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

Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
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Prologue

“Master Light, we have received information regarding the whereabouts of your younger sister, Yume!” Mei informed me. I was sitting in my office in the Abyss, listening to the Forbidden Witch Ellie’s post-mission report after the successful conclusion of our quest to defeat Sionne the dark elf and the Soul Dragon, when the Everseeking Maid, Mei, burst through the door and delivered this piece of shocking news. I consequently put my conversation with Ellie on hold and focused my entire attention on Mei as she relayed the information she had received about my sister, who I hadn’t seen for three long years.

“So she’s being kept as a ward in the Human Kingdom palace?” I said once Mei had finished.

“Correct,” Mei replied. “Miss Yume is currently working as an apprentice maid for the royal family.”

By this point, Ellie was absolutely fuming. “How *dare* those people keep the sister of our almighty Blessed Lord Light as a lowly maidservant! How could anyone be so disrespectful? I don’t care if they’re humans! They must pay for this outrage with their lives!”

“Ellie...” I said with an air of irritation. “Mei’s not finished with her report yet. Do you mind not interrupting?”

“F-Forgive me, Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie replied, getting all flustered before hanging her head glumly, like a puppy that had been told off by its owner. Normally, I would attempt to cheer her up, but there were bigger fish to fry, so I refocused my attention on Mei, who on seeing that I was waiting, promptly continued with her report.

“Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom was traveling by carriage when she spotted Miss Yume lying motionless on the ground due to some serious injuries she had sustained. They were reportedly able to save her life by giving her a healing potion,” said Mei. “The princess is known for her strong moral compass, as shown by some notable acts of charity, such as personally paying for a food distribution program, which has led some citizens to refer to her as a ‘living

saint.’ I believe the princess is ostensibly keeping Miss Yume as an apprentice maid so that she can pay back the cost of the healing potion, but the real reason might be that your sister simply had no other place to go.”

I’d been on the hunt for information regarding Yume and my brother Els for a while, but my allies and I had spent most of our time sniffing around orphanages and slave markets for clues on their whereabouts. The idea that my sister would be serving the royal family in the Human Kingdom palace had never entered into my mind.

“Not that I’m doubting you, Mei, but are you *sure* this girl is actually my sister?” I asked.

“I am certain,” Mei stated. “The description of her physical appearance is an exact match for Miss Yume.”

“If the princess has custody of Yume, that means she must be in the capital of the Human Kingdom,” I mused. “That’s really far from my home village. We’re talking about a monthslong trip by carriage.”

“Please forgive me, Master Light,” Mei said. “I am afraid I have not ascertained how your sister came to be so displaced from your village.”

To be honest, I was just glad Yume was still alive and breathing. But how in the world had she ended up in the Human Kingdom capital?

“What about my brother?” I asked. “Wasn’t he with her?”

“I regret to tell you that we have no information regarding your brother,” Mei apologized. “This intelligence concerns only your sister, Miss Yume.”

I had assumed that the discovery of Yume’s whereabouts was a sign that both of my siblings had managed to survive the attack that had devastated my village, but since my brother was still missing, that would indicate that little Yume had become separated from him in some way—and the worst-case scenario would be that this was because my brother had died. *No, there’s no use lingering on thoughts like that without any kind of proof,* I told myself. *Anyway, I’m pretty sure Yume will fill in the blanks when I see her again.*

“In any case, thank you for your report, Mei,” I said. “It’s a huge weight off my chest knowing that Yume is alive and well in a place where we can get to her. Of

course, the next step is to immediately send clandestine operatives to the palace to monitor and protect Yume for the time being, while we make the necessary preparations to bring her here to the Abyss as quickly as possible."

"In that case, allow me to take charge of the operation, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, looking to redeem herself after my reprimand.

"I am afraid that we need you to remain at the Great Tower to govern the location and maintain quality of life for the community of humans that has formed around it," Mei told her. "Your presence is also needed at the tower so that you can exercise your authority over the Elven Queendom."

Ellie grumbled something incoherent and was visibly seething after hearing Mei's inarguable reasoning for why she couldn't spearhead this new operation. "Honestly!" she finally spat out. Apart from being my deputy, the Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie also served as the ruler of the Great Tower, which had sprung up near to the Elven Queendom capital. Calling herself the "Wicked Witch of the Tower," Ellie had singlehandedly conquered the queendom and subsequently forced the nation to liberate all its human slaves. The former slaves had then migrated to the forest surrounding the Great Tower and were presently in the process of building a community there, under the protection of the so-called Tower Witch.

Before Mei had rushed into my office with news of Yume's whereabouts, Ellie and I had been discussing the possibility of her engaging in a face-to-face meeting with the authorities of the Dark Elf Islands, since it had become apparent that they knew something about Masters. In other words, Ellie had far too much on her plate already, and she couldn't be in multiple places at once, even if she did have an SSR Teleportation card.

"I believe the realistic option would be to have myself approach Yume instead," Mei stated.

"Yes, I reckon I can trust you with that job," I said. "Please take care of Yume for me."

"I swear on my honor as a maid that I will bring your sister to you without fail, Master Light," Mei replied with a gentle smile. Hearing her say this gave me heart, though I still had questions about the mission.

“There’s still the issue of how to actually get Yume to the Abyss,” I said. I didn’t feel as if storming the Human Kingdom palace and spiriting Yume away like a captive would really be the best approach. For one thing, the princess had saved my sister’s life and taken her in as an apprentice maid, and I didn’t want to repay that generosity by laying siege to the palace. And what’s more, the truth of the matter was I wanted to be one of the first to see Yume, just so I could confirm for myself that it really was her.

Sensing my mixed feelings, Ellie raised her hand to speak. “I suggest we get the Elven Queendom to extend an invitation to the Human Kingdom to send a delegation for a tour of the Great Tower. Perhaps that might work, Blessed Lord Light?”

In her guise as the Wicked Witch of the Tower, Ellie had declared “absolute autonomy” for all humans, which had led to what could only be described as a brand new nation of emancipated human slaves forming around the tower. It would therefore stand to reason from a humanitarian perspective that royals from the Human Kingdom would jump at the chance to see how members of their own race were being treated.

“Even though we have essentially turned the Elven Queendom into a vassal state, it still retains much of its influence up on the surface world because we didn’t turn the nation into a full-fledged colony,” Ellie stated. “As such, we can have the queendom use its sway for our own ends and issue an invitation to the Human Kingdom to come and inspect the tower. Given that the princess appears to care deeply about the welfare of humans, it seems unthinkable that her kingdom would turn down the offer.”

I mulled over the viability of this idea. We could further seal the deal by offering to cover the cost of travel, as well as by guaranteeing their safety and putting on a lavish reception for the delegation. Since Princess Lilith would be pretty much duty bound to come, all we would really need to do is ensure that Yume accompanied the princess. Then, once Yume arrived at the Great Tower, I’d finally get to see her again face-to-face, allowing me the opportunity to bring her to the Abyss. I greeted Ellie’s cunning plan with a broad smile.

“You always come up with the most brilliant ideas, Ellie,” I praised her. “How soon can you put this plan into motion?”

Visibly trembling with joy, Ellie stifled a squeal before blurting out her excited reply. “It will be done as soon as possible, Blessed Lord! I’ll travel to the Elven Queendom at once and get the process of summoning the Human Kingdom underway!”

And with that, Ellie practically flew out of my office to prepare for another meeting with the elf top brass. Now that we were alone, Mei and I started discussing how I would go about confirming Yume’s identity on seeing her, plus ways in which we could immediately ferry my sister to the bottommost level of the Abyss.

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Later that night, after that life-altering discussion with my deputies had wrapped up, I retired to my bedroom, where I slumped down on my sofa and started thinking about a whole range of things. Yume was one of them, naturally, as well as the remaining enemies I still had to get revenge on, plus what lay after that.

There’s little to no reason to disbelieve Mei’s report on Yume, but I should also brace myself for the possibility that we’ve got the wrong girl, I thought. *If I get my hopes up too much and then find out it’s not her, the disappointment will absolutely break me. And if she does turn out to be the real Yume, I must keep my promise to my mom and dad and do everything in my power to protect her.*

When I had partially unsealed my God Requiem Gungnir to kill the Soul Dragon in Sionne’s lab-turned-dungeon, the power unleashed by the genesis-class spear had caused me to momentarily lose consciousness, and during that brief blackout, I had a vision of my long-dead parents for the last time.

“It’s time for us to go now, Light,” my dad had said in the vision. “Els and Yume are counting on you.”

“Both of them are still alive,” my mom had said. “So please go and find them for us, Light.”

“I promise,” I had said to my parents as they prepared to drift off into the void once more. “I swear I will save them.”

I simply refused to dismiss what I’d seen as just some dream, or a

hallucination, or a psychotic episode. To my mind, I had made a *real* promise to my mom and dad, even if it had been inside what had ostensibly seemed to be a dream created by my long-held desires.

I will *save Yume and my big brother, even if it means making powerful enemies along the way!* I thought to myself. I'd managed to build up an army of overwhelming might in the three years since I was accidentally teleported to the bottom level of the Abyss, and this was precisely one of the moments I had been waiting for to put my resources to use.

This train of thought made me reflect on the years I had spent down here. *Now that I think about it, I've struggled massively to even get this far—especially during those first months, when it was just me and Mei.* Yep, it all started when I summoned my first SUR warrior immediately after the Concord of the Tribes had left me for dead in the Abyss...

Book 1: Dungeon Building

Chapter 1: Level 15

More than three years ago, my trusted companions in the Concord of the Tribes had tried to kill me in a wicked act of betrayal. I managed to survive by the skin of my teeth by unwittingly triggering a teleportation trap that sent me much deeper into the Abyss, but the next thing I knew, a giant snake-tailed monster showed up, ready to make brunch out of me.

Out of desperation, I activated my Gift—the Unlimited Gacha—and pressed the button a bunch of times until a burst of light gave birth to a Super Ultra Rare card: Level 9999, Everseeking Maid, Mei. She wasted no time in dicing up the monster—saving my life in the process—and once Mei had healed me, the two of us started discussing what my plans would be from that day forward.

“I just want to grow stronger and take revenge on them all myself,” I said to Mei. “I also want to find out why a nation would seek out and befriend a so-called ‘Master,’ only to turn around and try to kill him.”

“You should summon more allies using your Unlimited Gacha and build your very own kingdom in this dungeon, Master Light,” Mei suggested.

I couldn’t wrap my head around how anyone could even think to build a kingdom in this dark, spooky place, but I listened to Mei’s advice all the same and started pushing the Unlimited Gacha button. But after pulling just a few cards, my legs gave out from under me.

“What the...” I breathed as my sudden dizziness sent me collapsing to the floor. Luckily for me, Mei reacted quickly enough to catch me before I hit the ground, and she just about managed to keep me on my feet.

“Are you all right, Master Light?” Mei asked me. Due to our height difference, my face was completely buried in her substantial bosom, but I was too drained to even think about blushing from embarrassment.

“Please forgive me, Master Light,” Mei continued, her brow furrowing with

worry. “You survived being betrayed as well as being attacked by that monster, yet I urged you to activate your Unlimited Gacha again without taking any notice of how completely exhausted you are.”



Mei’s words made me realize that an hour hadn’t even passed since my

former party had tried to assassinate me, and during that brief period of time, I'd also escaped being gobbled up by a Level 1000 monster, thanks to my near-miraculous encounter with Mei. I was a Level 15 adventurer, which was considered high for a human my age, but humans were still the weakest of all the nine races, and this whole ordeal was way too much for a kid like me to withstand without feeling completely burned out.

"But..." I managed to mumble. "But I can't sleep here." I wasn't entirely sure, but I was probably in the lowest level of the Abyss, which was reputed to be the world's largest and deadliest dungeon, and other than Mei, I hadn't pulled any gacha cards that would prove even remotely useful in protecting me. So if I did flake out, how would Mei be able to protect herself *and* me from the monsters lurking around down here?

As if to allay my fears, Mei hugged me tighter and stroked my hair lovingly. "I assure you that I will make sure you stay safe. Not one scratch will blemish your skin, so I implore you to sleep peacefully."

"M-Mei..." The last thing I saw before darkness flooded my vision was her saintly smile as my head slowly filled with her flowery aroma and the pleasantness of her body heat. I soon surrendered to the soothing effect of the gentle strokes of her hand and fell into a deep sleep.

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"Nmm..." I mumbled, still dozing. As I slowly regained consciousness, I became increasingly aware of a warm, fuzzy feeling I had all over, and it seemed as if I was enveloped in a soft, pleasing scent, especially around the head region. I had an overwhelming urge to bury my head deeper into this pillow and never leave this spot.

Hold on. I don't remember my pillow ever smelling this *good*, a voice in the back of my dazed mind said. My bedroom in the lodgings I shared with the Concord of the Tribes pretty much consisted of just an old wooden bed with a threadbare blanket on it, and my pillow had never felt *this* nice. *Besides, wasn't I just betrayed by my party?*

My eyes snapped open and I jumped to my feet, instantly wide awake. I was trapped in the world's most dangerous dungeon. This was most definitely not

the time to be taking a nap.

“Good morning, Master Light. It is not safe to move around so much so soon after waking up.”

“M-Mei?” I said, half-surprised.

“Yes, it is Mei, your ever-loyal maid.” A beautiful woman with raven hair tied into a long ponytail was kneeling beside me. She gazed at me warmly with a smile on her face, greeting me like an actual maidservant who had just woken up her charge.

I hazily replayed what had happened to me: first, I was betrayed by the Concord of the Tribes, then I’d summoned Mei with my Unlimited Gacha—and as a result, survived a monster attack—and finally, I’d passed out from exhaustion. Yes, the voice in my head had been right. The Concord had indeed double-crossed me, and I could still remember the words of my former party members as they viciously mocked me before trying to snuff out my life.

“Nonsense!” the leader, Drago, had said. “We dragonutes simply have too much pride to consort with you inferiors on equal terms. I only consented to this charade because I had orders from above.”

The beastman, Garou, had howled with laughter. “Oh *man*! This is the funniest thing I’ve seen in my life! Yer killin’ me!”

“Why are you marveling over this display?” Sasha the elf had said, her nose wrinkling as I dragged my wounded body across the ground. “I swear, humans are vile, revolting creatures! Why don’t the authorities just eradicate these inferiors once and for all?”

“C’mon, kill him already!” the dwarf, Naano, said, egging on the others. “This kid’s not a Master. He’s nothing to us! We’re burning daylight as we speak!”

Along with the other four members of the Concord, they had conspired to kill me after welcoming me into their party with open arms. Back before they took me in, I’d been an adventurer who only got hired to perform menial, low-level jobs, but during my time with the Concord of the Tribes, the other members of the party taught me skills and trained me without showing even a hint of disgust at my presence. Whenever others made fun of me for being a human

“inferior,” they’d shout angrily at the bullies on my behalf and drive them off. They consoled me whenever I was feeling sad, and laughed along with me during the good times.

I groaned loudly and crouched down, cradling my head.

“Master Light?” Mei asked, but I continued to wail like a wounded sheep, in total disbelief at how my friends had played me for a fool. I may have been the only human in the Concord of the Tribes, but I’d trusted those turncoats right up until the moment they tried to assassinate me. According to what they’d said, they had determined I wasn’t a “Master,” but had decided to kill me just to be on the safe side, specifically bringing me to the Abyss so they could pass off my murder as an accident. It all seemed like some horrible dream, but it wasn’t. I had been stabbed in the back by all eight other members of the Concord of the Tribes! This realization crushed me all over again, to the point where I was crying bitter, ugly tears without caring if anyone was watching. Mei came over to hold me and stroke my back, like a mother consoling a fussy kid.

