Yude would cash in that favor by making Gighis cough up all the info on Masters that he was mysteriously withholding.

“Plus, we plunged quite a lot of money and personnel into that lab,” Yude added. “We need to rescue Sionne at the very least, or else everything we’ve done to further the research into that particular field will go up in smoke.”

“It would be one thing if it was just the money we lost,” Rayeh said. “But Sionne also had us kidnapping Gifted inferiors for her research, since almost none could be found in the slave markets. I for one don’t want all that effort to end up being for nothing.”

“Those missions really were a hassle, *especially* when it meant we had to kidnap inferior children with Gifts,” Eyrah agreed with a shrug of wistful annoyance. “Whenever their parents caught us in the act, almost without exception, they felt the need to fight us, despite how overwhelming the odds were against them. And then, not only did we have to kill the parents, we also ended up having to kill all the *other* witnesses...”

“I for one found it particularly annoying whenever a kid broke down in tears after we’d killed their parents,” Rayeh added.

“Well, at least all they could do was *cry*, thanks to my powers,” said Eyrah. “If it weren’t for that, those kids would’ve tried in vain to fight us too.”

“I would’ve hacked off their legs if they’d tried anything,” Rayeh stated firmly. “Though I’ll admit, I would need your powers in that scenario, or else there’s a possibility I could end up killing them by accident.”

Sionne’s research concerned the relationship between Gifts and souls, which meant the dark elf scientist had needed Gift-wielding human subjects in order

to conduct her experiments. However, Gift-wielders were rare and most made a decent living off their powers, so they almost never got sold into slavery. Of course, there were exceptions—such as Light originally—whose subpar Gifts wouldn't be enough to escape a life of bondage.

Due to these circumstances, Sionne had solicited Yude to kidnap some Gift-wielding humans. The two had kept the arrangement secret because kidnapping non-slaves was a criminal act, though that didn't mean either Sionne and Yude felt any compunction about abducting humans, since they viewed them as little more than talking farm animals. This likely stemmed from the fact that humans tended to be weaker than actual farm animals.

Sionne's experiments involved torturing humans to death in order to stir their emotions, and her test subjects included children and adults alike. Yude had no qualms about the number of humans killed in the process—even the ones who weren't actually part of the experimentation—but it was still a chore to go around killing parents who were desperately trying to protect their children, as well as any other witnesses who attempted to flee.

"We sometimes had to face an entire village of inferiors just because they were trying to defend some kid," Yude said, chuckling to himself. "All those animals had to do was let us do our job, and we wouldn't have had to destroy their miserable little towns. I ask you, what makes those inferiors such absolute morons, anyway?"

"I actually found it rather amusing destroying all those inferior villages," said Eyrah.

"I for one—" started Rayeh.

Yude's mention of wiping out whole communities had prompted the two sisters to enter into a heated discussion about which particular kidnapping episode had been the most enjoyable when it came to butchering obstinate humans. Although the exact wording of the conversation is virtually unprintable, suffice to say, the dark elves quickly got lost in the merriment of their recollections.

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Back in the Abyss, a few days after Light had headed off on his quest, his subjects were busy sorting through the latest batches of gacha cards in a part of the dungeon known as the Card Repository. Due to the Unlimited Gacha being jerry-rigged to draw around the clock, fairy maids had been tasked with delivering loads of cards to the repository twice a day: once in the morning and once in the evening. The Card Repository was the busiest part of the Abyss because the people who were permanently stationed there were in charge of sorting, organizing, and warehousing the heaps and heaps of cards that were brought to them day and night. But this was only half of the job that the repository administrators had been assigned.

"Please look over this list of food for the cafeteria tonight."

"Here's a list of items that need replacing in the bathing areas."

"I have a product list for the dungeon store!"

A host of fairy maids with various lists and documents in their hands lined up at the repository that morning to collect cards. Some maids even showed up pushing empty carts that could seat multiple passengers. In addition to the personnel who resided in the dungeon, all the food, consumables, and other items that made the Abyss habitable came courtesy of Light's Unlimited Gacha cards. Back when Light started out and only had a few summons, it was possible to just walk up to the young dungeon lord and ask for a specific card if you needed one, but in the present day, the dungeon's population and the sheer number of cards was too high for Light to handle distributing them all on his own. It would've been highly inefficient for Light to try to maintain the old system, since he would've quickly found himself snowed under with all the requests. The establishment of the Card Repository had come about naturally as a solution to alleviate this pressure on him, and the ones put in charge of one of the busiest parts of the Abyss were a brother-sister team of ultra-rare summons.

"Hey, Mr. Alth, can you hook a brother up with some more arrows? Got the request form right here."

"How have you been, kind sir?" Alth replied. "I see that your band of Mohawks has returned from the surface once again."

The Mohawk handed Alth the requisition form which had been filled out in surprisingly impeccable handwriting. The Mohawks operated up on the surface as covert intelligence agents disguised as adventurers, but they often returned to the Abyss in order to stock up on weapons and ammo. Back when the Mohawks initially began their operations, it was assumed they would just buy replacement weapons on the surface when they needed them, but this idea was largely abandoned on safety grounds.

Alth was the repository administrator in charge of handing out weapons, armor, and magic items, and he flashed his usual dazzling smile at the Mohawk as he scanned the list he had just been given. Alth was about 180 centimeters tall with blue eyes, and he kept his blond hair impeccably trimmed. He was wearing a black vest over a black dress shirt, dark slacks, and a pair of white gloves so that he wouldn't damage the cards. He was the sort of handsome youth who always looked like he'd come straight out of a painting, even when he was doing something as simple as reading a list. If someone had asserted that he was a prince working undercover as an administrative clerk, most wouldn't have doubted it for even a second.

While Alth scanned the Mohawk's list, several cards that had been brought in that morning floated around him; he was using his powers to arrange the cards into stacks in midair, categorized by type. Once a stack was complete, one of several fairy maids assisting Alth took it to its assigned shelf. In some instances, a gacha card was too powerful to stay in the repository, so it would be taken to a more secure vault reserved specifically for valuables instead. For example, any mythology-class weapons the Unlimited Gacha produced would be secured in the vault to safeguard against the possibility—however remote—of them being swiped by an enemy that had infiltrated the Abyss. Unlike the repository, which was constantly abuzz with activity, very few people had access to this so-called "treasure vault."

Alth looked up from the Mohawk's requisition form with a courteous smile on his face. "It appears you are requesting the same number of arrows as last time, but since your team has been using up arrows at a much faster rate lately, I suggest taking fifty percent more arrows with you this time around."

"Yeah, man, we've been goin' through a whole lotta arrows," the Mohawk

said, agreeing with this assessment. “But we don’t want it to look like we’re out there wastin’ Lord Light arrows, ya feel me?”

“I sympathize deeply with the sentiment, but our Creator is too magnanimous to think badly of you for needing more arrows. I believe he would rather his Mohawks stayed safe up on the surface.”

“Yeah, Lord Light *has* been real good to us,” the Mohawk admitted. “All right, man, ya convinced me. Load me up with more of them arrows.”

Alth continued to smile in a way that was a little *too* bright for the Mohawk. “Understood, my good sir. I shall change the amount on the form.” Even as Alth was putting pen to paper, his powers continued to bundle together more gacha cards in midair for the fairy maids working for him to file away.

“Please wait right there while I retrieve the arrows for you,” Alth said once he’d finished making the corrections. “This will only take a second.”

There was a flash of light between himself and the Mohawk, and an instant later, the Arrow cards materialized out of thin air and dropped into Alth’s hand.

“Here you are. Please make sure everything is present and correct,” said Alth.

“Sure thing,” the Mohawk said as he flipped through the cards until he was satisfied he had all the arrows he had asked for. “Looks all good here, chief. Thanks again!”

“You are very welcome, sir,” Alth replied. “I look forward to having drinks with you and your Mohawk friends again.”

“You got it, bud!” the Mohawk called over his shoulder as he left the Card Repository. “We really hafta kick back a few one of these days!”

Once the Mohawk had departed, a fairy maid came in with a requisition form for weapon replenishment. Even though it seemed like Alth was always extremely busy, he wasn’t actually the busiest person in the Card Repository. That honor—such as it was—went to his older sister, Annelia, who was the administrator in charge of all the consumable item cards. A much longer, much more meandering line of fairy maids with requisition sheets in their hands had formed in front of her reception desk.

“Miss Annelia, here’s the list of food for the cafeteria.”

“This is the one for seasonings, condiments, and disposable cookware.”

“Miss Annelia, we need soap for the restrooms and disinfectant.”

Due to the fact that rather a lot of people resided in the Abyss, the dungeon got through an absurd number of consumables. For example, on a single day, it wasn’t unusual for more than a thousand Tea cards to be exhausted. Because of this, the items Annelia oversaw far exceeded Alth’s remit, and a full-on blizzard of gacha cards zipped around her in the air as she spoke. Annelia had twice the number of fairy maid assistants aiding her than her brother did, and despite her daunting workload, she always had a bubbly smile splashed across her face. Just like Alth, Annelia could make specific cards appear out of thin air and deftly drop into her hands.

“Here you go,” Annelia said. “These are the cards for the cafeteria food, the seasonings, the condiments, and the disposable cookware.”

At just over 140 centimeters, Annelia was shorter than her younger brother, but just like her sibling, she dazzled everyone with her exquisite beauty. Her silver-colored hair cascaded down the full length of her back and was adorned here and there with a few adorable-looking ribbons. On top of that, Annelia boasted one of the—if not *the*—largest busts out of all the women in the Abyss. If that wasn’t enough, she also wore a short skirt coupled with knee-high socks, which allowed a narrow yet alluring glimpse of skin around her thigh region. Like her brother, Annelia also wore gloves to prevent causing any damage to the cards. Almost as soon as you laid eyes on her, you could tell Annelia was the calm, nurturing type, and that was actually quite a good description of her personality in most regards. Even though she was utterly gorgeous, she was approachable, friendly with everybody, and never quick to judge anyone harshly.

“Oh, I’m afraid one of the numbers on your bathroom product requisition form is off by one teensy little digit,” Annelia pointed out. “Want me to fix that for you?”

“Ah, forgive me, Miss Annelia,” the offending fairy maid apologized.

Annelia smiled gently at her. “It’s okay, kiddo. Everyone makes mistakes. I’m

always here for you if we do find an oopsie."

Annelia's one potentially problematic quirk was her habit of calling everyone she liked "kiddo" or some other term of endearment that would usually be reserved for younger siblings, which became a slight issue whenever she was around Jack, the Level 7777 summon, because her "big sister" personality clashed with his tendency to call everyone his "bro" regardless of age, rank, or gender, and they would pretty much always end up clashing on what to call each other—though they were perfectly friendly with one another otherwise.

Collectively, the two Card Repository administrators went by the official moniker of UR Level 5000, Card Keepers, Annelia & Alth, and they were pivotal in maintaining the quality of life everyone had become accustomed to in the Abyss. The two siblings were capable of producing cards out of thin air when within a certain range of them, and they could make the cards arrange themselves while floating around in midair. Furthermore, Annelia and Alth were capable of accurately determining the powers of each card, as well as intuitively gauge any changes to the inventory. In short, it was thanks to Annelia and Alth that card requisition orders were fulfilled so smoothly. Even though they operated well out of sight, and they mostly handled low-to mid-level cards, the Abyss would have likely ceased to function without them.

Annelia suddenly received a message via Telepathy from Light.

"Annelia, have I caught you at a bad time?" Light asked.

"Of course not, kiddo," Annelia said out loud. "Is there something wrong, sweetie? Or were you just missing the sound of my voice?"

Light chuckled awkwardly at Annelia's blithely infantilizing response, but he let it slide, because he knew it came from a well-meaning place.

"No, nothing wrong. But you see, the thing is, I have an *unusual* card request," Light said.

"*What*?!" Annelia blurted out once she'd heard the rest of Light's message.

Chapter 2: The Journey to the Dark Elf Islands and Sionne's Dungeon Lab

I trekked with the rest of the Black Fools to the Elven Queendom capital to register for the quest that had been issued by the Dark Elf Islands, but when we arrived in the city, we immediately noticed things there had changed for the worse.

"By George! What's that bally smell?" Gold spluttered, glancing in Nemumu's direction.

"Gold..." Nemumu began, trying her best to contain her rage. "How *dare* you falsely accuse me of having odor issues! And in front of Lord Dark, no less! I'll have you know I make sure to bathe at *least* once a day!"

The vitriol in Nemumu's voice didn't disconcert Gold in the slightest. "Mind your temper, m'girl. My comment wasn't aimed at you. I merely observed that this blooming city now has a stench that it didn't have the last time we were here."

"Then why did you look at *me* when you said it?!" she protested.

"I wasn't looking *at* you, I was looking *to* you for confirmation," Gold explained. "You should really do away with this constant need you have to act the victim, what?"

While Nemumu and Gold were busy bantering, I breathed in a lungful of air. "Gold's right. I detect a slight odor too. Not to mention, this whole block seems filthier than anything we saw last time."

Most of the buildings in the Elven Queendom capital were made of white-colored stone, almost as if this had been a conscious decision by the authorities to give the cityscape more of an artistic feel. But standing here at this moment in time, the walls of the buildings looked somewhat grimier than before, while trash littered the streets and rats could be seen scuttling about.

I'll bet Ellie and her dragons conquering the queendom is why there doesn't

seem to be much life in the capital now, I thought. *But why's the whole city so filthy? I didn't hear anything about Ellie forcing these conditions on the elves.*

Nemumu winced as she looked around. "I don't know what's happened to this place, but you shouldn't stick around here for too long, Lord Dark. We should get out of this city as soon as we've concluded our business at the guild."

"You may have a point there," I said. "This place stinks and strikes me as unsanitary. Plus, I'm not liking the general vibes I'm picking up on. It'd be too depressing to hang around here more than we have to."

"I'm not keen on the idea of sticking about, either," Gold concurred. "So let's go sign up for this quest toot sweet, so we can skedaddle out of this ruddy pigsty already."

After Gold's gentle bit of urging, we carried on toward the guild. We were expecting to arrive at an establishment with an interior that was designed to be every bit as stately as its exterior, its fanciness a reflection of the Elven Queendom's pride as a nation, but instead we found a building that obviously hadn't been cleaned or maintained in a long while. Even the adventurers inside the guild seemed to have something of a gloomy aura about them.

"What happened to their 'hottie power'?" Gold said mockingly, and had to put a hand up to where his mouth was under his helm to stifle a giggle.

"Dammit, Gold!" Nemumu cursed him. She'd been reminded of an episode she would sooner forget.

When we'd first visited this guild, two pretty-boy elf adventurers hit on Nemumu with the proposition to "fill" her with "more hottie power" than she could handle. If I were Nemumu, I would've suppressed that memory long ago, but it seemed as though the phrase "hottie power" still tickled Gold's funny bone. *Gold must really like that pick-up line,* I thought. *Wait, huh?*

This reaction was because I'd suddenly noticed something was off about the guild's bulletin board. The first time we came to this guild, the so-called "Great Mystery Tower" quest had been stuck smack dab in the center of the board where nobody could miss it. I also remembered there were other quests on there that were typical of the kind of tasks you'd find posted up in a guild.

“Lord Dark, is something wrong?” asked Nemumu.

“Last time, this board was filled with regular quests,” I replied. “But now, it’s all simple cleaning jobs.”

“Hmm...” Gold ruminated as he approached the bulletin board for a closer look. “Waste disposal, corpse removal, garbage retrieval, monster carcass disposal... They all look like bally dirty jobs indeed, if I do say so myself, what? Other guilds advertise these kinds of quests too, of course, but I don’t recall whole bulletin boards getting jolly well buried with them.”

“Um, hello? Might you be adventurers? Would you be interested in attempting one of these quests?” A rather haggard, exhausted-looking elf receptionist scurried up to us with a preening smile on her face, like a salesperson desperate to close a deal.

“As it happens, no,” I said to her and flashed her my guild card. “We’re here to discuss a completely different matter with the guild.”

On seeing the name of my party and recognizing us as the ones who had taken part in the heroic battle near the Great Tower, the receptionist was astonished, though her initial reaction quickly gave way to dejection as her shoulders drooped. When I asked her what was wrong, she burst into tears and explained why there were so many cleanup quests.

Ellie—who was known to the elves as the Wicked Witch of the Tower—had ordered the elves to recognize the absolute autonomy of humans and abolish slavery without delay. However, a side effect of this proclamation was that there were no longer any human slaves the elves could force to clean up after them. That meant they had no one to collect their dead bodies, dispose of their trash, or perform anything else that was remotely dirty in nature. Because the elves were pathologically prideful, they collectively refused to take it upon themselves to do any work that was even the least bit messy, no matter how necessary it was.

As time went on, the Elven Queendom capital gradually became a squalid cesspit, and due to the heightened risk of disease running rampant through the city, the queendom had ordered the guild to issue cleanup quests. However, the rewards the queendom were offering for these jobs weren’t nearly enough

to entice elf adventurers to get their hands dirty. Following the overthrow of the queendom, the coffers were running too low to be able to sweeten the offers, so nothing was getting done. Ordering soldiers to perform cleanup duties wasn't an option either, due to how thin the army was stretched now that the White Knights were no more. So with no money or manpower to spare, the queendom's authorities had told the guild to take care of the sanitation problem. Of course, the guild really wanted to help out with this, but they also had limited funds and staff to play with, meaning it would be a long while before they could resolve the crisis—though this didn't stop the royal family from urging the guild to clean up the mess immediately. So because of the crisis, compounded by the constant pressure applied to them by the powers that be, the guild was in complete disarray and unable to function effectively.

"The garbage keeps piling up because those inferi—those *humans* went away," the elf receptionist corrected herself. "We don't know how to go about cleaning up the city because they had all the expertise. We're honestly at our wits' end."

The elves had been forcing their human slaves to perform all of their dirty work for who knows how many centuries, and with the slaves now gone, the elves didn't know how to do any of the work themselves—at least, not in a way that was speedy and effective. To even begin thinking of cleaning up the city, the elves would have to learn everything from scratch through trial and error, or alternatively, beg us humans to do the work for them. I figured elvish pride wouldn't allow them to consider either option.

Talk about reaping what you sow, I thought once I'd heard the extent of the situation from the despondent elf receptionist. *I could easily get the "Wicked Witch of the Tower" to send help to the capital, but this is exactly what these elves deserve for enslaving humans. We don't owe them a damn thing.*

In any case, even leaving aside my own sentiments on the matter, I didn't see what we stood to gain by offering a helping hand. Though this situation did present a problem.

"We're here to sign up for the quest that was issued by the Dark Elf Islands," I told the receptionist. "Would you be able to help us with that?"

“I’m afraid we can’t,” she replied. “Like I said, this guild is unable to function right now, and I don’t believe we have the capacity to officially enlist you for that quest. Of course, if the Black Fools were to help resolve our sanitation issue, we *might* be able to find a way to accommodate your request.”

“In other words, you’re telling Lord Dark he has to clean up your mess or you won’t hire him for the quest?” said Nemumu, the veins in her forehead pulsating as she placed both hands on the hilts of her knives. “Do I need to remind you who you’re talking to here? Answer me like your life depends on it!”

The elf receptionist shrieked in fright, compelling me to admonish my bodyguard for her behavior.

“Nemumu,” I said curtly.

As soon as Nemumu heard my voice, she swiftly pulled her hands away from her knives and held her tongue, though her rage-filled eyes remained fixed on the elf receptionist.

Gold sighed at Nemumu’s conduct before turning to me. “Milord, if this guild can’t help us register for this quest, then I don’t see any ruddy point in staying here. Let’s make our exit before we cause even more of a scene.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I said, then turned to the receptionist. “We’ll be taking our leave now. Thanks.”

The three of us walked out of the guild building without even bothering to listen to the elf’s protestations. Since the city was too filthy for us to even contemplate spending the night at an inn, we headed straight for the main gate out of the capital.

“Who would’ve thought that granting autonomy to all humans would affect us in such a fashion, what?” Gold said while we were en route to the gate. “So what do you suggest we do about this teensy predicament, milord?”

“Well, what we do know is it’s a waste of time trying to sign up for the quest in the Elven Queendom,” I said. “In which case, we should just go sign up for it over in the Dwarf Kingdom guild. At the very least, relations between the dwarves and the dark elves are more neutral, so we don’t have to worry about

any petty race rivalry gumming up the works."

And if the Dwarf Kingdom guild didn't work out, I could always get Ellie to strongarm the Elven Queendom into appointing us for the quest.

"Of course! There's always the Dwarf Kingdom! You're so smart, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said, fawning over me in a way that was in complete contrast to how pissed she had gotten with the elf receptionist a little while ago. That receptionist had been lucky that the Assassin's Blade had managed to suppress her anger in that little exchange, because if Nemumu *had* unleashed her full rage, the dark energy from her Level 5000 powers would've been enough to cause the elf woman to suffer a cardiac arrest or possibly even kill her outright.

Once we were out the other side of the city gate, the three of us hurried to an out-of-the-way spot so that I could activate the SSR Conceal and SR Flight cards, which would allow us to fly to the Dwarf Kingdom city that was home to the dungeon we had previously quested in. While we could've used the SSR Teleportation card to get to our destination faster, we didn't want to take the risk of spooking any surface-dwellers by suddenly materializing out of thin air. Since the city was located on the very edge of the Elven Queendom, it was a relatively short flight, and we reached our destination just past noon. We landed just outside the city gate and strolled down the familiar streets until we got to the guild, where one dwarf receptionist recognized us immediately.

"The Black Fools! Welcome back, sirs and madam!" the receptionist said gleefully. "Have you decided to come back here and quest in our proud dungeon?"

"Good to see you again," I replied. "However, I'm afraid we're here on a different matter."

This receptionist had been the one in charge of cashing out my party's loot when we were active in the city previously. The reason she was so welcoming was because we used to farm a ton of ice gems from the yetis in the nearby dungeon, and as yetis only spawned on the fifth floor, which was practically unreachable to other adventurers, ice gems were something of a rare commodity. When this receptionist first heard we were leaving for the Elven Queendom, she had a look of total horror on her face, as if the end times had

come.

Now that we had come back, I didn't want to get her hopes up too much, so I immediately waved away any suggestion that we would pick up where we'd left off in the nearby dungeon. Naturally, this reply caused the dwarf receptionist's shoulders to droop, but I cut to the chase all the same.

"We were actually looking to take on the quest issued by the Dark Elf Islands. We wondered if we could sign up for it at this guild," I said.

"The Dark Elf Islands?" the receptionist echoed. "Ah, you mean *that* quest. Wait right here. Back in a jiff."

The receptionist was true to her word, reappearing from the back offices of the guild a few minutes later with a letter of recommendation in her hand.

"Even though you are still C-ranked adventurers, you not only brought ice gems to us from our dungeon on a daily basis, but you also provided us with the information that led to the serial killer case being solved," said the receptionist. "We will provide you with a map to guide you to the Elven Queendom's main port, where you will find a Dark Elf Islands-flagged ship. If you show this letter of recommendation from our guildmaster, you will be allowed to board the ship to take part in this quest. We at the guild will take care of the rest of the recruitment process in the meantime."

"Thank you so much," I said, taking the recommendation letter from her. "We're very grateful for your help."

"Oh, no, it's our pleasure," the receptionist said, rubbing her hands together in a deferential manner. "This guild is hugely indebted to you kind people in the Black Fools. Of course, if you *do* happen to find yourself with any spare time on your hands at some point, we would very much welcome you taking on a quest in our dungeon."

I never imagined it would be *this* easy to get accepted for the quest. It seemed the solution to our problem had been right in front of our noses the whole time. I was so moved by this one helpful deed that I even found myself willing to go along with her request to go farming in their dungeon again. If I had nothing else to do. Sometime in the distant future.

In any case, the three of us expressed our appreciation again and departed from the guild building not long after.

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We followed the map to the Elven Queendom's main port city, which unlike the royal capital, was still a bustling place, with ships and tradespeople coming to and fro on a regular basis. Even in the aftermath of the human autonomy declaration, the city was a hive of activity, and the streets were kept acceptably clean. We quickly found the ship belonging to the Dark Elf Islands, which was being loaded with cargo for transport. After the captain of the ship had cast an eye over our recommendation letter, my party was officially conscripted for the "lab dungeon" quest. I assumed my party's track record must have played some role in getting accepted so easily, but it also appeared the dark elves were just extremely desperate for adventurers.

After the ship had finished loading up, we set sail for the island with Sionne's lab. *This is my first time seeing the ocean, but I'm not in the right headspace to enjoy it at all*, I thought.

That wasn't to say this was my first time on a boat, because I used to travel down the river from my village to the capital back in my homeland, but this was the first time I'd ever seen the aquamarine seawater, heard the crashing of the ocean waves, and smelled brine in the air. No matter which way I turned my head, there was only calm, flat water as far as the eye could see. I'd normally be super-excited about experiencing something new like this, but not knowing if Sionne was dead or alive was proving too much of a distraction. Instead of enjoying the voyage, I spent the entire time mentally urging the ship to hurry up and get to the dungeon island.

After several hours of grumbling to myself and impatiently pacing up and down, we finally reached our destination, a full day after we'd left the port city. Me, my party, and the other adventurers who had signed up for the quest disembarked from the vessel, and as we did so, I noticed a few other ships had just docked and were depositing more questers onto the island.

I scoped out my surroundings and raised an eyebrow. "Does this island *really* have a dungeonified lab? This place looks more like a resort."

“We’re surrounded by white sandy beaches, the sky-blue ocean, and a bunch of tropical flowers,” Nemumu observed as she fiddled with her muffler. “You’re right, Lord Dark. It’d be more believable if we’d been told this island had a tourist town on it rather than a research lab.”

Although this was supposed to be a minor island, the terrain certainly seemed to have been tended, since you’d expect it to be completely overrun with wild vegetation if nature had been left to its own devices. On top of that, the island had ports which, while small, were easily able to accommodate large ships. The white, sandy beach had obviously been maintained by the inhabitants, and the palm trees I could see had the look of having been planted strategically to act as natural windbreaks. A stone road wound its way past multicolored flower beds and apparently led directly to Sionne’s lab, but you couldn’t blame someone for assuming the road might have led to guestrooms at a resort.

“I had a natter with one of the crew during our little sea jaunt back there, and from what he was telling me, it sounds like you two aren’t all that wide of the mark, what?” Gold said.

According to the crewman Gold had talked to, the scientists working on this island didn’t necessarily spend all their time down in Sionne’s lab. Not only were they provided with lodgings outside of the lab, they tended to spend their days off lounging around on the island’s white beaches. The ports and the stone road were mainly for transporting cargo, suggesting the nation had thought of everything to make sure Sionne’s lab was hospitable and operated as smoothly as possible.

“I’d heard the top scientists on the Dark Elf Islands were given preferential treatment by their nation, but this is ridiculous,” I said. I guessed this was a large part of the reason why this nation was one of the only three producers of new technology in the world.

“All adventurers, please board the carriages so that we may take you to your next destination,” a guide said after all of the cargo had been unloaded. My party and I took our seats in our assigned carriage, and we set off for what I thought would be Sionne’s lab-turned-dungeon, but instead, our “destination” turned out to be what looked like a resort area, complete with straw-thatched cottages on raised wooden stilts. At first, I thought this *was* the research

complex and I was just too attached to preconceived notions about what such places should look like, but the more I sized them up, the more the buildings seemed to be lodgings for vacationers, with nothing to indicate that any sort of lab work took place in them.

The carriage drivers eventually parked up, allowing my team and the rest of the adventurers to jump out and take a look around at the lush surroundings. “These are the guest houses where you will all be residing,” a dark elf guide told us. “The maintenance crew has already tidied your rooms and our staff will now show you to your quarters. Take this opportunity to rest up after your long voyage, and we hope to conduct an information session for everyone regarding the dungeon tomorrow morning.”

The dark elves may have been desperate, but they seemingly weren’t so desperate that they’d just toss us straight into the dungeon as soon as our ships docked. The guide also directed our attention to the nearby store, where we could request supplies. The dark elves said they would provide food and most other items free of charge, with luxury items being the only exception to this. Including my Black Fools, ten parties had arrived on the island, and each party followed a dark elf guide to their respective guest cottages.

“We have reserved this cottage for the Black Fools,” our guide told us, maintaining the kind of forced smile only a bureaucrat could muster the whole time he was leading us up the path to our lodging.

“Uh, thank you,” I replied.

“If you need anything else, feel free to ask over at the store,” the guide said curtly before turning to leave. “Enjoy your stay.”

Once we’d climbed the age-worn steps, my party and I opened the door to the cottage and were confronted by a living area furnished with two dirty, battered sofas facing each other with a coffee table in between. Behind a shabby-looking door with a lock, I found a private bedroom, but when I went to inspect it, I could tell from a distance that all the bedding was absolutely filthy.

“Those dark elves acted all nice and proper to our faces, but it’s obvious those rotters don’t really want us here,” Gold said as he glanced around at the sad state of the interior. “Or rather, they think these sorry-looking digs are more

than good enough for *our kind*."

When I'd first laid eyes on the exterior of our cottage, I couldn't help thinking it looked, well, more *vintage* than the other cottages, to put it mildly. But after taking a closer look at it, the best word to describe this place was "decrepit." Not only that, but this particular cottage was situated under a bunch of trees, meaning we were walled off from practically any natural light. When you chucked in the whistling sea breeze on top, this place was rather spookier than what you'd expect to find on a tropical island.

"Yes, Gold, I think you're right. They must've given us this dump because we're humans," Nemumu said. "If that's the case, we *personally* need to show them who they've just spat on." She cracked her knuckles as she said this, and the veins on her forehead were throbbing, which were both telltale signs that she was about to bolt outside and have a little squabble with the dark elf guide that had just left.

"I don't mind, really," I said, quickly stopping Nemumu before she could act on her impulses. "Compared to all the abuse we've gotten from the other races up to now, this is pretty vanilla."

Almost like clockwork, I activated the R Detection, SR Magic Jamming, and R Silent cards to scour the cottage for surveillance items and to secure the location from any eavesdroppers who might be trying to listen in on our conversations. Once I'd made sure we were in the clear, I sat down on one of the beat-up old sofas and spoke to my teammates.

"We need to go over how we're going to approach this dungeon quest tomorrow," I said. "I would have rather dived into the dungeon straight away so we could ascertain if Sionne is dead or alive, but—"

"Just say the word, and I'll go scout possible entry points, Lord Light," Nemumu piped up.

I paused, as Nemumu's suggestion was a tempting one. If anyone could infiltrate and map out this dungeon unnoticed, it would be the Level 5000, UR Assassin's Blade. However, we had zero intel on what lay inside this newly-created dungeon, and Nemumu could end up triggering some kind of alarm or trap the moment she slipped in, putting her in a grave situation that might be

too much for her, even with her elevated power level. Maybe I was being overcautious, but that was a possibility I couldn't rule out. We'd be better off waiting until we'd gotten all the available info on the dungeon first before attempting to do any questing. Sure, I was very eager to start exploring the dungeon there and then, but I had to be patient—partly to prevent Nemumu from accidentally wandering into danger, and partly to make sure this operation would be a success.

I took a deep breath and collected my thoughts before replying. "Thanks for the offer, Nemumu, but it's much too risky to run headfirst into a newly-created dungeon without knowing what you're letting yourself in for. To be on the safe side, we should work on the assumption that we're about to step into the deadliest dungeon imaginable."

"Good thinking, milord. Haste makes waste and all that, so it's best to tread carefully, what?" Gold said, crossing his arms and nodding his approval. "Restraint is the best way of ensuring a successful mission. You have a good head on your shoulders, milord!"

I smiled at Gold, and picked up where I'd left off on our strategy session. "So like I said, we'll head for the dungeon in the morning. Once we're there..."

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That night I had a dream.

I can smell the soil... I remember this smell.

The next thing I knew, I found myself in long-forgotten surroundings from bygone days. *I can feel a gentle breeze on my face, and I'm standing on a wheat farm, the ears rippling like a sea of gold.* It was my dad's farm. The one at my old home.

Mom... Dad...

I saw my parents standing in front of our old house, as well as two more faces I'd thought long gone.

Big brother... Yume...

I'd buried my parents, but I couldn't find the remains of my brother or little

sister in the ruins of what was once my village. My family noticed me running toward them, their smiles just the way I remembered them...

I awoke to find myself back in the run-down old cottage, my eyes gradually growing accustomed to the ghostly rays of the early morning sun. My team had discussed teleporting back to the Abyss so we could get a bit of sleep in some better-kept rooms, but I decided against it and opted to spend the night in the shabby-looking private room instead, while Nemumu and Gold bedded down on the sofas in the living room. Nemumu had suggested staying in my room all night to keep watch over me while I slept, but Gold talked her out of it, pointing out that all of us would need to be well-rested for the dungeon quest.

I sat up in bed, the threadbare blanket falling away from me, and recalled the dream I'd just had. *Why did I dream about my old home?* I wondered. *My entire village was destroyed, so why am I dreaming about my family now, of all times?*

The dream had left me feeling uneasy, but not so much that I took it as some kind of warning from my gut. In any case, this was neither the time nor the place to start stewing over some weird dream, so I got out of bed and started getting ready for the busy day that awaited me.

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After we'd eaten breakfast in our cottage, a call went out for all of the adventurers to assemble in the plaza. There were twenty parties on the island, and ten showed up to this introductory session, with the other ten apparently already having ventured into the dungeon. We all stood in front of a stage where three dark elves—one male, two female—walked toward the crowd that had gathered. The male had red hair, was the tallest of the trio, and appeared to be the group's leader. He was wearing gold armor and a necklace, had multiple piercings, and some kind of ornament adorned the right side of his forehead. He was also armed with two rapiers, which were slung to his hips.

"I am Yude, the head of the A-rank adventuring party, the Blade of the Isles," the dark elf introduced himself. "I would like to thank you all for participating in this quest."

"That's Yude the Magic Gatherer, the mightiest adventurer in the known world?" someone in the crowd said.

“I’d never seen him before,” another added.

“I hate to admit it, but he’s way more imposing than any of us,” a third person piped up.

As the chatter continued from the nine other parties who’d come to the island on the same flotilla of boats we did, looks of self-importance established themselves on the faces of the two young dark elf maidens standing behind Yude. One of the maidens was noticeably taller than the other and was wearing an elaborately designed red dress, while the other looked much younger and had a smaller chest. This second maiden looked a lot like a doll—especially around the face—although strapped to the back of this “doll” was a giant battle-axe. The two maidens were casting passion-laden glances at their party leader’s back as he spoke to the expectant audience. Yude paid no mind to the chattering from the crowd of adventurers, nor to the longing gazes of his two partymates.