“I can only imagine the pain of being betrayed by those you trusted,” Mei sympathized. “But everything is all right now. I am here for you, Master Light. Even if the Goddess herself forsakes you, I shall never leave your side.”

Mei pulled me tighter into her warm, gentle embrace, her soft hands stroking me. “Mei...” I managed to get out before the tears started flowing again. I thought I’d lost everything. I thought I was a goner. But now I had Mei, who swore she would never leave me, even if the gods themselves were against me. “Thank you, Mei...” I sobbed, my face pressed tightly against her chest.

I had no idea how many minutes had passed by the time I’d cried myself out and come back to my senses. I sat down in front of Mei and turned crimson over what had just transpired.

“Sorry for acting so weird,” I said. “I’m fine now, honest.”

“There is no need to apologize to me, Master Light,” Mei said. “In fact, I am immensely glad that I was able to witness this equally precious side of you.”

I groaned. This perfectly honest reaction from Mei made me blush even more, and my feeling of humiliation wasn’t helped by my stomach picking that exact moment to growl with hunger. I guessed it was to be expected though, since I’d

had nothing to eat since tripping the teleportation trap the day before. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Mei instantly looked apologetic after hearing the noise my empty belly had made.

"Master Light, you must have something to eat," Mei told me. "Unfortunately, I am forced to ask you whether your Unlimited Gacha can summon some proper food or ingredients for us. I know a query of this kind goes against my maid code, but the alternative is to feed you a meal made from the monsters that tried to attack us. I would rather not have the flesh of those beasts gracing your tongue, Master Light, since feeding you such questionable fare would also run contrary to my honor as a maid."

Mei's mention of monsters made me realize that we were surrounded by a bunch of things that looked like cocoons made of white strings, and it appeared that, trapped inside of them, were all the monsters that had tried to attack Mei and myself. I noticed we were also sitting on a square carpet seemingly made out of the same strings, and lying around us were blankets and other woven things. We hadn't moved an inch from the spot where the teleportation trap had initially dumped me, and as we appeared to be in the dead center of a vast, craggy terrain, it could only have been Mei who had fashioned these items.

Wowed by Mei's talents, I silently activated the Unlimited Gacha and pressed the button. "My Gift used to produce bread on the surface, though it was always moldy and inedible up there. But given how my Gift seems to work, I'm pretty sure it'll produce real food down here. Anyway, I'll just keep doing pulls until it spits out something we can eat."

"Thank you most kindly, Master Light," Mei said. "And once you are finished with your meal, we should immediately engage in leveling you up."

My hand inadvertently stopped what it was doing. "Leveling up?"

"Correct," Mei replied. "At the very least, we need to get you to Level 1000 in order to avoid you being killed instantly by the monsters of this dungeon."

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Luckily, it didn't take long for the Unlimited Gacha to spit out an N Bread card, and when I released it, it produced a loaf of bread that was white, fluffy, and had that slight hint of sweetness you only get with wheat. This was actually my

first time eating white bread, and it totally blew my mind.

"I can't believe aristocrats and royalty get to eat stuff this delicious every day!" I marveled. Mei replied with a near-incomprehensible lecture about "yeast" or whatever it was she called it. It turned out Mei wasn't just beautiful, but also every bit as smart as she looked.

She's nothing like the simple farm boy I am, I thought.

After sitting and digesting for a little bit once we'd eaten the bread, Mei launched into another lecture, this time on leveling up. "The Magistrings I spin are produced using mana. This means I am able to manipulate their softness, their strength, their shape, and the material they are made of in order to fit my needs."

That explained how it was possible for Mei's strings to be used to make the soft blankets I'd slept under and the sheer white carpet I was presently sitting on, while at the same time being sharp and tough enough to dice up monsters or ensnare them.

"Those objects that resemble white cocoons over there contain monsters that attempted to attack us," Mei continued. "Master Light, I must ask you to pick up a stone and throw it at a cocoon from a safe distance."

"What? That's all I have to do?" I asked. "We could get a much better weapon if I pulled from my Unlimited Gacha, you know."

"You are right that your Gift can produce useful weapons," Mei said. "But I am afraid you are still only Level 15, and I cannot risk you going near one of those cocoons. Yes, I have sworn to protect you at all times, but I cannot rule out the unthinkable happening. You might view it as me being overprotective, but I must ask that you please understand my erring on the side of caution."

Mei did have a point. She may be Level 9999 and armed with powerful Magistrings, but there was no guarantee she'd be able to shield me from every single possible danger I might be confronted with. A scratch or even a breath attack by a Level 1000 monster would probably be enough to kill me, so I didn't really blame her for being overprotective at this point.

"Thank you, Mei," I said, appreciative at how attentively she was looking out

for me. “I’ll do as you say and just throw rocks instead.”

“I am honored that you would display such magnanimity toward me,” she said from her seated position and bowing her head. While I was busy bashfully laughing off this unnecessary formality, Mei raised her head again and promptly got down to business.

“Now, I suggest that you throw this stone at the cocoon nearest to us,” Mei said as she handed me a rock. “If you would, Master Light.”

“Uh, thanks.” I took the rock and noticed that it had been chiseled in such a way to make it easier for me to throw it. I could only assume that Mei had used her Magistrings to carve out chunks of rock from the walls or floor around us while I was fast asleep. I stood up at the same time as Mei and followed her to one of the white cocoons. The strings had partially unraveled at the top, allowing a glimpse of the monster inside, which made me silently tense up. This creature was the same type of snake-tailed behemoth that had tried to devour me the day before. Mei’s Appraisal skill identified the monster as a Snake Hellhound, but this time, it was securely bound by the Magistrings to the point where even its mouth was clamped shut by the strings and it was unable to make a sound. All the creature could do was gaze at us tearfully, as if begging us to spare its life, and truth be known, that made it kind of hard for me to throw the rock at it.

“Master Light, you may proceed,” said Mei.

“Um, uh, you got it,” I replied noncommittally, but I threw the rock anyway. It bounced lazily off the creature’s rock-hard, flinty fur, doing zero damage to the beast, but the important thing was that I had successfully attacked the Snake Hellhound.

It was common knowledge among adventuring parties that combat roles were not limited to vanguard fighters. In bigger parties, there were also people who did their thing from the rear, and if one were to ask if vanguard fighters were the only ones to gain experience points from battles, the answer would be no. I wasn’t sure about the exact mechanics of it, but everyone who was involved in a battle got a share of the experience points, based on how much they contributed. That meant scouts, healers, and other people positioned on

the back line were able to gain experience points by launching minor attacks on a target the vanguard fighters were already engaged with. Even if the damage done was relatively minor, party members in the rear would still gain experience points using this gambit. But if members of a different party were to launch these types of attacks, it would be frowned upon and viewed as self-serving cheap shots—even being denounced as “kill stealing” in some extreme cases—but I deduced that Mei planned to use this approach to level me up.

“Nice! While that didn’t do any damage, I still got its attention!” I said. You could gain experience just by getting an opponent to look at you, which was how scouts managed to raise their levels without engaging in any actual fighting.

“Splendid. Now, I shall finish it off,” Mei stated before appearing to pull on some invisible strings. The cocoon enveloped the Snake Hellhound completely once more, and the next thing I knew, the cage of threads shook slightly, then started oozing blood all over the dungeon floor. Mei was able to kill a Level 1000 monster *that* quickly?

“Master Light, has your level gone up?” asked Mei.

“Uh, lemme check,” I said. I activated my stats screen and couldn’t believe my eyes. Just by throwing one stupid little rock, I’d shot up a whole 55 levels to Level 70. Was that even *possible*?!

“H-Holy cow, Mei!” I cried. “I can’t believe how much my power level has jumped!”

“Congratulations, Master Light,” Mei said, a faint smile on her face. “However, we have only just begun on this journey. I have prepared a number of other monsters for you to strike with rocks, so I urge you to continue.”

She handed me another chiseled rock and pointed me in the direction of a mass of cocoons that were waiting for me. It looked as though she wasn’t going to let me rest at all until I was done hitting every single one of these white chrysalises. *I never thought Mei would be this strict,* I mused.

I spent the next few days throwing rocks at captured monsters, only stopping to get some sleep. I diligently level grinded my way through this routine, and eventually, I was able to do some real damage to the monsters, even if it was

still minor. If I was going to survive in the Abyss, my stats were everything, and even with Mei as my protector, a single attack could kill me if I stayed as weak as I was. I didn't want to continue being a burden to Mei—after all, I would never be able to forgive myself if I repaid Mei for saving my life by turning her into my perpetual babysitter—so I kept on throwing rocks, and in time, the minor damage became middling damage, until I finally gained the ability to do serious damage to the monsters. The Abyss contained a variety of monsters, and I eventually became good enough to help Mei defeat creatures that would give me a lot more experience points. One day, I activated my stats screen and I couldn't keep my voice from trembling as I read out what it said.

"L-Level 1000..." I whispered. "This is incredible. I'm now every bit as powerful as a top-level dragonute, demonkin, elf, or dark elf. Me, a human. Now at Level 1000..."

"It was only a matter of time before you achieved this feat of greatness, Master Light," Mei said. "In fact, I believe you have the potential to rise even further. Alas, I am unable to capture stronger monsters for you to defeat."

"Oh, no, don't apologize, Mei!" I said quickly. "It's really awesome how you got me to Level 1000 at all! I mean, I always thought humans had a level cap of 100, and..." I paused as a thought occurred to me. "At least, that's what I got told at one of the guilds. So how come I was able to blow past Level 100 like this?"

Back when I was still in the Concord of the Tribes, I had gotten talking to an adventurer in a guild who had clued me in on the various level caps for the different races. They were also supposedly called "growth limits," and humans were capped at Level 100. Beastmen and centaurs could only get as high as 200 or 300, while dwarves and onifolk peaked somewhere between 500 and 700. The growth limit of demonkin ranged anywhere from 300 to 1000, and elves, dark elves, and dragonutes could go as high as 1000. These level caps were all just commonly agreed-upon estimates, however, rather than being set in stone. Even so, that didn't explain how I had managed to reach Level 1000.

"I am not familiar with the other races, but I suspect that humans—including yourself, Master Light—do not possess growth limits in the first place," Mei surmised. "The idea that humans cannot rise above Level 100 could potentially

be traced to the fact that humans require a lot more in the way of experience points to reach that power level. It was likely due to these constraints that leveling you up took much longer than I had anticipated."

Mei paused briefly before continuing her in-depth explanation. "It is my assumption that no growth limits exist for the other races either, and the established level caps are merely ranges of values where an individual is required to accumulate an inordinate amount of experience points if they wish to further raise their power level. However, such individuals tend to find themselves left with monsters that do not possess high enough power levels to grant the experience points required. Or rather, the level adjustments may operate differently in accordance with the individual or the race in question. Please be aware that this is based purely on speculation and there is every possibility that I might be wrong in this."

"Hm, I see..." I said. "Well, in any case, I'm now Level 1000, so I think you're right, Mei." She may well have hit upon the discovery of the century, but there was no way of telling anyone else about this theory from the bottom of the Abyss.

"However, as far as I can tell, the monsters spawned by this dungeon are not powerful enough for you to level up to the fullest of your potential," Mei declared.

"Mei..." I said, looking at my partner in mild disbelief. "You *do* realize that this is the world's largest and deadliest dungeon, right?" To my mind, it was too much of a stretch to assume that the Abyss didn't contain far bigger monsters that could help to lift my stats.

Mei discreetly ignored my remark. "Master Light, I believe that ends our session for today. Before we partake in dinner, I would like us to take a bath, so that we may properly wash off all the sweat and grime that is clinging to us."

Chapter 2: The Bath

Once Mei had helped me to reach Level 1000, I'd finally earned a chance to rest and relax for the first time since becoming trapped in the Abyss. Mei decided to end my leveling session right then and there and suggested taking a bath before eating dinner.

"A bath?" I asked. "You mean those large tubs filled with hot water that royalty and aristocrats have?" While I'd heard that wealthy people liked to soak their whole bodies in these things called "baths," I'd never experienced one personally before. Even when I joined the Concord of the Tribes, the only way to wash was by wiping myself down with a wet towel in my bedroom or bathing in a nearby river whenever we set up camp somewhere.

"Yes, that is precisely the type of bath I had in mind," Mei answered. "I promise you will find it pleasant, and you will soon forget all about your fatigue."

"Mei," I said, unable to hide my disbelief at her suggestion. "That's not going to be possible. First of all, we'd need a whole lot of water. *And* it has to be heated up. *And* we don't have a tub or even some kind of box big enough for a person to sit in. It was next to impossible for me to take a bath up on the surface, so how in the world are we going to *make* a bath down here in this dungeon?"

"On the contrary. It will be quite simple," Mei stated. "Allow me to make all the necessary preparations."

I watched on in awe as Mei promptly went about making an actual bath from scratch. First, she wove a perfectly solid tub using her Magistrings, and when it was done, it was certainly big enough for at least one person to sit in it comfortably. Next, she snapped her fingers and caused water to appear out of thin air, filling the tub nearly to the brim. A few minutes later, I saw steam rising from the water, which told me the water had reached the perfect temperature.

"Holy smokes, Mei!" I cried gleefully. "You really made a bath in no time! Wow! How did you heat the water?"

“It is rather a simple process,” Mei said. “Since this tub is made from my Magistrings, I simply converted the mana in the strings into thermal energy in order to convey heat into the water.”

Mei had lost me the moment she had said the words “thermal energy,” but I still found the whole thing totally amazing. I couldn’t believe I was getting the opportunity to do what only rich people usually got to do!

“Come, Master Light, it is time we prepared to enter the bath,” Mei stated. “First, we must wash ourselves thoroughly before we submerge ourselves in the water to soak. Allow me to assist you, Master Light.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” I gasped. “Are you saying we’re gonna take a bath *together*?”

“Of course, Master Light,” said Mei, who had suddenly started disrobing. Or to put it more accurately, she instantly disintegrated her maid outfit, since it too was apparently made from Magistrings, leaving herself only in her underwear. I got a real eyeful of her huge breasts, slender waist, and curvy thighs, and this time, there was much more skin on show than I could handle. I quickly turned around as I felt my face going red to the tips of my ears, but that didn’t stop Mei from approaching me from behind and wrapping her arms around my chest.

Her... Her skin is so soft! I thought wildly. The next thing I knew, Mei had started moving her fingers to undress me.

“Master Light,” Mei said, “it is natural for a maid to wash the body of her charge and bathe with him. Because I serve you, Master Light, me entering the tub with you is simply a matter of course. What we are doing is as natural as the water in a river flowing downstream, or birds soaring through the air, so there is no need to be ashamed. I am simply doing my job as your maid.”

I couldn’t help noticing that Mei was talking somewhat faster than usual through that mess of words. But I was twelve years old, had lived most of my life on a peasant farm, and had no idea how people in high society lived. Since Mei was the ultimate maid, maybe what she was saying was true?

“Um...” I said hesitantly. “Are you *sure* this is normal?”

“Yes,” Mei asserted with a pointed look. “I swear it on my honor as a maid.”

Okay, that meant we were in the clear, right? Against my better judgment, I decided to trust Mei’s justification for taking a bath together.

“B-But Mei, at least let me take off my own clothes!” I protested.

“I am afraid this is also part of my duties as your maid,” Mei said. “I do not intend to spare any effort when it comes to serving you.” As she spoke, she magically dissolved her underwear and instantly covered herself with a towel made from Magistrings. She helped me to remove my own clothes, and even though I had misgivings about that, I was in no position to resist since her power level was way higher than mine. At least she was gentle about it, and once she had removed my last piece of clothing, she wove me my own towel to cover my lower half. When all of this was done, she pulled me backward by my shoulders and sat me down on her lap.