“I’ll now go over what my party and the other ten parties have found out on our previous forays into the dungeon,” said Yude. “Please don’t write any of this down, since our clients don’t want any potentially sensitive information leaking out. I know it’s a hassle, but they *are* the ones paying the bounties. And trust me, I made sure your bounties will be *huge*.”

Yude quickly scanned the crowd to ensure nobody was looking too disappointed before diving straight into the intel. According to Yude, the laboratory used to be a two-story building with one underground level, but the new dungeonified lab had two confirmed subterranean floors, and there were potentially even more floors than that down there. The lab had grown much larger than what was on the original blueprints, and it contained a number of traps that could trigger psychotic episodes in whoever tripped them. To make matters worse, the dungeon was filled with monsters that had never been seen before, and nearly all of them seemed to unleash magical psychosis attacks. We were warned that some of the monsters took on unusual appearances, so we would need to take extra care against those ones, and we were also instructed to bring back as much additional information as we could if we made it out of the dungeon again. That way, Yude’s team would be able to immediately make another foray into the dungeon themselves, using the previous team’s intel to

guide them. Yude added a few additional notes on what he expected from us adventurers, but that was the basic gist of what we were told.

After Yude had finished his briefing, one adventurer raised his hand. “Whaddaya mean by ‘some of the monsters take on unusual appearances’?” he asked. “Ya mean one look at ’em will drive ya insane?”

“Well, uh...” said Yude, glancing around at a group of dark elves who looked like senior officials. One of the bigwigs grimly shook his head.

“The clients don’t want me to elaborate any further on that,” said Yude. “But you’ll know the monsters when you see them, and I’m sure you’ll quickly figure out what we mean by that. What I *can* tell you is those monsters don’t turn you psychotic just by looking at them. Any other questions?”

“Something doesn’t add up here!” yelled a beastman, who looked like a raider. “Me and my party signed up for this emergency quest ’cause we heard a whole lot of lives are at stake. So what are these useless inferiors doing here?! If this is some sorta joke, I’m gonna file a formal complaint with the guild!”

Needless to say, my party were the only humans that had joined this quest. Normally, humans would be too powerless to even attempt to take on dangerous, high-profile quests like this one, and that was the very reason other races looked down on us. In the face of this insult hurled in our direction, Gold remained unflappable, though Nemumu stared daggers at the beastman.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re fine,” Yude said. “They’re the Black Fools, the party who made it to C-rank in record time. They did that in part by farming ice gems on a daily basis in that Dwarf Kingdom border dungeon. They can handle themselves, no problem.”

“What? The *Black Fools*?!” the beastman yelled, his eyes flitting back to us in surprise.

“The party that’s currently on the rise?” another adventurer said. “I thought they’d look tougher.”

“Instead, they’ve got a fairy princess, a gold knight, and some kid in a fool’s mask,” a third onlooker summed up. “I can’t speak to her abilities, but the fairy princess is way hotter in person than the rumors suggest.”

“I heard they were part of the Elven Queendom’s assault on the Great Tower,” another adventurer said. “It’s said they took on a bunch of really powerful monsters, but they all came away from the battle without any fatalities. They may be humans, but if we underestimate them, we might be the ones in trouble.”

Once the other adventurers started discussing our past feats with approval, Nemumu’s anger faded and she basked in the praise instead.

“Well, it appears we have no other objections to the Black Fools’ presence here,” said Yude. “So if we are all out of questions, the carriages are ready to take you to the dungeon. Those who are ready now can hop in them whenever they please. You’re all dismissed.”

The adventurers who were already packed and ready for questing filed out of the plaza and headed for the carriages, while the rest went back to the cottages to get their things. Of course, my party was in the former group, since I was desperate to know if Sionne was still alive or not. If it weren’t for the mask hiding my face, everyone in the plaza would have seen an extremely fidgety pre-teen itching to get going. I made a beeline for one of the carriages, but was stopped in my tracks by Yude and his party.

“Hey there, Black Fools. Sorry for that little disruption during the session just now,” Yude said.

“Thanks for advocating for my party,” I said after a brief pause. While it was true I wanted to jump into a carriage as soon as possible, it would be rude to blow off what was essentially the point man on this quest.

Yude gave a casual shrug. “Don’t sweat it, kid. I had to intervene back there since I’m the one in charge around here. I heard it only takes you guys a single day to retrieve fifth-floor ice gems from that Dwarf Kingdom dungeon. Even for us, that’s an impossible feat, and we’re A-rank adventurers. If you’re able to do that, you guys should be the first to bring back intel on how to get to the bottom floor of the dungeon.”

“We’ll try to live up to your expectations,” I said dryly.

Seeing that I wasn’t likely to be particularly talkative, Yude shifted his attention to Nemumu, though in all honesty, it seemed as though she was the

sole reason Yude had approached us at all.

“I could see you were beautiful when I spotted you in the crowd, but now that I’m seeing you up close, you are so absolutely stunning that it defies belief that you’re human,” Yude said to Nemumu. “If it would please you, milady, would you like to leave this party and join mine instead? I guarantee you will be *well* taken care of.”

Yude said all this in front of his two female party members, and both of them glowered at Nemumu, their rage palpable. Their anger didn’t stem from a concern that adding another member might upset the cohesion of the party that had been carefully built up over the years, though. No, they were staring daggers at her out of jealousy, and it was so obvious, even a guy like me could tell.

Amid the hate-filled glares, Nemumu sighed and turned to address Yude. “I’m afraid I will have to refuse your offer. The mere fact that I get to accompany Lord Dark on this quest is everything I could ever ask for.”

“Dark?” Yude said quizzically, before quickly sizing me up and grinning as if he’d come to some sort of realization. “Okay, I get it. So that’s your fetish, huh? In that case, I’ll say no more.”

It was my turn to look quizzical when I heard the word “fetish,” but I wasn’t about to waste time asking Yude what he meant by that, since I was really anxious to get to where Sionne was, so I cut the conversation short.

“Thanks for being so understanding,” I said. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we have a dungeon to go explore.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me, fairy princess,” Yude said to Nemumu. “Good luck in your mission of getting intel on the dungeon.”

Luckily for us, Yude knew when to give up, unlike the two pretty-boy elves we’d run into back in the Elven Queendom guild. The dark elf waved to us and strode off toward his own cottage, while his two partymates gave Nemumu one last dirty look before scuttling off after their leader.

“Egads, milord,” Gold said with a shrug of the shoulders. “At least this time he didn’t try to push his luck. Though I highly doubt he will give up on his little

infatuation with Nemumu so easily, what? Suffice to say, I'd rather not have any more stalkers tailing us, like what happened in that bally forest. What *do* these blighters find so appealing about you and your washboard chest, m'girl? I simply do not understand it."

"Gold! I keep telling you my chest is *normal-sized*, dammit!" Nemumu yelled, before proceeding to kick the Auric Knight repeatedly in his golden shins—though of course, Gold's armor was much too sturdy to sustain any damage from her kicks.

"It's not your fault he tried to hit on you," I said to Nemumu, attempting to calm her down. "That's all on that guy. And besides, we need to jump in a carriage and head for the dungeon as soon as possible."

"Of course, Lord Dark," said Nemumu, quickly regaining her composure.

"Ready when you are, milord," Gold said. "I for one cannot wait to see what we will encounter down there."

The three of us boarded the carriage and set off for the dungeon, though it was a good twenty teeth-rattling minutes before we made it to our destination. As we alighted from the carriage, we noticed that a few other parties had beaten us there, but we paid them little heed and instead took stock of the building that housed Sionne's former lab. It was a stone structure surrounded by a thick wall, and our carriage had parked at a gateway in the wall that was guarded by soldiers who were performing entry checks on the arrivals. If you asked me, the building looked more like an imposing fortress than a regular lab.

"Is this supposed to be a lab or a fortified prison?" Nemumu wondered aloud.

"I suspect it was built this way to keep it secure from the type of rapscallions who'd sneak in and pinch the highly-classified research going on inside," Gold surmised. "Or it could serve a double purpose of secretly taking care of 'problems' that might occur among the scientists, which may perhaps explain the heavy security presence."

Nemumu basically shared my opinion, while Gold had voiced a somewhat grimmer supposition, which for all we knew, might be right. While we were conversing, we found ourselves next in line for the entry checks.

“You are adventurers sent here to investigate the dungeon, correct?” one of the soldiers said. “Name of the party?”

“The Black Fools,” I replied.

“The Black Fools...” the soldier said as he scanned the register in front of him. “Ah, there you are. Take care not to kill any of your fellow adventurers while inside the premises. Your mission is to retrieve intel on the dungeon so that we can destroy it and resolve this problem.”

The soldier reminded us that all we had to do to get the reward money was bring back some useful information. After running through some other boilerplate stuff, the soldier finally let us venture beyond the thick outside wall. We passed through a wide courtyard which consisted of a few flowerbeds, a fountain with no water in it, and some trees planted along the wall, before finally arriving at a two-meter-wide double door that was already wide open, allowing us easy access to the interior of the laboratory. Nemumu took the lead while I went to stand beside Gold, and it was in this formation that the three of us took our first steps into the laboratory-dungeon. But I immediately stopped, prompting Nemumu to look at me with concern.

“Lord Dark, is something wrong?” she asked.

I sensed something was off the moment I crossed the lab’s threshold. *And it’s not just that,* I thought to myself. *I swear this sensation feels familiar...*

In front of us was a grand double staircase, with two flights of steps that curved around to the left and right before conjoining at the upper level, while in the middle—between the two sets of steps—was a pair of closed doors that presumably led to a hallway. If this had been an aristocrat’s estate, we would have expected to see plush carpets on the floors and stairs, but since this was a lab, there was nothing covering the exposed stone.

Our footsteps echoed around the open space, and the air inside the lab was strangely cool compared to outside. I didn’t see any kind of magical apparatus that could be responsible for cooling the air, which meant the air was chilly because of a threat—and therein lay the source of my unease.

I know I’ve felt this strange chill before, I thought. But I couldn’t recall for the life of me the last time I’d felt it, so I gave up trying to figure it out after a few

seconds.

"Sorry, Nemumu, it's nothing," I said. "Keep pressing on and watch out for traps. Gold, keep a close eye on our surroundings and be ready to shield us if anyone or anything tries to attack us. I'll keep my cards at the ready."

"Of course, Lord Dark," Nemumu replied.

"Right-o!" said Gold. "My golden shield will protect you from disaster, milord!"

"According to the original blueprints of this lab, the area beyond these doors is supposed to be a large reception hall for announcements and meetings, but from the look of the doors themselves, it seems like a hallway may have taken its place," I said as we approached the closed double doors. Since our objective was to get to the lower levels, we needed to enter the corridor that lay beyond. Nemumu carefully opened the doors, made sure there were no traps lying in wait for us, then took the lead again as we walked down the hallway. Thanks to a bunch of candles lining the walls, the corridor was bright enough that we could fight any bad guys without worrying about visibility if any leapt out at us —though I did note that it looked like the wax of the candles hadn't melted at all, not even a little. As we made our way down the hallway, our shoes clack-clacked forebodingly on the stone floor.

"Lord Dark!" Nemumu hissed suddenly.

"Yeah, I sense people too," I said. "Or possibly, manlike monsters."

Due to Nemumu's powers, she'd detected the enemies first, and a few moments after she had warned me, my Level 9999 abilities had managed to sniff out their presence too. Gold silently held his shield up in front of us in case anything was about to happen.

I was hoping to get a bit deeper into the dungeon so I could use my SSR Clairvoyance to find out where Sionne is, I thought. *But I guess this is as good a chance as any to check out how powerful these dungeon monsters are first.*

The SSR Clairvoyance card allowed its user to visualize a faraway object, but it didn't work if the user had too vague of an idea of what the target was, or tried to visualize something they didn't know anything about, or if the object was too

far away. I'd tried using the Clairvoyance card the night before, when we were in the cottage, but it had been a bust. I didn't know if it was because the target was too far away or if the dungeon itself had somehow canceled out its power. So I'd planned on using the Clairvoyance card when I got a lot deeper into the dungeon, where there would be no one around to observe what I was doing. But now that we had encountered some monsters, I had to put my plans on hold and prepare for a fight instead.

As we stood ready for battle, three humanoid creatures drew closer to us, but when I got a closer look at the first of these adversaries, I was thrown for a loop.

"*Sionne*?!"

Standing in front of me was one of my sworn enemies from the Concord of the Tribes: a woman with silver-blonde hair, a large rack, an hourglass figure, and shapely long legs. I recalled that Sionne had never given a damn about her appearance, but she definitely had the kind of figure that most women in the known universe—never mind the world—would die for, and she didn't even have to work for it. Sionne had won the lottery in the looks department, which was largely why she used to constantly bicker with Sasha when they were in the same party.

I knew we were going to be confronted by humanoids the moment I heard footsteps, but I never expected to encounter Sionne this soon after entering the dungeon. A moment later, the two other humanoids came into view, and just like the first, this pair also looked like carbon copies of Sionne.

"No, that's not her," I told my team. "They might look like Sionne, but I don't ever remember her mentioning being a triplet."

A closer look at these "monsters" revealed that none of them were wearing Sionne's trademark pouch—the one where she kept her potions that she never went anywhere without. Their eyes also looked blank and lifeless, making them look more like stringless marionettes rather than the real deal. The three creatures suddenly started shrieking at us, a garbled, unintelligible mess of sounds spewing forth from their mouths, and I quickly realized these were no ordinary screeches. There was a magical property to them that could scramble your mental state, which suggested these were the monsters Yude had warned us about earlier that could mess you up with their psychosis attacks. Thankfully, due to our high power levels, their attacks had zero effect on me and my team. I decided to capture these fake Sionnes so I could inspect them a little closer.

"SSR Shadow Dance—release!" I yelled.

As soon as I activated this card, dark bands sprouted from the shadows of the monsters and wrapped themselves around the creatures to restrict their movement. It was easy enough to capture the three Sionne copies, since they were all standing in a group and didn't even attempt to move out of the way. However, being ensnared didn't stop the clones from continuing to try to make us go crazy with their psychosis attacks, even though none of us were displaying

any signs of going mad. Though it had to be said, their loud shrieks *were* about to drive me insane in a more figurative sense, and I activated the R Silent card so that I could examine them in peace.

Next, I activated the SR Appraisal card, which showed me the primary description of these creatures. It read: *A monster from another world called the Soul Dragon has captured Sionne and made copies of her, and these copies roam the dungeon assaulting and killing any perceived enemies with their psychosis attacks.* The Appraisal also displayed their power levels, mana reserves, and a few other details, but I skimmed over those bits since they weren't anywhere near as important as the fact that we were dealing with an interdimensional monster.

I knew the chill in this dungeon was all too familiar, I thought. *It's the same sensation I felt when Ellie cast the Koshmar Summon.*

The Koshmar Summon was an ultimate-class spell that conjured monsters from other worlds through an interdimensional portal, and it was this forbidden spell Ellie had used to help raise my own power level to 9999. What makes the spell forbidden, you may ask? Well, a typical summoning spell would call forth familiars or other magical creatures that were completely loyal to the summoner, but the Koshmar Summon conjured powerful and vicious monsters that were hostile to everyone, friend and foe alike. The summoner couldn't control these monsters, and they would often go on destructive rampages. On first glance, the Koshmar Summon would be all but useless to your typical mage, but Ellie had a completely different take when I first asked her about it.

"Naturally, the Koshmar Summon is forbidden because it is much too dangerous. But as to the question of why such an evil spell even exists? Well, there are many different applications, studies, and techniques related to the summon, of course!" Ellie had said, all smiles. Confronted with Ellie's dazzling expression at the time, I couldn't muster a response and had simply chuckled nervously, but standing here in this lab-turned-dungeon and recalling this strand of memory from my early days in the Abyss, I was able to put two and two together.

Ellie could only use the Koshmar Summon once a day, and she's the Level 9999 Forbidden Witch, I thought. *Does this mean there's someone else out here who*

can perform ultimate-class magic?

Up here on the surface world, people could perform combat-class, tactical-class, and strategic-class spells, the level of magic getting increasingly more powerful in that order. As far as I knew, Ellie was the only one capable of wielding ultimate-class magic, but it was starting to look as if there was someone else who might be able to execute a Koshmar Summon if they'd managed to bring forth this Soul Dragon. But for what purpose?

Sionne was the head of this lab, but I can't imagine her knowingly performing ultimate-class magic, I thought. *Her power level is too low for one thing, and I'm pretty sure she's not even aware of ultimate-class magic being a thing. Besides, why would she wreck her own research lab to this extent? Maybe she used some kind of magic item by accident? Or maybe there's a Master in this very lab?*

The only scenarios that would make any sort of sense were if Sionne had accidentally used an item capable of ultimate-class magic, or if a Master had infiltrated her lab and used a Koshmar Summon to sabotage her research.

Both of these options are too hard to swallow on the face of it. But if there is *a Master in this lab, Gold and Nemumu will have a really tough fight on their hands.*

I could probably go toe to toe with a Master, but Nemumu and Gold were both Level 5000 warriors, meaning they would face much steeper odds against such an opponent. If there were just the one Master, I could probably protect my two teammates, but a worse scenario would see us facing multiple Masters, with Nemumu and Gold each having to take on one or possibly several Masters by themselves.

"Lord Dark, is there a problem?" Nemumu asked, noticing that I was brooding at length. I didn't answer her immediately.

"I've got all the info I need, so you two can get rid of these monsters now." I said finally. A moment later, Gold and Nemumu had beheaded all three of the Sionne clones, though no blood spilled from the creatures and they simply disintegrated, clothes and all.

"Those blasted things didn't even think to leave behind a bally magic gem," Gold muttered as he resheathed his sword. "Those rotters could've at least

rewarded us for our troubles, seeing how utterly ghastly they were."

"Yeah, they were definitely creepy," I agreed. "But now I know what Yude and his dark elf handlers meant by monsters with 'unusual appearances.'"

"Hm? What did you figure out, Lord Dark?" Nemumu asked, looking genuinely curious.

"Well, it'd be one thing if those monsters had been zombified lab personnel, since that sort of thing happens a lot and there's no real need to be secretive about it," I began. "But we didn't encounter just *one* Sionne monster, *three* of them attacked us, which is just plain weird. Maybe Sionne got caught up in some kind of accident that resulted in clones of her being spat out. Or maybe it's Sionne herself who is the one making these zombie clones."

If the latter were indeed the case, the adventurers who had signed up for this quest would quite understandably get the mistaken notion that the dark elves had knowingly sent them into a trap. And if said adventurers were members of a different race, any dispute had the potential to blow up into a full-on international incident.

"So there lies the rub, eh?" Gold chimed in as he stroked the jaw part of his helm. "All those adventurers eager to be the ones to save the lab chief, Sionne, only to get attacked by the woman herself. That's jolly well sure to leave the dark elves in a pickle if word gets out, what? Not only would their nation have to deal with the reputational fallout, people wouldn't know if Sionne was the victim or the aggressor in all this. So the dark elves kept that little bit hush-hush so they could hire as many skilled adventurers as possible. It would also explain why they told us not to take down any notes."

I decided it'd be better if we turned around and retraced our steps out of the dungeon. "I know we've only just got started, but let's head back for the day. I've gleaned some info from those fake Sionnes that I really want to take a closer look into before we go any further."

"Well, fancy that," Gold said with a shrug. "Given your reaction, I'm guessing you've happened across a bit of bad news, hm, milord?"

"I think so," I said. "I'll fill you in once we're back in the cottage. Nemumu, please lead the way."

“Affirmative, Lord Dark. Allow me!” Nemumu obeyed.

Before we left, I got Nemumu to make sure we were all alone, then activated the Clairvoyance card. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to find the real Sionne using this method, though I wasn’t sure if that was because she was too far away or for some other mysterious reason. Once I’d given up on this vain attempt to find the dark elf scientist, Nemumu scouted ahead, with me and Gold following close behind, as we made our way out of the dungeon again.

Chapter 3: Sionne's Past

When we arrived at the guesthouses by carriage, the other adventurers milling around seemed shocked that we'd returned from the lab-dungeon so quickly. We ignored their stares and made a beeline for our own cottage, where I secured the living room using my anti-snooping cards. Once I was convinced we were all good, I relayed to Gold and Nemumu what I had learned from the fake Sionnes.

Once I'd briefed my team, I told the two of them to remain in the cottage while I returned to the Abyss using the Teleportation card. I entered my office on the bottom level and encountered Ellie, who was already in there waiting for me. I'd contacted her in advance using the Telepathy card, since I needed to report my findings to the superwitch in person so I could get her counsel on what I'd discovered. Ellie stood across the desk from me and nodded several times as I detailed what my Appraisal of the Sionne copies had told me and the potential implications arising from it.

"Blessed Lord Light, I don't believe there is a Master in that laboratory dungeon," Ellie said after hearing my summary of the events so far. "I think there's a much greater likelihood that it was an accident."

"An accident?" I said. "Do you think you know what kind of accident it might have been, Ellie?"

"I have a good idea, Blessed Lord," Ellie said, smiling radiantly like a flower in full bloom. "First of all, I don't think anyone used the Koshmar Summon, because that spell is designed to close the portal again once the summon is complete. The spell would never leave a portal open indefinitely, and even I couldn't sustain keeping an interdimensional portal open for days on end."

Well, that sealed it. If the Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie couldn't open a portal that would transform an entire building into a dungeon, I could safely rule out a Master being able to pull off that trick.

"However, I do believe the reason the laboratory turned into a dungeon was due to a bridge being made to another world," said Ellie. "Other worlds operate

on different rules when it comes to physics and magic, but this bridge caused the magical and physical rules of both worlds to intertwine, leading to the spatial distortions in that dungeon."

Ellie's voice and expression grew more somber as she continued. "The Dark Elf Islands have reported minor tremors in the vicinity of the lab, and I think they are being caused by the two worlds being connected for too long. These minor tremors may develop into a disaster of untold proportions the longer we allow the two dimensions to intermingle. At the very least, the dungeon might wipe the Dark Elf Islands off the map, and worst-case scenario, it could lead to the destruction of the entire mainland, including the Abyss."

On hearing the scale of the danger we were facing, I gulped. "It could destroy the whole of the mainland?"

"Well, this is only supposition, but I believe some kind of accident occurred while Sionne was carrying out her experiments, which unfortunately caused this interdimensional link to form," Ellie said. "Since it wasn't a Master opening up a portal, the most likely explanation is an accident created a rift that nobody knows how to close, which is why this interdimensional connection has been allowed to fester."

"I see..." I said, totally convinced by Ellie's answer. "So all the circumstantial evidence points to it being an accident rather than some kind of Koshmar Summon."

"Yes indeed, Blessed Lord," Ellie replied. "I would also like to add that the appearance of those Sionne doppelgängers is solid proof that she must still be alive somewhere deep in the dungeon."

"What?!" I cried, suddenly lurching forward out of my chair. "Are you sure about that, Ellie?!"

"I'm positive!" Ellie replied, proudly puffing out her shapely bust to show how confident she was in her evaluation. "It was you who used your Appraisal to determine that the Soul Dragon was involved in the dungeonification incident, and the body doubles serve as proof that Sionne is alive."

Ellie went on to tell me all about the Soul Dragon, including how it used to exist in another dimension, and how its body was composed of all of the souls it

had collected. Since Ellie was the master of the Koshmar Summon spell, she knew a thing or two about this particular monster.

"Oh, and another thing: the Soul Dragon doesn't have a power level," said Ellie.

"No power level?" I murmured.

"Yes indeed, Blessed Lord," Ellie reaffirmed. "The Soul Dragon is made out of more than ten thousand souls, but it has a single mind. Perhaps that is why doing an Appraisal of the Soul Dragon displays 'Level Unknown' in its stats. That dragon is a truly peculiar creature—though, actually, 'creature' might not be the best word for it, since it is made out of souls. What I *do* know, however, is that the Soul Dragon will be a very difficult opponent."

It sounded like the Soul Dragon was such a special case, even Ellie was worried about it. Since this monster collected souls, it killed pretty much each and every living creature it encountered, though there were rare occasions where the Soul Dragon *didn't* kill a creature it came across. Sometimes, it would keep a creature alive inside its body, and make copies out of mana based on information absorbed from its victim. The fact that the dungeon was spawning copies of Sionne meant the *real* Sionne must still be alive and trapped inside the Soul Dragon.

"I still believe it isn't too late to get your revenge on Sionne, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie assured me. "And speaking as a sorceress, I also suggest you try to get that interdimensional portal closed as soon as possible. If we leave the portal open too much longer, it could cause incalculable damage. As I said before, it could even end up affecting the Abyss, along with the entirety of the mainland."

"I never imagined a quest to find out if Sionne was still alive or not would turn up evidence of the existence of a world-destroying Soul Dragon," I said as I leaned over the desk and rubbed my temples. "Is this supposed to be a lucky break or an unlucky one?"

In any case, if I wanted to exact my revenge on Sionne, I had to retrieve her from inside the Soul Dragon *and* break the interdimensional link.

I sat down heavily in my chair again and issued an order to Ellie. "I need you

and Mei to come with me tomorrow to explore the dungeon. It's now looking like I need to get my revenge on Sionne, close the portal to this other world, *and* defeat this Soul Dragon. Ellie, I'll leave you to contact Mei so we can all get ready to travel there."

"As you desire, Blessed Lord," Ellie said before happily curtsying with one hand bracing her hat while the other held her skirt out to the side. "Leave everything to the Forbidden Witch!"

☆☆☆

The Soul Dragon lay curled up in the lowest level of the laboratory-turned-dungeon, a space which used to be the institution's one and only basement level. Sionne floated around inside the Soul Dragon, like a fetus in its mother's womb. At this particular moment in time, Sionne was dreaming about her life up until this point.

Sionne had always been a genius. She had learned how to read at a young age and devoured every book her parents had on their shelves, even while children her own age spent their time playing games. It wasn't long before she had memorized every word in those books, which spanned a wide range of subjects, including magic theory, medicine, and magic circles. As such, Sionne gained an internal library of knowledge no regular scientist could ever achieve, which would usually be quite unsettling to a parent, though because both of Sionne's parents were scientists themselves, they were beside themselves with joy at their daughter's precociousness. They poured all of their resources into their daughter's education in order to maximize her academic gifts, because while Sionne's parents were often too immersed in their own research to have normal conversations with their child, they saw a rare opportunity to answer the question of what would happen if a fortune were spent to provide the best learning environment to raise a child as a scientist from a very young age. To this end, they bought little Sionne the latest books and had her come up with theories she could test in full experiments.

Sionne's life as a young prodigy was the best, but then, tragedy struck. Her mother and father died in an accident while they were researching how to simplify strategic-class spells. Sionne became an orphan at a young age with no other living relatives who could take her in, but because her parents had been

conducting research for the Dark Elf Islands, the nation made sure the little girl was taken care of. The dark elves placed a premium on blockbuster scientific discoveries, since they saw these breakthroughs as the most effective way to compete against the Elven Queendom and their custom of maximizing their power through mixing bloodlines, so the authorities rewarded the late scientists for their contributions by granting their daughter death benefits.

When Sionne first heard of her parents' deaths, she didn't shed a single tear, though that wasn't because she despised her parents—in fact, she thought it was a great shame they had died before they could witness the fruits of their research—but because the little girl had viewed the event from a purely analytical standpoint as a fellow scientist. She didn't display the usual emotions one would expect from a kid who had just lost her parents. Her complete lack of sadness over the death of her parents stemmed from her inability to empathize with other people's feelings or pain—a condition that had been apparent since birth—and it meant that, instead of weeping over the loss of her family, she was entirely focused on building a future without her parents.

When Sionne was just ten years old, she took the entrance exam at the Dark Elf Islands' elite mage school. Although she was technically still much too young to take the test, she was granted an exception thanks to the death benefits the nation lavished on her. The little girl passed the entrance exam with a perfect score and became the youngest dark elf ever to be matriculated into the mage school. By the age of thirteen, she had built up an academic record that had earned her the title of being the highest-achieving student in the school's history, and to top it all off, the institution had officially run out of subjects to teach her.

It was at this point that the mage school decided to recommend Sionne for the School of Magic in the Principality of the Nine, the most selective magic school in the world. As part of the acceptance process, the School of Magic had received a report on Sionne's new area of research—magic spells that manipulated the soul—which the professors at the school rated very highly, and she was formally accepted into the elite institution. Sionne ended up graduating from the School of Magic in record time—after just one year—and every single professor at the school wanted the fourteen-year-old scientist on their staff.

Each research team in the school figured they would be able to pursue their area of study to the fullest if Sionne was among their number.

Although Sionne was basically treated like a magic lamp that could grant wishes, she rarely if ever expressed any excitement over the special treatment she was receiving. For Sionne, any lab that could give her the space she needed to conduct research into her topic of choice without any interference was good enough for her. Eventually, Sionne chose to work in a laboratory that would allow her all the time she would need for her scientific inquiries, giving absolutely no consideration to how her decision would affect the power dynamics at the School of Magic.

Sionne could finally focus all of her energy into researching the soul—in particular, on the theory that Gifts were linked to the soul. Most people thought Gifts were miraculous abilities granted by the Goddess to select humans—and *only* to humans—and due to this spiritual aspect, scientists believed Gifts were inscribed into their souls. Sionne began researching ways of artificially stripping Gifts from human souls, as well as the possibility of manipulating them to serve other purposes. If such a breakthrough could be attained, it had the potential to make the race that mastered the technique even more powerful than the dragonutes. It was possible that new Gifts could be created that could, for instance, grant a person immortality, as well as many other coveted abilities along similar lines. This research might even lead to the creation of a new god. If Sionne were to be successful with her research, the dark elves would instantly gain hegemony over the other races. Unfortunately, Sionne was so absorbed in her research, she failed to heed the warning signs that not everyone was okay with her methods until it was too late.

“Sionne, we must ask you to leave,” the supervising professor told her after summoning the dark elf into his office. “There is no longer a place for you in this laboratory, nor anywhere in the School of Magic.”

Sionne stared at her supervisor as if he had just spoken to her in tongues. After all, he was talking about dismissing a top scientist on the verge of a major breakthrough.

“Up to now, we have allowed you to use animals and monsters when performing your experiments into the soul,” the supervisor told his puzzled

subordinate. “Other labs use monsters as test subjects to gauge the effectiveness of new magical attacks, so we are in no position to condemn you for this practice. However, conducting live experiments on humans crosses a line. You are killing your test subjects with cruel and wanton abandon, and this academy can no longer turn a blind eye to such barbarity.”

The normally very placid Sionne’s expression hardened, and when she retorted, her tone was scathing. “This decision is grossly incoherent. The human test subjects I have been using are slaves I acquired out of my own pocket, and I was well within my rights to kill them, since they were all convicted criminals. This academy has no grounds to punish me.”

Sionne’s self-righteous obliviousness caused the supervisor to sigh. “Sionne, this is an academy for research, not an execution chamber. We know all about how you needlessly torture your test subjects, because we can hear them screaming and begging for mercy, day in, day out. You frighten our students and we’ve been receiving complaints about this issue.”

“If those students get frightened because they hear a few noises made by some lab animals, then they’re unqualified to be scientists,” Sionne said huffily. “No breakthrough comes without sacrifices, and inferiors are expendable. Those bothered by my experiments are the ones in the wrong.”

“Please refrain from casting racial aspersions while you are in our academy,” the supervisor admonished her. “This research institution is open to *all* people of talent. There are no racial boundaries here.”

The supervising professor offered to rescind her dismissal if Sionne switched to a more acceptable area of research, but she refused the proposal and left the School of Magic. The academy gave her a generous severance package, which also served as their way of saying that their doors were permanently closed to her.

After being fired, Sionne elected to return to the Dark Elf Islands. *If I submit my research proposal to the dark elf authorities, I can continue my research with the full support of my nation,* Sionne had thought.

Out of all the nations, the Dark Elf Islands was the most generous in the assistance it offered to researchers. If a project were approved, an entire island

would be allocated to it for the purposes of conducting the research, along with all the necessary facilities, funding, staff, and security required. Sionne had been confident that the Dark Elf Islands would back her research proposal and give her free rein over how she conducted her experiments, since everything had always gone her way—at least, up until her dismissal.

When they give me my lab, maybe this time, I should take care not to torment those inferior slaves so much, Sionne had thought. *It simply amused me to watch them scream so absurdly at the top of their lungs and I often got carried away with hurting them. And thanks to that, I had to leave the academy. Though I did really enjoy making those inferiors squeal.*

Sionne didn't have any hobbies because she devoted her entire being to her research, but while she was conducting experiments on humans, she found out that she had a particular fondness for inflicting pain upon her test subjects before snuffing out their lives. She often inflicted more pain on her victims than necessary just to hear them scream louder, and although she hadn't acknowledged it at this point in her life, Sionne had embraced sadism as her secret pastime.

However, Sionne's plans were dashed when the Dark Elf Islands promptly rejected her research proposal. In fact, it went straight in the trash the moment the gatekeepers saw her name on it. The dark elf authorities had already received word about Sionne's research into souls from the duchy, including all the complaints that had been lodged against her, plus the lack of progress she had made in producing any findings.

After experiencing her second ever disappointment in her professional life within such a short space of time, Sionne spent the next few weeks holed up in a room at an inn on one of the islands. *I've accumulated quite a bit of money from my inheritance, the death benefits, my salary as a researcher, and my severance package,* Sionne had thought to herself while pondering what to do next. *But it's not nearly enough to further my research on my own.*

Ultimately, Sionne managed to break out of her funk by plowing all her money into investments, then earning some more by registering as an adventurer. Sionne had gained plenty of experience trapping and capturing large animals and monsters in order to carry out her experiments in her time at

the Principality of the Nine, so she had little trouble completing quests. She made sure to finish up her quests in record time, so that she could devote the rest of her time to her research, and everything she earned while questing went toward even more investments, because she planned to make money off the assets appreciating in value.

Due to her looks, Sionne had very few problems attracting males—at least, in the beginning. Much of this attention came from adventurers with no hope of making a name for themselves looking to live off Sionne's small fortune, but once these males heard the way Sionne spoke, they quickly realized they were dealing with a deeply unsettling personality. *This only proves what I've heard about the difficulties that come with trying to understand the feelings of the opposite sex,* Sionne had mused. *These men are drawn to my looks, my figure, and my money, yet they quickly distance themselves once I start talking to them. I do not understand this pattern of behavior.*

Sionne spent her days building up her reputation as a highly skilled, highly efficient adventurer, while at the same time, gaining notoriety as someone who wasn't quite right in the head. She didn't concern herself with what people were saying about her, instead focusing solely on amassing funds for her research. But even after doing this for a while, all the capital she had accumulated wasn't nearly enough to hire a permanent research team, let alone acquire a facility that would allow her to torture human slaves without interference.

One day, someone claiming to be an emissary for the Dark Elf Islands came to visit Sionne.

"You're searching for a Master?" Sionne asked.

"Yes, Miss Sionne," the dark elf said, his lips curled upward slightly into the stiff, perfunctory smile of a bureaucrat. "We require your beauty and skills as an adventurer for a top-secret mission. Will you allow us to use these assets of yours for the good of the nation?"

The two dark elves sat across from each other at a table in Sionne's room at the inn that she had made her home. Sionne flipped through the documents the emissary had given her. "These terms are incredibly generous."

This “Master” the Dark Elf Islands authorities were seeking was a superpowered human the nations of the world regarded as a potential threat. Sionne was told that if she managed to successfully persuade a Master to come over to her side, she would be given the opportunity to marry a scion from one of the four ruling clans that governed the Dark Elf Islands. This deal also came with an unconditional guarantee that the nation would give her everything she desired. And if even after thirty years, Sionne failed to track down a Master, her nation would still grant her a laboratory as well as financially subsidize her research—at least, to a partial extent. Sionne didn’t care much about marrying into the aristocracy, but the prospect of state support for her research whether she succeeded in this mission or not was enough to pique her interest. Such a sweetener was more than Sionne could have ever dreamed of. Of course, the dark elf authorities had crafted the offer in this way to ensure it was impossible for Sionne to turn down, because not only did she bring her questing abilities to the table, she was a young woman who could commit to this mission for the long haul, and these were qualities that other candidates could not offer.

Furthermore, Sionne had a genuine interest in seeing a Master for herself. *So Masters are inferiors whose powers surpass those of other races?* Sionne had mused to herself. *That would suggest they possess very powerful Gifts, and as a researcher, this excites my curiosity greatly.* However, her curiosity hadn’t been such that she’d considered stealing this “Master” out from under her nation’s nose.

“I see no issues with the mission as laid out. I will sign up for it,” Sionne had said.

And that was how Sionne became an official member of the Concord of the Tribes, fully prepared to wait an entire thirty years to get her hands on the research lab of her dreams. This assignment also meant she didn’t need to waste any time on more investments or monitoring her portfolio, so she spent the extra free time she found herself with on her research.

However, it didn’t take the Concord long at all to discover a potential Master: a boy by the name of Light. Unfortunately, a background check determined that Light wasn’t a Master, and the sponsoring nations had ordered the Concord of the Tribes to assassinate the human boy. The party chose the Abyss as the site

to bump off Light and cover up his murder, but while carrying out this plan, Light tripped a teleportation trap and vanished without a trace. A search of the dungeon—or as much of it as they could—turned up no sign of Light, and the nations sponsoring the party determined there was no possible way Light could have survived. Thanks to this, the Dark Elf Islands decided to not only grant Sionne a research lab, but an entire island where she could house her project. Officially, the authorities justified the largesse by stating that Sionne's research project was in the national interest.

Sionne devoted the next three years to furthering her life's work researching the soul. As luck would have it, on hearing of Sionne's topic of research, Yude the A-rank adventurer offered his assistance, and not only did he inject funds into the project, he also agreed to secretly kidnap Gift-wielding humans of the type seldom found in slave markets. Although Yude and his party felt that abducting "inferiors" took more time and effort than they were comfortable with, they carried out the task as instructed without too many complaints. The abductees ranged from young children all the way up to the elderly, and Yude's party slaughtered anyone who got in their way.

Because these clandestine activities amounted to serious crimes, Yude and his team were forced to kill all witnesses, even if that meant massacring entire villages of humans. Neither Yude's party nor Sionne herself felt any guilt over what they did, for they considered humans to be little more than talking livestock, and they were of the opinion that their victims should be happy the dark elves had found *some* use for them.

After years of racking up a rather hefty body count for the sake of her research, Sionne finally encountered something that would satisfy her thirst for knowledge: the Soul Dragon. A short time later, Sionne was floating around inside the creature and being made to watch as her life flashed before her eyes. The Soul Dragon wasn't necessarily torturing Sionne by doing this, though; it was all part of the process of extracting information from her body, so that the dragon could learn the ways of this new world that was alien to it. At the same time, the Soul Dragon was imparting its own knowledge about souls to Sionne. The monster knew far more about souls than the dark elf scientist could ever have imagined, and she was deluged with information, but instead of feeling

pain, Sionne found the whole experience closer to listening to relaxing music. As time progressed, both Sionne and the Soul Dragon drew closer to awakening.

☆☆☆

After I'd put in an emergency Telepathy call to Annelia, Mei and I rushed over to one of the busiest sections of the Abyss: the Card Repository.

"Sorry to bother you, Annelia and Alth," I said on arrival, though I wasn't here on a social visit; I needed to pick up a ton of cards Ellie said I would need in order to take down the Soul Dragon.

The Card Repository itself was several times bigger than the kind of ballrooms you might find in aristocratic estates, and we had also attached additional storehouses to the main structure to hold all of the gacha cards my Gift produced. Despite all that extra space, however, row after orderly row of shelves were full to bursting with cards.



Annelia and Alth had a counter each in front of these shelves where they did most of their work. Normally, the Card Keepers would be busily fulfilling replenishment orders for all of the fairy maids standing in line, but they were presently standing in front of their counters to greet me. There were also no fairy maids anywhere to be seen doing pickup at the Card Repository, perhaps because they wanted to give me some space to be able to speak with the siblings without distractions.

They really didn't have to do that for me, I thought, feeling somewhat apologetic.

"Light! Mei! I'm so glad you're here, sweeties!" Annelia exclaimed. "We've been expecting you."

"You are not bothering us in the slightest," Alth said as he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "I promise you, there is no one in the Abyss who thinks of their Creator as a 'bother.'"

Annelia welcomed me with the warm, bubbly attitude of someone who'd just found out her kid brother was visiting her workplace, her cute miniskirt swaying with every excited little movement she made. Of course, Annelia wasn't *really* my big sister, but she interacted with everyone in the exact same way, much like how Jack called everyone his "bro." Alth, on the other hand, was *way* more deferential, even going as far as to kneel before me like I was some kind of god. *It's not just their heights that are very different; they're polar opposites attitude-wise too,* I thought as I chuckled wryly at this welcome.

And sure, it made sense in a way for Alth to call me "the Creator," since my Ultimate Gacha had "created" him, so to speak, as it had the rest of my summons. *Does he treat me like a card-making god because he's a Card Keeper?* I asked myself, but since I'd already accepted Alth's quirks for what they were—and his sister's too, for that matter—I decided to move the conversation along.

"Thanks for seeing me at such short notice, and I'm glad to see you two are well," I said. "So like I said through the Telepathy link, I'm here to get a bunch of cards."

"My sister informed me of the cards you were seeking, and while I would never dream of doubting my Creator, the request did sound a little *far-fetched*,

if I may," said Alth, who had risen again. "Would you mind repeating your order so that we may accurately process it?"

I guess I *was* asking a lot, but I happily obliged, since I saw no reason not to.

"Sure, it's always important to double-check things," I said as I looked at the two siblings in turn. "You know how I'm currently exploring that dungeonified laboratory over on the Dark Elf Islands, yes? Well, I just found out that there's something known as the 'Soul Dragon' waiting for us on the bottom floor of it, and it's an otherworldly monster that won't be easy to defeat. Of course, I do want to see your faces, and it's been a while since I toured the Card Depository properly, but what I'm really here for is to retrieve the cards that will allow me to destroy this Soul Dragon."

I paused briefly before repeating my big ask, making sure they were in no doubt about what I wanted. "And it has to be every single card we have with that property," I added once I'd restated my request. "And I mean *all* of them."

"I-I guess I didn't mishear you," Annelia spluttered. "But honey, do you even realize how many cards you're talking about?"

"Yeah," I said simply. "I didn't want to force the two of you to bring all those cards to me, so that's why I came over here to pick them up myself."

"It *would* be beyond our abilities to transport all of those cards to you," Alth said. "Having you come here certainly expedites the process, but even so, retrieving all cards of that type might be somewhat prohibitive."

Even though both siblings were clearly less than willing to call up all the cards I wanted, I persevered with my order and tacked on an additional request. "Oh, and if any other cards of that type are summoned before I leave again, be sure to have someone bring them to me. I don't care if it's just a single card."

"As you wish, my Creator," Alth said.

"How dangerous is this dragon that it requires so many cards?" Annelia asked as she magically transformed her clothing into light armor, complete with a longsword in a scabbard which she clutched at the ready. "Allow me to slay that awful monster for you, sweetie."

Annelia and Alth were UR Card Keepers who knew how to manage cards

much better than I could, and the two of them were able to call up and activate any card in a second, as long as they were within a certain range of it. That meant they could instantly arm themselves using weapons cards—even ones that were buried deep in storage—and since they were both Level 5000, Annelia and Alth were powerful fighters in their own right. But Mei stepped in to wave away Annelia's suggestion.

"No harm shall befall Master Light, Annelia," Mei reassured her. "Ellie and I will accompany him to the dungeon to provide him with personal protection."

"Well, if you and Ellie are going with him, he's as good as safe," Annelia conceded. "Considering my power level compared to yours, I'd probably just get in the way, anyway. But you're still my kiddo, Mei, so you can always come to me if you ever need anything."

A good number of my allies had never once thought of themselves as Annelia's "kiddoes"—for obvious reasons—and Mei was a prime example, but she also had a good dollop of self-restraint too, which meant she tactfully avoided getting into a drawn-out confrontation with Annelia over the issue.

"Thank you," Mei said curtly. "I will keep it in mind."

It was my turn to step in for Mei's sake. "You see? Mei here will keep me safe and sound. And besides, Annelia, I need you here so that the Abyss keeps running smoothly while I'm away. I hope you understand."

"Yup! Sure thing!" Annelia gushed. "I'd do anything for you, sweetie!"

"I am also willing to work past my breaking point in order to serve my Creator," Alth declared, his overly earnest attitude coming to the fore once more.

As the four of us resumed preparations for my fight against the Soul Dragon, I sensed Mei's relief about no longer being subjected to Annelia's insistence of being the adoptive older sister of the two.

Chapter 4: The Night Before the Raid

“Huh? It says here the Black Fools left the dungeon practically as soon as they went in.”

Reclining on the sofa with his feet up on the coffee table, Yude was busily flipping through the pages and pages of reports detailing everything the parties who had gone questing in the dungeon earlier that day had found out. For the duration of their stay on the island, each party had been given their own cottage to reside in—which had previously served as accommodation for the scientists and their families—by the dark elf officials. Yude’s own party, the Sword of the Isles, had been given the finest cottage on the whole estate, which not only commanded the best location, but also boasted the most lavish furnishings.

Yude took a closer look at the report that had been compiled that same evening. The text read: *The Black Fools were seen departing the dungeon almost immediately after entering. It would appear they lost their nerve after encountering a monster, and they took the decision to vacate the premises.*

“Well, well. Is this really the same up-and-coming party we’ve been hearing so much about?” Eyrah said as she leaned over the back of the sofa to peer at the report in Yude’s hands. “Those inferiors are even more pathetic than I could’ve ever imagined.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that if I were you,” Yude said, pushing Eyrah away because her hair was smooshed up against his face. “What this says to me is they happened upon some juicy bit of information right away, then hightailed it out of there.”

“I, for one, don’t think that’s the case,” Rayeh said skeptically. “I mean, they are mere inferiors, and your report says nothing about the party turning in any information.”

Rayeh had seized her chance to squeeze herself between Eyrah and Yude, and was presently smiling triumphantly at successfully usurping her sister from her position behind the sofa. Finding herself displaced from her spot at her love

interest's shoulder, Rayeh glared at her little sister, her face a mask of mortified jealousy. Through it all, however, Yude didn't take any notice whatsoever of the tableau of sibling rivalry going on behind his back.

"True, the report doesn't say any of that, but I *know* that black-haired brat must've gotten his hands on some juicy bit of intel using his Gift. I can feel it in my bones," Yude said. "I'm willing to bet he fed our people some cock-and-bull story about what happened on his first day of questing, and conveniently left out the part about him having a Gift. Because if he doesn't, none of this makes any sense."

"Then, if we're lucky, I guess we might find out more in tomorrow evening's report to back up this hunch of yours," said Eyrah. "Though I do have to wonder what makes you so sure this black-haired boy is a Gift-wielder, Lord Yude."

"I saw it in his eyes," Yude replied, letting out a chuckle. "After all, we kidnapped a whole bunch of Gifted inferiors before. Remember how some of those savages thought they were strong enough to stand up to us? That kid had the same look in his eye as those assholes who refused to come with us quietly. You saw how that brat stayed totally calm even as people were mouthing off about his party, right? That's because he knew deep down that he was tough enough to hold his own if a brawl broke out."

Yude's mouth widened into a toothy grin as he recalled his personal encounter with Dark's party that very morning. "He definitely carries himself like he's got a powerful Gift. He even has enough pull for that silver-haired fairy maid to refuse my come-ons."

"Lord Yude, were you serious about recruiting that *woman* into our party?" Rayeh puffed out her cheeks at the mere thought of an inferior receiving any attention from her beloved leader. Eyrah naturally shared her sense of indignation, but Yude didn't pay any heed to how the two sisters felt about the matter.

"Yup. Dead serious," said Yude. "I couldn't believe my ears when I first heard people talking up some *human* as a 'fairy princess' of all things, but now that I've seen her, I realize that nickname doesn't do *nearly* enough justice to how hot she is. I need to make her my woman..." Yude paused and licked his lips,

then continued. “But that’s beside the point. I want that kid’s Gift for myself. If it wasn’t for that Gift, he wouldn’t have dared to cop that attitude with me this morning.”

Yude was completely under the impression that Dark could only display that level of confidence because he had some all-conquering Gift he could draw on to prevail in battles.

“I’m literally getting chills just thinking how much power that Gift of his must be packing,” he continued. “If it’s as powerful as I think it is, then it’s a damn shame it’s being utterly wasted on that inferior. If anyone is to wield that Gift, it should be us, since we’re the ones who are going to take down the White Knights. But for that to happen, we need to rescue Sionne, so that she can discover a way of ripping a Gift out of one person and bestowing it on another.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Eyrah said. “That boy’s Gift would be put to much better use defeating the White Knights.”

“If it makes us stronger, no one’s going to blame us for killing that inferior and stealing his Gift,” Rayeh chimed in. “It makes zero sense *not* to do it.”

Getting this affirmation from Eyrah and Rayeh—who were now sitting either side of their leader on the sofa, pressed up against him—left Yude exuberant. “We can’t afford any more delays in learning how to extract Gifts from inferiors. Let’s just hope Sionne is still alive down in that dungeon.”

Yude could still vividly remember his shock when he ran into a Sionne doppelgänger on one of his first ventures into the dungeonified lab with his party. To date, he had no idea whether the real Sionne was dead or alive, nor what her exact location was.

“At any rate, it looks like we’re making faster progress exploring the dungeon than I imagined we would, if these reports from the other parties are anything to go by,” Yude noted. “Just goes to show that money counts for a *lot* when you want to round up the best people for a job.”

Eyrah giggled. “But those recruits are still several leagues below us when it comes to *real* talent.”

“You’re damn right they are,” Yude agreed. “But we’ve still got a long way to

go in the strength department ourselves. We need to get this quest sewn up soon, so we can pump Gighis for info on Masters. Not to mention, we need to retrieve Sionne if we ever want to transplant Gifts. If we get that figured out, we'll become strong enough to crush those White Knights, and *nothing* will be sweeter than that!"

As if to emphasize this last sentence, Yude tossed the report onto the table and burst into raucous laughter, while Eyrah and Rayeh simply looked on lovingly at their leader as he whooped it up.

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Mei, Ellie, Nemumu, and Gold stood in front of my desk in my office in the Abyss. I was all business as I briefed my allies on the mission we were about to embark on.

"As you all know, we picked up some intelligence yesterday that strongly points to Sionne still being alive," I said. "We believe she has been captured by an otherworldly creature known as the Soul Dragon, who is probably keeping her alive in order to extract information about this world from her. That's great news for us, but the downside is the longer we wait, the more likely it is this Soul Dragon will finish extracting the information it wants from Sionne and finish her off." My face darkened as I recalled how Sionne and the rest of the Concord of the Tribes had brutally betrayed me. "Under no circumstances can we allow this Soul Dragon to kill Sionne. Not before *I* get her back for what she did to *me*!"

Due to my insanely high power level, the rage-filled energy emanating from me in that moment caused Nemumu to tremble all over, and even Gold looked somewhat perturbed—though judging by the reactions of Mei and Ellie, they were a lot more understanding and sympathetic to my fury.

When I eventually noticed that my anger was affecting my allies, I made an effort to suppress my emotions before picking up where I'd left off. "My revenge against Sionne is naturally high on my list, but now I've also become aware that this Soul Dragon could do untold damage to the whole of the mainland, including what we've built here in the Abyss."

According to Ellie, the Soul Dragon's world and our world were connected by

an interdimensional bridge, and if the portal to this other world remained open for too long, it would spell disaster on a scale that even the Forbidden Witch couldn't predict. At present, the damage was limited to a few small tremors that could be felt in the lands in the immediate vicinity of the dungeon island, but things could feasibly escalate to the point where the presence of the dungeon could end up destroying the whole world.

"So today's mission is to raid the dungeon, retrieve Sionne from the Soul Dragon, and minimize the damage the interdimensional portal can do by closing it," I outlined. "To help us achieve all of that, I've brought Ellie and Mei on board for this quest. I'll be counting on the two of you."

"You can depend on me, Master Light," Mei stated. "On my honor as a maid, I will support you to the fullest on this mission."

"Allow me to handle the closure of the interdimensional portal," Ellie piped up. "I won't be *entirely* sure how to go about it until I've seen the portal for myself, but I *can* promise it won't be all that difficult to collapse the bridge between worlds."

I needed to bring Mei and Ellie on this mission to ensure its success. While Ellie was confident she wouldn't have all that much trouble closing the portal, that didn't take into account the fact that she was unable to close the portal from the Abyss, meaning she would have to travel to the very bottom level of the lab-turned-dungeon to do so, which is where we suspected the Soul Dragon was lurking.

Mei would serve as backup to Ellie. Even though the maid wasn't a specialist like Ellie, she was capable of performing the same tasks at a level approaching the Forbidden Witch. In other words, Mei was a highly competent all-rounder who would be able to assist Ellie and take care of any emergencies that might crop up while in the depths of the dungeon. I planned to use the SSR Conceal card on Mei and Ellie so that they could accompany my party without their presence being noticed by others.

"I was also thinking of bringing Nazuna along, since she *is* the strongest fighter we have..." I started before trailing off.

"Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said gently. "I don't think Nazuna is *quite* ready to

be taken up to the surface world."

"I am afraid Ellie is correct in her assessment," Mei stated. "Nazuna is exceptionally powerful, but she does not possess the wherewithal to respond swiftly and judiciously to any unforeseen circumstances. Your plan is for us to accompany you unseen, but we might encounter a situation which requires us to reveal ourselves and converse with a large number of adventurers. In a situation like that, Nazuna would not be resourceful enough to be able to take the initiative."

I found myself nodding at everything my two deputies were saying. Everyone had their strengths and weaknesses, and as such, it looked like the only realistic option was to have Nazuna stay here and hold the fort. Again.

"And since Aoyuki is a monster tamer, she would be at a major disadvantage against the Soul Dragon," I thought aloud. As its name suggested, the Soul Dragon was composed of souls it had collected from the living, according to Ellie. Or to put it another way, that monster was created by a bunch of ghosts melding together.

"Having Aoyuki tame thousands upon thousands of ghosts all at once is definitely out of the question," I said. "She *might* be able to do it by taming one ghost at a time, but it'd probably take her forever and a day."

In all honesty, I didn't even know if it was *possible* for Aoyuki to tame a soul in the first place, so on this occasion, I asked her to stay behind in the Abyss with Nazuna.

"I also considered taking Suzu down there because of her tracking skills, plus Mera and Jack too," I said. "But I'm sure Mei and Ellie will be able to deal with pretty much any issue that might arise by themselves, and besides, even with the SSR Conceal card, it's probably better if we don't crowd the dungeon by taking an entire army with us."

"Good thinking, milord," Gold agreed. "If you were to join the fight yourself, having the Level 7777s around might well be a handicap. Having us Level 5000s there is already bad enough!"

"Lord Light! If you do engage in battle, I implore you: do not worry about the rest of us and focus solely on your opponent!" Nemumu pleaded. "I really mean

that! Even if it means we'll die without your intervention! In fact, if it comes to it, we're willing to be your human shields!"

"Thanks for the offer, Nemumu," I said, "but I'll make sure I protect you and Gold, even if I'm already fighting a bad guy. I'll just do both things at once. And if it does come to that, I'll protect you guys with everything I've got, so don't worry about that."

"L-Lord Light!" Nemumu said, blushing. She looked moved to tears. "Thank you so, so much!"

I wasn't lying when I said I could fight *and* protect Nemumu and Gold at the same time, but that was also part of the reason I was choosing to take only a small number of elite fighters with me into the dungeon. I didn't want to risk getting bogged down in trying to protect an expanded roster of allies.

I got up from my chair and put on my disguise to become the adventurer known as Dark. "All right, team. I think it's about time we headed for the cottage up on the surface world. From there, we will apprehend Sionne, defeat the Soul Dragon, and close that interdimensional portal. I'll need all of you to help me get my revenge on Sionne and save the world from this looming threat."

"I swear on my honor as a maid that I will carry out your orders," Mei declared.

"Leave everything to the Forbidden Witch!" Ellie said cheerily. "I'll see to it that you accomplish everything you desire!"

"Be sure to add the Auric Knight to that list, what?" Gold piped up. "In accordance with my golden chivalric code, my sword and shield will strike down anyone who stands in the way of your supremacy! I convey my golden loyalty to the absolute monarch!"

"I will set upon this lab-dungeon like a hound sent from Hell, so that I may safely guide my Lord Light to its bottommost level!" Nemumu proclaimed. "I swear it on my title as the Assassin's Blade!"

After hearing these heartfelt replies from my four comrades, I took out the SSR Teleportation card and beamed us back to our rundown cottage on the

dungeon island.

Chapter 5: Exploring the Dungeon Lab

After teleporting back to our quaintly retro cottage (to put it charitably), my team and I strolled out through the rotting front door and made our way to the row of carriages waiting to take us and the other parties to the dungeon. But as soon as we stepped outside, the dozens of adventurers who were milling around by the carriages greeted us with stares.

I didn't think anyone would be able to see Mei and Ellie, thanks to my Conceal card, I thought, genuinely surprised at the attention we were getting. *And all these guys are way too low-level to sense that I've actually added another two people to my party...*

It would've been one thing if only one of the other adventurers had been looking at us strangely, due to he or she possessing some special skill that allowed them to see through cloaks of invisibility, but it felt like *everyone* was gawking at us, and I knew the SSR Conceal wasn't *that* vulnerable to prying eyes. On top of that, these stares weren't the kind you'd get from people leering at a pair of gorgeous women they'd never laid eyes on before. Nope, it looked like these guys were scowling at us due to the usual antihuman bigotry. My ears picked up whispers from among the crowd that sadly confirmed my hunch.

"Didja hear?" one adventurer said. "Yesterday, they bailed from the dungeon as soon as they walked in."

"They said these 'up-and-comers'—or whatever you wanna call 'em—gained some cred at another dungeon, but now we *know* that was a buncha bull," another said. "When push comes to shove, inferiors will always be inferiors."

"Wonder if we can poach that smoking hot babe from their party," a third piped up. "She'd be better off without that pair of gutless cream puffs, anyway."

We'd departed from the dungeon early the day before so that I could go consult with Ellie about the info I'd gotten from the fake Sionnes, but it looked like the other parties were under the impression we'd scuttled out of there out

of fear.

“Lord Dark, please allow me a few minutes to put a stop to all these unpleasant stares.” Nemumu said, cracking her knuckles. Her pupils were dilated and full of rage—aimed squarely at the people making fun of me—while the veins on her forehead were pulsating so much, they looked like they were about to burst. But before Nemumu could take a swing at any of them, Gold grabbed her scarf from behind and held her in place.

“Leave them be, you wally. We’re not petty hoodlums,” Gold chastised her. “We have better things to do than go about giving a bunch of dithering imbeciles clinging to mistaken notions a damn good thrashing.”

“I can live with the stares,” I said, agreeing with Gold’s assessment of the situation. “Besides, we’d just be wasting our own time if we engaged them.”

“F-Forgive me, Lord Dark,” Nemumu said.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong: I’m glad you’re looking out for me, Nemumu,” I told her.

“L-Lord Dark!” Nemumu exclaimed, her eyes and entire body seemingly glowing in response to my approval of her intentions.

“Honestly, milord. You can be a smidge too soft on our girl at times,” Gold sighed with a shrug.

My party and I were just about to climb into a waiting carriage when we suddenly heard one of the onlookers cry out.

“What the hell didja trip me for, you sonuvabitch?!” the apparent victim yelled at the person next to him.

“What? You fell down all by yourself. There’s not even anything to trip over!” the accused barked back. “Seriously, how incompetent can you get?”

“What did ya just call me?!” the first adventurer bawled.

“Gah! My stomach’s killing me!” a third person cried out.

“M-Mine too!” came a fourth voice. “Was it something we ate?”

If I had to guess, I would’ve said Mei had been the one who had stuck out her

foot to trip the first adventurer up, and I was willing to bet Ellie was responsible for giving the other two guys painful indigestion by casting some sort of spell. It seemed Nemumu and Gold had also figured out what was going on, if their gleefully satisfied air when they hopped into the carriage was anything to go by, and I couldn't help grinning under my mask myself as I took a seat beside them, though my reaction was more out of embarrassment than gratification.

☆☆☆

When we arrived at Sionne's lab, the dark elf soldiers went through the usual entry checks before allowing us into the dungeonified research facility, where we swept across the hallway on the first floor, its exposed stone walls unchanged from the day before. Just as we had planned in advance, Nemumu went a little way ahead of the rest of the party to scout out the surroundings, and she swiftly led us in the direction of the stairway that connected this floor with the first subterranean one.

All of a sudden, Nemumu encountered a monster dubbed the "Ghost Dog" that was known to prowl around on the first floor. The creature rushed toward Nemumu, snarling demonically.

"Out of the way!" Nemumu yelled before gliding past the Ghost Dog and slicing it open with one of her knives without so much as slowing down. The monster yelped, then disintegrated into nothingness.

The lab-turned-dungeon contained monsters that had never been seen anywhere else in the world, and the Ghost Dogs were one such example. Aside from the fact that their bodies were translucent, they looked exactly like giant canines, and according to the latest intel we'd received, these Ghost Dogs were capable of causing their victims to experience psychotic episodes by either biting or howling at them.

Before now, the only type of ghosts that had been witnessed anywhere in the known world were pale, humanoid apparitions, and personally speaking, I'd never heard of a ghost in the form of a huge dog, either. According to Ellie, the Ghost Dog was another otherworldly being, but it turned out the Ghost Dog could be destroyed with exorcism magic or with a weapon imbued with the kind of properties found in holy water or other purifying substances, much like the

ghosts of this world. Using her skills, Nemumu had added these holy properties to her knives, allowing her to dispatch the Ghost Dog in no time.

Since the adventuring parties that had come questing in here before us had drawn a map of how to get to the stairway that led to the first underground floor, it didn't take us long to reach the flight of stairs and descend them. The first subterranean level had the same exposed stone floor, walls, and ceiling as the floor above, with the only difference being a total lack of windows, which was to be expected since we were effectively down in the basement now. Instead of sunlight filtering in, a bunch of radiant magic items had been embedded into the walls to give off a bit of a glow, though they didn't come anywhere near to flooding the space with light. As such, the area was replete with sections in shade, and in them, you could find another species of otherworldly monster: the Shadow Ogres. As the name indicated, these creatures were made out of shadows, and they were also able to manipulate the shadows around them to bind and capture the hapless. If that happened to a run-of-the-mill adventurer, they'd be completely immobilized and other monsters could just creep up and kill them on the spot, but thanks to the power levels of my party members, we would easily be able to break free of these inky bonds. Still, we decided to avoid the shadows all the same. The Shadow Ogres remained stationary while trapping their victims instead of moving in to attack, meaning it was easy enough for us to simply sidestep getting involved in pointless fights.

The Blade of the Isles and some of the other adventurers had already mapped out a path to the next set of stairs to the level below this one, and by following their directions, we easily made our way down to the second underground floor. It was at this point that Gold decided to sum up for the rest of us how fortuitous we had been so far.

"This is going splendidly, milord," Gold said. "We have barely run into any monsters and we haven't triggered a single trap. I'd say Lady Luck is jolly well on our side today, what?"

"Yeah, though it's really Nemumu we should be thanking," I said. "She's the one leading the way and picking the best route for us to take."

"L-Lord Dark!" Nemumu exclaimed, clearly ecstatic to receive the compliment

from me. “You’re much too kind!”

“But this is where things start getting trickier,” I added.

The second underground floor hadn’t been completely explored yet, so nobody knew if this was truly the bottommost level or if there was another flight of stairs leading even further down. Any critical bit of intel—such as anything regarding dangerous monsters, teleportation traps, or instant-kill traps—tended to get immediately relayed to all the adventurers on the island, but every other bit of new information was basically only given to us once every three days. That delay was necessary so that the quest organizers could check to make sure that the raw intelligence they had been given was accurate. If they just immediately handed unvetted information to us, it had the potential to expose one or more parties to a completely avoidable hazard, and a mishap like that would end up fomenting distrust among all the other parties. We were due to receive an updated report the next day, which could well contain something about stairs to a third subterranean floor, but I didn’t want to waste even a single day waiting around to find out.

I should use it here, just in case, I thought to myself. Once I’d scanned my surroundings to make sure my party was all alone, I activated my SSR Clairvoyance card. *The first and the second staircases downward looked alike, so I figure Clairvoyance should be able to tell me where the third staircase is if I get it to look for a similar set of steps.* But the card failed to do what it was meant to, leaving me with no clue where to go. The same thing had happened the previous day in the dungeon, when I’d tried to pinpoint where Sionne was being held. At the time, I didn’t know what had gone wrong, so I’d talked it over with Ellie in the Abyss that evening. *I guess she must have been right in what she said,* I thought. *If I can’t use Clairvoyance down here, then I probably can’t use Teleportation, either.*

“There are different physical and magical rules under which the other world and our world operate, and those rules are not just intermingling, they’re coming into *conflict* with each other,” Ellie had told me when I’d brought up the subject of my Clairvoyance card not working. “So in addition to the distortions to the physical space that the dungeon has caused, the magical rules of our world have also been disrupted, so I don’t think you’ll be able to use

clairvoyance *or* teleportation magic properly when in that dungeon."

I'd decided to give the SSR Clairvoyance a go anyway, because I figured the card should still be able to spot a simple staircase, but just like Ellie had said, it didn't work. If we wanted things to get back to normal, we would have to close the portal to the other world.

"If my card's unusable, we'll just have to live with it," I said. "Nemumu, do your thing."

"On it, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said excitedly, balling her hands up into fists.

With a look of deep concentration on her face, Nemumu closed her eyes tightly, then suddenly opened her mouth and made a sound that was too high for ordinary human ears to pick up. The Assassin's Blade was capable of creating a mental map of her surroundings by producing a high-pitched sound that reverberated off every object in a wide area and noting how and when the sound was reflected back to her. The stone surfaces of this dungeon turned shouts into echoes loud enough to leave your ears ringing, so this place was practically made for Nemumu's power.

After mentally combing through the sonic feedback from her noisemaking, Nemumu finally opened her eyes again and reported what she had learned. "Lord Dark, I can detect no staircase leading downward from where I'm standing. Please allow me to proceed to the next position."

"Sure thing. Lead the way," I said.

"With pleasure!" Nemumu said cheerily.

Since this floor was seemingly so massive, Nemumu wasn't able to sonically map out the entire area from one spot. Our progress wasn't quite as fast as it had been previously, since every time we moved to a new location in this unmapped section of the second underground level, we had to check our surroundings for enemies and any other hazards, and while following Nemumu was a lot more productive than exploring this floor blindly, it was still something of a time-consuming process that allowed monsters more of an opportunity to attack us. At one point, a Headless Horse dashed toward us, whinnying up a storm, while in the same moment, a Black Ghost appeared seemingly out of nowhere, like a shadowy wraith in the night.

“SR Thunder Arrow Rondo—release!” I yelled, unleashing several lightning bolts that blasted the Headless Horse to smithereens. Meanwhile, Gold drew his sword, activated his Judgment Flare skill, and struck down the Black Ghost with his holy golden flame. Since the mana-filled flame was infused with purification properties, the Black Ghost didn’t stand a chance.

“How in blazes does a horse neigh like that without a bally head?” Gold quipped.

“Forget neighing: how does it eat hay so it can live?” I said, posing a question of my own.

Gold let rip with his trademark belly laugh. “You’ve got me there, old boy. This other world must be one mysterious place if a mixed-up beastie like that can survive in it, what?”

Both “Headless Horse” and “Black Ghost” were nicknames the quest-givers had given to these monsters, since they apparently came from the other dimension and didn’t seem to exist in our own world. Normally, I wouldn’t care enough to find out what was so special about these creatures since I wasn’t a monster researcher, but I couldn’t help wondering what made the Headless Horse tick. At the very least, I knew these particular adversaries weren’t all that powerful. The Headless Horse could only attack its foes by running straight toward them, which made it relatively easy to beat. The Black Ghost packed a slightly stronger psychosis attack than the Ghost Dog, and it could drain your life energy just by touching you, but that was all you could really say about it. These two monsters might have posed something of a problem for the other adventurers, but to us, dispatching them was as easy as cutting down a couple of goblins.