“Since this is your first time taking a bath, allow me to explain the process as I attend to you,” Mei said as she tenderly wrapped her arms around me. “I hope you are not feeling cold at all, Master Light. My body heat should help to keep you sufficiently warm.”

I could definitely feel Mei’s body heat flowing into me, and it really was pleasant, like I was covered in a layer of pure warmth. “Mei, this feels nice and warm. Relaxing, even.”

“I also feel at peace when I hold you like this,” Mei told me. “This way, I know that I am truly protecting you with my entire body and soul, and I could not be more content. I am truly blessed to have been summoned by a master as sweet and genuine as you, Master Light. Fate has brought us together, and you are my reason for existing. Everything I do is for what I have right here in my arms. You are my life, Master Light.”

Mei’s gentle embrace tightened, allowing me a better feel of her soft, warm, supple skin, which sent a jolt coursing through me in a very obvious way, as if my heart was about to leap out through my throat. *Why’s this making me feel so weird?* I thought. *Is it because nobody’s ever held me like this before, besides my own family?*

“Master Light, have you grown accustomed to this position now?” Mei asked.

“Then first, we should rinse you with hot water to remove the majority of the dirt from your body.” Mei stretched her hand out toward the tub, then formed a bucket using her strings, scooped up some water, and poured it over my head.

Oof, hot! I thought. *But that actually feels pretty nice.* The water had been heated to just the right temperature, and I started to feel flushed everywhere. Adding to the water’s heat was Mei’s soft skin pressing against the back of my head—not to mention the bottom of my thighs touching her own damp ones—and the warmth she was giving off felt heavenly.

“Please close your eyes, Master Light. I am going to pour water over you again,” Mei said. “Yes, very good. And quite adorable, I might add.”

Mei poured water over me again, but a little more slowly this time, so that my body could adjust to the heat a bit better. Then she stroked my shoulders and back with her dainty fingers.

Ah, so warm... I could feel the heat from Mei’s fingers tracing their way across my skin, as well as from her cheek that was pressing up against my own. She wiped my bare skin gently, as if she was handling a fragile yet valuable piece of ceramic. While my focus was primarily on Mei’s body heat, the SUR maid continued to walk me through how to take a bath.

“We are all done rinsing you off now,” Mei declared. “Next, we shall begin washing your body and hair. It is very fortunate that your Unlimited Gacha has produced shampoo and soap for us. Allow me to start with your hair. I will need you to close your eyes to prevent the shampoo from irritating them on contact.”

“Uh, okay, sure.”

Shampoo? What’s that? I thought as I shut my eyes. Mei’s slender fingers moved expertly through my locks, and I could feel suds forming on top of my head. Her hands were tickling me, but all the same, this “shampoo” stuff felt good. Mei rinsed the suds out of my hair, then moved on to scrubbing my body—

“M-Mei! I can wash myself!” I insisted.

“I assure you that this is also part of my duties as a maid,” Mei replied firmly. I

grumbled quietly as she soaped my back using a towel she had made with her Magistrings. For some reason, I found it hard to argue with Mei whenever she invoked her “duties as a maid.” She proceeded to gently wash my body with the soapy towel and her hand, and all I could do was sit still with my eyes shut and endure it. Having her wash my back was one thing, but I almost died of embarrassment when she started on the front as well.

“I have finished washing your body, Master Light,” Mei finally announced. “Now that you are fully clean, we are ready to enter the tub. I recommend counting to one hundred while sitting in the water all the way up to your shoulders.”

My present level of self-consciousness wouldn’t allow me to utter a word in reply to this as Mei guided me across to the tub, her arms wrapped around me the entire time. Mei sat down behind me in the bathtub, and I ended up with the back of my head pressed against her chest. The heat from the water and the complete mortification I was feeling at how this whole scenario was playing out had caused my mind to stop functioning properly.

Mei drew me closer to her and leaned in to whisper something into my ear. “We shall have dinner once we are done bathing. We should take a bath together every day to stay healthy and prevent us from catching any illnesses.”

“Um, sure,” I said faintly. “We’ll take baths. Together.”

Mei balled up one of her hands to make a fist under the surface of the water. Was she getting ready to fight a monster? If she was, I hadn’t seen any sign of a creature creeping up to us.

I hadn’t been totally with it when I’d agreed to Mei’s suggestion of more baths, but a yes was a yes, so we ended up sharing baths every day for an entire month after that.

☆☆☆

After a *very* eventful month living and battling with Mei, my power level finally surpassed the 4000 mark. Unfortunately, the Abyss only produced monsters with power levels roughly between 1000 and 4000, and I was no longer leveling up as fast as I had been before.

By this point, Mei and I had transformed the wide-open, rock-filled space where the teleportation trap had dumped me into a huge living area, complete with tables, chairs, and some other furniture that my Unlimited Gacha had spat out. We couldn't afford to make our shelter any smaller than it was, because if a monster happened to spawn inside an average-sized room, we'd have to deal with it in cramped conditions. So instead, Mei had covered the exits with her Magistrings to stop any intruders from wandering in, and if any creature were to spawn inside our makeshift dwelling, we had plenty of space to comfortably battle it. As evidence of just how much I'd grown used to this unpredictable new lifestyle, I was presently sitting at a table in my living quarters-slash-combat zone and leisurely sipping tea that Mei had brewed.

"It turns out you were right to be worried, Mei," I said to my partner. "Most of the monsters in the Abyss only go up to Level 4000, so it's a lot more difficult for me to level up now."

"True, though at the very least, your Gift has afforded you a higher standard of living, on top of furnishing you with weapons," Mei pointed out.

"Yeah, this was supposed to be the deadliest dungeon ever discovered in the world, but I'm actually living a better life down here than I ever did on the surface world," I reflected. "I never would've expected it."

When I was living in the rented place the Concord of the Tribes used as their base, I was given a small room with a tiny bed that had a threadbare blanket and a rock-hard pillow on it. But to me, at the time, that was practically living in the lap of luxury. When I first left the family farm for the big city, I tended to end up sleeping in back alleys, stables, or if I had a bit of money to spare, I bunked with a bunch of other people in a room at a cheap inn.

But here in the Abyss, I slept in a large, soft bed, and I didn't have to worry about any monsters attacking me, thanks to Mei. The food I ate was nothing like what I'd had up on the surface, and all sorts of dishes were put in front of

me, each as unbelievably delicious as the last, whether it was a ready-to-eat meal produced by a gacha card, or some culinary delight whipped up by Mei. To top it off, the cards also produced snacks that were sweet, salty, and lots of other flavors I never even knew existed.

Of course, I took a bath every day like I was royalty, and by this point, I had an extensive wardrobe of clothes too. Heck, I even had enough underwear for me to change into a new pair every day. There was absolutely no contest between the hard-knock life I'd endured up on the surface to life down here in the Abyss.

"And it's not just my new life," I continued. "The Unlimited Gacha has also produced a phantasma-class spear that even a human kid like me can use. I can't imagine that ever happening up on the surface."

I was presently using the UR spear, Uragan, as my main weapon, which had magical wind properties and also boosted my speed. Whenever I stabbed a monster with the Uragan then infused it with mana, the weapon unleashed a small whirlwind that would open up the wound and churn the creature's innards. The Uragan wind could also be used to blast a monster back if I needed to get some distance between me and it. So basically, it was a very handy weapon that had all sorts of capabilities.

These weren't the only reasons I'd picked the Uragan as my weapon of choice though. Back when I was questing with the Concord of the Tribes, my partymates trained me in the use of all kinds of weapons, but I'd found that I was most adept with spears. My next best weapon was the bow, and I was worst with the sword. Even after all the leveling up I'd done, my weapon mastery went from high to low in that same order, according to what Mei had told me after testing me. Like any other boy, I really wanted to be a swordsman, but I was still technically living in a deadly dungeon, and I didn't want to go risking my life unnecessarily. Plus, even if it wasn't a sword, the Uragan was still a phantasma-class weapon, which a country would normally consider a national treasure, if the talk at the old guild the Concord used to frequent was anything to go by.

"I still can't believe my Gift produced a weapon this awesome," I marveled.

"It is all thanks to your incomparable powers, Master Light," Mei remarked as

she made us some more tea. “I will forever be proud to serve you as your maid.”

“At least we’ve carved out something of a decent life for ourselves here in this dungeon,” I commented. “We’ve got all the weapons, food, and luxury items we need. The only question is: how am I supposed to level up further? I want to reach Level 9999 like you, Mei, but I don’t see that happening unless we can come up with a good idea.”

Under different circumstances, I wouldn’t be so desperate to level grind to 9999—I’d be more than psyched that I’d hit Level 4000—but I’d sworn I would take revenge on my former partymates, and on top of that, I needed to find out more about these “Masters” and why a whole load of powerful people had wanted me dead. In order to get to the bottom of these mysteries, I could foresee that I would have to take on entire nations, which was why I needed to raise my power level to 9999.

“Master Light,” Mei said in a serious tone. “I have a proposal for raising your power level beyond your current constraints if you would like to hear it.”

“What?” I blurted out. “You’re awesome, Mei! Of course I want to hear it! What do you propose?”

Though my excitement immediately dissipated when I heard Mei’s lead-in to her suggestion. “I believe you are well aware that your Unlimited Gacha has produced monsters and people who are every bit as fully sentient as I am, Master Light.”

Throughout the month that I’d been living in the Abyss, I’d been pulling from my Unlimited Gacha whenever I had any free time. Apart from everything else my Gift spat out, it also produced cards that would let me summon living beings, such as monsters, fairy maids, merchants, and even this group of funny-looking guys called the “Mohawks.” They were all listed as having power levels ranging from the teens up to around the 5000 mark, but I kept all of these cards in my SSSR Item Box, which had also been produced by the Unlimited Gacha. Unlike most other single-use gacha spell cards that disappeared the moment you used them, the Item Box was a card that granted its user the ability to activate a magic spell that called it up just by thinking about it. Up to this point,

I'd been using the Item Box to safeguard all the cards that had living beings, meaning Mei was still the only other person I had summoned and released here in the Abyss. If we were to bring forth any other allies, they would be too low-level to survive in the dungeon without our constant protection.

In fact, it had been Mei who had said, "I do not believe we have the time or necessary resources to attend to those individuals, so I recommend limiting the inhabitants of our abode to just you and I." Though Mei had agreed that if another Super Ultra Rare card showed up, I should release it. But I hadn't pulled another one yet, so why would she suggest releasing some of the cards I did have?

"If you were to summon high-level beings, I believe they would be willing to assist you in your desire to level up," Mei said in a deliberately measured tone and with a super-composed look on her face. "The ones you would summon, I presume, would share my fealty toward you and would gladly offer themselves up for you to—"

"Mei!" This was the first time I could recall ever screaming in fury at my maid. "Are you telling me to do the *same thing* to my cards that the Concord of the Tribes did to *me*? You want me to snuff out their lives as if they're nothing more than garbage to me? Those fake comrades betrayed me, but now I'm supposed to betray my *true* ones?!"

Mei froze then quickly fell to her knees and bowed her head deeply in contrition. "Please excuse my impropriety, Master Light. I beg your forgiveness for my thoughtless words."

I rose from my seat and walked over to Mei. When I reached her, I lifted her head, guiding her back up onto her feet, then embraced her in a tight bear hug. As before, due to our difference in height, I got a faceful of bosom in this position, but I felt like I needed to do it in order to hide my tears.

"Mei..." I said before pausing as I tried to put my thoughts into words. "Mei, I don't ever want to hear you saying anything about allies sacrificing themselves for me. Because if I were to lose you too, I..." I choked up. "It would destroy me."

"I promise that I will always be here for you, Master Light," Mei said, lovingly

stroking my head and back. “You are precious to me, and I dedicate my entire body and soul to you. On my honor as a maid, I pledge absolute allegiance to you. I will be with you for as long as there are birds in the sky, and branches on the trees.”

“Uh-huh,” I said between sobs as I hugged her tighter. “Thank you, Mei.”

A few minutes later, I let go of Mei and attempted to hide my reddened face and eyes by wiping them with my sleeves. “Anyway, I refuse to level up by murdering my allies. But I do want to continue leveling up, so I think it’s probably about time we went and defeated that thing.”

“By ‘that thing,’ do you mean the monster that lives in the deepest part of the dungeon?” Mei asked.

“Yup,” I replied, unwavering in my decision. “If I want to level up, I have to go defeat the Abyss’s dungeon guardian.”

Chapter 3: The Orochi

Mei was always insisting that she wasn't all that strong. "I can do most things, but due to that, my fighting abilities are not exceptional," she had once said to me. But whenever I fought Mei in mock battles, I would always lose to her without even getting a clean hit in. If she was classing herself as "weak," I wondered how tough a Level 9999 specialized fighter would be. But since Mei was such a versatile warrior, she took on the role of scout and mapped out the entirety of the bottom level of the Abyss, including the location of all the traps, plus how to get to the dungeon's guardian monster.

For those of you wondering what a guardian monster is, it's basically the creature that protects the dungeon core. Because of the importance of this duty, the guardian would always be the strongest boss of any dungeon, and if an adventurer were to get past said guardian, he or she would end up having access to the dungeon core, which was believed to be the thing that maintained a dungeon.

Mei had discovered a huge pair of doors on this level of the Abyss, and her senses had detected what she described as a "large monster, approximately Level 5000" lurking on the other side of them. Judging by its power level, that thing could only have been the dungeon guardian.

"If that monster is Level 5000, we shouldn't lose to it with you around, right?" I said, making sure I had some insurance in case things went south.

"Of course, Master Light," Mei replied. "My Magistrings would be able to tear the creature limb from limb the moment I enter through those doors." And yet, Mei didn't see herself as strong...

"A-Anyway, I think I should take on this monster first. For training purposes, I mean," I explained. "Be sure not to turn that thing into mincemeat before I get to have a whack at it."

"Understood, Master Light," Mei said. "However, if I judge that you are in danger at any point, I shall take it upon myself to intervene. I must not allow you to be overwhelmed by the creature."

“Fine, if you want,” I said in an exasperated tone. “Sheesh, you’re so overprotective.”

“It is entirely natural for a maid to be protective of her master,” Mei replied simply.

Sure, I was calling Mei “overprotective” like some rebellious kid, but deep down, I was glad she cared so much for me. It was almost like having a big sister. We ultimately decided we’d fight the guardian monster the next day, since we didn’t want to rush into it, and to prepare for the big battle, I warmed my body up by taking another bath with Mei.

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As soon as we awoke the following day, we ate breakfast and I changed into my battle gear, then we headed off to the dungeon guardian’s chamber. We encountered some Level 1000 monsters on the way, but I dispatched all of them by myself, treating these battles as warm-ups for the main event. In the month I’d been trapped in the Abyss, I had raised my power level significantly and amassed an arsenal of weapons. On top of that, all the monsters I ran into were creatures I was already used to seeing, so their intervention didn’t slow me down one bit as I continued on to my destination. In other words, it was basically like taking a stroll. It didn’t take us long to reach the double doors, which had a sinister-looking tableau sculpted in relief on them, and if I’d had to guess the height of the doorway, I’d say it was around four or five meters tall. I did a light pre-battle workout with the Uragan before turning to Mei.

“So as I said yesterday, I don’t want you helping me out at all,” I said. “Remember, I’m using this fight for training purposes.”

“Understood, Master Light,” Mei replied. “But if I feel you are in danger, I will step in. If you prefer that not to happen, take care not to overtax yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time.” I really did sound like a kid being bratty with his older sister. I placed a hand on one of the double doors and both of them automatically swung open, revealing a dark interior that immediately brightened as firelit lamps cast their light across the ceiling and the walls. The ceiling was very high, and the cavern looked big enough to fit a small village inside.