While Gold and I had been fighting the bad guys, Nemumu had been busy sonically mapping out the rest of the floor. “Lord Dark, judging from these echoes, I believe we are quite near to the next staircase,” she told me.

“Good work, Nemumu! I knew I could count on you!” I praised her. And I meant it too. After all, thanks to her, we had pretty much found the stairs down to the next level with a whole lot of time to spare, and without the aid of a map, no less.

“I-I’m honored that I’ve been of some help to you, Lord Dark!” Nemumu stammered, her reddened cheeks clearly visible even in the gloom of this underground level of the dungeon.

I can’t be sure because of the Conceal magic, but I’m willing to bet that Mei is silently stewing over the praise I just gave to Nemumu, despite what her usual poker face might try to have you believe, I thought. *And if she wasn’t undercover right now, I’m sure Ellie would be making us all aware how her magic could’ve helped me out just as effectively.* I also suspected Nemumu had kept her reaction relatively low-key this time around because my two lieutenants were in attendance. Imagining this whole dynamic made me grin underneath my mask in spite of myself.

At any rate, we soon made it to the next staircase, which led us straight to the third underground level. I thought we could just basically repeat what we had done on the second floor and have Nemumu echo-locate our way to the next staircase, but we ran into an unexpected surprise at the bottom of the stairs.

“Please tell me I’m not seeing things,” said a sardonic male voice. “Are these the same Black Fools who wandered back home stupidly early yesterday, but are now strolling onto this floor in damn near record time?”

Standing in front of us were Yude and the rest of his Blade of the Isles party, who had gotten here before us. My party hadn’t sensed anything on the floor below while descending the stairs, likely due to the spatial distortions. We’d already known this was a possibility, and had been prepared to face monsters as soon as we made it to the bottom of the staircase, but we hadn’t anticipated this welcoming party awaiting us.

Well, these guys are *the lead party on this quest, so they probably got early access to the intel on how to get to the third floor from some of the other adventurers,* I thought. *Maybe they’d heard about the location of the stairs, or maybe they were given the most up-to-date maps.*

If Yude’s party *did* have a map, then it made sense that they’d reach this floor quicker than us, no matter how fast we moved with Nemumu’s help. It definitely didn’t hurt that Yude’s party were A-rank adventurers who had probably forgotten more about exploring dungeons than I’d ever known. But in

our defense, we'd done everything through the proper channels when signing up for this quest, and we hadn't broken any rules that I knew of, so I looked Yude square in the eye and coolly responded by saying, "We decided to withdraw early yesterday due to unforeseen circumstances. Today, we fully intend to reach the bottommost floor, which is why we're here."

"I would never put that past a party who's able to make round trips to the dwarf dungeon's top floor in less than a day," Yude said. "Though I'm pretty sure it takes a *bit* more than just elbow grease to make it all the way here at the speed you guys did."

Huh? What's he trying to imply? I asked myself. Yude was acting like he could see right through us, and even the two dark elf maidens behind him didn't seem all that surprised by us showing up here. It was almost like they'd been expecting us. Moreover, the vibes I was getting from Yude didn't seem to be born out of anger at being shot down by Nemumu or from any antihuman bias. It felt like Yude was fishing for something. But for what?

"So are we to assume the Black Fools are going to explore this floor, or what?" Yude asked.

"Yes, we are," I said after a skeptical pause. "Is that okay with you?"

"Sure, all fine and dandy with me, kid," said Yude. "As the man in charge of this quest, I have to give you credit for your hustle. If a boy's Gift can lead his party this far down into the dungeon, that works out super for us."

Now Yude had started talking about my Gift totally unprompted. These dark elves were definitely angling for something. *Are they searching for Masters, just like the Concord of the Tribes used to?* I thought.

Those types of parties were typically put together by a group of nations, but that didn't mean other parties couldn't hunt for Masters independently. The whole reason me and my allies were operating as adventurers on the surface world was to get intel on the nations that were looking for Masters, and to get in contact with people who had the same mission as the Concord of the Tribes. If Yude's party was indeed searching for Masters, I really wanted to know what they knew. *But our first priority is to get to the bottom of this dungeon so we can capture Sionne and close the interdimensional portal,* I thought, so I

responded to Yude's fishing by giving him a guarded answer.

"I'm not sure what sort of 'Gift' you're talking about, but I hope we live up to your expectations."

"You sure you're only a boy?" Yude asked. "'Cause you've got a real cagey way of comporting yourself."

Yude was obviously starting to get edgy about not being able to draw any useful information out of me—either implicitly or otherwise—and my mask was doing a great job of stopping him from getting a good read on me. I ignored the snide remark, gave a quick bow to Yude, and turned around with the intention of pressing forward to explore this third underground level. I only managed to take a few steps, however, before I was stopped in my tracks.

"Or maybe you're one of those Masters, like I always suspected," Yude called out to me. "Though you're way too young to be one in my book."

It wasn't just me who froze on hearing this; Gold and Nemumu did too. I guessed it had probably shocked Mei and Ellie as well, though I couldn't see them due to the SSR Conceal. None of us had expected Yude to start talking about Masters, and now that it had become clear that he and his party might potentially know something relating to that mystery, we couldn't just let them go. Yude—who a few seconds before was looking thoroughly peeved at how we were trying to walk away from him—had broken out into a toothy grin at how he had managed to get our full attention.

"Ooh, does that mean we *do* have a Master in our midst?" Yude said, but I just stared at him in silence, so he continued where he left off. "Lemme guess: you're currently wondering how I know about Masters, aren't you? Well, as you might've heard, we've been traveling the world for years on end in search of magic items, and along the way, we heard a few rumors about these humans who were freakishly powerful. We heard talk of 'Masters' out west in the Onifolk Archipelago, up north in the Demonkin Nation, and back east in the Dragonute Empire. More recently, we got word of a Master showing up in the Human Kingdom."

Yude's words hit me like a ton of bricks. *A Master showed up in the Human Kingdom?* I thought. *That means this Master could've been near my home. It*

also means this Master could've been the one who destroyed my village!

My goals were to get revenge on my former partymates, to learn the truth about this world, and to find out who wiped out my village. Now that I knew the dark elf in front of me might hold some clue that could lead me to answers surrounding these particular areas of interest, I couldn't maintain my composure any longer and blurted out a question. "Could you tell me more about this Master in the Human Kingdom?"

"Oh, so *now* you know stuff about Masters?" Yude scoffed. "You almost had me fooled into thinking you were totally clueless. Fine, we'll swap info. But you go first. Tell me everything you know. Go on."

Yude and his party were now all smiles, which was a complete reversal from how positively annoyed these dark elves had been with us earlier. But I wasn't about to tell these guys anything I knew about Masters, and I didn't feel like it'd be a good idea to just willingly hand over all the intelligence we'd acquired from our time in the Elven Queendom, so I kept my mouth firmly shut.

"Quit stalling and start talking, you little shitstain of an inferior," Yude hissed. "We can always rip off those scrawny little limbs of yours if that'll help you sing." It appeared Yude's proverbial mask had well and truly slipped. "We're deep in the pits of this dungeon where nobody will give a rat's ass about a couple or three dead inferiors. Or maybe torture's more your thing? I personally find it a dumb chore, though I do enjoy hearing you primitives screaming your lungs out, so I guess we do have *that* in common, at least. Hell, even if you *had* agreed to tell us everything, we would still have had to torture you just to make sure you weren't snowing us, so I suppose we might as well cut to the chase, snap all your joint tendons here, and take you with us."

The two dark elf maidens were starting to eyeball us like predators preparing to swoop in for the kill. It looked like we were unlikely to get anywhere by trying to talk our way out of this confrontation, so I switched to battle mode.

"Nemumu! Gold! We must capture these guys at all costs!" I yelled. "Don't let even one of them escape! And make sure you keep them alive, so we can pump them for info!"

"Leave them to me, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said.

“As you command, milord!” Gold hollered.

And so, our biggest fight in this dungeon so far began.

Chapter 6: The Fools vs. the Blades

“If this party is calling themselves ‘the Black Fools,’ that must mean this child is their leader,” Eyrah deduced. “But their so-called ‘leader’ obviously has quite a bit of growing up to do. He could’ve escaped with his life if he’d just told us everything he knows about Masters. This is precisely why I *loathe* children.”

Eyrah shrugged her shoulders, which were partially covered by the stole she wore around her neck. The dark elf was the very picture of a femme fatale, with her black-and-red dress replete with frills resembling the petals of a rose, and long bangs that covered half her face adding to her air of mystery. Yet she immediately found herself under fire from someone much prettier than her.

“I could say the exact same thing about *your* leader,” Nemumu said pointedly. “If he’d just given us the information we wanted without any trouble, Lord Dark may have been merciful enough to let you all walk out of here unharmed, but unfortunately for you, your leader is a sorry excuse for a man.”

This last remark had Eyrah seething. “Well, I stand corrected. Now I’m pretty glad the boy refused our offer, because thanks to that, I get to tear you limb from limb to my heart’s content. You shouldn’t take that preening attitude with me just because you *think* you’re a little on the attractive side.”

“An elf said pretty much the same thing to me,” Nemumu said. “I’ll have you know, I’m not acting ‘snotty’ or ‘preening.’ I know for a fact there are plenty of people prettier than me, so I could never allow myself to be vain, even if I wanted to. Just because you don’t like the way *you* look doesn’t mean you should take that out on me.”

Eyrah’s initial response was to titter at Nemumu’s comeback, but slowly, her face twisted into a mask of ugly, unadulterated hatred. “Drop dead, you inferior trollop!”

Without even removing it first, Eyrah suddenly whipped both ends of her stole in the direction of Nemumu, the material elongating and rippling through the air like a pair of angry snakes. This unexpected attack startled Nemumu—so much so, in fact, she only just managed to get out of the way at the very last

millisecond. The ends of the stole struck the stone floor where Nemumu had been standing, sending shattered fragments of it flying everywhere.

“A magic weapon?” Nemumu uttered, shocked.

“Correct. And I’m going to carve up that beautiful face of yours with it!” Eyrah replied. With a full-on sadistic grin still contorting her features, she repeatedly lashed the two ends of the stole toward Nemumu, the garment turning out to be a weapon that was stronger than steel and able to cut through stone. Any normal opponent would’ve already been torn asunder by this point, but Nemumu was no ordinary fighter. The Assassin’s Blade was able to visualize the attacks clearly as they rained down on her, allowing her to dodge the ends of the stole without the weapon even touching her.

I’m still not sure what kind of magic weapon it is, thought Nemumu. *So my best bet is to keep evading her attacks without drawing my knives.*

“Surely there’s got to be some sort of mistake?” Eyrah yelled in frustration. “How do I keep *missing* you?! Are you really an inferior? Or are you one of these so-called ‘Masters’?”

“I’m not a Master, and these attacks are much too slow to even touch me,” Nemumu said, still weaving about between the whip-like ends of the stole.

“Don’t belittle me!” Eyrah roared. “Let’s see how you handle this little trick!”

Eyrah whipped one end of the stole toward Nemumu—who expertly dodged the strike yet again—and the cloth-weapon buried itself into the stone floor. But instead of the stole getting reeled back like it had previously, it dug in and yanked Eyrah toward it, with the dark elf leaping forward at the same time to propel her toward Nemumu at lightning speed.

“Join me in a dance of death!” Eyrah screamed as she aimed a roundhouse kick at Nemumu’s head. The Assassin’s Blade managed to duck just in time, but Eyrah continued to lash her killer stole toward her foe again and again, creating a dizzying whirlwind of flying kicks and bladelike fabric.

“So you can incorporate hand-to-hand combat into your attacks with your magic weapon, huh?” Nemumu remarked, acrobatically ducking and evading each attack. “This is really fascinating. For a sideshow act.”

Eyrah scoffed. “We’ll see how long you can keep up your arrogant sneering!”

She unleashed the same combination of attacks several times over, her legs whirling through the air in a feverish ribbon dance as a rose-scented aroma that grew stronger with each spinning kick overwhelmed Nemumu’s nostrils. If Nemumu had been an A-rank adventurer like Eyrah, she would have succumbed to these high-intensity combo attacks long ago, but none of the dark elf’s blows were actually landing. Nemumu eventually decided she’d seen enough, drawing her knives and slicing Eyrah’s stole into a third of its length before aiming a well-placed flying kick to Eyrah’s abdomen. The blow sent the dark elf flying backwards and she crashed to the unforgiving stone floor with an unladylike grunt. Nemumu looked down quizzically at her opponent, who had landed flat on her stomach but was now struggling to get back to her knees.

“That kick was *supposed* to render you unconscious,” Nemumu said. “Looks like I went too easy on you.”

Eyrah finally managed to lift her upper body up off the ground, though she continued to clutch her injured midriff with her hand. “How can this be? I’m Level 1000, yet you floored me with a single kick without me even laying a single scratch on you...” Eyrah’s pained expression suddenly transformed into a wicked grin. “But I’ve still come out victorious in this fight—Ugh!”

“Hm? How do you figure that? I don’t *recall* kicking you in the head...” Nemumu said, looking dubiously at the dark elf. “If you really believe you still have a chance of beating me, you toadies take after your idiot leader.”

Eyrah simply giggled in response. “Keep talking while you’re still able. My Rose Poison should be taking effect very soon!” Although Eyrah wasn’t as strong as Yude, she was still a Level 1000 fighter, which was considered top-tier for her race, even for dark elves far older than her. Her high power level was the reason Yude had recruited her to the Blade of the Isles, the party he’d created for the specific purpose of defeating the White Knights.

Just like Yude, Eyrah wore multiple magic items to give her an edge in battle, and as it turned out, the dress she was wearing was no ordinary garment. It was known as the Rose Poison Dress, and when infused with mana by its wearer, it released a toxic rose-scented gas that paralyzed any opponent that breathed it

in. The rose-shaped ornament affixed to one of Eyrah's ears also served to intensify the effects of the poison.

The stole was a magic item as well, but its only real function was to distract her opponent while the Rose Poison did its thing. The kickboxing moves were also just for show, since they allowed the dark elf to bring the poisonous gas nearer to her target, and make it so they couldn't help breathing it in. Eyrah's real aim had been to get Nemumu to breathe in enough of the fortified Rose Poison to render her unable to move a muscle. Even the ornate frills on her dress weren't there solely for decorative purposes; they were designed in such a way as to disperse the Rose Poison everywhere during close combat. Nemumu had breathed in several lungfuls of the Rose Poison during that exchange, which should've been more than enough to make her collapse to the ground and unable to move.

"How are you still standing?!" Eyrah yelled after several long seconds of this outcome not coming to pass. "You shouldn't even be able to lift a finger after breathing in that much Rose Poison!"

"Oh, was that supposed to be poison?" asked a somewhat still-confused Nemumu. "That stuff is far too weak to have any kind of effect on me. I wouldn't even call it poison. It was more like smelly perfume. If you're going to poison me, it has to be at least as strong as *this*."

Nemumu poured mana into one of her knives to infuse it with her Poison Manifest skill. In the next instant, she had closed in on Eyrah in the blink of an eye and nicked the dark elf with her knife while she was still struggling to get up off the ground. The laceration was no deeper than the kind of light scratch the fingernails of a child might make, yet Eyrah instantly started screaming like a wounded animal, her voice echoing all around the third underground level while oozing fluid leaked out of every visible bodily orifice—her nose, her tear ducts, her mouth, and even the pores of her skin. The agonizing ordeal was ultimately enough for her to pass out, with both of her eyes rolling back into her head.

"That was the weakest class of poison in my arsenal, yet you still react to it like that?" Nemumu sighed. "If you enjoy poisoning your victims so much, at least build up some resistance to other poisons..." She paused and glanced

down at her foe. “Oh, I guess you can’t hear me, can you?”

Irritated, Nemumu resheathed her weapon. “I got too worried about her magic weapon and wasted a lot of time beating her. I wonder if I should go to Lord Dark’s aid next.”

☆☆☆

“I, for one, can’t believe my opponent is some cheesy-looking rustbucket,” Rayeh said, her eyes not even on Gold, who she was referring to. “Wish I’d been the one who got to fight that tanned woman instead of my sister.”

“And I’d rather not be fighting a gal who looks like she’s still in her ruddy teens, but I have my orders from milord and I cannot deviate from them,” Gold said as he drew his sword and held his shield aloft.

Rayeh’s large innocent eyes were still fixated on Nemumu—who was engaged in battle with her sister, Eyrah—to the extent that she hadn’t even bothered to so much as touch the giant battle-axe strapped to her back yet. “That miserable hussy used her looks to seduce Lord Yude, and now I want to kill her,” Rayeh pouted. “Any woman who tries to get close to Lord Yude should drop dead, and that includes my stupid sister. I don’t care how handsome, talented, and magnificent he is, tramps like her should stay away from him. They all just need to die, die, die, die—”

“Pardon me for interrupting your train of thought, dear girl, but for the sake of Nemumu’s good name, I feel I must point out that she has never once dreamed of seducing that dark elf,” Gold chimed in. “That third-rate lothario was the one who propositioned my associate of his own accord. You witnessed it yourself, so it would be best if you didn’t engage in all these bad-faith distortions, what what?”

This reprimand from Gold finally prompted Rayeh to turn her head toward her much larger opponent. Normally, Rayeh’s appearance was adorable and doll-like, her womanly curves still on the cusp of blossoming, but on this occasion, the face she showed to Gold was closer to something out of a horror movie. She was completely expressionless, save for her large, unblinking eyes, which were much wider than before and positively glowing with murderous rage.

“You lie,” Rayeh said in a voice that was eerily calm. “There is no woman alive who could suppress her feelings of lust while in Lord Yude’s company.”

“I know they say love is blind and such, but you have gone quite mad with lust, dear girl,” Gold pointed out. “Men like Yude over there are not as attractive as you think. I dare say any of our Mohawks is more of a catch than that bounder.”

Gold trash-talking the man she loved was enough to make Rayeh finally unhook the battle-axe from her back as she stared down the gold-armored knight, her eyes as wide as it was physically possible for them to be.

“You’re dead,” Rayeh said in a low voice. “I wanted to keep you alive so I could torture you for information, but now, I just need to end you. I’ll dice you up until all that’s left is a pile of metal shavings.”

“The fact you would immediately resort to violence on hearing my thoughts is a telltale sign that you know I’m right, dear girl,” Gold said simply.

“I’ll kill you!” Rayeh yelled as she swung her axe at Gold. The knight deftly sidestepped the blow, sending the blade crashing into the stone floor where he had been standing, but that wasn’t the end of it because Rayeh immediately swung her axe around toward the knight again with exactly the same intensity. Even though Rayeh was smaller than her opponent, her reach with the battle-axe was more than enough to compensate for their difference in size, and the weapon was heavy enough to hack down any run-of-the-mill fighter, no matter how much armor they had on. But Gold wasn’t a normal warrior, and the Level 5000 Auric Knight easily blocked Rayeh’s axe blow with his shield, the shock of it leaving the girl frozen.

“Well, it seems you possess the arm strength to wave around that giant axe of yours, but you have to lunge harder with it, dear girl,” Gold said, the axe still pressing into the shield. “All you’re doing is swinging your weapon around without even attempting to guess my next move. I could easily have dodged again without ever needing to use my shield, you see.”

After this bit of mockery in the form of coaching, Rayeh tried to overpower the knight by thrusting her axe into the shield even harder, but neither it nor Gold himself budged so much as a millimeter.

“How can an inferior be *stronger* than me?” Rayeh screamed.



Rayeh ground her teeth, mortified at the thought that she might be losing in a contest of strength, but she wasn't about to back down so easily, and she decided it was time to unleash her ultimate attack.

"You haven't won yet, inferior!" Rayeh shouted. "Frenzy Axe!"

Now it was Gold's turn to be shocked as Rayeh unlocked the power of her magic axe, causing the blade and the handle to glow a dark red. Since he didn't know what kind of effect this "Frenzy Axe" might have on him, Gold quickly backed away to a safe distance. Rayeh roared at length, sending flecks of spittle flying everywhere as if she were a rabid animal, and all trace of sanity had vanished from her bulging eyeballs. She hurled herself at blistering speed toward Gold.

"You're moving a damn sight faster than before!" Gold noted as he relied on his reflexes to just about dodge out of the way of the incoming axe, which whizzed past his head at more than double the speed it had previously. The axe blade even managed to graze Gold's armor, generating a small firework of sparks. "You're like a mad beast that has been let off the leash!" Gold shouted over his foe's noisy flurry of attacks.

Rayeh continued to roar and furiously attempt to hack away at her opponent, but as Gold had pointed out to her, all she was doing was wildly swinging her weapon without employing any sort of practiced technique. Basically, Rayeh was behaving like an animal that relied purely on its base instincts to catch and kill its prey.

The Frenzy Axe doubled every skill stat of the user—aside from their overall power level—but the buff came at the cost of sacrificing all rationality, thereby sending the user into a state of lunacy. Once the Frenzy Axe's true powers were unleashed, the user would go on a mindless rampage until the target identified as the enemy was stone dead, so even though the Frenzy Axe did come with an extremely advantageous buff, losing your senses was a huge drawback, especially when the axe was overly big and heavy in the first place. Due to all of these factors, the Frenzy Axe was classified as a low-level relic-class weapon, but it was just the right weight for Rayeh and it had quickly become her weapon of choice.

Just like her older sister, Rayeh had hit Level 1000 at a very young age, which was why Yude had also recruited her to his party. Rayeh had a better knack for close-combat fighting without needing to resort to gimmicks than Eyrah—which was something even Yude acknowledged—but where she really stood out from her sister was that, using the Frenzy Axe's powers to their fullest, she had repeatedly proven herself capable of dispatching opponents much stronger than herself. In fact, Rayeh was confident she could go toe-to-toe with the White Knights as long as she had the Frenzy Axe in her hands. At this moment in time, however, she was facing Gold.

At first, the golden armor-clad knight was genuinely surprised by the speed of Rayeh's axe swings, but after he'd gotten over his initial shock, Gold realized she was still nothing to worry about, and even went as far as expressing disappointment at this anticlimactic stat boost.

"It appears this greataxe of yours is a magic weapon that boosts your skills, but all it has done is double your power and speed, dear girl," Gold pointed out, raising his voice to be heard over Rayeh's animalistic battle cries. "But losing your composure in the middle of a battle is a staggeringly huge trade-off. After all, if you do not have the wherewithal to apply some *real* fighting skills, your attacks become less varied, and you leave yourself open to countermoves, what?"

Rayeh flung herself high into the air with the intention of executing an aerial dive on Gold, where the velocity of her descent would add to the speed at which she swung her axe down toward his helmet. But instead of sidestepping this attack, Gold held his shield aloft and waited for the exact moment for the axe to connect with it. As soon as he felt the axe come into contact with his shield, Gold used the shield to give the axe more downward momentum and speed up its pendulum motion, which not only caused Rayeh to miss landing what she'd thought would be the finishing blow, but also made her lose control in midair and do a full one-eighty flip while still hurtling toward the ground. Without missing a beat, Gold brought his shield around and slammed Rayeh deep into the stone floor, like an Aikido master exploiting the force of the opponent's attack against them. The back of Rayeh's head took the brunt of the devastating blow, and even though the Frenzy Axe had doubled her resilience

stats, Gold's shield smash was powerful enough to knock her out cold.

Gold lifted his shield and looked down disappointedly at Rayeh's motionless body lying in the middle of the small crater that had been made in the dungeon floor. "You know how to use a magic weapon, I'll give you that, but it amounts to nothing if you let the magic weapon use *you*, what? You're in dire need of some more training in the fundamentals, dear girl."

☆☆☆

When he was young, Yude's parents used to tell him bedtime stories about all the adventures they had been on when they were in the Spear of the Isles, and because of that, little Yude dreamed of one day becoming an adventurer himself. This was a fairly common way for people to become inspired to go into the adventuring trade, but Yude had a unique advantage in that he was blessed with an exceptional talent for questing. The highest power level a dark elf could usually reach was 1000, but Yude had smashed through that growth limit and his power level was presently somewhere above 2000. Elves were able to produce Submasters who could attain high power levels due to being able to trace their lineage back to Masters, but Yude wasn't anything like that. He was simply one of those vanishingly rare special cases that cropped up all throughout dark elf history who were able to reach double the normal level cap for their race.

Because he possessed this rare trait, Yude became prideful and considered himself in a class of his own. When Yude's parents discovered he had exceptional talents, they pleaded with him to defeat the White Knights, the elven order that had caused the Spear of the Isles to disband. On hearing about this supposedly powerful band of knights, Yude traveled to the Elven Queendom and got the chance to see the White Knights for himself—albeit from a distance—and came to the startling realization that the members of this order were every bit as powerful as him, if not more so.

Before that fateful visit to the Elven Queendom, Yude had complete confidence in his own fighting prowess, though at the same time, he had felt frustrated about the total lack of potential opponents that he could unleash the full might of his powers on. But after seeing the White Knights in action, this frustration turned into an ambition to defeat these warriors who were

potentially even stronger than himself. That one brief encounter prompted Yude to start looking for ways to get stronger. He traveled all over the world, defeating monsters and exploring dungeons and ruins in a lifelong quest to collect items and weapons that were magical in nature. He officially formed his own party by recruiting two dark elf sisters with high power levels, and before long, the Blade of the Isles became known among A-rank adventurers as the leading party of the day.

However, Yude and his partymates eventually realized that defeating the White Knights would still be an uphill battle if they relied on magic items alone, and they weren't planning on losing a duel that would no doubt prove to be eventful but in vain. They needed something that could *guarantee* them victory against their sworn enemies, and it was around the time he was wrestling with this conundrum that Yude heard about the existence of Masters, as well as ongoing research that was seeking to find a way to transplant Gifts from humans into people of other races.

When Yude heard that humans could become freakishly powerful, he believed this indicated that there was a way for dark elves to substantially boost their own power levels too. Yude started hunting for more information on Masters, which was how he came to find out about Sionne's research, and not only did he end up providing funding for this research, he also contributed to the cause by kidnapping Gift-wielding humans of all ages and killing anyone who witnessed or tried to interfere with the abductions, even if that meant destroying whole villages. He did all of this in the name of eventually defeating the White Knights, once and for all.

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"So you *are* a Gift-wielder," Yude said menacingly, but I kept my mouth shut and didn't even bother to answer him. I was busy doing something else, anyway.

Mei, get rid of any monsters that notice us battling down here, I ordered through a Telepathy link I'd secretly activated. *Ellie, use your magic to make sure no other parties wander down here to the third floor and stumble across us. We need to capture these guys because they might know something about Masters and whoever destroyed my village.*

As you wish, Master Light, Mei replied telepathically. *I swear on my honor as a maid that not a single monster will come near you.*

And I'll make sure no adventurers wander down these steps, Ellie answered. *I can't have my Blessed Lord mourning a senseless death that could've been avoided.*

While I continued to conduct my telepathic conversation with my lieutenants, Yude treated my silence as proof that he was right, and started spouting off, trying to rub it in that he'd seen through me. "You know, the director of this lab wanted Gift-wielders to use as test subjects, but unfortunately, we couldn't find all that many Gifted inferiors at the slave markets, so we ended up having to raid villages and abduct whoever we could find off the streets to make up the numbers. Guess you could say we went out hunting for lab animals. Well, anyway, what I'm saying is, I've dealt with my fair share of Gifted inferior runts like you, so I know your kind when I see one."

My allies and I already knew about Sionne's research into souls in the Principality of the Nine, and how she had been forced to resign due to how gruesome the human experiments she ran were. We were also aware how she had subsequently gone on to become an adventurer, continuing her experiments on the side before eventually joining the Concord of the Tribes. But the fact that she had teamed up with Yude to kidnap Gifted humans to experiment on was new information to me, and I couldn't let that pass without remark.

"Don't you feel *any* remorse for kidnapping humans and using them as lab animals?" I asked Yude.

"Remorse? For a bunch of inferiors?" Yude scoffed. "You and the rest of your race are no better than barnyard animals. At least this way, we actually get some *use* out of you primates."

Yude doubled down on his lack of repentance. "So, no, I don't feel remorse. Hell no. In fact, I always got a kick outta hunting down smartass little inferiors like you. You mutts are all alike. At first, you fight back, thinking you can beat us, then as soon as you realize you don't have a snowflake's chance in Hell of winning, you start bawling for your mama, papa, or big brother to come and

save you. Seeing you little turds squirm like that was the best part of those jobs!”

I could feel power surging into the hand gripping my staff, spurred on by my rising anger. “You monster...” I breathed.

“Oh, I’m not the monster here,” Yude said simply. “You inferiors are the ones who are too weak and pathetic to protect yourselves. If you wanna blame anyone, blame yourself for being born into that race of vermin.”

Yude drew one of the two rapiers down by his hips, and in the next instant, he lunged forward with such force that he left behind a crack in the stone floor where he’d been standing, and with a wicked smile spread across his face, he aimed his blade at my legs. His approach was so swift, a normal foe probably wouldn’t even have had time to think before Yude had slashed both of their legs and rendered them unable to stand. But he was facing me, and I just lazily swatted away the rapier with my staff, causing Yude to back away from me cautiously.

“That attack was weak,” I said, taunting the dark elf. “Was that what you used when you were capturing humans? Or did someone actually hire you to steal a bunch of baby chicks? It’d certainly explain all that nonsense about ‘barnyard animals.’”

“Y-You little puke!” screamed Yude, who had gone completely red in the face by this point. “That staff must be some kind of magic weapon and you’re just hiding behind it! I’ll make you pay for running your mouth like that, you talking farm animal!”

Yude drew his other rapier and swiftly scraped the two blades together, creating a resonant metallic sound, before resuming his battle stance. However, he wasn’t quite ready to re-engage.

“All magic items, activate!” Yude barked. The several piercings in his ears, the multiple necklaces he was wearing, and the thick armor covering his forearms and legs all started to vibrate, emitting a low hum.

“You ever heard of the White Knights, you shit-eating brat?” Yude asked.

“I might have,” I said guardedly, after a slight pause. I mean, of *course* I’d

heard of them: they were the guys we'd fought in the Great Tower in the Elven Queendom, though I wasn't about to tell him that. Those battles had been set up as a way to test the strength of my allies, but the White Knights had ended up being so easy to beat, they were pretty much useless as yardsticks. Well, at least they lived on in my memory. *We executed the White Knights after extracting all the information we needed out of them,* I thought to myself. *But why's he bringing those guys up? He's a dark elf, so he shouldn't have anything to do with them, right?*

Even though he was clearly still angry at being made fun of, a fierce-looking smile flashed across Yude's face at the notion that he now had the upper hand. "Well, today's your lucky day. I'm gonna give you a little preview of the arsenal that's gonna take down the White Knights. It took me many moons to gather up all these items!"

"You planned to take down the White Knights with those things?" I said skeptically.

"Yeah, I finally figured out how to beat them after years of puzzling it over," said Yude. "If you wanna put the all-powerful White Knights out of commission, you gotta hit 'em with everything you've got first before they can hit you back. You've pretty much gotta kill those bastards before they even have time to blink."

Yude's evil grin stretched even wider. "You know, my original thought was to just incapacitate you, but I've changed my mind. Now I think I'm gonna slice off your arms and legs, and turn you into a living potato sack. It's only fitting for such a stupid inferior. Or you can beg for mercy and cough up all the info you've got, if you prefer. I might be talked into leaving you with one arm and a leg to get by with. So what's it gonna be, boy?"

"I've made up my mind," I said, then jabbed a finger toward Yude. "Come on then, dingus. I'll show you that you're nowhere near my level."

"You little prick!" Yude yelled. "Once I've made you talk, I'm gonna torture you to death!"

Thanks to the armor on his legs, Yude was able to lunge forward so fast, it almost made me think he'd somehow blasted himself toward me. But that

wasn't all. A magic item above the dark elf's right eyebrow suddenly started glowing brighter than a hundred suns, reflexively forcing me to close my eyes.

"You dumbass!" Yude yelled triumphantly.

He's pretty much announced he's going to hit me before I have time to blink, but I'm guessing that means he's betting everything on literal vision loss, I thought to myself. It was plain to see that all of Yude's magic items were buffing his abilities, but his real aim was to blind his target and leave them wide open to his ultimate attack.

"You're wasting your time," I said with my eyes still closed. I could sense that Yude was puzzled by my reaction, but he still hurtled toward me at breakneck speed with both rapiers swinging. I didn't even try to dodge his swords, however. I simply caught the blades in my bare hands and casually snapped both of them in two. Yude looked down at the hilts of his broken rapiers and stammered in disbelief at the sight, but before he could form a coherent thought—and with my eyes still shut—I thrust my staff into the dark elf's solar plexus, sending him careening heavily to the ground. Once he'd stopped rolling, he clutched his stomach with both hands and dry-heaved.

"If that was 'everything you've got,' it was too pathetic for words," I said, still holding the broken blades of Yude's rapiers in my hands. "Though I'll admit, trying to blind me was a surprisingly sneaky thing to do—and a cheap tactic at that—but it didn't really matter, since your attack was way slower than advertised."

Yude whispered something ending with "you."

"Hm?" I said, my look of disappointment quickly turning to one of puzzlement.

"I'm gonna kill—shit..." Yude gasped, still writhing around in agony but looking completely consumed with rage. "I'm gonna *kill* you, little boy! You're dead! I'm gonna bury you, even if it kills me!"

With one hand still clutching his stomach, Yude got to his feet, while his other hand moved around to his back. "I don't give two shits what you know about Masters now! I'm gonna kill you, right here, right now! I'll bury your scrawny ass, and in the process, I'll humble you worse than you just did to me! You hear

me?!”

From behind his back, Yude pulled out a creepy-looking scepter with a magic gem the size of an eyeball attached to one end.

“This here is a phantasma-class weapon I found at the bottom of a dungeon!” Yude yelled. “It’s called the Eye of Balorqh, and it’s a magic weapon that causes instant death! It can only be used a few times before it breaks apart completely, but it dooms any living creature, no matter how powerful they are!”

Yude’s mouth widened into a twisted grin as he brought the scepter forward. “Once I’ve killed you with this, I’ll chop up your corpse and feed you to farm animals! Then I’ll hunt down every single person who knows you and kill all of them too! You’ve brought this on yourself, and now it’s time for you to meet your maker! Light him up, Eye of Balorqh!”

Yude infused the scepter with mana, making the gem twist around and focus on me as if it were a real eye. The next thing I knew, the gem’s surface started glowing darkly, and Yude broke out in a fit of uproarious laughter.