I took the lead entering the chamber, with Mei courteously following three paces behind. “So that’s the Abyss’s dungeon guardian, huh?” I mused as I peered over at the rear of the chamber.

Curled up there was a gigantic creature that looked kind of like a seven-headed hydra covered in red scales. When it noticed me, the monster slowly raised its dragon-like heads, which proceeded to circle lazily around in the air, their mouths letting out soft-sounding growls. I couldn’t see any wings on the creature, but the total length of its body was easily a good fifteen meters.

“This is apparently a Level 5000 Orochi,” Mei said, reciting the readings from her Appraisal scan. “It possesses elevated physical, magical, and defensive capabilities, and each of its seven heads can unleash a unique attack. The creature can also spawn minions and is capable of regeneration.”



Well, that confirmed it. This monster was about 1000 levels above me, which

would normally put me at a hopeless disadvantage. But before I could mull over this gap in our power levels any further, one of the hydra heads suddenly lurched forward with its mouth wide open and spat out a large black mass that barreled toward us at lightning speed. I automatically jumped to the right to avoid this projectile, while Mei dashed to the left. A second later, the black mass careened into the spot we had just been standing in, carving a good-sized hole out of the rocky floor and spraying debris far and wide.

"That sneak!" I shouted. "It purposely moved around slowly to trick us into letting our guards down before launching that high-speed boulder at us!"

"I would think stealth and underhandedness would be natural attributes for a monster to possess," Mei said, almost jokingly.

I was too tense to respond to Mei's flippant remarks, but luckily, despite how fast it had flown toward us, I'd been able to dodge the boulder just in time, thanks to the speed boost granted to me by the Uragan. I believed that this phantasma-class spear, plus the Unlimited Gacha cards I had brought with me, would prove enough to bridge the gap in our levels, allowing me to fight the Orochi on an equal footing. I fired back with a card I'd drawn from my Item Box.

"SSR Detonation Inferno—release!" I yelled. The SSR Detonation Inferno was an advanced tactical-class magic attack that combined an explosion with flames. It tended to work on most monsters, and in this instance, it exploded around the Orochi, surrounding the creature in thick smoke. This attack should have caused a heavy amount of damage to the Level 5000 dungeon guardian, but when the smoke cleared, the Orochi simply roared back at me in anger.

"N-Not even a *scratch*?!" I cried out. "And it's even preparing to *strike back*!"

Mei had said that the Orochi had elevated defensive capabilities, and this was definitely apparent, because not only had my Detonation Inferno failed to injure the monster at all, it hadn't even seemed to knock it off its stride, the Orochi returning fire practically straight away. One of its heads breathed out a ball of fire, while another spewed some sort of liquid blob, and both hurtled toward me at high speed. I managed to just about dodge both projectiles, though some of the flames licked at the side of my head, singing a few locks of my hair. The liquid blob, however, burned a hole in the floor, hissing like acid as

it melted through the rock. If I'd taken the full force of those attacks, I would've been a goner.

"M-Master Light, I believe it might be best if I aided you," Mei called over, staring at the melted hole in the ground.

"Relax! I'm just getting started!" I shouted back. "Don't help me out just yet!" I may only have been twelve, but I considered myself a man in my own right, plus Mei's master to boot, so I didn't want to go crying uncle in front of her so soon.

I will have to battle entire nations to get to the bottom of the assassination attempt on me, I thought. *If I start running away from opponents already, I'll never achieve my goals!*

I gripped my Uragan once more and launched another attack. "If the Detonation Inferno won't do the trick, I'll just have to hack through you myself!"

Three of the monster's seven heads were facing me, while the other four heads were fixated on Mei. I figured that meant the dungeon guardian instinctively knew which of the two of us it needed to be more watchful of. The fact it felt that way pissed me off, but it also gave me a good opening.

The three heads fired off a black boulder, a fireball, and another acid blob all at once, but I dodged all three and closed the gap to the Orochi. The creature spun around, whipping its tail toward me at a speed that belied its lumbering frame, but I'd anticipated this move and was ready to use it against my adversary. I leapt up to avoid the tail, and with both hands, I plunged my Uragan into one of the Orochi's massive necks while its back was turned. Since the Uragan was a phantasma-class spear, it buried itself deep into the monster even though its scales were tougher than steel.

"Uragan! Full Power!" I yelled as I infused the weapon with mana. A whirlwind erupted from the spear into the wound, blasting a large part of the monster's neck—plus the head connected to it—away from its body. The monster howled in pain and confusion, because it never imagined I would be able to rob it of one of its heads. I quickly retreated to a safe distance and pointed the Uragan at the creature once more.

“Sweet! I’m able to fight a Level 5000 monster with this baby!” I rejoiced. “Now I don’t need Mei’s help to beat this—Huh?”

Before I could finish bragging, the Orochi started regenerating its severed head, and it took roughly ten seconds for a brand new one to appear in its place. As if that wasn’t enough, the chunks of flesh and the pool of blood on the ground transformed into a horde of large insect monsters, while the giant decapitated head also seemed to fast-decay into a similar mass of gross-looking superbugs.

“How the heck can this thing instantly regrow a head?” I shouted. “That regenerating ability is *insane*! A-And it can turn its flesh and blood into bug monsters! Are those meant to be the ‘minions’ Mei mentioned?!”

Spiders and centipedes that were a good two meters long skittered across the ground, while huge wasps zoomed toward me, their buzzing wings creating an ominous drone. Those weren’t the only bugs though: there were plenty of other monsters in the heaving swarm that resembled jumbo-sized versions of real-world insects, and they were all rushing at me, as if they’d just discovered their next meal.

“Master Light, please allow me to help you,” Mei said, sounding clearly very worried by this point.

“I told you, I’ve got this!” I called back, my male pride taking over once more. “I’m nowhere near down and out yet!”

As Mei looked on like an anxious sister watching her baby brother buying something at the market for the very first time, I activated my Item Box and retrieved another gacha card.

“SSR Blue Rose Fire—release!” The card roasted the four hundred-strong insect monster army and lit up the cavern in a bright, ice-blue blaze. The SSR Blue Rose Fire card had unleashed an energy blast of such intensity that the flames looked blue instead of the usual red, and true to its name, the resultant fire formed the shape of a single giant rose around its targets. The Blue Rose Fire was hot enough to melt steel, so the bug monsters had stood no chance and were immediately incinerated.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, proclaiming victory. “Now I should be able to take down

that guardian, no matter how many more insects it produces."

I'd had a hunch that those bug monsters were weak to fire attacks, and with that now confirmed, these spawning minions no longer worried me because I could just fry those pesky giant insects again if they ever got in the way of me attacking the Orochi. There was one slight problem though. The Blue Rose Fire had also engulfed the Orochi itself, but the monster had emerged from the flames completely unscathed and three of its heads were now collectively roaring in anger at me—and it was still *only* those three heads that were paying attention to me.

Looks like those other four heads still view Mei as the real threat here, I thought to myself. Mei hadn't moved a single muscle to try to help me, yet the Orochi was taking more notice of what the warrior maid was doing than of what I was getting up to. I was holding my own against the Orochi despite the 1000-point gap in our respective power levels, but that was likely because the monster was using less than half of its strength to take me on, if the number of heads facing in my direction was anything to go by. If all seven heads had attacked me from the very start, would I still be standing?

While I was racked with self-doubt, the three Orochi heads spat another fireball and acid glop at me. I dodged both of them, but the third head had waited before spewing its high-speed boulder at me, aiming it directly at where I was going to land.

"Dammit!" I cursed, before materializing another card from my Item Box. "Ice Sword—release! Fly!"

The R Ice Sword zoomed skyward and intercepted the boulder in midair. However, a sword made of ice was never likely to destroy a large, heavy rock, and the blade shattered into hundreds of icy pieces on contact. But I hadn't been looking to destroy the boulder: I simply wanted to deflect it off course, so that it wouldn't land where I was planning to. Once I'd touched down again, having successfully dodged these three deadly spheres, I ran toward the Orochi once more, preparing to hit it with another attack. The three heads fired off yet more boulders, fireballs, and liquid blobs at me in an attempt to get me to stay back, and in all honesty, it was working. While I was able to evade every single attack that came my way, I was never going to get anywhere near the Orochi at

this rate.

“If you’re gonna keep firing long distance attacks at me, then I’ve got a card for that!” I said, activating my Item Box once more. “It’s time I cut you down to size! SSSR Divine Windstorm—release!”

I figured if the double-super rare Blue Rose Fire didn’t work on the Orochi, then this triple-super rare card ought to do the trick. The Divine Windstorm was an extremely decisive tactical-class spell that solidified blasts of air into invisible blades that sliced a target to pieces. The Orochi roared in anguish as the wind blades slashed at its scaly body, drawing blood all over, with additional gusts of wind opening the wounds up yet further. Even with its high resistance stats, the Orochi wasn’t able to withstand this assault. And if this had been any other monster, the Divine Windstorm would’ve ended the battle right then and there, but I was facing a Level 5000 dungeon guardian, so obviously my victory wasn’t assured just yet. I released another gacha card with the intention of making sure that none of the blood or sliced-off flesh could turn into any more of those annoying insect monsters.

“Smite my enemy with righteous fury,” I intoned. “SSSR Rolling Thunder—release!”

My field of vision filled with blinding light the moment I activated this SSSR card, and a deafening thunderclap that practically shook the walls around me followed soon after. Several lightning bolts struck the already-wounded Orochi, barbecuing the monster into something resembling a hunk of roast beef that had been left in the oven too long. Despite being charred to embers, its heads and necks were still recognizably intact, though every drop of its blood had been vaporized, and the chunks of flesh the Divine Windstorm had lopped off had all been burnt to a crisp.

Despite covering my eyes and ears, my vision had become temporarily blurry due to the blinding flash of light, and my ears were still ringing from the thunderclap. “That SSSR Rolling Thunder packs quite a punch. But maybe I shouldn’t use it in an underground dungeon next time.”

That tactical-class spell had almost made me drop to my knees, such was its overwhelming power. If I were ever to use that card again, I told myself I’d

better make sure I was outdoors, in a wide open space. But luckily, it had succeeded in incinerating the Orochi, so that was that chapter finally closed on this particular monster. But then, out of nowhere, I heard a weak gurgling noise from the charred-up pile.

"What?! You're not dead?!" I bawled. "Are Level 5000 guardian monsters seriously *this* resilient?!"

I'd only noticed the stirring because I'd kept my eyes and ears fixed on the not-quite-dead beast, and a firm grip on the Uragan. The burbling from the burned husk turned into a low growl, and then all of a sudden, the Orochi started shedding the carbonized debris as it regenerated itself. The monster rapidly grew out a new set of scales until it was fully formed again and good as new. In fact, it was *better* than new, because the Orochi now had two more heads! And if that wasn't enough, the charred debris from all of my previous attacks still metamorphosed into giant insect monsters, and this time, there were several hundred of them.

The two new heads turned toward me and let out an ear-splitting screech that echoed around the chamber. To my utter shock, one of the new heads spat out black lightning bolts, while the other breathed out wind swords that barreled toward me at breakneck speed. I managed to dodge and parry these attacks using the power of the Uragan, but all around me, the lightning bolts and windcutters were gouging chunks out of the terrain as far as the eye could see.

"Did that thing seriously learn to copy the attacks that almost killed it?" I asked no one in particular. "And it sprouted more heads just so it could use those attacks? This thing's a real piece of work!"

But I was soon about to learn that its state of near-immortality and its ability to copy attacks weren't the only tricks the Orochi had up its sleeves.

"So an adventurer has to travel deep into the Abyss just for the chance to fight a monster that's almost completely resistant to physical, magical, and air attacks," I thought aloud. "Now I'm starting to understand how hard conquering a dungeon *really* is."

I pulled another card out of my Item Box. "Well, anyway, I'll just fry all these

bugs again so I can focus my attention on attacking that slow-moving snakepit. SSR Blue Rose Fire—release!”

The blue flames flared up around the superbugs once more, but this time when the blaze subsided, I was in for a shock. “Wait, why didn’t it toast any of the insects?!” The same bugs that had been instantly fricasseed by the Blue Rose Fire the first time around seemed completely immune to the attack on the second attempt.

“Master Light,” Mei called over to me as she activated her Appraisal skill again. “It appears these insects have acquired resistance to fire, wind, and lightning properties. It would seem that the Orochi has granted its minions these resistances based on your initial attacks.”

What?! This giant nine-headed worm is able to give its army of insects resistance stats?! I used my Uragan to beat back the critters as I tried to duck and dodge out of the way of the swarm that was bearing down on me until I felt one of my legs give out.

“Master Light!” Mei yelled, and I could tell she was very close to swooping in to save me.

“Uragan! Full Power!” I bellowed. “Blast my enemies to the great beyond!”

On bent knee, I imbued the Uragan with mana and unleashed an almighty surge of wind from the spear that blew away all the bugs coming toward me. I immediately pulled another gacha card out of my Item Box to protect myself.

“Close this being off from the outside world!” I yelled. “SSR Ice Prison—release!”

Normally, the Ice Prison would be used to ensnare an enemy for a limited period of time, but the spell could also be used on the caster themself, as a way of shielding against attacks. I opted for this latter approach to shelter me from the bugs, and I thankfully managed to escape from what could’ve been a very bad situation without a scratch. Though speaking of injuries, I was still feeling so weak that I was unable to rise, my knee refusing to unbend itself, and it was then that I suddenly figured out what the problem was.

“Have I been poisoned?” I muttered. “So the Orochi’s blood doesn’t just

produce a bunch of bugs, it also gives off a poison that can be breathed in when vaporized? Is that why I'm feeling so weak?!"

If it were the case, this would all make sense. It would mean vaporizing the blood with the Rolling Thunder had produced the poisonous gas that was currently nearly paralyzing me. In fact, I reckoned if my power level had been any lower, I'd probably already be dead from it.

"Master Light, will you please allow me to assist you?" Mei asked. "Can I show these insects and this multi-headed lizard who it is they are trying to harm?"

"I'm..." I said slowly. "I'm fine. I can still fight. Don't even think about lending me a hand."

Mei looked like she couldn't endure watching what I was going through any longer, and she was having to fight back her own anger at the Orochi and its minions who were trying to hurt her precious charge. The entire horde—including the guardian monster itself—wouldn't stand a shadow of a chance against Mei. This entire time, the maid had been using her Magistrings to slice up any stray insect monsters that had attempted to approach her, creating what was basically a protective bubble around her. As a result, most of the otherwise-mindless bugs had figured out to stay well away from Mei, and even the Orochi remained cautious of her.

After I'd told her to stand down, I saw Mei's brow wrinkle with worry, but I honestly wasn't keeping her out of the game out of spite. I was actually trying to tell her that things had now turned in my favor—though the Orochi didn't seem to get the memo either, because it chose that moment to let out a loud growling roar, as if to express that its victory was all but guaranteed. I guess it did have a few good reasons to feel upbeat about its chances. After all, I was still weakened by the poison, and the Ice Prison protecting me was starting to be worn down by the mass of bug monsters scraping themselves against its walls, meaning it wouldn't be long before they broke through. So unless I was Mei, it would be impossible for someone like me to stage any kind of a comeback in this situation. Nevertheless, I didn't feel the least bit defeated.

"SSR Poison Cancellation—release!" I activated this poison antidote card to restore my strength, then materialized another gacha card from my Item Box.