“Die, you little punk!” Yude roared. “Die and go straight to Hell!” But after a few moments of not a lot happening, with me standing there, markedly alive and still breathing, his sense of euphoria slowly turned into despair. “Wh-Why aren’t you dead?” he stammered. “That light should’ve made a cadaver out of you!”

“Well, don’t ask me. How would I know?” I said. “SR Appraisal—release!” I activated the gacha card and glanced at the Eye of Balorqh’s powers using the Appraisal skill. “Oh, I see. It says here that this *is* a magic item that instantly kills people, but it only works on people who are Level 3000 or below,” I said. “So it looks like you were wrong when you said it killed any living creature. It was never going to work on me, since I’m Level 9999. But even then, it wouldn’t have done much whatever its top level limit was, since I’ve made myself invulnerable to instant death attacks.”

“L-Level 9999?” whimpered Yude, who looked like his soul had just departed from his body.

I looked Yude square in the eye. “Now, since you: A) know about Masters; B) just saw me use my Unlimited Gacha card; and C) committed all that bloodshed

against humans, there's no *way* you're getting out of here scot-free," I pronounced.

"S-Stay away!" Yude yelled. "Don't come near me, you freak!"

Despite his protests, I strolled toward Yude, who was still tightly gripping the Eye of Balorqh with both hands and screaming as if praying to the scepter. "You *can't* be Level 9999! That's too high for anyone! Even Hardy, the commander of the White Knights, is nowhere *close* to that power level! You just *can't* be 9999! Please, Eye of Balorqh, kill him now! No! Stay back! Somebody heeeeelp—"

I shut Yude up with another whack from my staff, though I made sure not to hit him too hard, since I needed to capture him alive. The force of the blow was still enough to send him flying through the air though, and by the time he eventually hit the ground, he was out like a light.

"You didn't need to scream. It's not like I'm going to kill you straight away," I said to his motionless body. "I still need to find out everything you know and what crimes you've committed. Then you'll get the punishment you deserve."

I looked down at my fallen opponent for a few seconds and recalled how he had gleefully recounted abducting and slaughtering countless humans, including children like me. It was a painful reminder of how violently cruel this world was for us humans.

"I really can't stomach the way you guys persecute us," I spat out venomously.

☆☆☆

I delivered the final blow to Yude at around the same time Nemumu and Gold were finishing up their battles. Their opponents were both A-rank adventurers, but it turned out they were only Level 1000 or so. Nobody in the Blade of the Isles was a match for us, but their unconscious bodies did present something of a problem.

"Well, it's great that we defeated them, but how are we supposed to get them out of here?" I said.

After my allies and I had beaten the White Knights in the various tower battles we'd engaged in, I'd simply used the SSR Teleportation card to transport

the elves and my fighters to the Abyss. But in this particular dungeon, things were going to be a little more complicated than that. According to Ellie, my clairvoyance and teleportation powers weren't going to work in here, because the two worlds colliding had distorted a bunch of rules governing the physics and magic of this place. I'd tried using the SSR Teleportation card one time during this quest in this lab-turned-dungeon in the faint hope that we might have been wrong on that, but unfortunately, our luck was out.

While I was busy racking my brain over how to get Yude and his party to a location that was a little more secure, Gold stepped in with a suggestion. "Milord, allow Nemumu and I to ferry these blighters out of the dungeon where we can then use your Teleportation card to take them to the Abyss. While the pair of us are occupied, you and the two ladies can simply continue to the bottom level of this dungeon without us, what?"

"Gold!" Nemumu screeched. "Lord Dark honored *me* with the task of guiding him to the bottommost tier of this dungeon! Why are you insisting on making me carry these pieces of trash up to the surface with you?!"

But then, Nemumu suddenly gasped. "Wait..." she said, hugging her arms in front of her chest defensively and shuddering before quickly backing away from Gold. "I-Is this just an excuse so you can get me alone?!"

"No. Not even in the slightest, *Nemumu*," Gold said firmly in an unusually serious tone. "And if you insist on continuing that line of thought, I *will* lose patience with you." Gold cleared his throat to reorient himself after Nemumu's baseless accusation. "The way I see it, our objectives are to get to the bottom of this dungeon, capture milord's sworn foe, and close up the portal to that other world, yes? Miss Ellie is absolutely essential when it comes to sealing up that portal, and in truth, the two of us would only hamper the mission, given our power levels. All things considered, I say the most practical approach is for us to part company and let them handle the rest from here on out, m'girl."

"But you could easily carry those three up to the surface by yourself, leaving me to stay here and escort Lord Dark!" Nemumu protested.

Gold sighed and shook his head. "You are quite right that I could carry all three of these wastrels by myself in normal circumstances. But in case you

hadn't noticed, m'girl, we are in a dungeon, and if I carried these three up there by myself, my hands would be too bally tied up to fight off monsters or hide them from potential witnesses. If milord needs a tour guide to get him through this labyrinth, he has Miss Mei to assist him. I'm sure you and I can both agree that she will do a bang up job, what?"

Gold turned his head to look down at Eyrah, Nemumu's fallen opponent. "And besides, you poisoned that rose lady to the point where she's all covered in bodily fluids now. Milord may have a card about his person that can clean the gal up, but I point-blank refuse to touch that befouled creature under any circumstance. So, as you are the one responsible for this inconvenience, you will be the one carrying her."

Nemumu had no comeback to Gold's argument, and just growled under her breath.

"I won't have that snarling, m'girl," Gold warned.

I wonder if Gold's suggestion is *the most practical course of action,* I mused. With Nemumu's tracking skills to guide them, the two of them could definitely sneak out of the dungeon without being noticed by any of the other adventurers. On the other hand, we had the option of just leaving Gold and Nemumu here to stand guard over the three bodies and ward off any monsters, while the rest of us continued on with the quest. *But we don't know what'll happen once we've destroyed the interdimensional bridge,* I thought. *It might cause this space to shrink and all of the adventurers currently in the dungeon could end up in the same room. And if that happens, there's no way we'll be able to explain away how we ended up with a group of half-dead A-rank questers at our feet.*

Ellie had told me that it was likely to take two or three days for the dungeon to return to its previous size once we'd taken care of the portal, but a much quicker transformation couldn't be ruled out. Using the SSR Conceal card on Yude's party was also out of the question, so getting Gold and Nemumu to carry the dark elves out of the dungeon and using the SSR Teleport card once on the surface again seemed to be the least complicated solution to our little problem.

"Mei, Ellie, thanks for taking care of all the monsters and adventurers for us

back there," I said. "You can reveal yourselves now."

"I appreciate your kind words, Master Light," Mei said as she canceled the shroud of invisibility that cloaked her.

"I've cast a spell to confuse the other adventurers, so none of them will be coming down the staircase to the third subterranean level for the rest of the day," said Ellie, who followed suit.

"Mei, are you able to map out the dungeon like Nemumu can?" I asked.

"Yes, I am proficient in that technique," Mei stated. It had been a good call bringing Ellie and the multitalented Mei along with us. Proceeding like this, nothing would get in the way of us completing our mission before the day was out.

"Nemumu, Gold, you two take Yude and his girls out of the dungeon and secure them in the Abyss," I ordered. "Make sure you're not seen by any adventurers. Me, Mei, and Ellie will carry on to the bottommost level."

"Very good, milord. We'll take care of this little lot," Gold assured me.

"As you command, Lord Light," Nemumu said.

My two allies were quick to answer in the affirmative, though Nemumu seemed somewhat downcast that Mei was capable of the same echolocation technique she was so proud of. I had to admit, I found it adorable to see this side of Nemumu.

To make doubly sure that Yude and his gang wouldn't wake up mid-journey and cause us some more trouble, I used the SR Slumber card on them to keep them asleep for a full twenty-four hour period. Once the dark elves were tied up—and had blindfolds put on them, out of an abundance of caution—Gold and Nemumu headed back up to the entrance with our captives under their arms, leaving my two lieutenants and I to strike out for the deepest level of the dungeon.

Chapter 7: Dream Home

Mei was able to perfectly mimic Nemumu's echolocation skill, mapping out the whole of the third subterranean level by making loud sounds that were outside the human hearing range and listening to the reverberations. In fact, Mei managed to find the next set of stairs quicker than Nemumu had using the same technique. *Doesn't this technically make Mei faster at scouting than Nemumu?* I mused to myself, though I quickly banished this train of thought for fear of harming Nemumu's reputation.

On reaching the fourth subterranean level, we saw that it was very different from the other floors in terms of its construction.

"It's just one straight corridor," I noted. The ceiling, walls, and floor were still made of stone like the floors above, but on this level, a red carpet stretched out in front of us, leading up to a pair of double doors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were no monsters in sight.

Mei scanned our surroundings using her scouting skills. "I do not detect any traps."

"I'm not sensing any magical traps either, Blessed Lord," Ellie reported. Armed with these assurances, I led my team down the length of the red carpet, which I could tell had nothing underneath it—save for the hard stone floor—from how it felt underfoot.

"The doors are unlocked, and there are no traps here either," Mei confirmed.

"Okay, Mei, you can open them," I said.

"Then, allow me, Master Light," she replied.

Staying alert at all times, Mei gently pushed open the double doors. Ellie and I also braced ourselves for what potentially lay in wait for us on the other side, but as the double doors swung open, all we found beyond was a room big enough to host a ball. We treaded carefully into the room.

"Was this originally the ground floor reception hall?" I wondered aloud. The map of the lab we had been given said there was a reception hall on the first

floor used for announcements and meetings, but it looked as if the spatial distortions had moved that room to the fourth subterranean level.

"Well, I guess we should make our way to those doors at the opposite end of the room," I said.

"Judging by appearances, I believe we are close to arriving at our final destination," said Mei.

"I think so too," I agreed. "I will soon be reunited with Sionne. Though, first, I suppose we need to defeat the monster blocking those doors."

Ellie stared at the empty space just in front of the doors in question with a puzzled look on her face before adding, "Was that thing supposed to be hiding? Well, at least that's what it appears to be *trying* to do."

Apparently realizing that we were able to see it, the monster canceled its invisibility magic and revealed itself to us. It looked like a giant lion kneeling on all fours, except that it had the face of an old man and its entire body seemed to be covered in splotches of soot. It gazed down at us with cloudy white eyes.

Mei activated her Appraisal skill. "'The Fallen Sphinx,'" she read. "This is the first time I have ever heard that name. This monster may have originated in the other world. It appears capable of creating powerful illusions, and it is Level 2000, which is quite high for a monster."

Even though we had figured out the nature of this monster—as well as knowing it had been there all along, despite its efforts to remain hidden—the Fallen Sphinx flashed us a haughty grin and began speaking directly into our minds.

I have been summoned to serve at the pleasure of our highest king, the Soul Dragon, the sphinx said.

I reacted with surprise at this. *He was summoned by the Soul Dragon?* I thought. *Does this mean he's some kind of gatekeeper?*

With these powers that I wield, it continued, *I shall make you wallow in the depths of your own souls.* As the last syllable echoed around our heads, the Fallen Sphinx unleashed a beam of blinding light that enveloped the three of us. Even though our eyes closed reflexively, we all instinctively assumed fighting

stances, though from what I could tell, I didn't sustain any damage. But when I opened my eyes again, I found I was no longer in the dungeon.

"So I'm now looking up at a cloud-filled blue sky, huh?" I said to myself. "And I'm standing right next to some farmland. Wait, is this my village? My home?"

The blue sky stretched for as far as the eye could see, with puffs of pure white dotted here and there, and I was surrounded by fields of wheat that glittered like gold.

"Is this the kind of illusion Mei said the sphinx was capable of?" I mused. "That thing's wasting its time."

But this was no ordinary illusion. I could smell the air and feel the dirt beneath my feet quite clearly. I was even able to feel the breeze against my skin. Everything seemed so real. *But I know this Fallen Sphinx is just trying to mess with my head,* I thought. *That creature is probably able to trick low-level adventurers into thinking this is all real and trap them inside these dream worlds until they die. I guess that's why the sphinx was acting all smug. It knows just how powerful its illusions are.*

But since I had Level 9999 resistance to magical attacks, I was able to keep my wits about me where others couldn't. All I had to do to release myself from this dream sequence was to pull out a gacha card that worked against hallucinations. But before I could, I heard a voice that stopped me in my tracks.

"Brother? What's that you're wearing?"

I turned to see a little girl with the same color hair as me. "Yume?"

Standing in front of me was my baby sister, who I'd left behind more than three years ago, when she was still just seven. She looked exactly the same as the last time I'd seen her before striking out into the world on my own. Her bob-length hair fell just short of her shoulders, and she had a red ribbon tied on one side of it. Even though Yume was wearing just your standard-issue farm dress made of tough fabric designed to withstand all forms of wear and tear, she still looked totally adorable in the eyes of this big brother. But it wasn't just Yume who had come to greet me.

"Light? What're you doing over there?" said a man with short hair and

stubble. “Are you done chopping the wood yet, boy?”



“If you’re all done with the firewood, bring some inside so I can make breakfast, honey,” a woman called out. She had her hair tied back, and you could tell just by looking at her that she wasn’t the kind of person who took any nonsense.

“Mom...” I said softly. “Dad...”

“What’s going on, Light?” said a tall teenager who chose that moment to poke his head out of the oversized chicken coop nearby. “If you’re not done yet, then let your big brother help you out.”

“Els...”

Even though I had jet black hair and my big brother’s was darkish brown, people could still tell we were brothers due to having similar eyes and noses. Every morning, back on the old farm, I used to chop wood around the back of the house, while Els cleaned out the coop and fed the chickens. Despite having to deal with the chicken coop by himself, Els always gladly offered to give me a hand too.

Not only is this sphinx making me have a vision about my devastated village, it’s reunited me with my family, I thought. Thanks to my Level 9999 powers, I knew full well I was in a fantasy world. I knew damn well what I was seeing wasn’t real, but... But seeing the family I thought I’d lost forever brought hot tears to my eyes.

“Brother? What’s wrong?” Yume asked, her big innocent eyes looking worried. “Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Yume...”

“Hey, is everything all right, son?” my dad said. “You got a fever or something?” He placed his hand on my forehead to check my temperature. His hand was huge, and while it was hard and leathery from his many years of farmwork, its touch still felt kind and gentle. Feeling the tenderness of my dad’s hand against my skin again brought a lump to my throat.

Dad, I’m so...

Even though I’d buried him along with my mom, my dad was presently standing right in front of me, showing me fatherly love. I hadn’t been able to

save him from the disaster that had befallen my village. I hadn't made it in time. All the emotions that I'd bottled up came rushing out in the form of a single stream of tears that ran down my cheek.

"What's this? What're you crying about?" my dad said gently. "Come on, Light, you gotta act like a man." My dad lifted his hand from my forehead around to the back of my head and tousled my hair playfully. He then treated me to a huge smile and hugged me in a way that said everything was going to be all right.

"So you're feeling a little under the weather, is that it, Light?" my dad said. "You're always taking too much onto yourself. You know I'm always here to lend a hand, so there's no need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders. If you need anything at all, I'm here for you, son."

"Your father's right, Light," my mom said. "I should note that your father's brute strength is all he's good for. He might tell you stories about how he was a 'lady-killer' back in the day, but I only married him because he came begging on his hands and knees. But despite that, I still love your father, and that won't change."

"Mom..." I whispered.

My mom was the next to hug me, and she did so very gently, like she was embracing something extremely precious. "A man doesn't have to be strong all the time, dear. A man doesn't have to shoulder everything. No matter what happens, your mom will always be there for you."

Standing beside her, my dad had started sulking, like he always did whenever my mom reminded him of how he'd proposed to her, which never failed to get a laugh out of Els and Yume.

"I get that you feel this huge sense of responsibility when it comes to us," Els said to me. "But you should let the rest of us support you, Light."

"I can help you too, brother!" Yume piped up innocently.

Seeing these visions cruelly reminded me I would never see my parents again. It reminded me that Yume and Els were likely still out there somewhere, waiting for me to find them. It reminded me of the warm embrace of the happy family I

used to have.

All of it is right here, just as I remember it, I thought. *But in reality, this is all long gone.*

I recalled a time when I was little and my mom was pregnant with Yume. She said the baby would either be a new brother or a new sister for me. Every night, we gathered around my mom in anticipation and chatted in the warm glow of the lamp.

“Am I going to have a sister or a brother?” I asked her.

“It could be either, dear,” my mom replied with a giggle. “I don’t really care, as long as my baby is born healthy. In fact, it doesn’t even have to be healthy. I’ll love my baby even if it’s weak and sickly. The best I can ask for is that you, Els, and this baby grow up happy.”

“And it’s not just your mom who thinks that. Your dad loves you both very much, as well as this baby we’re about to have!” my dad added. “If it’s a girl, I’m sure she’ll be a real looker, just like your mom. If it’s a boy, he’s gonna be a handsome stud like all the men in this family.” My dad stroked my mom’s belly as he spoke. “Ah, I wanna hold our new kid right now!”

My dad’s touch seemed to tickle my mom, but she still smiled at him and us all the same. We were dirt poor, and we worked ourselves nearly to death just to stay poor, but those days were full of warmth, especially our nighttime conversations. My mom and dad were always all smiles back then. After Yume was born, we’d go for picnics on a nearby hill whenever we could spare the time. From the top of the hill, we could see the whole of the village. *The breeze up here feels so nice...* I thought as I stood and looked out from this vantage point. *I remember how much mom and dad used to love this view.*

The sky was blue and endless, and the spring sun shone down gently on me and my family the way it used to in those days I would never get back.

“It’s really nice weather,” my dad said. “I’m glad we picked today to come up here.”

“I made plenty of pie to eat,” my mom said. “Come on, spread out the blanket so we can all sit. Yume, come over here and let mommy hug you.”

“’Kay! I love you, mommy!” said Yume, who was still a toddler at this point. My mom picked up my sister and nuzzled her cheek lovingly against hers, while my brother looked on as he laid out the meal my mom had spent all morning cooking.

I sighed inwardly as I recalled these memories from a time when I was still too young and ignorant to understand how cruel this world really was. If only I could carry on basking in the warm, gentle rays of the sun with my family like this... But I knew in my heart of hearts that I couldn’t stick around here forever, so I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out a gacha card. I dearly wanted to stay inside this dream, but I needed to open my eyes, face reality, and do what had to be done.

“SSR card: Time to Wake Up—release.” As soon as I activated the card, the unseen walls around me shattered like funhouse mirrors exploding. An illusion like that had been no match for this particular gacha card. I heard a telepathic yelp from the Fallen Sphinx, who I could now see standing on all fours, mere moments away from pouncing on me. The monster clearly hadn’t expected me to return from the dream world it had created for me to inhabit.

Wasting no time, I leapt forward and smashed the beast in the belly with my staff, putting the entirety of my strength and emotions into that single strike, and blowing a large hole through the Fallen Sphinx’s midriff. The sphinx’s screams echoed around my head before it disintegrated away into nothingness, though like the other monsters we’d encountered in the dungeon, it didn’t leave behind any magic gems.

“Very impressive, Master Light,” Mei said. “I see you have already defeated the monster.”

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Ellie added. “I had such an unexpectedly pleasant illusion that I tarried a bit too long in it. Though of course, it couldn’t compare to what you have to offer, Blessed Lord Light.”

Mei and Ellie had used their own powers to break free of their hallucinations at around the same time I’d vaporized the sphinx. It didn’t seem like their illusions had affected them at all, though they did have the look of two people who had just come out of a fun tourist attraction. But for their part, they

immediately noticed something was off with me.

"Master Light? Is something wrong?" Mei asked.

"If you've been injured, you must tell me, Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie said in a serious tone. "I'll make you all better with my healing magic!"

I took a deep breath before answering my lieutenants. "I'm fine. That monster only made me hallucinate. I'm not hurt anywhere."

I hadn't counted on being shown visions of my long-lost family, I thought, covering my eyes with my hand.

"Master Light?" Mei said again, still obviously worried about my health.

"Nothing's wrong, honest," I lied.

"If any problems do ever arise, please do not hesitate to tell me about them," said Mei.

"Thank you, Mei," I said.

"Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie jumped in. "You are of course always free to tell me anything too, if you need help!"

Ellie was blatantly trying to insert herself in the moment me and Mei were sharing, which made me chuckle despite myself. "Thank you, Ellie. I'll be sure to lean on you too, when the time comes."

Ellie's eyes moistened at this, which made me chuckle again, though this time, it was a bit more sheepish. After this exchange, as my team and I headed for the set of double doors on the other side of the reception hall, I made a silent vow. *I may not have been able to save mom and dad, but Yume and my big brother, Els, might still be out there alive somewhere,* I thought. *If they really are alive, I will do everything in my power to rescue them. I don't care how many obstacles I have to overcome, I swear I will find them, even if the Goddess herself tries to get in my way!*

When we finally reached the double doors, Mei used her powers to make sure they weren't trapped before pushing them open. Waiting in the room beyond was my sworn enemy, Sionne, who was floating around inside the Soul Dragon.

Chapter 8: Unlimited Gachas

The doorway at the other end of the reception hall ended up leading to the underground laboratory where Sionne had originally been conducting her experiments. *This lab is supposed to be about as big as a courtyard, according to the map*, I thought. *But looking at it now, you could fit a whole damn mansion in here*. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the lab were bare stone, like everywhere else in the dungeon, and lying curled up in the middle of the room was an icy-looking dragon. It had a long neck and tail, and at a guess, its wingspan was more than ten meters. Its pike-like claws were attached to paws that seemed strong enough to take down any large creature that came near it, and a mess of jagged fangs jutted out from its mouth. The only thing that really set this creature apart from your typical dragon was the fact that it was semi-translucent, and I wasn't even exaggerating. Its body was made out of some kind of ethereal crystalline material, and as far as I could tell, it had no organs, bones, or blood vessels—none that could be seen, at least.

So this is the Soul Dragon, *huh?* I mused to myself. *I guess it* is *more of a ghost than a living creature.* The only description we'd had of the Soul Dragon had come from Ellie, but now I was able to see for myself exactly what made this monster what it was.

Floating in the middle of the dragon was my sworn enemy, Sionne, her long silver-blonde hair drifting around above her back. She was wearing the same kind of outfit that showed off her ample cleavage and thighs that she used to wear back in her Concord of the Tribes days. She'd never cared how much skin was on show, though I always felt a bit awkward looking at her. Both Sionne and the Soul Dragon opened their eyes when they realized that intruders—namely, me and my team—had entered their lair.

"Who are you?" Sionne said, still floating around inside the dragon. "Only authorized people are allowed in here."

I wasn't able to answer Sionne at first. Her response was definitely unexpected, yet oddly natural at the same time. Sionne had always been all about her research—to the point where she barely cared about anything else—

so her treating this place like it was still a functioning laboratory was very true to her character. Thanks to this briefest of brief exchanges, I knew for a fact that this was the real Sionne inside the Soul Dragon. Ellie had been right when she'd said the fact the dragon could make copies of Sionne was evidence that the dark elf scientist was almost certainly still alive, and although I made sure not to show my feelings in front of Sionne, a wave of relief washed over me when I realized we'd made it in time and she was still safe and well.

As I had done with Sasha, I removed my SSR Fool's Mask and reintroduced myself to my sworn foe. "It's been a long time, Sionne," I said. "After three long years, I'm here to take my revenge."

"I remember you. I see you are still alive then," Sionne said laconically. "Are those two girls behind you new party members?"

Sionne didn't express one iota of surprise that I had survived the assassination attempt in the Abyss. Her reaction was the complete opposite to that of Sasha, who had screamed at the top of her lungs on seeing my face again. I felt compelled to say something about Sionne's total lack of reaction.

"You don't seem all that surprised to see me," I said.

"Is there a reason I *should* be surprised?" Sionne said, genuinely perplexed by the notion. "It doesn't concern me either way whether you lab rats live or die. In any case, I have finally met my soulmates."

"Soulmates?" I asked, confused by her use of the plural.

"Yes, my soulmates: the Great Soul Dragon," Sionne replied, indicating that she didn't see the dragon as one single entity. "By becoming one with my soulmates, we are able to exchange all of the knowledge that we possess. We are still only in the first stage of the process, but I have learned so much highly valuable information from them. It is truly magnificent! With the Great Soul Dragon's power and knowledge, I shall soon be able to extricate Gifts from inferiors and transplant them into members of other races!"

Ellie had said that the Soul Dragon sometimes kept a victim alive in order to absorb information from their brain and body. It looked as if the dragon was using that power to transfer all that information into Sionne herself, and the info must have been every bit as magnificent as the dark elf claimed, since she

was more talkative and expressive than I'd ever seen her.

Sionne's words apparently prompted the Soul Dragon to raise its head from where it had been resting. The creature was easily more than fifteen meters long, and although it didn't seem to have any visible vocal cords, it was able to speak to us as well.

"In Sionne, I have found my perfect half—the one most suited to me," the Soul Dragon stated. "The day I met Sionne was the day I was blessed."

Well, it seemed the Soul Dragon really liked Sionne too. On hearing the dragon's words of praise for her, the expression on Sionne's face morphed into one you'd usually see on a woman who had come to the conclusion that she was quite pleased with her choice of new man.

"I have discovered from Sionne that a multitude of souls exist outside of these walls," the Soul Dragon continued. "I eagerly await the feast of feasts I shall embark upon soon."

"Yes, we will collect all the souls you desire, Great Soul Dragon," Sionne said. "I cannot wait to serve them up to you, either."

"Wait, hold on!" I yelled. "Are you seriously saying you're going to take this Soul Dragon outside and let it *feed* on a bunch of people? You do realize that your fellow dark elves will be its first victims, right? You *do* know that, right?!"

"Is that supposed to deter me in some way?" Sionne answered flatly. "If the Great Soul Dragon desires souls, then I see no reason *not* to let them dine to their heart's content, whether those souls come from dark elves or you lower animals. I am sure you have heard the phrase: 'No breakthrough comes without sacrifices.' Well, that maxim applies here too."

Ellie felt the need to cover her mouth out of pure disgust. "U-Unbelievable. Even if she wasn't Blessed Lord Light's sworn enemy, as a fellow researcher, this woman nauseates me to my core."

"I am not a researcher, but I share your distaste of her, Ellie," Mei stated, glaring at Sionne as if she were evil incarnate.

I'd come into this former lab hating Sionne's guts, but those emotions had been eclipsed by the need for urgency to stop Sionne and the Soul Dragon

escaping from this dungeon and causing widespread havoc and slaughter. Sionne had turned into such a supervillain, I had almost forgotten she'd betrayed me.

I raised my staff and assumed a battle stance. "I came here to capture you and take my revenge, but now I need to defeat you and this Soul Dragon in order to save countless lives!"

"You think *you* can defeat us?" Sionne said, a look of pure scorn contorting her face. "You are nothing but a pitiful, grandstanding inferior. Please just end your lives so we can take your souls."

"Indeed, my chosen one, my bride," the Soul Dragon concurred. "These foul creatures seek to deprive me of my faithful companion, and for that, I demand they forfeit their lives!"

The Soul Dragon rose to all fours, which was the signal that battle was about to commence. Knowing I would also be facing my nemesis, Sionne, Ellie turned to reassure me that she and Mei wouldn't interfere. "Blessed Lord Light, we'll let you fight them alone, like we did in the Great Tower."

"Oh, there is no need to send someone to fight us, fair maiden," Sionne sneered at her. "I said we were going to take *all* your souls, not just Light's. I am going to assume that your soul tastes every bit as scrumptious as you look, young maiden."

As soon as Sionne had finished taunting us, the Soul Dragon opened its tooth-filled mouth and roared at the three of us. It was no ordinary roar, because it was clear the dragon's voice was laced with mana, but the noise had zero effect on us, other than making us cover our ears because of how loud it was.

Wincing due to the din, Mei quickly ascertained the nature of the dragon's magic-infused roar. "This type of attack robs the victim of their soul and instantly kills them. Of course, it has not worked on us as we are already immune to instant death attacks."

"We have Ellie to thank for that level of protection," I said before turning to the dragon once more. "Now, release Sionne and go back to where you came from."

The Soul Dragon laughed at my act of provocation. “Foolish creature. Your victory is not assured simply because you are impervious to my roar!”

The Soul Dragon spread its wings and swiftly skimmed the ground toward me. Then, when I was within range, it swung an arm as thick as a tree trunk at me. I stood my ground and parried the dragon’s claws with my staff, the impact sounding like two metal weapons clashing at high speed—a noise that reverberated loudly around the lab-turned-dungeon.

With its fifteen-meter frame, the Soul Dragon towered over me, but I didn’t move from my spot, deciding instead to wave my staff teasingly at the creature. “That wasn’t just a physical attack, was it?” I noted. “If you slash someone with those magical claws of yours, you can tear into their soul as well as their flesh, can’t you? But it won’t work if you don’t get a clean slash in!”

The Soul Dragon proceeded to rain down hit after hit with its icy claws, but I just casually batted away every attempt to slash me with my staff. But even though I was deflecting all of its blows, the Soul Dragon was still acting as if it had this fight in the bag.

“Your conceit is ill-founded, creature!” declared the dragon, before opening its mouth as if to roar again. But instead of deafening me once more, it barfed up some kind of extra-gooey dark liquid, covering me from head to toe with it.

“You inferiors are so predictable,” Sionne said as I looked down at myself, stunned. “Your intellect is too lacking to realize that all of that close-quarters combat was a ploy to get in close enough to execute our sorcery attack. The Great Soul Dragon generated this black potion using my knowledge, and just one drop of it places a deadly curse on you. As we have successfully bathed you in the substance, by now, your flesh and bones should be disintegrating completely—”

Without even bothering to wipe off the black goo, I flung myself toward the Soul Dragon and slugged it with my staff, sending Sionne and the giant lizard flying through the air like a kickball. I was tired of listening to her hot air anyway, and thankfully, the momentum of my sudden jump had shed the dark goop from my body. The force of my blow sent the Soul Dragon bouncing across the stone floor, hitting it several times before coming to rest on its side.

I approached Sionne's shaken body inside the dragon, and in an icy voice, told her, "None of your attacks will work on me. Don't make me repeat myself."

That "sorcery attack"—or whatever it had been—hadn't singed so much as a single hair on my head. Shouting from a spot a safe distance away so they wouldn't accidentally interfere in my fight, Mei and Ellie backed me up on this statement.

"Master Light is entirely correct," Mei said. "It defies logic that you would repeat the same attacks despite knowing they will have no effect on him."

"If there are any fools in this room, it's you and your Soul Dragon," Ellie said to Sionne. "You talk about how there are no breakthroughs without sacrifices, but all you've hit us with so far are low-level attacks. Instead of dreaming about future magical discoveries, maybe you should concentrate on demonstrating that you know the bare minimum of *any* kind of magic."

"You viperous wretches! You dare to mock me with those words?!" Our jeering seemed to have made the enraged Soul Dragon lurch back upright. "You creatures bask in jubilant leisure simply by enduring longer than most. Yet a creature is but a creature, and a creature in possession of a soul shall never best me! You insignificant creatures shall answer for your prideful indolence with your lives! You churlish fleas shall come to know true despair momentarily!"

Hearing the word "despair" uttered immediately sent me into a long fit of laughter. "I already experienced *true* despair three years ago!" I howled humorlessly. "All thanks to a handful of absolute rats like your bride, Sionne, over there!"

"In that case, you didn't experience *nearly* enough despair," Sionne said, gradually raising her voice. "You are merely a piece of refuse attempting to get in the way of the Great Soul Dragon and myself. We will make you suffer before we throw you into the fiery pits of Hell!"

The Soul Dragon roared and from its body came three flashes of color that morphed into three separate monsters. The first looked like a bull that was as big as a house, except it had a human face with horns as long and pointy as spears, and it was covered in skin that was seemingly made out of unbreakable metal. The second looked like a two-legged cyclops so tall, you had to raise your

head just to be able to take in the full size of the beast, though a major difference between this monster and a regular cyclops was that this thing had three heads instead of one, each with one eye. Although this behemoth was unarmed, it looked like one smash of its giant fist would be enough to kill pretty much any living creature.

While these first two monsters were nasty enough in their own right, the final one of the three looked like something straight out of a nightmare. It had the appearance of a metal dome with a mass of feelers and tentacles stretching out from its underside. It almost looked like a supersized bacteria that was wearing a bowl for a hat, and suffice to say, it totally grossed me out. Even more alarmingly, this thing was floating in the air, possibly due to magic because there was no sign of any wings on it. I couldn't imagine *anyone* thinking this freak of nature could be cute in any way whatsoever. Of course, none of these monsters existed in our world, meaning they had probably originated in that other dimension.

"My subjects, destroy these arrogant creatures!" the Soul Dragon commanded.

The man-bull and the tri-headed cyclops roared as they charged toward us. The floating bacteria swooped down toward Ellie while squirting some sort of juice from the ends of its tentacles. Using one hand to keep her witch's hat firmly on her head, Ellie deftly dodged the creature's attack.

"Why is the grossest-looking one coming after me?" Ellie moaned. "Couldn't the dragon have produced a creature that matches my dignified tastes?"

Meanwhile, the man-bull barreled toward Mei with such force, the stone floor crumbled each time its hooves struck it.

"Is the bull supposed to be my opponent?" Mei asked no one in particular. "In that case, I shall fight it, though unfortunately for this creature, it will never defeat me simply by charging."

Mei leapt out of the way of the man-bull, and as she did so, she loosed her deadly strings. The threads were so fine that no one would have been able to see them unless they were *really* squinting, so unsurprisingly, the bull monster ran headlong into them. Mei had made the strings stronger and sharper than

steel by infusing them with mana, meaning the man-bull turned into confetti.

My opponent was the three-headed cyclops, who roared in my face and swung a heavy fist toward me. It was your typical blunt-force attack, but a direct hit from it would have been powerful enough to instantaneously kill Yude if it had been him here in my place, even if that dark elf had activated every single buff he had on him. But to me, the incoming punch was so ridiculously weak, I didn't even bother trying to avoid it. I just stood where I was and raised one of my own fists.

"Just so you know, you're not going to kill me with that punch," I said.

When the cyclops's right fist connected with mine, its entire arm exploded into a fine powder, causing it to squawk oddly in confusion. The difference in our sizes went far beyond an adult duking it out with a kid—it had been more like a full-grown man punching an ant—yet I had still come out the winner. But instead of savoring my victory, I silently puzzled over why no blood was dripping from what was left of the tri-headed cyclops's arm. *Speaking of which, none of the monsters we have killed in this dungeon have bled at all,* I thought.

While I was ruminating on this, Mei finished dicing up the man-bull and Ellie barbecued the flying bacteria with some random attack spell. The only monster left alive was the one-armed, three-headed cyclops in front of me, but for some reason, both Sionne and the Soul Dragon still had confident looks on their faces, despite the lopsided outcome of this battle. In fact, they were acting as if they were watching a sad little clown show.

"I declared that you lowly creatures would know true despair," the Soul Dragon boomed after apparently noticing that I was staring at it, "and now, I shall visit such despair upon you."

The moment the dragon finished speaking, the cyclops sprouted another arm, and the man-bull and the bacteria monster both regenerated themselves.

"My subjects are beings of souls," the Soul Dragon announced. "Their forms are merely temporary existences. By conferring my powers onto them, they instantly return to their former shapes."

From inside the Soul Dragon, Sionne giggled. "We will show you uneducated inferiors how deep your despair can go." Sionne allowed herself a full-on roar of

laughter before continuing with her monologuing. “Thanks to the Great Soul Dragon, I’ve hit upon a truth about the soul, which is: even if a soul belongs to an inferior, it still bears powerful magical properties. To put it in terms even you lesser anthropoids will understand, the Great Soul Dragon will never run out of mana because it is made up entirely of souls. So I would advise you to stop engaging in this futile exercise of defeating our monsters.”

Sionne giggled once more, her contempt-filled eyes still on me. I was in the middle of seething at this pompous lecture when I suddenly heard the cyclops say something.

“K...” the creature spluttered, trying to get its words out. “Gill...” it managed. “Gill me. Set me free.”

The Soul Dragon looked down in amusement at the cyclops, all three of its eyes seemingly weeping. “Ah, this delights me to the fullest. Souls I have ensnared are powerless to defy me and are only fit for wailing their grief. Hearing their lamentations fills me with so much *pleasure*.”

“Truly astounding. You are just like me, Great Soul Dragon,” Sionne said excitedly. “Hearing my lab animals writhing in pain always thrills me to the core, for some odd reason. I can still remember the rush I felt on hearing Light scream in agony three years ago. He sounded preposterously absurd, and not all that unlike a pig being slaughtered. I do not indulge in any pastimes outside of my research, but I simply loved hearing you squeal like an animal back in the Abyss. I trust we will be seeing a repeat of that entertaining spectacle in a few minutes.”

“Sionne. Soul Dragon.” I glared up at the duo with barely suppressed rage. Mei and Ellie hadn’t said a word, but I could tell from how they were glowering at our foes that they were equally enraged. But Sionne continued to run her mouth, paying no heed to how much she was provoking us.

“Why do you sound so pained, Light?” Sionne sneered. “Is this the part where you try begging for your life out of hopeless despair? You can quit while you’re ahead, since it would be absolutely pointless. We will have your souls, no matter what. So amuse us all you like with your groveling, but we will still take your souls and kill you. There is no escape from it. The only fate that awaits you

is to be trapped inside the Great Soul Dragon for all eternity, ruing the day that you dared to challenge us. You will plead for mercy like the other souls we have imprisoned. That will be your punishment for your verbal and physical transgressions against us. Think of it as your divine punishment, filled with agony and despair."

"Soul Dragon..." I whispered.

"What is it, creature?" the dragon asked. "If you deign to plead for your life, my bride has already explained how ineffective such efforts would be. Or do you fear causing injury to your innocent souls by attacking me further? Whatever the case, I will surely kill you. Offer up your souls to me and regret the day you encroached upon my dominion."

Completely ignoring what the Soul Dragon had just said, I declared my intentions to the interdimensional reptile. "I only came to this place to capture Sionne, and you are only here because of a freak accident. If you weren't planning to do any harm to anyone, I was more than willing to just let you go free. But now I see that you truly are an irredeemable monster that I need to destroy without delay!"

I activated my UR Card Holder and retrieved a number of SSR Holy Bouquet cards. I threw them into the air, and each one turned into a glowing bouquet of flowers that released petals above the heads of the three-headed cyclops, the man-faced bull, and the dome-headed bacteria. As they fell, the petals slowly disintegrated the monsters, but instead of struggling against this fluttering doom, the creatures accepted their fates with elation. The SSR Holy Bouquet was designed to purify and destroy evil beings, such as zombies and ghosts, but thankfully, it seemed to work on the souls inhabiting these three monsters too.

"Thang you..." the cyclops mumbled. "Thang you, young god..." The other two monsters seemingly weren't able to say anything, but they also appeared grateful to be reduced to nothingness.

Instead of sounding surprised by this turn of events, Sionne calmly analyzed what had just happened. "I see. You understood that destroying their physical bodies would be useless, so you used holy magic designed to be wielded against phantom-type monsters instead. An impressive approach to the problem. For

an inferior.”

At this point, both Sionne and the Soul Dragon were smirking evilly, as if they had just witnessed something really comical.

“Or it *would* be impressive, if it weren’t so laughably pointless!” Sionne cackled.

“Indeed,” the Soul Dragon agreed. “Despair once more, creature!” The dragon produced three more souls from its body, which transformed into the same screeching cyclops, man-bull, and bacteria from before, then it sneered through its rows of fangs as it filled in the blanks for us. “These subjects are different beings from the ones you purified. I simply released three more souls akin to the ones you defeated moments ago. No matter how many times you purify my souls, I shall unleash countless more upon you.”

The Soul Dragon adopted an expression that made it seem like we were entering the big finale. “I am made up of one hundred million souls, indistinguishable from a supreme god whose subjects are as numerous as the stars in the sky! I have spent innumerable years collecting souls to arrive at that number, and the years it shall take you to purify all of my souls shall be innumerable still! Moreover, my subjects are presently in combat with more of you creatures above us, meaning they shall continue to replenish me with the souls that they reap!”

The Soul Dragon’s mouth widened into a grin that seemed to stretch from one ear to the other. “Will a mortal like you be able to purify my one hundred million souls? I say to you it is impossible! You lost this battle the moment you dared to face me, creature! Will I see despair in your eyes now?!”

I gritted my teeth in silence, but kept my eyes firmly fixed on the Soul Dragon. The translucent reptile threw its head back and laughed at my reaction.

“You *do* despair! You despair, stubborn creature!” the dragon chortled again. “You despair! You despair! You despair greatly!”

“I knew I could count on you, Great Soul Dragon,” Sionne gushed. “Light, show them how thoroughly dejected you are. And tell your two maidens to join you in your display! You must entertain the Great Soul Dragon! Hurry up and show them how you look! Show them!”

“I know...” I whispered, causing a confused Sionne and the Soul Dragon to abruptly halt their celebratory laughter. “I know everything about you, Soul Dragon,” I said firmly. “Ellie told me all about how you’re made out of more souls than I could ever count. And thanks to that valuable bit of info, I made sure to come prepared.”

The smiles on the faces of Sionne and the Soul Dragon stiffened in agitation. Since the two seemed unable or unwilling to speak, I continued to fire shots back at them. “We thought you guys might be packing some other powers besides the ones we had already banked on, but it sounds like you have no other trump cards left up your sleeve. In fact, the only new thing we have learned is that you make every single one of your souls suffer for all eternity once you have captured them. You really make me sick.”

“I agree with Master Light,” Mei piped up. “You are an incredibly repellent creature, Soul Dragon.”

“I never imagined the Soul Dragon could do such horrible things to the dead,” said a visibly-shaken Ellie. “If I had known, it would have been one of the first things I would’ve told you. Please forgive me, Blessed Lord.”

“It’s not your fault, Ellie,” I said. “Blame the Soul Dragon here for being impossibly grotesque.”

Once I’d calmed Ellie down, I turned to face the Soul Dragon once more. “I’m done playing these games with a horrible monster like you. It’s time to end this.” I took out the UR Card Holder again and raised up the gacha item so the Soul Dragon and Sionne could see it.

“UR Card Holder—release!”

The UR Card Holder spat out all the cards I wanted in a seemingly never-ending blur, with each card glowing and zipping about in the air, quickly transforming our surroundings into a snowstorm of light. The display was so dazzling and beautiful, even Sionne and the Soul Dragon were awestruck, though both of them instantly realized this whirlwind of gacha cards wasn't just for show. They could tell that each card had the same property that was harmful to the overlord of souls as the previous one I'd used.

"Th-This cannot be!" the Soul Dragon cried. "*All* of these talismans possess the power to purify the soul?!"

"There are enough magic items here to cover the whole ceiling!" Sionne gasped. "How many cards have you released?!"

"Exactly 99,999,999 cards," I replied, which made both Sionne and the Soul Dragon stiffen, as if time had frozen. "I found this little trick that made my Unlimited Gacha produce cards nonstop for three years, you see," I continued, sounding like the Grim Reaper reading aloud from his scroll of death. "And from the collection I accrued, I gathered up all the cards that can purify souls and stuffed them into my UR Card Holder. Turns out there were precisely 99,999,999 cards that fit the bill."

"Th-This cannot be happening!" the Soul Dragon bawled. "This is impossible! A mere creature like *you* cannot possess this much power!"

"Yeah, you're right," I retorted. "No single nation—or even the whole world—could *ever* have this many magic items at their disposal, let alone one kid. But the thing about my Gift is that it makes the impossible possible." I looked Sionne and the Soul Dragon straight in the eye before delivering my final order to the blizzard of cards. "Witness the power of the Unlimited Gacha! Release!"

As one, all 99,999,999 gacha cards discharged their powers like lightning bolts toward the hundred million souls that made up the Soul Dragon, causing the interdimensional monster to let out an almighty ear-piercing yet garbled scream that persisted for nearly the entirety of the combo attack. After each card had exhausted its power, it blinked out like a star vanishing, and when multiplied by millions, this mass twinkling was a sight to behold in its own right. But to the Soul Dragon, these sparks of light were a deadly shower.

“Th-This evil light...” the Soul Dragon screeched between roars as it writhed around in pain. “It’s purging me!” Realizing there was no escaping the onslaught, the dragon lunged forward in what was likely a desperate attempt to kill me before the cards could completely vaporize it.



“Stob this!” the Soul Dragon wheezed as it tried to strike me with its claws and tail. “Stob your light show now!”

“I can’t stop any card once it’s been released,” I barked back, warding off every attack with my staff. “I’m afraid you’ll just have to accept the fact that you’re being purged to oblivion.”

As I fought the Soul Dragon that was thrashing about on its last legs, I started hearing voices coming from the creature, and what surprised me was that these voices weren’t monsters trying to attack me, but the souls of people thanking me for liberating them from their purgatory inside the beast.

“Thank you for saving me,” one soul called out.

“Thank you. It doesn’t hurt anymore,” came a second voice that sounded like it belonged to a little girl.

“Thank you. Thank you so, so much...” another soul said to me.

This moved me so much, I felt tears welling up in the corners of my eyes. Their words of gratitude felt totally genuine, driven by the years of torment they had suffered inside the dragon. I gritted my teeth and battled the Soul Dragon even more fiercely, the joy emanating from the liberated souls giving me strength. As the seconds passed, the dragon’s bravado that had been on display since the start of our confrontation waned away into nothingness, and with each strike of my staff, the semi-translucent creature seemed to shrink.

By the time all of the cards had exhausted their power, the fifteen-meter behemoth had transformed into a creature the size of a dog small enough to pick up and carry. Naturally, due to this extreme reduction in size, the Soul Dragon was no longer able to keep Sionne inside itself and the dark elf had been expelled onto the stone floor. But although the dragon was considerably weakened, it hadn’t been purged entirely from this world. The Soul Dragon laughed in triumph at its apparent lucky break.

“It would appear I still live, thanks to the souls being fed to me from the floors above,” the Soul Dragon sneered. “Now that you have used up all of your 99,999,999 talismans, you have no way of wounding me! I have all the time I need to recover my strength, and I assure you, I shall torment you to death as recompense for diminishing me!”

“Yup, it’s true. Those were all the purification cards I had. And without some other weapon that can do damage to the soul, I’m out of options to destroy you,” I said matter-of-factly. All the soul-cleansing cards in the UR Card Holder hadn’t been enough to purge the Soul Dragon out of existence, and I couldn’t just kick the dragon to death, since physical attacks didn’t exactly work on ghosts. So in a sense, I’d reached something of an impasse against the Soul Dragon. But this outcome didn’t bother me in the slightest, since I’d already planned for it.

“But why the heck would you go assuming that I *don’t* have some other weapon that can do damage to the soul?” I asked before raising my staff high into the air. “Commencing primary Soul Seal cancel code: 9999, four nines! God Requiem Gungnir!”

Mei and Ellie looked on with pained expressions as I partly unsealed the Gungnir, but they didn’t interfere, since I’d informed them of my plan in advance. The top of the staff transformed into an ebony-colored spearhead, and dark, smoky flames emanated from the weapon. Even though the Soul Dragon had threatened to torture me to death barely a minute ago, it once again shrank away from me in a mix of fear, confusion, and despair.

While the 99,999,999 gacha cards attempting to purify the Soul Dragon may have been a wondrous sight to behold, the Gungnir exuded energy that triggered a primal sense of terror in any who laid eyes on it. There was absolutely nothing beautiful about this genesis-class weapon. It was the embodiment of hopelessness, and it made the Soul Dragon’s earlier rant sound like a child’s temper tantrum.

“I would’ve let you scurry off back to your own world if you’d just handed over Sionne from the start. Oh, and if you weren’t so evil, of course,” I said, my right hand gripping the Gungnir tightly as I strolled toward the Soul Dragon. “But not only did you refuse to give Sionne to me, you also needlessly torture the souls of innocent people for your own pleasure. Do you have any idea how much you nauseate me? You need to pay for everything you have done, Soul Dragon. But simply purifying your soul would be letting you off easy. No, I’m going to destroy you and your soul *completely* so that you never appear again, in this world or the next!”

A full-throated wail erupted from the interdimensional lord of spirits on hearing that I intended to destroy its soul, and in effect, the entirety of its being. The screech suggested that, for the first time in its life, the Soul Dragon actually feared for its very existence.

"A-Approach me not, foul beast!" the Soul Dragon roared. "Come no closer! I command you!"

Ignoring the Soul Dragon's pleading, I moved in closer and used the Gungnir to rip away the remaining souls from the creature one by one. I purified each soul I peeled off, and they floated up into the air briefly before melting away into the ether. I was only after the Soul Dragon's original spirit, and I didn't want to harm any of the other souls that made up its being. The semi-translucent creature continued to scream out of fear, desperation, and distress as I continued this process until there was only one soul remaining: the core spirit of the reptile.

Without any hesitation, I blasted the Soul Dragon with as much power as I could draw from the Gungnir, ominous black flames wrapping around my arms like the cloak of the Grim Reaper. I'd only been able to unseal a quarter of the Gungnir's power, since three of my lieutenants had placed their own seals on it to nerf the other three-quarters, yet it was still enough to burn through the flesh on my Level 9999 right arm, making me grunt slightly in pain. Still, this told me that the power I could access was more than enough to obliterate the Soul Dragon and ensure that it would never again bring harm to anyone else, in this world or any other.

"Have mercy on me, creatur—O Benevolent One!" the Soul Dragon cried. "I shall leave this world at once! I shall give Sionne to you! I have no need of this creature! You may do with her as you see fit!"

Now the size of a ferret that could easily sit in the open palms of two hands, the Soul Dragon was in full-on pleading mode, the desperation in its voice plain to hear. "If it is your desire, I shall become your subject, O Merciful One! Your powers are greater than I can comprehend! If you wish me to demonstrate my devotion to you, I shall slaughter this woman known as Sionne who has dared to insult you this instant! I shall torment her and end her life in a way that I am sure will bring you entertainment, O Benevolent One—Aaaargh!"

I didn’t even let the Soul Dragon finish its cringeworthy display of groveling before stabbing it through the torso with the sharp tip of the Gungnir.

“Why would you suggest denying me my revenge?” I said, twisting the head of the spear into the screaming dragon. “Even to the bitter end, all you do is annoy me!”

“You are expunging me from existence!” the Soul Dragon yelled. “No! Please stop! I do not wish to die—”

The dark flames permeating from the Gungnir quickly silenced the Soul Dragon’s ugly shrieks as its soul burned away without leaving behind even a single flake of ash, and I hoped that was the end of it—that the monstrous lizard would never be reborn in *any* world. Basking in my victory over the Soul Dragon, I drew back the dark flame the Gungnir had released, so that its power could be resealed. Everything was silent for a few seconds, but then all of a sudden, a multitude of spirits that had been freed from the Soul Dragon drifted up toward the ceiling, all of them expressing their gratitude to me as they ascended.

“Thank you!”

“I’m finally free!”

“No more pain...”

“Thank you so much!”

“Thank you...”

One small soul meandered slowly and falteringly toward the ceiling, where it approached two larger souls that seemed to be waiting for it.

“Mommy. Daddy...” the small soul said, and it quickly became apparent that it had belonged to a human girl who couldn’t have been much older than a toddler.

“I’m so sorry,” the father’s soul said. “I wasn’t able to protect you from all this.”

“All I could do was watch while you suffered in agony,” the mother’s soul added. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t help you. I’m so, so sorry...”

I could tell from the anguish expressed by the two parents that they had sacrificed their lives to protect the girl from some kind of danger, though obviously they'd been unsuccessful, and the girl had died at a young age despite their efforts. The girl didn't blame her parents at all though.

"Mommy, daddy, don't say you're sorry. It's not your fault," the girl said. "I know you tried really hard to protect me. I love you, mommy and daddy. Now we can be together forever."

"Yes, we'll always have each other," the father said. "We'll always be together as a family."

"Your mommy will always be with you, sweetie," the mother told the little girl. "Even if we are reborn at any point, I'll always be with you."

The three souls drifted up toward the ceiling, all of them brimming with happiness at being reunited, and because they were spirits, I knew their feelings were genuine and heartfelt.

The girl suddenly spun around in midair to say goodbye to me. "Thanks for saving us, mister!"

"Yes, thank you ever so much. Thank you," the father added.

"We're eternally grateful to you," the mother said. "You saved my precious daughter and husband."

The three souls turned back around and made their final ascent toward the ceiling. Before I knew what was happening, I felt tears dampening my cheeks.

"Mom..." I whispered. "Dad..." I'd unwittingly inserted myself into the place of that little girl, who had found the parents she'd thought were forever lost.

If I die, will I get to meet my parents too? I wondered. If I'd realized the full extent of my Unlimited Gacha powers sooner, my parents and everyone dear to me would still be alive. Perhaps if I'd never realized I *had* Unlimited Gacha powers... If I'd just stayed behind in the village and spent the rest of my days working on the farm like I was supposed to... Maybe then, everybody could've been spared... If only... If only...

"You shouldn't be wondering about nonsense like that, Light."

“That’s right, dear. You always overthink these things.”

I spun around in surprise to face the owners of these two voices. Surely I *had* to be hearing things? Surely it was just my mind playing tricks on me after witnessing that little girl reuniting with her own parents? After all, I was at the bottom level of a newly-formed dungeon that used to be a laboratory on the Dark Elf Islands. They *couldn’t* be here. This *couldn’t* be real! But when I turned around, I found that my mom and dad really were standing behind me, even though I knew they were long dead.

“None of it is your fault, so stop blaming yourself,” my dad told me. “You don’t have to be in such a rush to join us, son. Just know we’ll always be watching over you.”

“Dad...” I breathed.

“Your father’s right,” my mom said. “We’ll always be right here by your side.”

“Mom...” I couldn’t hold in my emotions any longer, and I ran over to my parents. The scenery around me had changed from the dark, bare stone of the dungeon to the sun-kissed wheat farms surrounding my old home. There was no trace of the charred devastation that had seared itself into my memory.

“Mom, dad...” I said, hugging my parents tightly. I could feel their warmth and smell their familiar scents. It felt like I was bathing in warm sunlight—a feeling I knew I would never get to experience again in real life. I wanted to go back home so badly, it almost drove me insane.

“I just wanted everyone to be happy,” I said. The village my family had lived in had been poor, so I’d left home to become an adventurer in order to make some money and give my parents a better life. I’d just wanted my parents to be happy.

“All I wanted was for you and my siblings to spend the rest of your days all cheerful and smiling,” I managed to get out between sobs. “But I...”

But it was my fault they’d died. People had tried to kill me because they thought I was a Master, and sometime after, my village had been wiped off the map. Whatever happiness my family still had left at that point had been destroyed, and it was all because of me.

“Light...”

But my mom and dad weren’t angry with me. They embraced me like I was precious to them, and they stroked my back and my cheeks to show how much they loved me. It was as if they were trying to convey their feelings to me for the last time.

“Light,” my dad started. “You probably don’t remember the day you were born, but I sure do. I’ll never forget it.” He hugged me tighter. “It was a snowy evening, and your mom went into labor in the dead of night. By the time you were born, the whole house was aglow with the light of the morning sun.”

“Right after I’d given birth to you, I held you in my arms and prayed that you would be blessed with a happy life,” mom said. “I practically begged for you to grow up happy.”

“I stroked your tiny cheek, and you grabbed my finger and wouldn’t let go,” dad reminisced. “That was the moment I realized how lucky I was to have you in my life. In spite of the whole world being what it is, I was really glad to be alive.”

My dad continued to hold me and talk about how much he treasured me. “Light, I want you to be happy. For you *and* for us. I don’t care how many times I have to say it. I don’t want to see you beating yourself up over anything.”

“Your father and I only care about seeing you happy and healthy,” my mom said. “You’re our son, and we love you so very much.”

“Mom... Dad...” I whispered, all choked up. My parents hugged me tighter than ever—so tight, in fact, it was like they were never going to let go of me again. But they eventually did, and they stroked my cheeks as they stood up straight again.

“It’s time for us to go now, Light,” my dad said. “Els and Yume are counting on you.”

“Both of them are still alive,” my mom added. “So please go and find them for us, Light.”

“Yeah.” My face was streaked with tears by this point. “I promise. I swear I will save them.”



I could feel their warmth steadily fading, which told me my parents were about to leave me again. My mom and dad smiled at me one last time before floating away and melting into the void.

“Light, make sure you lead a happy life,” my dad said. “I’ll always be by your side, son.”

“Your father and I will always be with you, Light,” my mom said. “We love you so very much, dear.”

“Mom! Dad!” I reached out toward my parents, but the backdrop of my old village drifted away with them, as if someone was stealing my whole world away from me. I wanted to tell my parents I loved them, and thank them over and over, but all I could do was sigh inwardly as I watched them float away, knowing I would never get to feel their touch again, no matter how far I stretched my arms out toward them. I tried to call out to them, but I was too choked up with grief for the words to come out as rivulets of tears streamed down my face. My chest felt like it was on the verge of bursting due to the raw emotion coursing through me, yet at the same time, I felt so empty inside, like there was a deep, dark pit trying to suck me in. I wanted to tell my parents how sorry I was, to thank them for everything they had given me, and to tell them that I loved them. I wanted to say it a million times, but they were no longer part of this world, so I couldn’t.

“Master Light? Are you back with us, Master Light?” Mei’s voice sounded worried as she attempted to rouse me from my stupor. “You unleashed the entirety of the God Requiem Gungnir’s partially unsealed powers, and it caused you to drop to one knee. Do you recall what happened, Master Light?”

When I finally came to my senses, I saw that I had indeed dropped to one knee, and it seemed as if I’d had my eyes shut while I was hallucinating. *The Gungnir must’ve caused me to lose consciousness for a moment,* I thought. *Does that mean the vision I had of mom and dad just now was a product of some long-held desires I harbor?*

But I knew in my heart of hearts that what I’d seen had been all too real. The words of my parents had been so warm and full of love, it was impossible to believe they could simply be a figment of a weak and desperate imagination.

Mei looked down at my arm and immediately turned to my other lieutenant. “Ellie, administer your purification magic through me this instant!”

“I’m about to!” Ellie said. “But I can’t believe how putrefied Blessed Lord Light’s arm is! I...” She let out a sigh as if she was about to swoon, prompting an admonishment from Mei.

“Ellie! I understand the urge to faint at the shocking sight of Master Light’s injuries, but I ask that you wait to do that until *after* you have administered your purification magic and helped me to reseal the Gungnir!”

Once Mei had verbally knocked some sense back into Ellie, the superwitch applied first aid to me by infusing Mei’s threads with purification magic, which the maid then wrapped around my right hand and arm like bandages made of pure-white silk. This way, the threads would purify the wounds on my arm over time and return it to normal. Once I’d been dealt with, Mei proceeded to wrap the Gungnir in these purification strings too in order to trap in its dark flames while she and Ellie began the lengthy process of readministering the soul seal. Despite their elevated power levels, both of my deputies struggled to contain the Gungnir’s power, and any momentary lapse in concentration would cause the dark flames to turn the snow-white thread pitch black. At one point during the incantation, Mei grunted due to the strain.

“Mei! You need to focus!” cried Ellie, who was sweating as profusely as her partner.

While the two of them were busy placing the final seal on the Gungnir again, I got to my feet and turned to face Sionne, who had spent the entire time sitting on the stone floor in shock, finding it hard to believe that the Soul Dragon was really gone. I glared at Sionne in silence, recalling how she’d left me for dead in the Abyss three years prior. When Sionne finally noticed my eyes were on her, she stood up, patted the dust off her clothes, and turned to face me. But there was no hint of despair, fear, or cajolery in her eyes. She regarded me the way a scientist would look at a curious specimen.

“I never would have imagined that you could possess the strength to destroy the Great...”—Sionne paused and corrected herself—“...to destroy the Soul Dragon. They had never known an enemy that could defeat them, making them

as close to an immortal being as anything could be. I know because of the information we exchanged. And yet, you, Light, were able to destroy the Soul Dragon completely. What magnificent power you wield."

I didn't say anything, so Sionne continued pontificating in a way that would have seemed out of character for her before. "Back when we ran background checks on you, your Unlimited Gacha was producing nothing but useless cards, was it not? I wonder how it is that you are now able to produce such powerful cards—and in such a high quantity, no less. Was the generation of those cards conditional on some variable we were not aware of at the time? You need to tell me what other cards you possess and what properties they have. Some of them may be useful in furthering my research into the soul."

"Sionne..." I said after a long, stunned silence. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh? Have I said something odd?" Sionne gave me a look that told me she was genuinely puzzled by my question. Her utter lack of self-awareness sent me flying into a rage.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you?!" I roared. "Not only did you leave me for dead in the Abyss, you abducted and killed a whole bunch of innocent humans for your experiments! Why would you imagine I would ever *want* to help you?! I came here to get my revenge on you and to make you pay for the countless murders you have perpetrated!"

Sionne sighed. "We are on the verge of a historic scientific breakthrough. We don't have time for these petty revenge fantasies." The dark elf hadn't even flinched when I'd yelled at her. In her eyes, I was simply an inferior who didn't understand the value of science, and she looked down at me coldly as she continued to lecture me like a schoolmarm trying to teach arithmetic to a preschooler.

"If we learn enough about the soul to transplant Gifts into individuals of different races, it won't just benefit the dark elves," Sionne said. "Everyone considers humans to be a vastly underdeveloped species, but this presents your race with a chance to finally progress to the next stage of your evolution. If we are successful in this endeavor, your kind may no longer find itself subject to the bigotry you endure currently. Even though I only managed to gain some bits

and pieces of knowledge regarding the soul from the Soul Dragon, if we combine the information I have gleaned with your Unlimited Gacha powers, we could make untold advances in my research!"

Sionne stretched her arms wide as she wound up her spiel. "You yourself joined the Concord of the Tribes in order to rid the world of discrimination, did you not? If you truly wish to attain that goal, the number of inferiors we have killed shouldn't matter. Their sacrifices will not have gone to waste if we bring about a whole new era for the world and your race. Am I wrong on that?"

Sionne's rambling and internally inconsistent sales pitch was truly one of the most insanely unrepentant things I'd ever heard—so much so, in fact, that I was left too stunned to speak for a moment or two.

"Yeah, it's true, I *did* want a world free of bigotry, just like the Concord of the Tribes said they stood for," I eventually said in a deliberately measured tone. "Whenever we went to restaurants, Garou would drink himself stupid, which used to annoy Sasha intensely; you used to launch into lectures that most of us didn't really get, except for Naano, who'd immediately start presenting counterarguments; Diablo would chide us for our bad table manners; Oboro would sit at one end of the table and drink all by himself; and Santor would wander off and pick fights with the other customers, which left Drago exasperated. We had our ups and downs, but those days were some of the best of my life. Right up until the moment I found out you guys had been tricking me the whole time, that is."

"I suppose you have a point there," Sionne replied indifferently. "I generally don't drink alcohol due to the way it dulls the mind, but Garou and Sasha always *insisted* I drink with them, much to my displeasure. I didn't mind those gatherings, however, and my time spent in that party was certainly enjoyable to some extent. So all the more reason for us to start afresh and—"

"But I can never look past what you've done!" I interrupted, my emotions laid bare. "Those spirits I liberated from the Soul Dragon—they *thanked* me. They thanked me from the bottom of their hearts. Some of those souls were the same people you killed during your human experimentation!"

For the past three years, Sionne and her gang had been illegally kidnapping

Gift-wielding humans for her experiments on how to transplant Gifts. Even at this very moment, I could still see the magic symbols on the floor that had been drawn around the poor people she'd tortured to death. The souls of her victims had remained trapped within these runes, still suffering the pain of those cruel experiments. It was probably by sheer chance that the Soul Dragon noticed the cries of torment from these countless souls while in its own world, leading the monster to make its near-miraculous appearance in Sionne's lab through an interdimensional portal it created. The joy and gratitude I'd felt from the freed souls had been so warm and genuine, I didn't think I would ever forget it. I could only imagine the pain and suffering those human souls had endured as they lay trapped within those magic symbols.

"You're expecting me to just forget what you did and help you in your research? Are you kidding me?" I glared at Sionne, wanting nothing more in that moment than to strangle her. "Did you conveniently forget how you and the rest of the party tried to kill me with the intention of leaving my corpse in the Abyss like a sack of garbage? Why the hell would I *ever* trust you again?! You think what I'm doing is some 'petty revenge fantasy'? Only someone who's never felt the devastation of being betrayed in their entire life could come out with senseless crap like that! No, I'm never going to work with you. In fact, even if I *wasn't* out for revenge, you're way too much of a murdering slimebucket to even consider letting you live one day longer! I'd burn you to the ground and spit on your ashes before I'd ever help you with your garbage research!"

"Garbage?" Sionne spluttered angrily. "You dare to call my research 'garbage'?" From what I could remember, Sionne had never expressed an emotion one way or another on pretty much *anything*, but when it came to her scientific research, that was one red line you never crossed.

"And what do *you* know about research, you worthless little lab rat?" Sionne yelled huskily. "You're just a primitive animal who doesn't know the first thing about science! No one from an inferior subspecies will *ever* understand the brilliance of my research, so for one of you troglodytes to deign to pass comment on it is the height of absurdity! You don't know *anything* about my research! It would be impossible for the mongrel intellect of an inferior to comprehend it! My research is brilliant, and I am *this* close to making the

discovery of the age!”

“My goodness. Do you even hear yourself speak, you imbecile?” Ellie called over. She was still struggling to reseal the Gungnir with the help of Mei. “All you did was kidnap some innocent humans so you could torture them to death and take a few measurements. Yet you call that research ‘brilliant’? You were more like an infant playing pretend at being a scientist, barely scratching the surface of any *real* scholarly breakthrough.”

Ellie paused as she refocused her concentration on the sealing spell before continuing. “First of all, it is impossible on the face of it to separate a Gift from the soul, and only a complete imbecile would cling to such a notion. Don’t you understand that the soul and the Gift form as a single entity? It’s a very basic concept. You’re just like a child who thinks they’re close to an epiphany after simply flipping a coin a hundred times. To even *begin* to understand the soul, you’d need to flip that proverbial coin billions of times, yet you still think you’re ‘*this* close’ to a breakthrough? With the way you go about things, I’m willing to wager you will remain a failed scientist for as long as you live, without a single discovery to your name. Are you really that much of an ignoble imbecile?”

“Even supposing I *did* go about it all wrong, I’m still right!” Sionne bellowed, and she was absolutely fuming by this point. “My theories are correct and a few tweaks to my research process is all it will take to *prove* that I’m right! That is the whole nature of science! Nothing else matters as long as I advance the world’s knowledge with my brilliant breakthroughs! All the people who died in my experiments will rejoice at my discoveries! Those souls will be glad knowing they were the foundation to my brilliant research!”

“No, your research was total garbage,” I retorted, prompting Sionne to glower at me, but I didn’t flinch at being the target of her ire. “Your research that snuffed out an untold number of innocent lives has been a blight on this world. You think all the people you’ve killed will rejoice? Forget about my revenge—I need to take you down for being an evil monster. I’ll even show you exactly how evil you are. Right here, right now.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out an Unlimited Gacha card. “SSSR Hell’s Gate—release!”

To Sionne's shock, a large creepy-looking gate appeared behind her. It was edged with dark stones mortared together, while the double doors themselves were made of a heavy-looking metal and large enough to let a two-meter-tall creature pass through them without needing to stoop. Instead of doorknobs, large weighty rings were attached to the doors, and it seemed like those were the things you needed to pull if you wished to open the gate. Above the twin doors was a sign that read: "Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here," which only added to the overall ominous vibe it was giving off.

"Where did this gate spring from?" asked Sionne, who had spun around to look at the structure. "Hm? What's this? Now it's opening by itself?"

The heavy doors slowly swung outward in a smooth motion without any hint of creaking, as if a pair of butlers were gently pulling the handles. Even though the gate appeared to be a flat freestanding object that wasn't connected to another room, the open doors didn't offer a view to the rest of the underground laboratory as you might expect. Instead, there was a pitch-black void beyond, and it appeared to be rippling.

All of a sudden, a cacophony of macabre, garbled sounds emanated from the void, and Sionne let out an earsplitting shriek at the sight that met her eyes. A mass of tar-colored tentacles wormed their way out of the gate, each appendage sporting a bleached skull, a hand, an arm, an ear, a giant eyeball, or some other body part protruding from random places, like mushrooms on a log.