“SSR Detonation Inferno—release!” I infused the Uragan with mana to create a wind shield and blasted the Ice Prison around me into glassy shards that instantly killed all of the bug monsters that were within close range, and left plenty of others on the verge of death. These creatures might have acquired a new resistance to fire, but they remained totally vulnerable to physical ice attacks. Even with that attack being effective, I was still left with the prospect of having to deal with over a thousand bug monsters that had survived the flying ice shards. Naturally, with me facing those numbers, the Orochi still believed it had this battle won. Or at least it did, right up until it caught sight of the brand new card I’d taken from the Item Box.

In shock, the monster finally ignored Mei’s presence and turned all nine of its heads toward me, each one of its eighteen eyes latching onto my card. I smiled smugly and waved the card at the guardian monster so it could get a better look at it.

“You thought you had me beat, but now, the tables have turned,” I boasted. “This is the only UR attack magic card I have in my arsenal, and this seems like the perfect time to unleash it.”

I wasn’t bluffing, and the Orochi knew it. Terrified expressions immediately appeared on all of its heads once it had read what was on the UR card. This time, the Orochi didn’t dare rely on the bug monsters to finish me off, and all nine heads rushed toward me at once out of sheer desperation. This one card I was holding up had made the creature fear for its very life.

“It’s too late for you,” I declared, knowing the Orochi was too far away to get to me before I could activate my trump card. “UR Venom—release!”

The Orochi’s heads roared loudly in despair as the Venom card covered it in slime mold that instantly started eating away at its flesh. The slime mold also blanketed the bug monsters and consumed every insect in the room, living or dead. The Orochi and the bug monsters attempted to flee, but the mold clung to them as it multiplied and decayed their soft tissue. My enemies were rapidly dissolving to death before my very eyes as I stood rooted to the spot.

To fill in the blanks here, the reason the UR Venom was such a powerful attack was because it used living slime mold spores, rather than some non-living

poison that could be easily countered with an antidote ability. But that wasn't all. Another quirk of the card was that the slime mold multiplied exponentially and gained potency in proportion with the number of enemies that were available to consume. This was precisely why I hadn't used the card at the beginning of the battle, because if I'd used the UR Venom when the Orochi was alone, the card wouldn't have been powerful enough to kill it outright, and even if the slime mold had managed to start eating away at the Orochi's flesh, the monster would have had plenty of time to develop a resistance to the attack. But as soon as the Orochi spawned several boatloads of bug minions, it inadvertently created the perfect situation for the UR Venom to work to its maximum effect.

The truth of the matter was, I hadn't really wanted to use the Venom card at all, especially if one of my other cards had been enough to defeat the Orochi, since it was the only UR magical attack card the Unlimited Gacha had produced up to this point. But at the same time, I also wasn't going to just keep hoarding the card forever, since I knew the Unlimited Gacha would produce another UR Venom card in time anyway.

The Venom had already killed all of the bug monsters by this point, and the only creature left standing was the Orochi, which was roaring loudly as it frantically tried to remove the slime mold from its body by any means possible. Its nine heads fired all sorts of attacks at itself: boulders, fire, acid blobs, invisible wind blades, and even black lightning. The monster was literally mutilating itself and ripping off chunks of its own flesh, but unfortunately for it, those pieces of flesh were transforming into yet more bug monsters for the slime mold to consume, which only made the Venom more lethal. This ugly, vicious cycle repeated itself, until at long last, the Orochi collapsed onto its side, with no energy left to even cry out. With the Uragan in hand, I strolled through the fuzzy carpet that the slime mold had created and approached the fallen monster.

"Orochi, for what it's worth, I don't actually despise you," I said to my adversary. "But you see, I need you to rot away into nothingness so that I can gain the power I require to take revenge on my enemies."

The Orochi used the last of its strength to gurgle something from one of its

mouths, which was seemingly an attempt to beg for its life. I paid it no heed and rammed my spear deep into the monster's flesh.

"Uragan! Full power!"

I imbued the spear with mana and it produced a whirlwind that tore through the monster's decomposing body. Because the Orochi was in such a decrepit state by this point, it couldn't resist the attack at all, and the creature was blown apart completely, from each of its nine heads right down to its single tail. Despite the huge level gap between me and the Orochi, I had managed to emerge victorious without any help from Mei. All the tiny pieces of bone, sinew, and various organs that had been scattered everywhere by the Uragan's attack were immediately consumed by the slime mold, until there was nothing left of the Abyss's guardian monster.

Chapter 4: Light, Level 4200

I had successfully defeated the Orochi using the Venom card, but I was left with a cavern that was totally carpeted with slime mold. I thought about cleaning up the mess by using another one of my Unlimited Gacha cards, but Mei beat me to the punch by waving around a bunch of her Magistrings to mop up all trace of the mold within a matter of seconds. While I was looking around the room, stunned at Mei's handiwork, she formed a handkerchief with her Magistrings, knelt down in front of me, and wiped some gunk off my cheek.

"Master Light, I thought I told you not to overextend yourself," Mei half-chided me.

"I didn't overextend myself," I protested. "I knew I had enough gacha cards to beat that monster. And actually, I wanna know if *you're* all right. The Orochi's poison filled this whole cavern, so you should tell me if it affected you at all. I have another antidote card if you need it."

"I am thankful to you for the amount of care you are showing me," Mei replied with a broad smile on her face. "However, a maid can never be poisoned, so you have nothing to worry about there."

Wow, so poison doesn't work on maids, huh? I thought after hearing this self-assured statement. *That's really something.*

The two of us made our way toward a door at the very back of the cavern that had opened the moment I vanquished the Orochi. When we crossed the threshold, we found ourselves in yet another space that was large enough to fit a mansion in, and looking up, I saw that there was a gently-curved domed ceiling above us. Smack dab in the center of the room was the circular dungeon core, floating a little way off the ground.

"So this is the dungeon core," I said. "It's bigger than I thought."

"It certainly is big, indeed," Mei agreed. "I also imagined it would be quite a bit smaller than this."

I drew closer to the dungeon core, which was giving off a sort of mellow glow,

and placed a hand on its surface. It was neither hot nor cool to the touch. So this thing was the core for the world's biggest and deadliest dungeon, huh?

"Master Light," Mei said in a near-chiding tone.

"Don't worry. I'm not gonna break it," I said as I turned to face Mei. "I need to keep this thing around."

If I were to smash the core right there and then, the Abyss would stop functioning as a dungeon, meaning no more monsters would be spawned, and I would finally be able to use my Teleportation card to instantly beam myself back to the spot where I was almost killed by my former party. From there, it would be a nice, easy trek up to the surface. But that approach didn't necessarily jibe with my objectives, and in fact, I'd even go as far as to say it would be totally self-defeating.

If I wanted retribution and to uncover the truth, I would need to fight whole nations, and to be able to do that, I'd need to form a nation of my own. And the only place a nation like that could be built was right here in the bottommost depths of the Abyss. One of the reasons for this was it turned out my Unlimited Gacha only produced good cards when I was somewhere with a lot of mana, and the higher the concentration of the surrounding mana, the better my chances of pulling powerful cards. I'd managed to summon the SUR maid Mei when I was at the lowest part of the Abyss, and it was that tier in particular that was awash with mana. I was definitely already strong enough to take revenge on all eight of my enemies, but if I were to impatiently destroy the dungeon core, the source of all the mana in the Abyss, I'd just be sabotaging myself in the long run.

Another point in favor of staying in a fully functioning Abyss was that I'd be able to build my kingdom down here without ever having to worry about any enemies from the surface coming to attack me.

"There's no place better than the Abyss for me to use my Gift," I explained to Mei. "Which means I can't smash the dungeon core before I've built up an army. But I also can't leave the dungeon core the way it is now."

I couldn't destroy the core, but I couldn't leave it entirely alone either. For one thing, it would continue to spawn monsters, making my burgeoning

kingdom practically uninhabitable. So I needed to find a way to control the dungeon core and make it work in my favor.

Mei walked up beside me and inspected the core. “I am capable of performing practically any task you ask of me, but unfortunately, I am unable to analyze or control a dungeon core.” She then turned to me. “However, I believe it would be possible to control the dungeon core sufficiently if your Unlimited Gacha were to summon a Level 9999 expert in sorcery.”

I nodded at this, acknowledging Mei’s assessment that there was no way she or I could manipulate the dungeon core with our current powers. But I still had my Unlimited Gacha, and all I had to do was continue pulling until it spat out an ally who *would* be able to solve this dungeon core puzzle.

“Well, anyway, I guess all we can do now is wait for a summon who can control this thing to land in our laps,” I said.

“I wholly concur, Master Light,” Mei said.

“Oh, and I had another thought. We should move from our current living space into this chamber,” I said. “From what I can tell, the dungeon core doesn’t spawn monsters anywhere near itself, for obvious reasons.”

I couldn’t see a single claw mark in the room housing the dungeon core, which was highly unusual, since everywhere else in the dungeon, the monsters left scratches on the floor or other signs that showed they had been there. Sure, I was perfectly used to life in the area we presently called “home,” despite the fact monsters regularly spawned in that space, but at the end of the day, I would have much rather relaxed and bedded down in a place where I *didn’t* have to worry about creatures popping up out of nowhere.

Mei immediately agreed to my suggestion. “There is more than enough room in this chamber, and the fact that monsters apparently do not spawn here confers a significant advantage over our present dwelling. In this chamber, I shall have peace of mind as I educate you in every subject.”

“Huh? What does a room with no monsters in it have anything to do with you educating me?” I asked.

“With our present living arrangement, I believed having you sit at a desk to

concentrate on your studies would be infeasible, due to the frequent appearances of monsters," Mei replied. "However, since I do not expect us to be interrupted by monsters spawning in this dungeon core chamber, I will set about urging you to educate yourself for the sake of your future endeavors."

I winced and pouted at Mei's plans. "I may not be as smart as you, Mei, but I've done some studying on my own, thank you very much. Because of that, I know how to write my name, and I can count change. No store has ever cheated me out of money."

Sure, I may have been tooting my own horn here, but it was really unusual for a poor farm boy to be as educated as me. Normally, kids on peasant farms weren't able to read or write their own names, and they certainly weren't able to do the math required to make sure they were given the correct change after buying something at market. Honestly, I thought of myself as pretty smart for a second son of a peasant farmer.

On hearing me bragging about my intellect, Mei brought a hand up to the side of her face, gently rested her fingers on her forehead, and gave me a look. "Master Light." She paused for a moment, as if she was choosing her next words carefully. "I do understand how you feel about yourself, truly, but I implore you to believe me when I tell you this: you need to build up a vast wealth of knowledge if you wish to wreak vengeance upon your enemies, as well as to uncover the truth you seek. I promise that you will not regret taking my lessons, though if you do find that you regret my instructions, I shall answer for the transgression with my life."

Mei looked me dead in the eye, and I could immediately tell how serious she was about this.

"Okay..." I said. "I don't like the idea of doing book learning sitting at a desk, but if you're that sure about it, I'll study under you." I looked up hesitantly at Mei. "Just be gentle with me. Please?"

The usually poker-faced Mei suddenly reacted like I'd said something incredibly shocking, before quickly turning her head away from me with a hand clamped over her nose for some reason. It took her several seconds to recover and face me again.

“Of course I’ll be gentle,” Mei said in her usual even-keeled tone. “I swear on my honor as a maid that I will personally instruct you in all of your scholarly pursuits.”

So to sum up everything that had happened, I had slain the Orochi after a hard-fought battle, which in turn revealed the huge chamber that held the dungeon core, and for all of that trouble, I had officially enrolled myself in Mei’s private tutoring sessions.

Chapter 5: Year One in the Abyss

And so, Mei and I made the dungeon core chamber our permanent residence, since we didn't have to worry about monsters spawning in there, and this change of location allowed us enough peace and quiet for Mei to teach me stuff about every subject imaginable. Every time I learned something new, it made me realize how stupid and oblivious I'd been before. *I thought I was such a genius just because I could do a bit of simple arithmetic*, I thought to myself in those moments. *Man, I so wanna punch my past self in the face!*

Sure, having that rudimentary knowledge *had* made me a lot smarter than most other twelve-year-old farm kids—which was how old I'd been a year ago—but that wasn't much of an excuse and I found it hard to live down just how cringeworthy I used to be.

But anyway, back to the story. A lot of things happened over the course of my first year in the Abyss, and perhaps the most notable events were the times I summoned other allies with the same power level as Mei. The second SUR card was spat out by my Gift two months after we'd moved our base of operations to the dungeon core chamber.

"SUR Level 9999, Genius Monster Tamer, Aoyuki—release!" As soon as I activated the card, giant magical runes shone brightly around me, just like they had when I summoned Mei. When the light show eventually died down, a cute, delicate-looking girl who couldn't have been all that much older than Yume was standing before me. She was wearing a hood with cat ears sewn onto it, and her chin-length hair that framed her baby face was an unreal blue. True to her short stature, the girl had willowy legs, a petite frame, and a chest to match.

The first time we locked eyes, it felt as if her gaze was penetrating deep into my soul. The two of us continued to stare at each other for a good ten seconds until Aoyuki finally broke the ice.

"Mrrow."

As Aoyuki approached me, I saw that the ears on her hood were twitching as if they were really part of her head, and once she was close enough, she rubbed

her head against my chest like a real cat. This affectionate act reminded me of my little sister, who used to adore me and always wanted my attention. A smile crept across my face as I scratched Aoyuki under the chin, and she responded by closing her eyes with a delighted look on her face, like a true feline would.

"I'm really glad you're here, Aoyuki," I said. "I know it's asking a lot, but we're gonna be needing your help with everything."

"Mrroww!" Aoyuki replied enthusiastically. The next thing I did was ask her if she knew how to control the dungeon core. I figured that, since the dungeon core could spawn monsters, it might be a kind of monster itself, and if that were the case, perhaps the Genius Monster Tamer would be able to bring this living, breathing orb to heel.

"Nyeew..." Aoyuki said, shaking her head and basically telling me that the dungeon core wasn't a monster at all, and controlling it was outside of her expertise. Well, it was worth a shot.

Three months later, I pulled my third SUR card: Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie. And this time, when I asked her the same question, the summon told me she knew how to control the dungeon core.

"I am a master of all magic, sorcery, witchcraft, dark arts, and mystical charms," Ellie declared with a vainglorious flick of her golden locks. "Controlling a dungeon core will be mere child's play!"

"Wow, thank you, Ellie!" I said in response. "I'll be counting on you, then!"

Ellie's face immediately flushed and her body quivered on receiving this compliment from me. She also appeared to stifle a squeal. "Of course, Blessed Lord Light," she eventually replied with a beaming smile. "Leave everything to me!"

But this particular dungeon core wasn't as easy to manipulate as she had thought, and one day, after about a month of no headway being made, Ellie was crouching in front of the floating orb and holding her head in frustration.

"I am utterly disappointing my Blessed Lord by failing to complete the very first job he gave me!" Ellie wailed. "How can a dungeon core be *this* incomprehensible?!"

“It ain’t the end of the world, Ellie. If ya need any help at all, just ask!”

“Nazuna, your number one job is to just sit somewhere and be quiet,” Ellie said with barely concealed annoyance. “If you can do that, it would help me immensely.”

“Oh? That’s all I gotta do?” Nazuna replied. “All righty! I got this!”

While we were busy struggling in vain to get the dungeon core to do what we wanted, I’d pulled the last of the SUR cards—Level 9999, Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna—about a month after I’d summoned Ellie. Since it had taken Ellie and Aoyuki three months each to pop out, I must have really lucked out with Nazuna.

Over that whole period, I’d also pulled a UR Bracelet of Youth, which stopped my body from physically aging. I’d taken to wearing it so that I would never forget the pain of my betrayal and my thirst for revenge. Around the same time, my Gift also spat out a UR Card Holder, which was a tool that allowed me to skip the whole process of drawing each card from my Item Box and releasing it in hand. Thanks to the Card Holder, I found myself able to use a much wider range of combat tactics.

When I’d first summoned Nazuna, my plan was to get her to train me so that I could become a better fighter, since she was supremely skilled in wielding broadswords, spears, and halberds, among other weapons. But while Nazuna was indeed unbelievably strong, there was one huge problem.

“Master, all ya need to do with a spear is go shwoosh! Pah-pah! Then, add a little ‘gmph’ to it!” Nazuna said partway through our first training session.

“Um, uh, okay?” I replied, utterly confused.

Nazuna was a veritable prodigy when it came to her skill with weapons, but because of that, she was the type who did everything from the gut, which made her unable to word her instructions in a way that I could understand. To her credit, Nazuna did all she could to train me using visual demonstrations, but when it comes down to it, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. As such, I got Mei to continue training me in close combat, and whenever I had time, I went to Ellie for instruction on magic. That said, I was still really glad I’d summoned Nazuna, since her sunny disposition made her the life and soul of

the dungeon.

☆☆☆

It took Ellie six months to decipher the dungeon core enough for her to be able to partially control the orb.

“Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie squealed. “I can finally control when and where the monsters are spawned, as well as the magical traps!”

“Way to go, Ellie!” I replied. “Now we can start redeveloping the Abyss!”

“Congratulations, Ellie,” Mei said. “I always believed you would solve this conundrum.”

“Mrrow!” Aoyuki concurred.

“Huh? What’s this? What’re we all excited about?” Nazuna said, glancing around at the four of us with a puzzled look on her face.

Nazuna’s ignorant interjection aside, Ellie basked in the praise and humbly bowed her head. “It was all thanks to you, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said. “Whatever success I attain will always be your achievement. Though hearing your compliments delights me to the fullest.”

However, according to Ellie, the dungeon core was still jamming all teleportation magic, so it looked like I would be stuck in the bottommost level of the Abyss for quite some time to come. But the fact that we could now control where monsters and traps spawned was a huge hurdle cleared, since it meant I could release living beings—such as fairy maids and builders— that would’ve been too weak to survive in the dungeon on their own otherwise. In short, I could finally concentrate on building my new kingdom and deploying my allies to the fullest extent of their abilities.

I turned and addressed my inner circle. “Now, let’s quickly build up an army that’s powerful enough to: A) exact the revenge I seek; and B) get to the truth the surface nations have been hiding from us.”

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Whenever Ellie wasn’t working on the dungeon core, she would tutor me in all things magic. On this particular day, Ellie was writing stuff to do with magic

spells up on the chalkboard, while I watched on from my seat at my desk. Once Ellie had finished writing, she put down the chalk, patted the dust from her hands, and turned to face me.

"We will now begin our lesson on the different types of magic, as well as the difference between black magic and forbidden magic," Ellie stated, pointing at the chalkboard. She was wearing her usual witch's garb and she had a self-satisfied look on her face.

"First, we will start with the three types of magic," Ellie continued. "These are usually classified as combat-class, tactical-class, and strategic-class. Basically, all attack, defense, healing, and support spells fall into these three categories."

A veteran mage would be capable of chant cancellation, and depending on the amount of mana released, they could intensify the power of the spell or even use their imagination to manipulate the spell into a specific shape. I'd already learned about these concepts, so I fully understood what Ellie was talking about.

"So how would we classify a particular spell into one of these three types?" I asked.

The superwitch cleared her throat softly, then launched into a lengthy explanation. Basically, combat-class magic consisted of minor attack spells a mage could cast by themselves, such as Fire Arrow or Ice Sword. A mage could be biased toward certain types of attacks within this class, and while that did narrow down the range of spells in the mage's toolkit, it was generally believed that a spellcaster who specialized in a particular kind of magic was more successful than a jack-of-all-trades.

Tactical-class magic referred to spells with a wide area of effect. If a mage were capable of even one tactical-class spell, they would be considered the cream of the crop.

"Back when I was still in the Concord of the Tribes, someone at one of the guilds told me no human could ever attain that level," I said. "Though I heard dragonutes, elves, dark elves, and demonkin are perfectly capable of that kind of magic."

"I believe a human adventurer would be too low-level to have the mana

needed for casting those spells," Ellie agreed. "Though of course, if they were able to raise their power level, it would probably be a different story."

Strategic-class magic was far more potent and impactful than tactical-class magic, and spells from this category could come in the form of a meteor falling from the sky, a tidal wave, or a ground-splitting quake. Because strategic-class spells required a lot of mana to cast, they were rarely used, though a caster like Ellie could perform strategic-class spells without even breaking a sweat.

"So those are the three basic classes of spells," Ellie said, continuing the lesson. "However, there are also ultimate-class spells, which are even more powerful than strategic-class spells. Ultimate-class spells are largely unknown to the wider population."

Ultimate-class magic had the ability to change the weather, open portals to other worlds, raise the dead (under certain conditions), and summon angels (thought to be servants of the Goddess, though in truth, it wasn't entirely clear what these beings really were).

"Even I would need to vocalize an incantation to perform ultimate-class magic," Ellie informed me. "Plus, a number of ultimate-class spells can only be used once a day. Now, moving along, I will give you a rundown on the types of witchcraft that are largely unknown even to mages."

"Witchcraft" was the general term given to spells that hadn't yet been categorized into the other four classes, such as new magic or local wizardry developed in isolated communities. This grouping included black magic, sorcery, forbidden witchcraft, and other spells that fell outside of the bounds of rigorous analysis. These spells often ended up being placed into the existing four classes based on their potency and area of effect.

"The Koshmar Summon, which I plan to perform to level you up further, is an ultimate-class spell," Ellie said, wrapping up her lesson. "It can summon a sentient monster from another world, though there is absolutely no guarantee this monster will become your ally."

"But we'd still be the ones summoning this monster, wouldn't we?" I said. "It doesn't feel right killing a creature we've brought over to this world through no choice of its own."

My questions about the Koshmar Summon were precisely why I'd wanted Ellie to give this lesson. I managed to reach Level 4200 after slaying the Orochi, the Level 5000 dungeon guardian, but there weren't any other monsters in the Abyss as powerful as the Orochi, so I'd been racking my brain for a long time over how I could continue my level grinding.

Ellie had pitched the Koshmar Summon as a solution to my problem. She would open a portal, and I would kill whatever monster came through in order to boost my power level. The monsters summoned could even be over Level 9000 if she managed to open a portal to the right dimension. Since these creatures would likely be a lot more powerful than the Orochi, I would need to fight alongside Mei and the other SUR warriors to slay them.

However, I still had reservations about killing a monster that we had dragged into this world unwillingly, and I felt I had to relate my concerns to Ellie. On top of that, even if the monster did end up being the kind that attacked people indiscriminately in its own dimension, there was a chance the creature might become our ally simply because we'd summoned it. After almost meeting my end when the Concord of the Tribes turned on me, I didn't want to then go and slay any potential allies, since that would, in a very real sense, make me no better than my former party. After listening to my qualms surrounding her proposed course of action, Ellie had decided to put some time aside to answer all of my questions as thoroughly as she could in this classroom setting, and it was here that she allayed my fears by launching into another free-flowing explanation.

"As you have alluded to, Blessed Lord Light, a monster that is summoned usually abides by the orders of its summoner and becomes their ally," Ellie said. "However, the Koshmar Summon is an exception to this rule."

"An exception?" I queried.

"Yes, indeed," Ellie confirmed. "The Koshmar Summon can bring forth hostile monsters from other worlds, but perhaps the word 'summon' is something of a misnomer. More accurately, the Koshmar Summon creates a portal that the monsters can pass through of their own volition. Due to that aspect of the spell, any monsters that do come through will not necessarily become allied to us. In fact, I would venture to say that most of them will choose to enter our world

hoping to prey on the very summoner that opened the portal."

This explanation sounded utterly bonkers to me. "So what you're telling me is that the Koshmar Summon isn't really a 'summon' per se, but a spell that brings an enemy right to your doorstep? A normal summon involves a contract between the summoner and the summoned, but I guess this spell basically just creates an interdimensional bridge and that's it?"

"Very good, Blessed Lord. You are completely correct," Ellie said with a smile.

"Well, thanks for the compliment, but I still have to wonder why a spell that summons *hostile* monsters even exists. Sure, it might be useful to me for what I want it for, but other than this one rather specific situation, I don't see much use for this spell."

For example, if I were to use the spell as a way of getting out of some kind of jam I'd found myself in, the high-level monster I ushered into the battle would end up assaulting friend and foe alike. It might be quite handy for the narrow use of level grinding, but the risks would laughably outweigh the benefits for any adventurer up on the surface world. The only other practical purpose I could see for the Koshmar Summon was if the summoner was fully prepared to die and wanted to take their enemies with them.

"Naturally, the Koshmar Summon is a forbidden spell, because it is much too dangerous," Ellie informed me, beaming from ear to ear. "But as to the question of *why* such an evil spell even exists... Well, because there are many different applications, studies, and techniques related to the summon, of course!"

It appeared Ellie identified strongly with the mage that had originally come up with the Koshmar Summon. I guessed it wasn't exactly rare for experts to break certain taboos in the pursuit of improving their skills or furthering their research, and Ellie had managed to convince me that the Koshmar Summon would be a fairly reliable way to boost my power level, so I couldn't exactly dismiss the spell as totally useless or pointless.

"In any case, the important thing to remember is the monsters brought here by the Koshmar Summon will never become your allies," Ellie said. "They will be enemies out to destroy you, so you shouldn't feel any misgivings about slaying

them.”

For the time being, I decided to simply nod along to what Ellie was saying.

Chapter 6: Year Two in the Abyss

In the end, I did agree to use Ellie's Koshmar Summon to level up, and the ultimate-class spell brought forth Level 9000-plus monsters that I slew with the help of Mei, Aoyuki, Ellie, and Nazuna. Thanks to those battles, I finally reached Level 9999—the same level as my four SUR deputies—and right after that, I received some good news from Ellie, who came to see me in my office, all smiles.

"I've finally figured out how to get around the dungeon core's jamming effect on teleportation magic!" the Forbidden Witch informed me. "I'm now able to control everything!"

"Nice job, Ellie! You're really amazing!" I said.

"Congratulations, Ellie," said Mei, who was also in the room, helping me with paperwork.

By this point, it had been over two years since I'd become trapped in the Abyss. Ellie had spent the past year looking for a way to cancel the teleportation jamming effect that was keeping me in the lowest tier of the dungeon, but with this news, she finally had total control over the dungeon core.

Of course, the rest of us hadn't spent the year just messing around. I'd grinded my way up to Level 9999, and collectively, my allies and I had remodeled the bottom level of the Abyss into a sprawling stronghold that was as habitable as one could hope for. I'd also developed ways to organize the cards my Unlimited Gacha spat out, assembled my army, and laid out plans for future operations to carry out on the surface world.

Elsewhere, I had assigned Nemumu, Gold, and a number of other Level 5000-plus warriors to engage in what amounted to a reverse subjugation of the Abyss. In other words, they were basically a mop-up team sent to kill all the remaining hostile monsters in the Abyss and disable the rest of the traps. We had already either eliminated or tamed the most powerful monsters that resided down in the bottom level of the Abyss, so it was just the weaker beasts further up the dungeon that needed taking care of. Since Ellie had shut down

the dungeon's ability to respawn monsters and traps, I'd naturally assumed clearing the rest of the dungeon would be a relatively simple job. However, to be frank, this operation hadn't been going as well as I'd planned, and it was down to the simple fact that the Abyss was the biggest dungeon in the world, meaning just clearing a single level of it took a frustrating amount of time. We also found out that the "middle layer" where the Concord of the Tribes had attempted to bump me off was actually a whole lot closer to the surface than I'd realized.

But after Ellie's latest breakthrough with the dungeon core, the calculus had changed.

"Now I can use the SSR Teleportation card to materialize at the exact spot where the Concord of the Tribes betrayed me," I said, responding to Ellie's news in my office. "From there, I know how to find my way to the surface."

"Blessed Lord Light..." Ellie said with a solemn look on her face, probably as a reaction to the mention of my betrayal. As for myself, I'd gotten over feeling sad about what had happened to me, though whenever I remembered that day, that same feeling of rage bubbled up inside me. In my first few months in the Abyss, however, I regularly used to wake up at night screaming, jolting out of nightmares where I was forced to relive that horrible experience. Thankfully, on those occasions, Mei would immediately come over to me to calm me down and console me. But that was all in the past, and as of this very moment, my allies and I could easily depart from the Abyss.

"We're finally able to begin our operations up on the surface," I said.

"I concur, Master Light," Mei said. "We can now send merchants and other human allies of ours to the surface to gather intelligence."

There was a very real possibility that I would have to go to war with entire nations if I wished to settle the score with my sworn enemies and solve the mystery behind Masters and my attempted murder. To achieve these objectives, I would need intelligence gathered by humans who were to go and register as merchants and adventurers up on the surface world. Under Mei's direction, a skilled artisan was tasked with crafting counterfeit coins using the gold and silver bullion the Unlimited Gacha had spat out, and because we were

using genuine precious metals, there was no way of telling the fake coins apart from the real ones. My plan was to release the human operatives from the relevant cards, give them this fake money so they could function up on the surface world, then send them all over the place to gather as much information as possible.

When I was an adventurer, I heard that intelligence had value, but I didn't really buy into it at the time, I thought to myself. *Back then, I'd been too busy trying to earn some money and find food to fill my belly to worry all that much about intelligence*. But thanks to Mei's tutoring sessions, I was finally able to wrap my head around exactly why information equaled power. However, my mind at that particular moment in time was focused on something else entirely.

"Would it be wrong if I did something for myself first?" I asked my two lieutenants.

"Oh? And what might that be?" Mei asked. Ellie also had a puzzled look on her face.

"I still want to get my revenge and find out the truth," I assured them with a hint of shyness in my voice. "But now that I'm able to go up to the surface world, I want to go and see my old home again. I want to see how my mom, dad, big brother, and Yume are doing."

"Master Light, there is absolutely nothing wrong with what you are requesting," Mei told me. "It is perfectly natural to wish to reunite with your family, and it would be a very meaningful event if you were to do so. What you desire, Master Light, is what we desire for you as well."

"I insist that we go and see your family!" Ellie piped up. "In fact, we *have* to go because I need to *properly* introduce myself to your dear mother and father, as well as to your dear brother and sister!"

I wasn't entirely sure what Ellie meant by "properly introduce," but regardless of what she was trying to imply, I quickly waved away her suggestion.

"No, I don't want to see my family *face-to-face*. I want to see how they're doing, but I want to do so in secret," I said. "If I see them in person, they might try to convince me to give up on my quest to get my revenge."

My plan was to use the SSR Conceal card so that I could see my family and the rest of the village without being seen myself. Both Mei and Ellie agreed that this was a good idea.

“In that case, I believe that seeing your family while remaining concealed should present no issues,” Mei concluded. “I volunteer to accompany you as your escort, just in case.”

“It’s a shame that I won’t get the chance to make a good impression on your parents, but I would still love to see your birth home, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie added.

“Thank you both for being so understanding,” I said, happy that my trip was a done deal. “All right. Let’s get everything ready so we can hit the surface and visit my home.”

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I also asked Aoyuki and Nazuna to accompany me on my visit to see my old village. A bunch of fairy maids and some of my other allies wanted to come too, but I didn't want this to turn into some kind of pilgrimage, so I limited the numbers to just the five of us. Before heading out, my inner circle and I gathered in my office.

"Should I maybe wear that other outfit instead, Blessed Lord?" Ellie asked, looking down at her standard-issue witch's clothing. "I really want to make a good first impression on your family. Actually, yes, I've changed my mind. I need to go change!"