Aside from the skulls, every hand, arm, and eyeball affixed to a tentacle was paired with its own mouth, and each one had a set of teeth that came in varying shapes and sizes. Some teeth were perfectly aligned, while others were jagged and uneven. Some were arranged in rows, like you'd see on certain species of sharks, while other mouths looked like the kind you might find on an old person, complete with decaying and even missing teeth. This gruesome, hair-raising mass of monsters lunged toward Sionne.

"What? No!" Sionne screamed. "Stay away from me—Aaaargh!"

It was too late. The disfigured tentacles had already wrapped themselves around the dark elf and were starting to tear away at her flesh with their monstrous array of teeth. Enough of the tentacled creatures had set upon

Sionne for the natural assumption to be that it'd take less than three seconds for her to be completely consumed while she was still breathing, but this wasn't the case. Every time Sionne lost a chunk of flesh, it would immediately regenerate itself, providing the monsters with even more to feed on. Unfortunately for Sionne, however, the pain and the sensation of being eaten alive were all too real, and my foe wailed throughout the excruciating ordeal.

"Light! Lebbee out of this! Helb!" Sionne yelled as she struggled to speak with the growing crush of predatory tentacles choking her and tearing her apart. The appendages began to drag Sionne toward the open gate, and while Sionne did attempt to struggle against these monsters, it was all in vain, because they just kept chewing off her constantly regenerating arms and legs.

The SSSR Hell's Gate unleashed demonic spawn equal to the number of cardinal sins committed by the target, plus it had the added facet of ratcheting up the pain and intensity of the grisly torture based on how deeply the vengeful user despised their enemy.

"Sionne, you will now suffer this hell of your own making," I declared.

Each time an arm was ripped off, she grew another. Each time a monster chomped off her entire shoulder, it regenerated itself. Each time she was disemboweled, her internal organs would get fully restored just in time for another round of evisceration. The carnivorous tentacles were constantly ripping Sionne to pieces, their actions fueled by the harrowing malevolence of her past deeds.

"Light! Stob these things! Helb!" Sionne screeched. "Leb me go! Light!"

But her pleading was all for nothing. The teeth-filled appendages dragged Sionne through the gate as she screamed like a wounded wildcat and the commotion only ceased when the double doors had slammed shut behind her. As soon as they did, the Hell's Gate automatically shrank and transformed into a palm-sized black cube that sat in the middle of the floor.

To be more specific on the nature of this card, the SSSR Hell's Gate was used for detaining and torturing an adversary. A prisoner would spend an entire day trapped inside the box with the monsters whose numbers corresponded to the number of crimes committed by the detainee before their ensnarement. Once

the day was up, the Hell's Gate would eject the prisoner physically unharmed, though the newly freed captive certainly wouldn't be able to forget the torment they had endured during that time.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't think the Hell's Gate was really all that effective, despite it being a triple-super rare card. For one thing, anyone with a high-enough power level could easily rip off the demonic appendages to free themselves from their impending punishment, and for another, the doors didn't open instantly, meaning a quick-thinking speedster could use that momentary pause to get as far away from the gate as possible before the monsters had time to crawl out.



Even if a detainee *did* find themselves trapped inside the Hell's Gate, it wouldn't be much of a harrowing experience for anyone with a power level of 3000 or above with adequate stats for pain tolerance.

I honestly didn't really see how this card could be useful when it was churned out originally, but it ended up being the perfect fit for Sionne, I thought. *When the Hell's Gate spits her out again, I'll imprison her in the deepest recesses of the Abyss, where she can suffer the same eternal torment as Garou and Sasha.*

I picked up the dark cube with my left hand because I couldn't use my right due to the burns the Gungnir had left behind on it. *So that leaves five foes on the payback list, huh?* I thought as I squeezed the cube in my balled-up fist.

"Excellent work with Sionne, Master Light," Mei said as she walked up beside me. "As for ourselves, we have finished resealing the God Requiem Gungnir, and Ellie will shortly proceed with the next task of dismantling the bridge to the other world."

I gave a casual nod of approval and turned to Ellie. "I know you had a tough time sealing the Gungnir again, but I hope you'll be able to shut this portal for good, Ellie."

"You can count on me, Blessed Lord Light!" replied Ellie, who didn't seem at all fatigued after her last task. Mei and I stood guard and shielded Ellie from any interference until the Forbidden Witch had finished getting rid of all trace of the interdimensional bridge.

Epilogue

I was sitting behind my desk back in my office in the Abyss, scanning the debrief report Ellie had prepared for me, while simultaneously listening intently to the verbal summary the superwitch standing across from me was giving me.

“The Hell’s Gate eventually spat Sionne back out here in the Abyss, whereupon we imprisoned her in a cell adjacent to the ones occupied by Garou and Sasha,” Ellie informed me. “As with the other two, we’ve made sure she suffers the same level of disproportionate torment that she inflicted on her victims.”

Ellie moved on to talking about the dungeon lab itself. “The collapse of the interdimensional bridge in the lab-turned-dungeon caused the spatial distortions to dissipate over the course of a few days—as I’d originally surmised they would—and after you reported back to the Dark Elf Islands’ authorities that you’d successfully resolved the matter, the dark elves acknowledged and thanked your alter ego, Lord Dark, for his exploits.”

“Yeah, once Nemumu and Gold had come back from dropping Yude and his flunkies off in the Abyss, we went as a party to deliver the news, though the dark elves didn’t believe us at first,” I recalled. “It wasn’t until the lab went back to normal several days later that the people who’d commissioned the quest came to the conclusion we were telling the truth.”

“I can’t believe they didn’t take you at your word the moment you told them of the outcome, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie complained. “Those people up on the surface world really are unbelievable!” She puffed out her cheeks in frustration, which I naturally found more cute than menacing.

At the same time, I didn’t blame the dark elves for not immediately taking the word of my party at face value. After all, we just *said* we’d resolved the problem without offering a single piece of physical evidence to back it up. There was no Soul Dragon to show them because I’d erased it from existence—which also meant the monsters it had unleashed into the dungeon disappeared shortly afterward—and I couldn’t point to the interdimensional portal that had been

causing the spatial distortions because Ellie had removed all trace of it. And I wasn't exactly going to produce Sionne as an eyewitness either, so in the end, all my party had were our deliberately hazy accounts of what took place. Of course, our report was eventually backed up by Sionne's laboratory reverting to its former structure, though there were still a few loose ends that had to be explained away.

"It seems everyone believes the Blade of the Isles met their end deep inside the dungeon, and that Sionne didn't survive long enough to be rescued," Ellie said. "The general thinking is that the reason they can't find any trace of them is because monsters consumed their corpses."

I had detained Sionne in a cell in the Abyss so that she would spend the rest of her natural life in sheer agony, but I had no compunction over ending the lives of Yude, Eyrah, and Rayeh for kidnapping Gifted people for Sionne's deadly human experiments. After Ellie had probed their memories for everything they knew about Masters, we had executed all three dark elves for their crimes against humanity. I recalled that, just before Yude's party had faced off against my own party in the lab-turned-dungeon, the dark elf had said that Masters had shown up in the Onifolk Archipelago, the Demonkin Nation, the Dragonute Empire, and even the Human Kingdom.

"According to what I could gather from the memories of Yude and his party, they did indeed have information about a possible Master appearing in the Human Kingdom," Ellie reported. "But unfortunately, none of the information they had rose above the level of unverified hearsay and rumors."

The reason I'd ordered Yude to be captured alive was precisely because he'd mentioned a Master showing up in the Human Kingdom. If true, it was possible that this Master was the one responsible for destroying my village and killing my parents. According to Ellie's written report, Yude's party had indeed heard rumors about a powerful being who looked human showing up in the northern part of the Human Kingdom, and as fate would have it, my former home was located in the northern half of that very kingdom.

"Did a Master really destroy my village?" I wondered aloud. "But why would a Master do such a thing? I thought they were supposed to be humans, just like me. I don't get why one would want to destroy a human village."

“I’m sorry, Blessed Lord Light, but I can’t provide you with a clear answer to that. We just don’t have enough information to go on,” Ellie replied, looking genuinely ashamed of herself.

“Oh, sorry, Ellie. I didn’t mean to sound like I was blaming you,” I said, realizing I was still in the middle of a conversation with my lieutenant and my musings could have been taken the wrong way. Needless to say, it wasn’t her fault that she couldn’t extract enough information to answer all of the questions I had. In an attempt to change the subject, I made a comment on the next item in Ellie’s report.

“Although Yude’s gang didn’t know all that much about Masters in the end, it says here they *did* have plenty of interesting info we can use,” I noted.

“Yes indeed, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said, perking up from her brief bout of mental self-flagellation. “From what I could pick out of their memories, they seem to have used their positions as A-rank adventurers to act as spies, collecting intelligence from all around the world that they then secretly handed over to the dark elf leaders. One of the four clan leaders, Gighis, appears to know something about Masters, according to Yude’s recollections.”

“Since the elf queen’s memories held information about Masters, it wouldn’t surprise me at all if a dark elf leader had some intel on them too,” I mused. “In fact, I’d expect it.”

“I would too,” Ellie agreed. “In fact, I plan to visit the dark elf leaders as the Wicked Witch of the Tower and use the fact that they were getting Yude to spy on other nations as leverage to extract information about Masters from them.”

“That’d be really awesome of you, Ellie,” I said. “Not only did you close that interdimensional portal, you also resealed the Gungnir and healed up my arm. Despite doing all of that, you’re now volunteering to go on another Tower Witch mission. I really don’t know how to thank you for everything you’re doing for me.”

The moment the words “thank you” passed my lips, Ellie blushed all the way to the tips of her ears before launching into an animated reply. “Y-You don’t need to thank me, Blessed Lord! Like the rest of us here in the Abyss, simply serving as your loyal assistant makes me happy, and I wouldn’t dream of asking

for anything more than that! So please, Blessed Lord, don't trouble yourself over how to thank me. Although..." Ellie paused and seemed to turn a shade redder. "If you really *insist* on rewarding your humble servant for her tireless efforts, then perhaps you would allow me to demonstrate my absolute fealty to you by letting me p-place my lips on the top of your foot—"

All of a sudden, there were a few quick raps at the door and Mei burst into my office. "Master Light! Pardon the interruption!"

This unexpected intrusion was very out of character for Mei, who was usually calm and collected in everything she did, though thankfully, her abrupt and hurried entrance meant I wasn't able to catch the end of Ellie's request. The superwitch responded to this interruption by furrowing her brow in annoyance.

"Mei, why must you always come rushing into the office when I'm doing my debriefings with Blessed Lord Light?" Ellie said tartly. "Do you have something against me? Is that it? If you do, there are other ways to air your grievances than disrupting me like this."

"N-No, Ellie, that was not my intent," Mei said quickly, allowing us a rare glimpse at her flustered side. "I realize this is now the second time I have interrupted your post-mission report, but I assure you, I bring critical news—"

"Mei!" Ellie yelled, cutting across her colleague. "I excused you interrupting us last time because you informed us of Sionne's life-or-death situation, but I refuse to believe the news you are bringing now can be anywhere near that same level of importance. I'll have you know that I was in the middle of updating Blessed Lord Light on everything we know about Masters. If what you have to say is indeed more critical than that, I will owe you for delaying you from delivering your message, but if what you're about to say turns out to be of little consequence..."

Ellie glared at Mei, daring the maid to rise to the challenge she had laid down, but despite the unmistakably threatening tone to Ellie's outburst, Mei maintained her deadly serious expression and relayed her urgent news.

"Master Light, we have received information regarding the whereabouts of your younger sister, Yume!"

I spluttered in surprise and stood up so fast, the chair I'd been sitting on flew

backward and crashed to the floor. “We’ve found Yume?!”

Even Ellie seemed shocked into silence by this world-shaking news. I was still curious to find out how much the dark elf authorities knew about Masters, but obviously, my baby sister who I hadn’t seen for more than three years immediately became my top priority.

“Sorry, Ellie, but we’ll have to put this briefing on hold,” I said to my deputy. “Mei, tell me more!”

“Of course, Master Light,” Mei said before promptly launching into recounting what she had heard. Sympathetic to my feelings, Ellie stood to one side as Mei relayed her report, and as I listened, I made a silent vow from the bottom of my heart. *Due to being separated from her for three years, I wasn’t able to protect Yume from the disaster that befell our village, but this time, I’ll do everything in my power, with all the knowledge that I’ve gained, to make sure nothing happens to her ever again!*

Extra Story: Nazuna Visits the Card Repository

“Wooow!”

The SUR Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna, turned her head this way and that on entering the Card Repository, one of the busiest sections of the Abyss, but she wasn’t there on any particular business—it just happened to be one of the stops on her daily patrols. Although Nazuna was the strongest fighter out of all of Light’s allies, she also displayed the least intelligence of his four lieutenants. This lack of wisdom meant Nazuna didn’t possess the kind of resourcefulness and adaptability that was required to join Light on his forays up to the surface world, and it also meant she wasn’t really the right person to leave in charge of the Abyss in Light’s absence. That universally shared sentiment wasn’t intended as a slight against Nazuna—after all, everyone agreed that her sunny personality made her the life and soul of the dungeon—but everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, so when Light left the Abyss to go capture Sionne, he gave Nazuna a very specific instruction to “protect” the dungeon while he was away. Since in her own words, Nazuna loved Light “super duper much,” she readily agreed to his request, which is how she came to be carrying out a patrol of the Abyss on this particular day. Or at least, in *her* mind, she was patrolling the premises; to everyone else, Nazuna was just out for a stroll around the dungeon.

Even though Nazuna made daily stops at virtually every location in the Abyss, the Card Repository was an exception. She hardly set foot in there because she didn’t want to get in the way of the crush of fairy maids dashing in and out with their requisition orders. But on this particular day, Nazuna had felt like making a rare visit to the Card Repository and she showed up there when it was least busy.

“Every time I see this place, it just looks amazing,” Nazuna said, still gawking at her surroundings. The Card Repository was bigger than several ballrooms put together, but wherever you looked, it was packed with rows and rows of

shelving, all tightly spaced and bursting with cards. To attain its present capacity, Light had needed to order several expansion projects until the repository had enough space for the huge volume of gacha cards it was expected to hold.

Positioned in front of the shelving were two counters manned by Annelia and Alth, the sibling UR Card Keepers. The pair were usually seen attending to the needs of two lines of fairy maids by handing out cards that matched what was on the requisition forms brought to them. The Unlimited Gacha had been jerry-rigged to spit out cards around the clock, and a group of fairy maid assistants brought the cards it produced to the repository every morning and evening.

Annelia and Alth used their Level 5000 powers to manipulate the gacha cards in midair to sort them, and whenever the keepers completed a bundle by type, an assistant took the stack and placed it on the corresponding shelf. Annelia and Alth were also able to use these same telekinetic powers to retrieve specific cards from the shelving when fulfilling requisition orders. And that is a basic overview of the work that gets done in the Card Repository.

“Oh, is that you, Nazuna?” Annelia said, noticing her walk in. “I almost never see you on our patch. Did you come here just to visit me, sweetie?”

“Nope! I’m here on an important job for Master!” Nazuna declared proudly. “He told me I had to patrol the Abyss and make sure everyone’s safe, ’cause I’m the strongest!”

Although Annelia was much shorter than her younger brother, Alth, she was still a little bit taller than Nazuna, which when combined with Annelia’s general nature to be nurturing, made her appear older than the Vampire Knight. On top of that, Annelia had a habit of calling everyone she liked “kiddo,” “sweetie,” and other monikers in a similar vein, regardless of age or rank, and while Nazuna most definitely outranked Annelia due to her Level 9999 powers, she never let this seemingly infantilizing language bother her at all.

The fairy maids would typically form long, meandering lines in front of the counters in order to get the daily consumables and other items they needed, but since this wasn’t one of the repository’s peak times, Annelia and Alth were using their downtime to sort through the mountain of cards that had been

retrieved from the Unlimited Gacha that morning and the evening before. But both siblings still had plenty of spare mental capacity to converse with Nazuna even while performing their other duties, so neither Annelia nor Alth were particularly irritated by Nazuna making a social call—or rather, for making the repository a stop on her patrol.

"You're doing a chore for Light? Oh, I'm so proud of you, honey!" Annelia said, flashing Nazuna a smile before rummaging around in her pocket. "Want a piece of candy?"

"Yup! Thanks!" Nazuna took the hard candy, popped it in her mouth, and rolled it around inside her cheek, her eyes closing in delight at its sweetness. Annelia and the fairy maid assistants placing the cards on the shelves looked on with affection, as if they were watching an innocent little kid.

As the only man in the room, however, Alth had a completely different reaction. *Should she really be patrolling the dungeon with such a flippant attitude?* he thought, though he wisely kept his opinion to himself and managed a strained chuckle at the sight. Nazuna opened her eyes again and gazed in wonder as the Card Keepers busily worked through the constellation of cards floating in the air above them, though she failed to pick up on Alth's somewhat unimpressed body language.

"I don't come by the Card Repository all that often, but I'm guessing it must be super tough keepin' track of all these cards," Nazuna said. "You guys gotta go through each card and put 'em into that shelving, huh?"

Hundreds—perhaps even thousands—of cards circled above Annelia and Alth like leaves whipped up by an autumn breeze. Cards that belonged in the same category seemed to automatically bunch themselves together and float down to the fairy maid in charge of that particular card type, who would then file the stack away in an empty space on the corresponding shelf. Even though the repository was pretty much devoid of any fairy maids waiting for their requisition orders to be filled, Annelia and Alth appeared to be reasonably occupied all the same.

But Alth flashed Nazuna a genuine smile and waved away the suggestion that they were too busy. "Oh, we do not find it stressful at all. We are Card Keepers,

after all, so this type of work is highly rewarding for us."

"Wow," Nazuna breathed, visibly impressed.

"I don't think I've once thought that this job was too much for me," Annelia said, echoing her brother. "In fact, I'm delighted I get to help out my little sweetie, Light, and everyone else in the Abyss by doing this work."

Annelia took a deep breath before launching into a lengthy yet lightning-fast rundown on all things gacha. "And that's not all. I get to touch a whole bunch of cards produced by Light's Unlimited Gacha, and let me tell you, I simply *love* looking at his cards. They all have these cute little pictures on them, and there's just so many of them! I never get tired of looking at them. I love reading their descriptions too. They fit in your hand easily, meaning they're really convenient to carry around, and I keep my most favoritest ones on me at all times so I can look at them and cheer myself up whenever I'm feeling a bit blue. Light's cards also have rarity levels—like Error, Normal, R, SR, and so on—which makes it fun to sort through them and organize them, and I get genuinely excited when I read what kind of power a super-rare card has. Though that doesn't mean I like super-rare cards more than any other kinds. Oh, no, no. I love each and every card produced my precious little Light's Gift equally, and—"

As Annelia prattled on, Nazuna stared at the administrator open-mouthed and unable to even get the odd "Uh-huh"—or for that matter, any other verbal acknowledgment that she was following the conversation—in edgeways. Seeing this, Alth felt compelled to step in to halt the torrent of words flowing from his sister's mouth.

"Dear sister, this is all too much for Miss Nazuna, so let us end the conversation there, shall we?"

On hearing Alth's voice, Annelia seemed to regain her senses, and she offered a frantic apology. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Nazuna, honey! I always end up yip-yapping away whenever I start talking about these cards!"

Nazuna shook her head. "Don't sweat it. I wasn't bothered by it. In fact, I thought ya looked super pretty when ya were talking about the thing ya loved more than anything else in the world. Too bad ya totally lost me midway through!"

Nazuna's honest assessment put Annelia on cloud nine. "Oh, Nazuna, you're such a *good* girl!" Annelia stood on her tiptoes, reached across the counter, and rubbed Nazuna's head.

"Yup! I'm always a good girl!" Nazuna said happily. She didn't exactly understand why Annelia had started stroking her head, but since Nazuna was obviously being praised, she accepted the compliment with her head held high. All of a sudden, Nazuna's stomach growled, startling Annelia.

"Nazuna, sweetie, are you hungry?" Annelia asked. "It's a teensy bit early for lunch, but we can go eat something together, if you like."

"Sure!" Nazuna replied excitedly. "I wanna chow down on a large helping of curry rice!"

Annelia came around the counter. "I should eat something now anyway, before the evening rush of requisitions gets going. Plus, I think this is as good a time as any to take a break. You should come with us, Alth."

"Of course, dear sister," said Alth, who saw no reason to refuse the invitation since he could easily pause his card-sorting. Alth came out from behind his counter and joined the two women, then they all headed off to the cafeteria, with Annelia holding Nazuna's hand. Nazuna was so wrapped up in her excitement at getting to eat curry rice, she didn't care that someone was guiding her by the hand like she was some kind of wayward toddler.

"Now, Nazuna, never forget that you'll always be my special little kiddo," Annelia told her.

"Wuzzat?" Nazuna asked. "Why am I a kiddo when I'm a grown up?"

"Well, you're *my* 'kiddo' because *that's* what I want to call you!" Annelia replied, drawing another puzzled look from Nazuna. This back-and-forth had become something of an established routine between Annelia and Nazuna whenever the two encountered each other—so much so, in fact, Alth found himself reflexively chuckling awkwardly behind the pair as they all made their way to the cafeteria.

☆☆☆

"I'm all done with lunch!" Nazuna announced.

“The food was certainly delicious, wasn’t it, Nazuna?” Annelia said.

“Yup!” Nazuna agreed. “The curry rice was *extra*-super tasty today!”

Nazuna and Annelia were sitting on one side of a cafeteria table, while Alth sat across from them, still finishing up his meal. Even though the two maidens had wolfed down their main courses, their appetites were still not sated.

“Nazuna, honey, would you like something for dessert?” Annelia asked.

“Can I really?” Nazuna said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I want ice cream!”

Annelia turned to her younger brother. “How about you, buddy? Would you like some ice cream?”

“Thank you, but I must decline,” Alth replied, flashing her a handsome smile. “This meal has sufficiently filled me up.”

“Well, I’m going to get some tea, so Alth, can you be a sweetie and watch our seats for us? Nazuna, you can come with me to get your ice cream, kiddo.”

“I’ll take my dishes back too,” Nazuna declared, before saying “Ice cream, ice cream!” in a singsong voice.

Nazuna picked up her tray and headed for the front of the cafeteria, with Annelia following close behind with her own tray in hand. Alth stayed at the table, intending to drop off his own tray once the two women had returned. *People are most certainly right when they say women always have room for dessert,* thought Alth. Suddenly, two familiar faces appeared in front of him.

“Alth, old boy! Fancy seeing you here at this hour, what?”

“Mr. Gold, Mr. Jack,” Alth said, immediately recognizing the blindingly glistening golden armor of the Auric Knight. Gold was a regular in Light’s party that went questing up on the surface, which probably explained how he’d become one of the Abyss’s most communicative denizens.

Jack was the next to speak. “Althmeister! Long time, no see, bro!”

“Yes, it has been a while since we last saw each other,” Alth agreed. “I have heard a great deal about your exploits up on the surface.”

The Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack was a lean yet muscular man who was over 190 centimeters tall. He had a tendency to show off his ripped physique by walking around shirtless, save for a jacket he wore like a cape. Jack also had a habit of calling everyone he liked his “bro,” regardless of their age, rank, or gender, and this verbal tic had ended up becoming an issue on a number of occasions. As a matter of course, Jack also treated Alth as one of his legions of “bros.” Gold and Jack had also come to the cafeteria for a fairly early lunch when they’d spotted Alth sitting all by himself at one of the tables.

“Oh, that?” Jack replied with a toothy grin. “I was only up there to make sure my main bro was all good. Ain’t nothing compared to the crapton of work you always gotta do.”

“Mr. Jack...” Alth felt his voice unintentionally tremble on hearing this sincere appreciation for the work Alth did at the Card Repository right off the bat. Jack was the kind of man who always looked out for his “bros,” and this conscientious side to him had won Jack plenty of admirers in the Abyss. And it went without saying that the gregarious Gold was one of Jack’s bosom buddies.

“He’s right. You’re doing a capital job, old boy,” Gold added. “Still, Jacks, my lad, your performance at the tower was quite something. The Mohawks also want to know how you made such short work of that blinkin’ elf.”

“Speaking of our Mohawk friends, I promised their leader I would have drinks with them, and I hear they will be returning to the Abyss in the next few days,” Alth said. “Will you and Mr. Jack perchance be joining us for a beverage or two?”

Both of them jumped at this idea. “Sweet!” Jack said. “I ain’t seen my Mohawk bros in ages. I’ve been wonderin’ how much ass they’ve been kicking up on the surface!”

“Yes, I *insist* on joining you lot for a couple of pints,” said Gold. “In fact, I think I will even bring along some of my special rum for the occasion, what? The only question is, where are we going to hold our little knees-up?”

“Bros, we can just go hang in my room,” Jack suggested. “I’ve got way too much space for just me anyway, so it’s the perfect place for ragers.”

Both Gold and Alth immediately embraced this idea and thanked Jack for his

generosity. In the Abyss, the size of the rooms that were assigned to the denizens depended on the individual's power level. At the lower end of the scale, the fairy maids and the Mohawks shared four or five to a room, while higher-level allies like Jack had rooms with ample space all to themselves.

After the three men had settled on where to hold their drinking party, the discussion turned to what each of them would bring, and they ended up getting so animated, both Gold and Jack clean forgot that the reason they'd come down to the cafeteria in the first place was to have lunch.

"If Mr. Gold is bringing his special rum, then I shall bring some snacks I have become rather fond of lately," Alth proclaimed.

"In that case, I'm gonna break out the top shelf booze and snacks I've got stashed away," Jack said. "It ain't every day a bro gets the chance to get hammered with his bros, y'know?"

Seemingly out of nowhere, a bubbly female voice interrupted their little chit-chat. "Jack! Gold! How are my two special guys doing?"

Annelia had returned with Nazuna, and they were carrying the ice cream and freshly-brewed tea they'd bought over at the counter. Once she'd put her tray down on the table, Annelia turned to the Auric Knight and said, "Gold, I seriously always *love* how shiny and neato your armor is. I hear that you, Light, and Nemumu have been doing a super job up on the surface."

"Oh, Annelia. Glad to see you looking as chipper as ever, what?" Gold said jovially. "Well, of course, it's my duty as the Auric Knight to ensure milord and all my pals stay safe."

Due to their time-consuming work in the Card Repository, Annelia and Alth usually ate meals at odd times, meaning they seldom dined alongside their fellow dungeon dwellers in an informal setting, which went some way to explaining why Annelia was speaking to Gold and Jack as if she hadn't seen them in a while, because in truth, she hadn't.

"And how have *you* been, Jack, sweetie?" Annelia said, turning to the Level 7777 warrior. "I still can't believe how tall you are. I hope you're remembering to wear your jacket the right way. You'll catch a cold in the nippy air if you don't."

“Lay off, Annelia. I’m too built to catch a cold *or* get sick,” Jack bragged. “Besides, we still haven’t settled our beef.”

“Oh, yes. There is still that itty-bitty issue we have to deal with, isn’t there?” Annelia said.

The two proceeded to speak over one another as they aired their grievances.

“Why can’t I call you my bro?”

“Why can’t I call you my kiddo?”

Both of them had special nicknames they used for people they liked, with Jack’s moniker of choice being “bro” and Annelia favoring “kiddo,” but there was a clash of personalities because Jack saw himself as the elder brother type while Annelia thought of herself as everyone’s big sister, and neither wanted to relinquish that dominant status to the other, even if it was entirely symbolic.

“Ugh! Why do you always have to be like this, Jack?” Annelia moaned. “You’re my sweet kiddo, so I *have* to call you ‘kiddo’!”

“No way, dude. I’m too tall for that noise,” Jack replied. “And whaddaya got against being my bro anyhow?”

“I *can’t* be someone’s ‘bro’! I mean, look at me!” Annelia protested. “That’s why it makes more sense if I call you my kiddo!”

Gold and Alth looked on and shrugged as the two of them tried to one-up each other over their unhinged fixations on using their preferred terms of endearment. *Here we go again,* thought Gold and Alth. Jack and Annelia continued to argue about it at length, even as people began filing into the cafeteria for the lunch rush, though everyone who walked in just ignored the quarreling duo, because they knew this same scene played itself out every time Annelia bumped into Jack, and there seemed to be zero possibility of a resolution ever being found.

“Honestly, are those two at it *again*?” Ellie sighed as she walked into the cafeteria with Aoyuki. “I wonder why they find it so hard to just get over all that silliness.”

“Mrrrow,” Aoyuki mewed in agreement. The two deputies didn’t even bother

to slow their pace to check out the spectacle as they made their way across the cafeteria.

Even though she was sitting right next to the clamor, Nazuna went ahead and started eating the ice cream she'd bought with Annelia.

"This ice cream is *so* good!" Nazuna said. "I wonder why ice cream tastes so yummy after eating curry."

And there you have it: just another ordinary day in the Abyss.

Extra Story 2: Battle Training

In a dark, rock-filled corner of the bottommost level of the Abyss, a din of magical attacks, sword slashes, and bestial roars could be heard as two men faced off against two giant canine monsters. One of these four-legged beasts, the Primal God Wolf, Fenrir, waved one of its front paws around and fired an ice blade toward its adversary. But Jack, the opponent in question, had already activated his crimson coat of skintight armor known as the Ironblooded Barricade, and without even jumping out of its path, the Level 7777 fighter punched the ice blade into dust, then turned to his partner in this battle.

"Alth!" he called over to him.

"Allow me, Mr. Jack!" came the reply.

Alth—who would more usually be found manning the Card Repository—darted out from behind Jack and dashed toward Fenrir in an attempt to take advantage of the beast being momentarily distracted. Alth wasn't wearing his usual black vest and dress pants combo, instead clad in light metal armor and wielding a double-edged sword, and as a UR Card Keeper, this getup was actually more fitting for his original role as a guardian warrior.

But before Alth got anywhere near the Level 9000 Primal God Wolf, another behemoth positioned itself between them: UR Level 8000, Hound of Hades, Cerberus. This three-headed beast was taller than a house, and all three of its fang-filled mouths fired off energy blasts that had enough power to level mansions. Alth raised his sword in front of him like a shield and leapt backward with a grunt, which helped to absorb a great deal of the impact of the energy blasts, but the sheer force of the attacks from the three Cerberus heads was a lot for the Level 5000 Alth to withstand, and he felt the shock judder his bones painfully. The energy blasts propelled Alth through the air, and the only way he could stop himself was by plunging his sword into the rocky ground and attempting to plant his heels—though even when he managed this, he slid backward for another hundred meters or so before eventually coming to a complete stop.

Unfortunately, this left Alth completely open to attacks from Fenrir and Cerberus, and both beasts immediately readied themselves to launch another assault on their foe. Jack quickly positioned himself between Alth and the giant hounds, when all of a sudden, a sound that seemed completely out of place in what was supposed to be an epic do-or-die battle brought everything to a grinding halt.

"Mrooww."

Aoyuki mewled to bring an end to the fighting, causing both Fenrir and Cerberus to bark in assent and rub their cheeks against the Genius Monster Tamer like a couple of pets cozying up to their master. Aoyuki responded by stroking them under their chins, on their noses, and on the scruffs of their necks. The shoulders of both Alth and Jack slumped in relief. The two men had been engaged in battle with a pair of monsters that were powerful enough to destroy a whole nation apiece.

When Aoyuki was all done nuzzling the two monsters, the maiden in the cat-eared hood turned to Jack and Alth to thank them with a heartfelt "Meeow."

Jack took this as a signal to psychokinetically peel off his Ironblooded Barricade armor before draping his red coat around his shoulders like a cape once more. He acknowledged Aoyuki's sign of appreciation with a broad grin.

"No need to thank me, bro," Jack said. "Ya *know* I'm always here for ya if you need me. I'm always down for brawling with your pets so they can blow off some steam."

"I am fairly sure this is all a bit too much for me," Alth stated, only managing a strained half-smile instead of his usual princely beaming smile that lit up rooms. "Now I understand why Mr. Gold chose not to participate in this with us."

Everyone present in the room was an ally of Light's that had been brought into existence by his Unlimited Gacha, so it stood to reason that they hadn't actually been fighting each other seriously. The five summons were presently using one of the training areas in the Abyss that had a magical containment barrier specially crafted by Ellie to allow even Level 9999 fighters to let loose without worrying about damaging the rest of the underground citadel. And while Fenrir and Cerberus were both highly intelligent beasts, even their

sapience couldn't prevent the two creatures from becoming infinitely bored with just lying around on their sides in the Abyss day after day with nothing to do. So in the same way that a pet owner takes their dogs out for walks, Aoyuki occasionally brought the hounds over to one of the training areas to battle to their hearts' content and work out all their pent-up stress.

On these occasions, it was usually a case of Fenrir competing against Cerberus, or the pair of them fighting a cage match against the Phoenix, the Armored Crab, or some other similarly overpowered creature Aoyuki had tamed. But fights against fellow monsters tended to get tedious pretty quickly too, so Aoyuki often asked Jack and some of the other high-level warriors to mix things up a bit by sparring with her beasts. Unfortunately for Alth, he had the lowest power level of the five in the room, meaning all the way through his maiden mock fight with Aoyuki's pets, he'd found it tough to keep up.

Still grinning, Jack slapped Alth on the shoulder. "You almost never get the chance to do any exercise, given the crapton of work you hafta do, so I figured I'd bring you along this once so you could get a workout. So whaddaya think, bro? It's a lot better than jogging, am I right?"

"You are certainly correct that this is good exercise, but I am afraid it is much too advanced for me," Alth said. "Perhaps next time, we can aim to have a session that is a little less intensive, yes?"

Along with his sister, Annelia, Alth was usually stationed in the Card Repository, warehousing newly-produced gacha cards and fulfilling requisition orders. As such, Alth's daily physical activities were largely limited to just standing in one place and a little bit of walking. Of course, Alth welcomed the opportunity to cut loose and use his powers to their fullest extent without having to worry about anyone potentially getting hurt, but he was facing monsters several orders of strength above him in terms of power levels, and he wasn't kidding when he'd pointed out that this simulated battle had been far too strenuous for him.

Incidentally, this was the one day of the week that Alth had off from work. Despite the Card Repository being the busiest section of the Abyss, Light insisted Alth and Annelia should have at least some time to themselves, and that everyone else in the dungeon had to make accommodations and work

around the schedules of the two siblings. Earlier that day, while Alth was spending some of his free time with Gold, Jack had swung by and invited both of his friends to join him in an “all-out workout” without going into specifics. On hearing this invitation, Gold had immediately shot up from his seat and marched away from them.