"Ellie, we will be using the SSR Conceal card, so your choice of attire does not matter," Mei said patiently.

"You're correct, Mei," Aoyuki said in a rare vocalized observation. "But I couldn't help noticing that *you've* been adjusting your hair, ribbons, and clothing this entire time."

"I-I always prepare for any eventuality," a clearly flustered Mei replied as she flushed slightly and peered down at the shorter Aoyuki. "In any case, I fancy you have also chosen to make yourself look rather more presentable than usual for this trip."

"Mroow," Aoyuki mewled, completely ignoring Mei's almost spiteful glare.

I had to agree with Aoyuki that Mei did seem to be putting an awful lot of effort into her appearance, presumably because she would be seeing her master's parents for the first time (though there was almost zero chance my parents would see her, due to the use of the Conceal card).

"I can't wait to see what your folks look like, Master," Nazuna piped up, seeming innocently excited to visit my old home.

I chuckled awkwardly at everyone's antics and pulled out the SSR Teleportation card as a way of grabbing the group's attention. "Well, there's no time to waste, so I think we should get going," I said. "I trust everyone is ready to teleport to the upper levels now?"

"Naturally, I am fully prepared for departure, Master Light," Mei stated.

“Mreeow,” replied Aoyuki.

“I’m all set to go too, Blessed Lord,” said Ellie.

“Ready when you are, Master!” Nazuna added.

“SSR Teleportation—release!” I shouted, while in my mind, I visualized the exact spot where I was nearly killed. In the next moment, my team and I found ourselves in the wide-open cavern in the middle layer of the Abyss that adventurers used as a rest area. Or at least I’d *assumed* this was the middle layer the last time I was in here, but I’d recently learned that this place was actually quite near the surface still. I looked around the cavern in silence, lost in thought.

“Master Light?” Mei ventured.

“It’s okay, Mei,” I said. “I’m not about to get all emotional over returning to the place I was betrayed.”

In truth, I could feel several emotions welling up inside of me, but it was stuff like anger and a yearning for revenge, rather than sadness. I knew I needed to keep those feelings bottled up though, so I forced a broad smile onto my face and turned to my troops.

“Anyway, let’s get out of here and make our way up to the surface,” I said. “Don’t worry, it’s not a long trip.”

I took the lead since I could still remember the way to the entrance that led to the surface. Since we were all Level 9999, the trek through the upper levels didn’t take us half as long as it had for the Concord of the Tribes. It was still morning when we reached the surface, and the sun was shining.

“So this is the surface world,” Mei said, looking around in fascination.

“Mroow,” Aoyuki mewled, expressing a similar sentiment of curiosity.

“It looks like we’re completely surrounded by trees,” Ellie observed. “And the sky is so high!”

“I ain’t seein’ a whole lotta powerful monsters around” Nazuna noted. “The monsters in the Abyss were way tougher.”

As the four maidens checked out their new surroundings, I allowed myself a

moment to bask in the sunshine for the first time in two years. The Abyss was nice and all, but nothing compared to actual sunlight. *I've finally made it back above ground*, I thought. Even though all of this was a familiar sight to me, for the others, it was their first time seeing the surface world.

"All right, time to head out," I told my crew. "First, I'll use the SSR Conceal on us."

The Conceal card was a very handy tool, but it had one drawback: the use of the Teleportation card seemed to cancel out the Conceal card's power. That was why I wasn't using the Teleportation card to take us all the way to my village, due to the very real chance that someone might see us suddenly appear out of thin air. The alternative we'd come up with was to find a secure location near the dungeon where we could use the Conceal card without being seen, then use the SR Flight card to soar through the sky all the way to my village, as the card granted the power of flight for twenty-four hours.

"SR Flight—release!" I yelled. From the Abyss, we flew west, crossing a wild forest and a huge river that emptied into the ocean, in the direction of my village, which was a little frontier community situated in the northernmost region of the Human Kingdom. Life was hard for everyone there, but the villagers looked out for each other like one big, happy family.

After a few hours of flying, I finally caught a glimpse of my village. Since I was now Level 9999, my eyesight had improved immensely, meaning I was able to clearly make out my village even though we were still miles away from it. But instead of feeling excited about seeing my home again, I stared at the settlement in silence, checking and double-checking that my eyes weren't deceiving me.

"Why are the fields so barren?" I finally uttered. "Why have all the buildings been torn down?"

Were we in the wrong village? No, that couldn't be it. We had flown all the way here with an eagle-eye view of the terrain, so it was impossible for us to lose our way. But from every angle, this looked more like a ghost town than the living, breathing community I'd left only a few short years before. No, even the term "ghost town" didn't fully capture what I was seeing. It wasn't as if the

village had been abandoned to the elements. Someone or *something* had completely destroyed my village, and they had done it intentionally, from the looks of it. All the fields were ruined, the barns and farmhouses had been razed to the ground, and I could see signs of arson everywhere. The well had been smashed into rubble, and all the fences had been demolished.

"What is this?" I mumbled. "What the hell happened here?!"

There wasn't a single house left standing, and as I got nearer to the ruins, I could see dead bodies strewn about in the wreckage. Years of decomposition and scavenging by small monsters and carrion-feeding creatures had turned the corpses to skeletons, but judging by their sizes and the clothes still draped around their bones, many of the dead had been children. I recognized one of the skeletons as belonging to Memeh, a friend of Yume's. Another corpse was all that remained of the stern-looking old man who had been kind to us kids. I also recognized the bodies of the old women who used to bake delicious bread in the village's communal oven for us to eat.

Feeling completely numb, I touched down and started sprinting along the village's roads, my muscle memory guiding me to my family home, but when I finally got there, I could only sob weakly at what I saw. My house was gone too, with not a single splinter left standing. It was as if a giant foot had stomped my home into the ground, and left two skeletons beside it. One of the corpses was draped in a dress, while the other had a man's work clothes hugging its bones. I recognized these outfits instantly as they belonged to the people who'd worn them every day before I left home.

"Mom..." I said, my voice trembling. "Dad..." It didn't seem real that both of my parents were dead. I could hear Mei calling out my name, but her voice barely reached me through the fog that had descended on me. Had I come to the wrong place? Was this all a dream? Was I still asleep?

"Master Light!" Mei yelled at me as she shook my shoulder from behind. "Can you hear me?!"

"M-Mei?" I slowly emerged from my grief-filled daze to see Mei, Aoyuki, Ellie, and Nazuna all looking at me, their faces etched with worry. It was only then that I realized I'd flown away from the other four without mentioning once that

I'd noticed something was wrong. The devastation was clearly why they were looking at me so anxiously, which meant the carnage that lay in front of me was all too real. An overwhelming wave of nausea caused me to drop to my knees and vomit up the undigested contents of my stomach. I looked down at the puddle and could make out bits of the salad, bread, and soup I'd had for breakfast that morning.

"Master Light!" Mei dashed to my side to prop me up and stroke my back. Mei didn't seem to care if her clothes got messy, even making a makeshift handkerchief out of her Magistrings to wipe my mouth.

Ellie magically produced water out of thin air so that I could rinse my mouth out, while Aoyuki placed herself in front of me to spare my eyes from having to see that traumatic sight. Nazuna, who had absolutely no idea what to do, simply stood where she was, looking frantic.

"Assholes..." I finally said, coughing up my emotions after coughing up my food. I stood up like a listless zombie and started hurling a stream of invective at the air around me. "You *assholes*!" I yelled. "Why did you *bastards* destroy my village? Why in holy hell did you kill my mom, dad, and everyone I knew?! Why? Why the hell did this happen, Goddess?! What did I do to deserve it?!"

I had a hunch, of course. It was probably because I was a potential Master. Sure, there was every possibility that it had been some random monsters or raiders who had destroyed my village, but the timing and the comprehensiveness of the massacre was too on the nose for it to be pure coincidence. No reasonable person would be convinced that this was just some random act of violence. A more likely explanation would be that a nation or a group of nations had wiped out my village, just like they had tried to off me.

Unable to bottle up my dark rage any longer, I threw my head back and roared an oath to the skies above. "I'll *kill* them! I swear I will *murder* every last one of the bastards who destroyed my village! I'll kill those wretches who slaughtered my family! They'll never get away with this! I'll search high and low for those murderers and execute them on the spot! They'll pay for what they did here a thousand times over!"

Because of my power level, the dark energy I was exuding caused my four

deputies to stand stock still out of fear, while all the birds and monsters in the nearby woods bolted, trying to get as far away from me as possible. Thanks to my heightened senses, I could tell that all of this was happening around me, but it was small comfort to me right at that moment. All I could do was keep yelling and cursing the world until my throat got sore.

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At some point, I came to the conclusion that there was no use continuing to yell at everything in a blind rage, so I activated the Teleportation card and whisked us all back to the bottom level of the Abyss. Once there, I assembled a team of investigators who would search for clues that would hopefully lead me to the killers. Much to my embarrassment, after giving out these orders, I found myself laid up in bed for the next few days due to developing a fever from the psychological shock of seeing the wretched state of my former village. Thanks to the care provided by Mei and the others, I recovered just as the team I'd sent out came back with the results of their investigation. But as I'd feared, too much time had passed to uncover much in the way of evidence.



All we really knew was: A) the destruction took place years ago; B) every

single building, field, barn, stable, and even the village's well had been destroyed in the incident; and C) the killers spared no one, not even those who had tried to flee. It was as if these murderers had harbored a deep antipathy for my village and wanted to wipe it completely off the map. But at this late date, there was no way of knowing if the perpetrators were monsters or members of one of the non-human races.

The investigation team did bring back some good news, however: they had been unable to locate the remains of Els or Yume. The team knew this wasn't just some oversight, because after wrapping up their probe, they had placed every single dead villager they could find into proper graves. They'd used the SSR Teleportation card to bring fairy maids along to assist with the task, and none of the bodies they interred had any clothing or physical characteristics that were a match for Els or Yume. My allies searched far and wide, even scouring the neighboring forest for my siblings, but they came up empty-handed.

Of course, my brother and sister could have escaped into the woods, only to be attacked and eaten by monsters, leaving no trace of them behind. But the fact that their dead bodies hadn't actually been found allowed me to hope, however faintly, that Els and Yume had survived this horrific incident, and were out there somewhere, alive and well.

On hearing this news about my brother and sister, I rushed to my office and started dishing out orders to Mei. "Tell the merchants and adventurers operating up on the surface world to find out any information they can regarding the whereabouts of Els and Yume," I told her.

"What order of priority should this directive fall under?" Mei asked.

"Hm, let's see..." While we were blessed with a lot of resources, we didn't have an infinite amount. The surface world operatives were already gathering info on my enemies and on Masters, and I didn't want to stretch them so thin, they ended up producing low-quality intelligence. I dearly wanted to avenge the death of my parents and the rest of the villagers, but not at the expense of the first oath I'd pledged of getting vengeance on my betrayers and uncovering the truth behind my near-assassination.

“I want our intelligence-gathering efforts to focus primarily on the Concord of the Tribes, Masters, and any information we can get our hands on regarding the non-human nations,” I said without flinching.

“As you wish, Master Light,” Mei said, bowing elegantly. “I shall communicate these priorities to our operatives immediately.”

My gut was still telling me that being labeled as a potential Master had something to do with the obliteration of my village, so I figured if we made my original objectives our first priority, we’d probably turn up clues regarding the massacre along the way. Though of course, that was only a hunch.

Mei left the office, and I settled back into my chair. I closed my eyes, and images of the charred buildings, piles of bodies, and my dead parents floated up onto the back of my eyelids. I gritted my teeth so hard, I could hear them grinding.

“Mom, dad...” I said to the empty room. “I swear I will avenge you and all the other villagers.”

About half a year later, I made Garou my first target in my revenge campaign. Judging by the wolfman’s reaction to my army, it was seemingly powerful enough to wage war against the world, and I finally felt ready to exact revenge on the rest of my enemies. It was at that point that I started sending my all-powerful warriors up to the surface.

Extra Story 1: Silica

The girl who had been rescued by the Mohawks near the Great Tower that had appeared next to the Elven Queendom went by the name of Silica. Born to a husband and wife team of traveling merchants, Silica and her parents used to spend their days crisscrossing the Human Kingdom selling their wares, until one day, tragedy struck. A monster killed Silica's mother and father, and although she survived, she soon found herself sold into slavery because she was too young to fend for herself.

After a number of twists and turns, a party of elf adventurers bought Silica and forced her to serve as their forward scout-slash-bait (as some kind of early-warning monster system) in their quest to perform recon on the Great Tower. But partway through the woods, a gigantic canine monster with a live snake for a tail attacked the party and devoured all three of the elf adventurers. Silica believed the snake-tailed creature would eat her too, but the monster just ignored her and disappeared off into the forest again.

Immediately after this, a party of Mohawks took custody of Silica and escorted her out of the forest, whereupon they sold her to a merchant in a camptown that bordered the woods. As a daughter of merchants herself, Silica quickly realized her new owner maintained a sound business that ensured it stayed out of debt, even if it wasn't making all that much in the way of profit. *Sure, he lucked out with all these adventurers and soldiers coming here because of the Great Mystery Tower, but it* is *a well-run operation*, Silica thought to herself.

The merchant also owned a few other human slave girls, but he made sure they were all well taken care of, and since Silica had learned how to do math from her parents, the merchant let her help out around the shop. Silica was also fully aware that she was cute and charming enough to attract attention. *I hope the merchant will make me his mistress someday*, she thought to herself. After all, she reasoned, she was able to present herself as a decent-looking slave girl who could be useful to his shopkeeping business. Of course, even though the merchant was unmarried, he was much older than Silica, but she was willing to

overlook the age gap between them because she believed it was a much better option than being sold to another owner who might end up using her as monster bait again.

Shortly after being sold to the merchant, Silica's life was turned upside down once more. A human woman calling herself the "Wicked Witch of the Tower" attacked the Elven Queendom with a swarm of dragons and forced the queen of the elves to pronounce "absolute autonomy for all humans." The queendom subsequently ratified this tenet into law, officially freeing all enslaved humans in the realm. The law applied to Silica and the other slave girls owned by the merchant, which meant they were all suddenly emancipated. Strictly speaking, however, the merchant sold the girls to an incredibly beautiful woman wearing a maid uniform, who was accompanied by a dragon. What was more, this woman had a pair of practically transparent wings sprouting from her back, and she floated a few inches off the ground while she carried out the transaction.

"So I'm, like, responsible for picking up the slaves in this area, yeah?" the winged maid said. "So, like, how much do you want for these girls?"

"Let's see..." the merchant said before holding up a few fingers. "Perhaps this much would be fair?"

"Sure, okay?" the woman replied as she handed the merchant a large sum of money. "I added, like, a little something extra for your trouble? Hope you have a good one, yeah?"

"Thank you very much, miss," the merchant said, the transaction completed.

As part of the emancipation edict, all of the slave owners were being compensated for the release of their human property, presumably because this approach was likely to minimize any conflicts that would have otherwise resulted from forced seizures. The woman who took custody of Silica and the other girls seemed somewhat lackadaisical, as well as having a conspicuous habit of phrasing everything like a question, but in spite of that, the woman was still a busty beauty whose radiant smile could make anyone—even Silica—look past whatever flaws she had. The maid uniform she wore was immaculate, and at first glance, the fabric it was made of seemed to be expensive. *That uniform must be worth over a hundred times what I cost*, thought Silica.

Because the maid was so extravagantly beautiful, she unsurprisingly caught the eyes of all the roughneck adventurers in the camptown. Some of the questers even stepped forward and attempted to hit on the woman, but the dragon growled a deep, menacing growl to make them think again.

The woman ignored the growling and turned to the slave girls. “Anyways, I think it’s time for the dragon to, like, give us a ride? The trip to the tower won’t take us all that long, but if you could, can you maybe just *not* freak out and let go during the flight? ’Cause, like, if you do, you’ll sort of fall to the ground and die, yeah?”

Silica and the three other girls stiffened at this thought, but since they were slaves and didn’t have a choice in the matter, they hesitantly climbed up onto the dragon’s back all the same. The woman floated up and took a seat on the dragon’s back as well.

“Okay, so you can go now, yeah?” the maid said to the dragon, which responded with a hearty snarl before spreading its wings and taking flight. The girls briefly screamed on takeoff, but they all did what the maid had told them to and stayed completely still while clinging to the dragon’s back for dear life.

It took less than five minutes for them to reach the Great Tower, but to the slave girls, it felt like much longer. Once the dragon had landed, the little girls hurriedly disembarked from the beast and sank to the ground, thankful to be on terra firma once more.

“Good job hanging on during the flight and all?” the woman said to them. “There’s not much to do out here, so you might as well, like, relax and take it easy for the time being, yeah? I need to go give my report, so kinda just like wait for me, yeah? You won’t wander off into the woods while I’m gone, I hope? We did take care of most of the monsters, but not all of them, so you might end up getting killed if you go in there, if you see what I’m sayin’?”

“Y-Yes, we’ll be careful,” Silica said, speaking for the group.

The maid turned to the dragon. “Thanks, bud. You’re gonna take the rest of the day off now?”

The creature nodded and took off once more. After the woman had seen the dragon off, she headed for the tower entrance, leaving the four slave girls

sitting in a huddle by themselves. After Silica had stopped shaking from the dragon flight, she looked up at the white superstructure with renewed fascination. *So this is the Great Tower I've heard so much about*, *huh?* she thought to herself.

The enormous tower stood in the middle of a large, round clearing carved out of the untamed forest, and seemed to stretch up beyond the clouds. The clearing itself had a radius of one kilometer, and the forest border appeared to be being guarded by three-meter tall golems standing equidistant from each other. Aside from the four slave girls, there were a good two or three hundred humans in the clearing, all of whom appeared to be former slaves like themselves, which led Silica to a sinking realization. *We're all going to die out here, aren't we?* she thought to herself—a supposition that was backed up by the fact that there were no farms, houses, or even a single tent or blanket they could sleep in out here.

Because the tower was located deep in the forest, it'd be next to impossible to go buy supplies at a market, or for a traveling merchant to somehow make their way to this clearing. Furthermore, the closest shops where they could buy food would be located in the queendom, a nation filled with extremely prideful elves, and while the people from the tower could of course use their dragons to force the elves to part with their food under duress, it would be logistically impossible to feed everyone through that sort of strong-arming, because the area around the tower would eventually be housing all of the human slaves in the queendom.

I heard it was the "Wicked Witch of the Tower" who freed all the slaves. Yes, she made this huge tower in the middle of nowhere, and yes, she controls a whole army of dragons, but nobody that powerful is going to care what happens to all the people trapped at the base of the tower, thought Silica. *That means we have to carve a life out for ourselves on our own down here. But I can't take care of myself. I'm just a kid...*

They could have made a start by building a farm there and then, but it would still be months before any of the crops were ready to harvest and eat. If Silica and the other girls were forced to fend for themselves, there was no way they'd be able to survive. *Unless a wizard happens to come along and magic us up*

some food like in a fairy tale, we're done for, Silica thought sadly.

Mages in fairy tales were certainly capable of creating food out of nothing, but here in the real world, making food by magical means was practically unheard of. The way things stood, death was the only fate awaiting Silica and the other girls.

As the four slave girls gloomily contemplated their dire situation, the beautiful woman—who was actually a fairy maid—returned from the tower, having seemingly completed her errand.

"Sorry, did I make you wait?" the winged maiden said. "If you don't mind, could you, like, give me some space, so I can set up your temporary shelter?"

"Huh? A temporary what?" Silica asked.

"All right, so budge up, okay? This'll only take, like, a second?" the maid said, then she held up a card. "Prefab—release?" In the next moment, a one-story building made of a metal that looked a lot like iron appeared in front of them.

"What?" Silica blurted out. The other three slave girls looked just as surprised as she was, but the fairy maid paid no attention to their reactions and went inside this so-called "prefab" building. A few seconds later, the maid wafted out again and approached the girls.

"So inside, you'll find, like, the bare minimum supplies for you to live here comfortably and stuff?" the maid told them. "If you need anything else, you can come to me or any of the other maids, yeah? Just, y'know, be careful what you ask for? Because some things might take a while to get to you? And that's if we don't just outright refuse the request and junk? So yeah, go check out your new digs, but don't wear your shoes inside, if you don't mind?"

"Uh, thank you," Silica said uncertainly. "We'll go on inside then." The four girls did as they were told and took off their footwear before entering the prefab, with the maid following them inside, though she didn't need to take off her shoes because she was still serenely floating just above the ground. The girls walked into a single room that was about fourteen square meters big, and had two sets of bunk beds in it with a dresser placed between them. In the middle of the carpeted room was a table with low legs that had a plate of cookies and a pot of tea on it.

This looks just like an average dorm room! Silica thought. *But there's no way she could've made this in a matter of seconds!*

While the girls looked around the room in shock, the maid continued giving them a casual rundown of their new living arrangements. "I think you're, like, able to decide between yourselves who gets the top and bottom bunks? The dresser has enough clothes and underwear for everyone, but I'll sorta just leave it to you guys to figure out who gets what outfit, yeah? If you need to use the bathroom, I think there are latrines nearby you can run to? As for drinking water, you can recognize a well if you see one, I'm sure? Supper will be ready in a few hours, so till then, you're free to have those butter cookies and tea on the table if you like?"

"Excuse me, ma'am," the youngest girl in the group piped up, her eyes glinting with anticipation. "Can we eat the cookies now?"

The maid patted the little girl on the head and gave her a somewhat nonchalant smile. "Of course you can, babes! It's totally cool to eat them right this second if that's what you wanna do? Oh, and another thing: the tea's already brewing in the pot, so all you need to do is, like, serve yourselves? Anyway, I've got a whole bunch more work to do now, but I'll be back to call you outside for dinner, yeah?"

As soon as the maid had left the prefab, the four girls rushed to the table and started wolfing down the refreshments.

"Mmm! This cookie's so yummy!" the youngest girl said.

"The tea has this sweet, rich flavor to it," one of the other girls said.

"I never dreamed us slave girls would ever get to eat something *this* good," the third girl added.

Unlike the other girls, Silica sat in silent contemplation, wondering what had gone into the cookies and the tea. *How can a cookie taste* this *good? It doesn't taste like someone just dumped a load of pricey sugar into a bowl. Someone actually thought about the best way to balance the flavors and how to get the texture just right! The cookies are all the same shape and perfectly baked, like they've been made by a world-famous chef! If it were up to me, I'd be selling these for one silver coin apiece.*

Silica glanced at the other girls who were also enjoying these cookies that'd probably sell for a higher price than what the girls would fetch at a slave market. *Even the tea has just the right amount of high-quality sugar in it to make it tasty enough for a kid to drink. The bed, the carpet, and even the dresser are all made out of quality materials too. If I wanted to, I could probably sell them for several pieces of silver, easy.*

The way the maid had produced the shelter and the furnishings out of nowhere in a less than a minute had shocked all of the girls, but Silica was the only one of the group who realized just how expensive the cookies and the tea they were consuming were, despite the maid acting like they were no big deal. Silica was the daughter of merchants, after all.

Though that wouldn't be the only thing to surprise Silica that day. After the sun had set, the fairy maids came out of the tower and used magic spells to create giant orbs that flooded the compound with light and made it look like it was still daytime. Supper was a buffet affair, and there was a whole range of stuff to choose from, including but not limited to: stew, roasted meat, food fried in oil, bread, salad, fish (both grilled and steamed), and plenty of other things. People lined up in front of the servers with trays, then took their food over to tables with long benches for seats. Those who had finished eating returned their plates and cutlery to collection points.

"Please form a single line," said a fairy maid with glasses who was standing behind a tall cylindrical pot. "We have enough food for everyone."

"Y-You can a-always ask for seconds too!" added a geeky-looking fairy maid, who had an amused look on her face. That remark earned her a smack around the back of the head from a different fairy maid.

The fairy maids poured out of the tower like busy worker bees, and even though they came in practically all shapes and sizes, every single one of them was beautiful in their own right.

Maybe the tower has the power to create pretty women, Silica thought as she stood in line to get food. Once Silica and the other girls had been given their meals, they found an empty section of table, plonked themselves down, and wasted no time digging in.

“Mmm! This stew is delicious!”

“It has so many veggies and so much meat in it!”

“The roast meat is super tasty too! And the fish!”

“The bread is so white and fluffy! This is just like what rich people eat!”

Silica’s three roommates excitedly gave their impressions of their supper, but as for Silica herself, she was once again sitting in stunned silence. *This bread’s so fluffy, it’s like someone cut off a piece of a cloud! Whatever the case, I’ve never eaten the kind of wheat that went into this bread before!*

Even though every nation in the world grew wheat, the Human Kingdom was the top producer of the staple food. In fact, farm products were the nation’s main export, though the kingdom only earned a pittance selling the produce to the other eight nations. One might even go as far as to say that the Human Kingdom was the breadbasket of the world, taking advantage of its location bang in the middle of the mainland, though a less favorable interpretation of the geopolitical situation would be that the non-human nations were essentially robbing the much weaker kingdom blind. For that reason, pretty much all of the wheat used the world over originated from the Human Kingdom. There were certain varieties grown in other places, sure, but they didn’t taste all that different from the standard kind. But Silica knew for a certainty that the bread she was eating right at that moment was too sweet to be made from any type of wheat that existed *anywhere* in the known world.

I couldn’t tell when I was eating the cookies because of the added sugar, but the flour they used to make this bread is obviously different, thought Silica. *The flour tastes very sweet and not in a sugary kind of way. But I’ve never seen or even heard of wheat that can be made into bread that tastes and smells this good!*

In fact, Silica didn’t recognize many of the foods people were sitting and enjoying at the tables, suggesting to her that these meals simply weren’t of this world. *Is this a dream? Am I dreaming?* Silica was beginning to doubt that she was really where she thought she was.

“Don’t you like the food?” a chipper voice asked her. “Or are you feeling sick, maybe?”

Shocked out of her stupor, Silica looked up at the fairy maid addressing her, who looked even more beautiful than the rest of her peers. This maid looked so cute, in fact, whatever personality she might have possessed seemed likely to be eclipsed by her sheer beauty.

Silica moistened her dry mouth before replying. “I-I’m fine, thank you. I don’t feel sick. And the food is great.”

“Really? Thank goodness,” the supercute maid said, and she flashed the girl a dazzling smile before continuing. “You have nothing to worry about here. You girls have been saved.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Silica asked.

The supercute maid looked the slave girl square in the eye, and it was like she was seeing right through to the girl’s mind and reading everything she was thinking. “You have been saved by the ‘Absolute Autonomy of All Humans’ order that was decreed by our dear Master. Now that you are in our custody, you will never face another day where you ache from hunger, shiver from the cold, fear your enemies, or suffer acts of bigotry. Our Master has vowed to take care of everyone, so your happiness and a better life are guaranteed.”

Supercute beamed as she continued to sermonize. “All the living, breathing people in this world have the right to be happy. Here, you will find no hierarchies that rank humans as inferior to any other race. Here, humans will never be sold to others. Here, people will not wish death upon you. Here, you are free to stand on your own two feet. Here, we will teach you how to fish and grow bountiful crops, so that you *can* stand on your own two feet. You girls are even free to leave this place altogether if you so choose, for we unconditionally believe that the only way to find true happiness is by seeking it out by your own free will.”

Silica looked at the maid in silence, entranced by her infinitely beautiful eyes. Instead of sounding fanatical and cult-like, what the cute maid was saying made complete sense to Silica. The meanings of the words tumbling from her mouth were clearer than any cloudless sky, and the message swept through her soul like a stiff breeze in the summer heat. Silica wholly believed the maid when she told her she and the other girls were completely free to find their own

happiness.

“So like I say, there’s nothing to worry about, okay?” the supercute maid reiterated.

“Y-Yes, I believe you,” Silica replied.

The maid beamed at her again before departing from the table, leaving Silica to grapple with her newfound realization. *The Wicked Witch of the Tower freed us using her powers, and now we’re free to live however we want...*

Silica had lost all hope of living any kind of life when her mother and father were killed. After being sold into slavery, she lived each day expecting to join her parents very soon.

Is it really okay for me to live? The tower witch was powerful enough to create this large clearing in the middle of the wild forest, which would be a staggering feat for *anyone* to pull off. The maid had promised her that no one would go hungry, even if the population of this settlement swelled into the hundreds, or even the thousands. In this place, Silica would never need to be cold, fear any foe, or look down in shame due to antihuman bigotry being aimed at her. It was as if she had suddenly found herself living in a fantasy world.

We’ve ended up in the middle of a fairy tale, thought Silica as she ate some more of her stew. Even though the stew had gone tepid while she wasn’t paying attention to it, Silica still found it utterly delicious.

Extra Story 2: Dungeon Inspections

Back when I was Level 4000, I slayed the Orochi and gained access to the dungeon core, but instead of destroying the giant floating orb then and there, I decided to keep it around so that I could eventually control the habitat in the Abyss. But getting a handle on the dungeon core was easier said than done, and it had taken Ellie six whole months before she was even halfway able to control the orb. At that point, I still couldn't teleport out of the Abyss due to the dungeon's magical jamming effect, but we did manage to stop monsters and traps from randomly spawning, which finally allowed us the opportunity to start redeveloping the bottommost tier of the Abyss. I'd already gotten myself an entire crew that could assist in the remodeling, but their power levels were so low, I couldn't risk releasing them from their cards before, while all the deadly monsters were still roaming about. But with the monsters out of the picture thanks to Ellie gaining partial control of the dungeon core, I could finally start forging an underground kingdom to house my huge army that would soon be mighty enough to wage war on whole nations.

On this particular day, I was in my office, looking over documents Mei had given me outlining the progress of the reconstruction work. The office itself had been built first to make it easier for me to go through all my paperwork.

"Wow, the redevelopment is going faster than I thought it would," I said. "They're already done building the Card Repository and the cafeteria."

We also appeared to be making good progress on the throne room, the large bathing areas, and a number of the other recreational spots. But despite all the headway we were making, Mei—who was supervising the reconstruction effort—seemed apologetic.

"I am afraid we still have no timescale for when Ellie will have complete control over the dungeon core," she said, standing in front of my desk. In stark contrast to the rapid progress we had made in redeveloping the Abyss, Ellie's deciphering of the dungeon core had largely ground to a halt once more. The superwitch didn't have a clue how to get around the dungeon core's teleportation-blocking magic.

“Well, we already have our hands full reconstructing the dungeon anyway, so I should sit down with Ellie and tell her she can take her time over it,” I said. “Mei, could you set up a meeting?”

“Certainly, Master Light,” Mei replied.

As for my two other Level 9999 lieutenants, Aoyuki and Nazuna, the former was busy taming and assuming command of the army of monsters that would soon be capable of taking on armies from other nations, while the latter had been engaging the monsters in mock battles to prepare them for this task. The creatures needed this kind of training, because not even the Genius Monster Tamer could put together a battle-ready army overnight, and the sparring gave Nazuna the chance to move around a bit and blow off some steam. *From what I hear, Nazuna’s undefeated in those mock battles, though Aoyuki has only given her monsters instructions from the sidelines rather than fighting alongside them*, I thought. *Still, I gotta say, Nazuna’s incredibly strong.*

As these thoughts swirled around