“Obliged for the offer, old boy, but I have urgent business to attend to, what?” Gold said curtly. Failing to pick up on the significance of Gold’s hasty departure, Alth had foolishly agreed to accompany Jack, and ended up having to basically fight for his life against Fenrir and Cerberus.

“Mew.”

“No, you are not at fault, Miss Aoyuki. I am the one to blame for not being adept enough to fight on an equal footing,” Alth said. Naturally, he hadn’t understood what Aoyuki had said, but he deduced from the vibes she was giving off that she had been expressing concern for him. “In any case, this has been the first time in a long time that I have been able to fight at full strength, and in all honesty, I found that aspect enjoyable,” Alth added.

As he continued, Alth broke out his most princely smile. “I am very appreciative that you allowed me to come here. I would love to do all of this again when the opportunity next arises.”

“Whoa, whoa, dude. You really think we’re done *already*?” Jack said to Alth. “Nah, we’re just getting started, brah.”

“What?” Alth’s bright expression was quickly doused by a sudden outbreak of cold sweat. Fenrir and Cerberus both barked excitedly, as if to confirm Jack’s words.

Jack threw off his coat-cape and recoated his body in his near-impenetrable armor made of blood, prompting the two hounds to leave Aoyuki’s side and pad across to stand with Jack and Alth.

Jack flexed his muscular arms and cracked the bones in his neck and shoulders. “The way this goes is we give these doggos a bit of a warmup first, then we brawl it out with the tamer bro, Aoyuki. To her, we’re just a coupla chumps she can dust off easy, but to us, she’s a Level 9999 savage, so you’d best get hyped and stay sharp, bro!”

Fenrir and Cerberus growled and snarled as though they were perfectly in-sync with Jack. For her part, Aoyuki produced a spiked metal collar attached to a chain, which just happened to be her phantasma-class weapon of choice, known as the Beast Chain. To add further context to all of this, Aoyuki was the only one of Light's Level 9999 lieutenants who actually looked up to Jack as her "bro," and it was precisely because he was always helping out with these play-battles with her hellbeasts.

At the sight of the Beast Chain, Alth almost fell backward onto the seat of his pants, because even though Aoyuki remained silent, the overwhelming aura she was exuding nearly knocked Alth off-balance through fear. Without warning, Jack smacked Alth on the backside to bring him back to his senses.

"Alth! Ya gotta stay fierce, bro! Remember: if us bros stick together, it don't matter if we're facin' a Level 9999 or whatever, 'cause we're putting everything on the mat and then some!"

"U-Understood, Mr. Jack!" Alth yelled as he unsheathed his sword. Jack's words of encouragement and trust had completely chased away any lingering fear inside Alth.

Fenrir and Cerberus snarled even louder than before, then launched their attacks against Aoyuki in concert, and unlike the warmup session with Jack and Alth, the monsters were out for blood this time. Fenrir sent a glacial mass the size of a small iceberg hurtling toward Aoyuki faster than the speed of sound, while the triple heads of Cerberus added even more velocity to this massive ice rocket by propelling it forward using a series of energy blasts. The air resistance acting against the frozen mass caused it to splinter around the edges, with large pieces of ice blowing back toward Alth, but before they could strike the Card Keeper, Jack quickly positioned himself in front of his partner to shield him from the flying shards, allowing Alth to escape from the danger with nothing more than a case of nervous perspiration.

"Th-This is going *too* far!" Alth yelled to Jack. "Miss Aoyuki isn't even attempting to dodge that thing! Is she really going to—"

"Alth!" Jack cut off his buddy by grabbing him by the shirt collar and dragging him a safe distance away. A moment later, Aoyuki's spiked collar came barreling

out of the misty haze of powdered ice and landed explosively in the very spot where Jack had just been standing. The Beast Chain had flicked out faster than Fenrir's ice rocket, and if Jack hadn't dragged him out of the way, Alth would've been part of that crater.

The Beast Chain kicked up a large plume of dust and gravel when it struck the ground, causing tremors to reverberate around the entire Abyss, but that wasn't the end of the danger. The weapon jinked around toward Fenrir and Cerberus without losing an ounce of its speed after the two hounds had darted off in the opposite direction from Jack and Alth. Fenrir yelped, first in confusion, then in shock, as the spiked collar embedded itself into one of its front paws in a matter of seconds. Aoyuki casually yanked on the Beast Chain and swung Fenrir around like a stuffed animal, sending it careening into Cerberus like a mace and slamming both beasts against one of the stone walls.

"Wh-What just happened?!" Alth cried, stunned by what he'd just witnessed. When he'd squared off against the beasts not long before, he had felt in his bones how powerful both Fenrir and Cerberus were, so he knew that, against any normal opponent, they were nowhere near weak enough to get put out of commission at the same time and within a matter of seconds.

Aoyuki's Beast Chain had the ability to track an opponent's movements, meaning that even if an adversary managed to dodge the spiked collar's first lunging attack, the weapon would continue to fly around at top speed until it bagged its prey. However, the real reason Fenrir and Cerberus had both ended up pancaked against a wall was due to Aoyuki's raw physical strength.



“Mrrow!”

The moment Alth raised his voice, Aoyuki appeared in front of him, and even though she was meowing like an adorable little kitten, her unquestioned ferocity overshadowed any cuteness being conveyed by the noises she was making.

“Alth! Follow my lead!” Jack barked as he swung his fist toward Aoyuki. Jack’s punch whizzed through the air so fast, next to no one on the surface world would’ve even been able to react to it before getting a face full of fist, and since Jack was presently covered in his iron blood, a direct blow would’ve left any fighter at a similar power level to him down for the count. But Aoyuki remained serenely calm as Jack’s fist flew toward her, and she swatted it aside with a clinking wave of her even-faster Beast Chain. Naturally, Aoyuki was perfectly capable of dodging Jack’s punch altogether, but she opted for a more showy approach instead.

“Sonuva!” Jack cursed as he overbalanced, allowing Aoyuki the perfect opportunity to immediately strike back.

“Myaah!” Aoyuki delivered a swift kick to Jack’s midsection, drawing a long, pained groan from her opponent as he tumbled and skidded across the ground for a good distance, plowing a massive rut in it. While there had been nothing special about Aoyuki’s kick, the strike was still powerful enough to leave a visible crack in the Ironblooded Barricade armor.

Now it was just Alth and Aoyuki left standing. Although the crack in Jack’s armor was already starting to repair itself, he was no longer able to provide his partner with backup. But Alth spotted his chance and rushed at Aoyuki, roaring like a wild beast as he did so to banish any lingering anxiety he might have had. Aoyuki was still standing on one leg after kicking Jack, and it was this pivot leg that Alth swung his sword at. However, it was the sound of metal hitting metal that rang out around the training ground, indicating that Alth had failed to strike his intended target. Aoyuki had quickly moved to block the double-bladed sword by holding out her weapon’s chain in both hands.

Alth hissed his frustration. He was 180 centimeters tall, while his diminutive opponent was only 142 centimeters. *Maybe I can use my height advantage to*

overpower her? Alth thought. *No, it is hopeless! She incapacitated Mr. Jack and her pets in a matter of seconds, so there is no way I can win a contest of strength against Miss Aoyuki! Then, how am I supposed to get a clean hit in on her?*

"Alth, move! The collar!" Jack roared at him from afar. Reacting to Jack's instructions without a second thought, Alth leaped backward before the Beast Chain collar had a chance to wrap itself around his neck. The spiky part of the collar relinquished its grip on Fenrir's paw and zoomed toward where Alth was standing at such dizzying speed, the weapon still managed to remove a few strands of hair from Alth's bangs despite his efforts to dodge it.

Yikes! thought Alth. *If Mr. Jack had not warned me, that collar would be firmly around my neck by now. Though actually, that thing came at me so fast, I would likely have been splattered upon impact!*

A chill ran down Alth's spine as he realized what a close call that had been. But when his feet were firmly planted on the ground again, he noticed something was off about the Beast Chain. Aoyuki realized it too.

"Mrrrow?"

"The chain is frozen?" Alth said in disbelief.

Even though the Beast Chain was still zipping about swiftly enough, the weapon appeared to be undulating in the air somewhat more languidly than it had been at the start of the battle. This change in its behavior came courtesy of Fenrir and Cerberus, the two intelligent hounds. Knowing that Aoyuki had caught Fenrir with her Beast Chain, Cerberus had purposely allowed itself to be barreled into, so that it would crash into the wall first and cushion the blow for its fellow monster. So even though Cerberus had been crushed in the attack, the Primal God Wolf had managed to cling on to its wits, if only barely.

While Aoyuki was distracted by the other fighters, Fenrir had slowly and sneakily injected ice properties into the Beast Chain to slow it down, and this was the *real* reason Alth had been able to dodge the Beast Chain, rather than Jack's warning just being timely.

"Ironblooded Palisades!" Jack yelled, punching the ground with his fist. While Aoyuki was momentarily bewildered by her malfunctioning Beast Chain, Jack

wasted no time in unleashing a skill that would incapacitate his opponent. Lines of blood spread outward from his fist and coursed through the ground until they reached Aoyuki, then they shot up and formed a densely packed array of steel stakes around her like a skintight cage.

Even though the Ironblooded Palisades was a powerful restraining technique deployed by a Level 7777 warrior, Aoyuki would easily be able to break free from its grip within a second. But one second was all a high-level fighter needed in order to take down a restrained opponent, since they would be too busy struggling to free themselves to put up any kind of defense against a subsequent attack.

“Alth! Now!” Jack yelled.

On cue, Alth whipped out his trump card. “Severance card! Grant me your protective powers!”

Because Alth and Annelia were Card Keepers, they had the power to create cards, though the ones they made weren’t as powerful as the ones Light’s Unlimited Gacha produced, and the siblings could only craft a card that boosted their abilities to a limited extent roughly once a month. The card Alth unleashed this time around was the Severance card, which gave his sword the power to cut down an otherwise-invulnerable opponent from a long distance away. No matter how tough the armor or the opponent, Severance did away with the whole concept of “uncuttable.” Alth held up the Severance card, and all of a sudden, it disappeared. Then, gripping his newly-upgraded sword in both hands, Alth roared and swung the weapon in the direction of his stationary opponent. The sword flashed as bright as the afternoon sun and fired off a blade of light that headed straight for Aoyuki.

In that same moment, the Genius Monster Tamer did something she hadn’t done at any other time during the battle: she smiled. Or rather, she grinned excitedly, like a hunter standing over some particularly tenacious prey. In that short instant which seemed to stretch on for so long, it was practically yawn-inducing, Alth was certain he caught a glimpse of Aoyuki smirking as she grabbed the collar of the Beast Chain and wrapped it around her own neck—a move which totally flabbergasted Alth. The blade of light hit Aoyuki square, but once it had faded away, Alth saw that his opponent was still in one piece

without a single rip in her clothing, nor a strand of hair out of place, nor one link of the chain broken.

"Mrroow," Aoyuki purred sedately, her expression suggesting the battle had ended to her satisfaction. A moment later, the Beast Chain had been magically put away and Aoyuki seemed to have returned to her normal state as a carefree, cat-like maiden, though Alth continued to silently stare at her in the knowledge that she was the most frightening thing he had encountered to date.

How is this possible? thought Alth. *My bespoke Severance card failed to cut her anywhere. In fact, it did not leave so much as a crack in the ground! Even Mr. Jack's palisades have disappeared! Did she put up some kind of defense? Or unleash a counterattack? My Severance attack is not the kind of thing that people can counter easily, so how?*

"You did good, bro," Jack said, clapping Alth on the shoulder. The Card Keeper spun around in surprise to find that his partner had shed his Ironblooded Barricade and was once again wearing his coat-cape.

"As ya can see, Aoyuki's lookin' stoked, which means we don't hafta spar no more," Jack explained. "So you can put away your sword now."

"M-Mr. Jack..." Alth mumbled. "How in the world did Miss Aoyuki..."

"Don't stress over it, bro. She *is* Level 9999 after all," Jack said simply. "You and me ain't gonna know everything about our allies, are we? A real bro don't go digging into how someone beat your killer move."

Jack's clear-cut thinking allowed Alth to relax a little. *Yes, this* is *Miss Aoyuki we are talking about here,* Alth thought, glancing over at his opponent, who was tending to Fenrir and Cerberus's injuries. *I suppose I shall just have to accept that she had something up her sleeve that allowed her to nullify my attack.* After all, Jack and the rest of the 7777s had powers Alth couldn't get his head around either, so it would be a pointless exercise for him to even *try* to imagine what kind of abilities a Level 9999 warrior might have.

"Thank you, Mr. Jack," said Alth. "Without your timely advice, I would still be standing around, needlessly brooding about how that fight ended."

"It's all good, bro. That's what a real bro does," Jack told him.

“Hey! Is this where you guys have been hidin’?” Alth and Jack turned and saw that Nazuna had entered the training grounds, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Are you all practicin’ in here? Lemme get in on that! It’s been a super long time since I had some good exercise!”

The blood drained from Alth’s face at this proposal. He had barely survived a manic battle with a Level 9999 superwarrior, and he was now faced with the daunting prospect of sparring with Nazuna, the undisputed strongest fighter in the Abyss (if you excluded Light), of all people. Based on the rumors Alth had heard, Ellie was considered the second strongest, while Mei came fourth in this imaginary ranking list, which meant Aoyuki was the third toughest brawler in the dungeon. However, the battle Aoyuki had just fought was totally one-sided, and that was without her using even *half* of her strength, so with Nazuna being added into the mix as well... Alth’s head was spinning simply from imagining the carnage.

Alth flashed the best princely smile he could muster in a desperate attempt to weasel out of what would be a potentially lethal sparring match for him. “M-Miss Nazuna, while we are flattered by your offer, as you can see, we have already finished our battling for today. We have all exhausted ourselves to the point that we can barely move our leaden bodies, so might I ask you to reconsider?”

“Huh? Ya ain’t gonna fight with me?” Nazuna said.

Even the two hounds who had been restored back to full health by Aoyuki were hiding behind their master in an attempt to avoid a battle with Nazuna. While this treatment was similar to a little girl being deliberately left out of a children’s game—and Alth did feel guilty about that when he saw Nazuna’s disappointed expression—the Card Keeper remained fully intent on getting out of battling her.

Jack, on the other hand, proved to be too attentive for his own good and refused to just blow off Nazuna like this. “Alth, one of our bros wants to throw down with us, and no *real* bro is gonna go and let a fellow bro down like that. It’s time to man up, my dude.”

“Mr. Jack, you really are putting me in a very awkward position here,” Alth

replied. The Card Keeper didn't want to upset Nazuna, and with his friend, Jack—whom he looked up to—clearly willing to take her on to the point where he was even egging Alth on by telling him to "man up," he found himself in no position to walk away. In spite of everything, Alth still felt the need to defend his pride as a man.

Alth sighed quietly and drew his sword once more. "On second thoughts, Miss Nazuna, we will gladly be your opponents. But I must plead with you to go easy on us. I do not say that as a joke. I am being deadly serious."

"Ya got it!" Nazuna chirped. "Remember how I fought that guy called, um, uh, Party the Silent? Y'know, whatshisname, up on the surface. Well, anyway, I'm an expert on goin' easy!"

The name she was looking for was that of the White Knight's commander, Hardy the Silent, and it was only thanks to Ellie's immortality spell that Nazuna hadn't outright killed her adversary during their tower battle. In no meaningful way did Nazuna "go easy" on Hardy.

The prospect of fighting Nazuna gave Jack flop sweat too, but he went ahead and covered himself in his Ironblooded Barricade again all the same. "Man, doin' all these favors for my bros is gonna kill me one of these days."

"Miss Aoyuki, if you sense that we are in danger, please do everything you can to stop her," Alth requested. "This is a serious request. You must cease the fight at all costs if it comes to that."

"Meeow," Aoyuki replied, which could most likely be translated to: "Try not to die on me."

As soon as she saw Jack and Alth assuming fighting positions, Nazuna giddily drew her broadsword from the scabbard on her back. "All righty! Time for some badly-needed exercise!"

And that's how Alth and Jack ended up fighting an opponent who was way more powerful than Aoyuki. And to summarize the outcome of the battle as succinctly as possible, Alth and Jack just about managed to escape from the contest with their lives, while Nazuna was able to fight to her heart's content.

Extra Story 3: Secret Club

"What are you doing here, ladies?"

"M-Miss Iceheat? Why are *you* here?!" gasped the fairy maid whose extreme cuteness eclipsed whatever personality she had. She was astonished to see the Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat, standing in the open doorway of the room with her companion, the UR Chimera, Mera.

Moments before, Iceheat and Mera had caught sight of a group of four fairy maids entering a spare room in Light's underground citadel in the Abyss. The quartet had looked very furtive, peering around as if checking to make sure they weren't being followed, before stepping inside the room. Since Iceheat was the deputy head housekeeper, and as such, responsible for the other maids, she and Mera had secretly followed the four fairy maids into the room, and happened upon a scene they never would've anticipated.

Aside from the four fairy maids, the Double Gunner, Suzu, and the Card Keeper, Annelia, were also in the room, and they were all sitting around a table. Every single one of the six people present flinched in surprise on seeing Iceheat and Mera.

"I myself am here because I witnessed you four acting suspiciously when you entered this room," Iceheat said, answering the supercute fairy maid's question. "Suzu, Annelia, what are you two doing in here with them?" It was then that Iceheat noticed there were several objects on the table. "Are those dolls of Master Light?"

Sure enough, there were several cloth dolls lined up on the table the six maidens were sitting around—a sight which elicited a great deal of mirth from Mera.

"Keh heh heh heh!" Mera screeched with laughter. "Hey, lemme see those things! Ooh, you weren't kidding! These dolls aren't all that detailed, but aside from that, they're the spitting image of our Master!"

This assessment caused Suzu to silently blush, which was a clear indication

that she was the one who had made the dolls. However, Iceheat felt that nothing she had seen so far was adding up.

"Why did you four enter this room in a way that suggested you were hiding something?" Iceheat asked, genuinely curious. "I myself don't believe you are doing anything that's prohibited, and these dolls only serve to show how much love and respect you have for Master Light. In fact, I think these dolls are very well-made, so there was no reason for you to be sneaking around in the first place."

"That's a good point, Iceheat," Annelia agreed. "But honey, acting all sneaky-peeky is what makes these things so much fun!"

Once again, Mera cackled uproariously. "How does sneaking around the place make *this* fun?"

Annelia proceeded to fill Mera in on how these meet-ups had first gotten started, explaining how Suzu had this secret hobby of making dolls that looked like Light, and because of that, she had built up a sizable collection of homemade Light dolls. Annelia and the four fairy maids happened to catch sight of one of these dolls, and while praising Suzu for how well-made it was, they blurted out that they also wanted to make dolls as good as Suzu's. After that, the normally reclusive musketeer had taught the other five how to make dolls by hand, and soon, her students had developed their own styles of dollmaking. This naturally led to the sextet holding irregularly scheduled secret meetings in an unused room to show off their latest bit of handiwork. This way, they got to enjoy their shared hobby away from the prying eyes of others, which came with its own thrill of essentially being part of what amounted to a secret society.

"It's actually really fun sharing a secret like this, so please don't be too grumpy with my kiddos here, Iceheat," Annelia said.

"You're the best, Miss Annelia!" said Supercute.

"Miss Annelia is entirely correct," said the fairy maid who was wearing glasses that made her look bookish.

"So this makes us, like, y'know, completely innocent?" said a third fairy maid who looked and acted like a trendy Japanese high-school kogal.

Annelia thought of herself as a big sister to everyone in the Abyss, calling everyone “kiddo,” “honey,” and other similar terms of endearment, regardless of age or rank, so it was only natural that she also doted on the master of the dungeon, Light, as if he were her baby brother. This would normally be a total breach of protocol for a strict disciplinarian like Iceheat, but Light had personally informed everyone that he didn’t mind being treated like a younger sibling by Annelia, so the Frozen Firestorm Grappler was willing to overlook the Card Keeper’s behavior. But this whole business with the Light dolls... Iceheat was somewhat unsure how to respond to it as the deputy head housekeeper.

“All right, you win,” Iceheat said, pressing the palm of her hand against her forehead. “Sneaking around and making others suspicious of your activities does present a problem, but there is no rule against maids conversing about a hobby during their down-time, so I myself will not reprimand anyone involved. However, you must ensure that this activity does not cause any misunderstandings with anyone else.”

“Y-Yes, understood, M-Miss Iceheat,” said the fourth fairy maid, who looked like a cute geek, and she sighed with relief.

“I must say, these dolls certainly do capture Master Light’s likeness very well indeed,” Iceheat continued. “I never knew this was a hobby of yours, Suzu.”

“She is *such* a talented dollmaker!” Annelia said. “You can really *feel* the extra love that goes into making these cute little things.”

The ever-silent Suzu blushed at Iceheat and Annelia’s praise for her.

“I like your dolls too, Miss Annelia,” Supercute piped up. “Your designs are really original, and they’re super fun to look at. You must get your ideas from being Master Light’s Card Keeper.”

“Thanks, honey. You’re really sweet,” said Annelia, and like Suzu, she also blushed at the compliment.

Mera cackled at Supercute’s praise. “Okay, now I *gotta* see this. Where’s this ‘original’ doll of hers?”

“I brought it with me, so you can take a look at it if you like, sweetie,” Annelia said to Mera. “After all, you’re my little kiddo, so all you have to do is ask.”

Mera crowed like a banshee in response, but this time, her laughter was more manufactured, attempting to deflect from the awkwardness of the infantilizing exchange because Mera had no time for Annelia's excesses. The Card Keeper activated her Item Box and produced her newest creation. Extremely impressed with what she saw, Iceheat was the first to pass comment on it.

"Yes, this is certainly quite an original concept," Iceheat said. "I never thought Master Light could be shrunk in this way, yet your doll and Suzu's dolls share the same detailed likeness."

Annelia's doll was made out of porcelain, which wasn't unusual in itself, but what *did* set it apart was the fact that the head on this doll was the same size as the rest of its body, giving it a super-deformed look. Even so, the paint job on the doll still managed to capture Light's visual likeness—in this case, as the adventurer named Dark, complete with his SSR Fool's Mask.

Mera guffawed, every bit as impressed by it as Iceheat. "I always thought the point of dolls was to make them look as real as possible. I never imagined they could look like this. Okay, I'm sold. You're more imaginative than I gave you credit for."

"Thank you so much, sweethearts," Annelia said. "But I'm afraid I wasn't the one who came up with the idea. One of Light's R cards occasionally produces dolls that look like this, so I used those as a guide."

Annelia's usual place of work was the Card Depository, though today was her weekly day off. Because of her duties, Annelia was more familiar with the Unlimited Gacha cards than even Light, meaning she was able to reference types of rare cards that had never been seen by anyone else in the room.

"Master Light's Gift never ceases to amaze me," Iceheat marveled. "I never knew it could produce a card that would eventually lead to this creation!"

"Guess spitting out weapons and magical attacks isn't all the Unlimited Gacha is good for, huh?" Mera cackled. "It even gives us cultural knick knacks like the dolls you saw."

The others in the room nodded in agreement. The fairy maids then decided this was a good opportunity to present their own most recent bits of handicraft.

“Since you’re both here, you won’t mind, like, checking out our doll too, yeah?” said Kogal.

“We also put a lot of work into it,” Glasses informed them.

Iceheat and Mera watched on with interest as the two fairy maids activated an Item Box and brought out a doll.

“This i-is what we call Master Light P-Prototype III,” said Geeky as she placed the doll on the table.

This doll was one-eighth the size of the real Light, just like the dolls that had been made by Suzu and Annelia, but the fairy maids’ creation lacked the impact of the other dolls. Suzu’s dolls were adorable and pleasing to the eye, while the doll Annelia had made was highly original. Placed next to those, the fairy maids’ doll looked painfully average, though that didn’t seem to stop both Suzu and Annelia inspecting it with looks of fascination on their faces.

“You made a *third* prototype?” Annelia queried. “I wonder how flexible you kiddos made this one...”

Suzu nodded excitedly, suggesting she wanted to know too.

“Flexible?” Iceheat and Mera repeated in unison.

Supercute picked up the doll and launched into a spiel as if she were some roadside peddler hawking their latest product. “You might *think* this looks like just a normal, everyday doll, but by using golem technology, we made it so that its arm and leg joints can bend in any direction we desire. We can even adjust its hips and neck.”

Supercute emphasized her statement by bending the doll’s knees and elbows, which totally blew Iceheat and Mera away, since the concept of a posable doll was unheard of in this world.

“Oh, gosh. This one’s even bendier than the last one!” Annelia marveled.

“Th-Thank you!” Supercute stammered. “We worked really hard to give this doll more flexible joints.”

Suzu applauded them without saying a word. It appeared the fairy maids had made real progress in creating a Light doll with movable arms and legs.

“You can flex this doll’s joints and leave them in whatever position you want, plus you can place his staff in his hand and make him take any pose you desire,” Supercute added.

The doll came complete with a miniature God Requiem Gungnir, which Supercute placed in its right hand before manipulating the doll into a pose that was so heroic, Mera couldn’t help commenting.

“Our Master looks awesome, all right!” Mera said, crowing with laughter. “I personally like this doll the most now!”

“Wow, I’m like, so amazed you like our doll this much?” said Kogal, who had a bad habit of phrasing practically everything she said in the form of a question.

“However, this isn’t the only new thing we have crafted,” Glasses stated, pushing her frames up her nose in a flamboyant gesture as she retrieved another item from the Item Box.

“A-Are those *cat ears*?!” Iceheat exclaimed. The item Glasses had produced was a miniature headband with cat ears which she promptly placed on the head of the Prototype III doll, transforming it into a cat-eared Light.

Mera exploded into cackling once more. “H-Holy crap! Our Master looks cuter than ever in those ears!”

Suzu fervidly nodded three times.

“And it’s not just cat ears we have,” Glasses explained. “We also have bunny ears, dog ears, fox ears, and lots of other animal ears.”



“Wow, honey! All of these ears look so *adorable*!” Annelia cooed. “I’m not sure which set to pick!”

While Mera, Suzu, and Annelia were totally engrossed in deciding which animal ears would look the most precious on mini-Light, Iceheat raised an objection, even though she too found herself half-distracted by the cat ears.

“H-Hold on just a second!” Iceheat piped up. “I myself don’t care *how* c-cute Master Light looks in those replaceable ears, this may prove highly disrespectful to him!”

“It’s not disrespectful,” Supercute argued. “How can it be when our Master looks so incredibly cute in these animal ears?”

“Indeed. The fact that our Master looks this adorable in these ears does no dishonor to him in the slightest,” Glasses agreed.

“That’s the thing, yeah?” Kogal added. “It’s, like, being cute just makes everything right, y’know?”

“A-Also, w-we plan to do some research into how to make a l-life-sized Master Light doll using the same technology,” Geeky said. “We’ll be able to change his clothes and do all s-s-sorts of things we wouldn’t be able to do with the *real* Master Light.”

“What do you mean by ‘all sorts of things’?” Iceheat said.

“Anything you want!” said Geeky. “Y-You could move his joints into *any* position you want, a-a-and you could take off all his clothes! You’d be able to do *anything* you could ever dream of with it!”

On hearing this, everyone else in the room gulped as their imaginations started running wild, until an unexpected visitor snapped them out of their reverie.

“Ladies, what is the meaning of this?”

Everyone in the room turned their heads to find Mei, the chief housekeeper of the Abyss, standing in the doorway.

“M-Miss Mei! What are you doing here?” Supercute said.

“I was passing by this corridor when I happened to overhear a conversation of

a rather dubious nature from this room, so I took it upon myself to eavesdrop on the rest of the exchange," Mei said in an ominously measured tone. "I believe Master Light would be quite forgiving if he knew you were making dolls of him, even the ones with animal ears. He would even find it amusing, I suspect. But making a life-sized model of Master Light that you can undress crosses the line."

Mei pressed her fingers to her forehead as if nursing a migraine. "Honestly, is *this* what you four do with your time off? And Iceheat, as deputy supervisor to these maids, it is your responsibility to promptly put a stop to this kind of depravity."

"P-Please forgive me, Miss Mei!" Iceheat stammered, going pale. However, the four fairy maids weren't about to give up on their dreams of creating a life-sized Light doll that easy.

"Please reconsider, Miss Mei!" Glasses cried. "We weren't planning to do anything indecent to any life-sized figure of Master Light we wish to make!"

"We just, like, wanna show off all that hot guy energy our Master has, yeah?" Kogal added.

"W-We absolutely *need* a life-sized doll so we can make it do a whole bunch of awesome poses, give it weapons to hold, and do dress-up with it to figure out what kind of clothing combinations look b-b-best on Master Light!" Geeky explained.

"How in the world can the four of you have absolutely no remorse for your actions?" Mei said, her eyes narrowing forebodingly. "I can see that I need to discipline you ladies thoroughly."

The fairy maid quartet shrieked and trembled at the mention of "discipline," then turned to Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, and Annelia to silently appeal for help. Unfortunately, the four higher-level allies purposefully avoided making any eye contact with them, because they all knew there was absolutely no way for them to save the fairy maids from their fate now.

"I hope you ladies are ready to pay the price for this effrontery," Mei stated, before grabbing the four fairy maids and physically dragging them out of the room.

☆☆☆

"Huh? Why has Nazuna been sparring with a group of fairy maids?" I said, shooting Mei a puzzled look after hearing her report while I was casting an eye over some documents in my office in the Abyss. "Those fairy maids are only Level 500 or so. Why would they agree to fight her in a mock battle?"

"That particular group of fairy maids share a hobby of making dolls with Suzu and Annelia, and the four of them wished to learn how to make said dolls stand in dramatic fighting stances. As such, the maids in question sought out Nazuna to train with in order to gather some real-world reference material on fighting poses," Mei explained. "For her part, Nazuna welcomed the opportunity to train with them, since she needs to practice how to control her immeasurable strength."

"I see. So it's all because of their hobby, huh?" I replied. "Still, I can't believe how far some people go for their hobbies, since even I struggle when I spar with Nazuna."

Back when I was a low-level adventurer, I would hear stories recounted in taverns about people who sold their own homes just to get their hands on a valuable item to add to their collections of magic objects or books. I was really shocked to hear the kind of lengths people would go to for the sake of their pastime, so when I was told that the fairy maids were fighting Nazuna for a similar reason, while I was initially surprised by it, I readily accepted that they were doing it because of their hobby.

"The maids had Ellie cast a magical spell that ensured they would not die from any wounds they suffered," Mei explained. "And thanks to her assistance, they were able to be punished—ahem, I mean, able to attain a *rewarding*, *educational* experience from their all-out battle with Nazuna."

"Hm?" I thought I'd heard Mei say something really disturbing just then. Come to think of it, I'd also recently caught wind of a rumor that Iceheat, Mera, Suzu and Annelia had started acting strangely fearful around Mei. Was it just me, or was there some connection there?

"It's great they have a hobby, and I'm not saying they should quit doing it, but be sure to warn them not to take things *too* far," I told Mei. "After all, it'll be all

for nothing if they end up getting seriously injured."

"Of course, Master Light," Mei said. "I will certainly warn those four *not* to go too far again."

I got the feeling Mei and I weren't exactly on the same page, and because I didn't get the subtext at all, I spent more than a few seconds trying to make sense of what I'd just been told. I eventually decided to wave away my misgivings as a false alarm and carried on with my work, picking up another set of documents to review. Mei, meanwhile, brewed a fresh pot of tea, smiling contentedly as she watched me work.

Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here once again. I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading and/or purchasing the third volume of *Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World!*

This time around, I wrote the main story and all the extra stories entirely from scratch, doing everything I could to make sure this volume would be enjoyable to all who read it, whether they are following the web novel version of *Unlimited Gacha* (originally published on *Shosetsuka ni Naro* [*"Let's Become a Novelist"*]), or reading the printed novel version.

This has been my first time writing an entire volume of newly-written stories, and although the work I've done so far has certainly been demanding, I found this volume particularly challenging due to the need for new characters and other original material. But I still went for broke in the hopes that you, the reader, would enjoy what I've written. If everyone is able to derive pleasure from this volume, at least to some degree, there can be no greater joy for this writer.

And now, on to the acknowledgments.

First up is the light novel's illustrator: tef! Once again, I wish to thank you for your amazing illustrations, cover art, character designs, and everything else you have done for this volume! There was never a time where I wasn't waiting excitedly to receive new illustrations from you, and all the ones I received, I saved in a folder on my PC so that I can look at them any time I want to recharge from fatigue brought on by working a lot. Thank you once again for your breathtaking illustrations!

Next up is HJ Novels' editorial team! I really appreciate the wealth of advice and pointers you gave me, all of which I really needed for writing this volume full of all-new stories. I also apologize for being a nuisance, and I look forward to continuing to work together on *Unlimited Gacha*.

I also wish to thank Takashi Ohmae for authoring the manga version of *Unlimited Gacha*, with new chapters coming out on the Magazine Pocket app every Tuesday! The manga is now in the Sasha revenge arc, and the art in the early drafts of those chapters really conveyed Ohmae's energy to this particular reader. You have turned my novel into a really great manga series, and for that, I am forever indebted to you. I really look forward to working with you on *Unlimited Gacha* from here on out!

I would also like to express my gratitude to the editorial team at Kodansha's Magazine Pocket for giving a home to the *Unlimited Gacha* manga. It is thanks to your efforts that we have a multitude of fans reading the manga on the app. I may be a nuisance on a bunch of issues, but I will continue to work diligently, so I appreciate your kind cooperation going forward!

Last of all, I would like to acknowledge all of you reading this for picking up *Unlimited Gacha*! Thanks to everyone's support, I was able to put out this third volume. I can feel all of your support giving me strength whenever I publish a novel, whenever I release an update to the web novel, and each time a volume of the manga version goes on sale. For what it's worth, I wish to return the favor by putting every effort into writing *Unlimited Gacha*, so I look forward to receiving your support right through to the very end.

Thank you so much for everything!

P.S.: Just like in the last volume, I have written a bonus story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. To access the bonus story, go to my activity updates on the *Naro* website, click on the entry which has a date of or around January 18, 2022, and follow the instructions in the entry. You will be directed to my personal webpage, where you will need to enter a password. (You can also do a web search for "明鏡シスイ　活動報告 (Meikyou Shisui Activity Update)" and that should take you straight to the right webpage. Once there, search for the entry that corresponds to the date above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read all the past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **gold**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired]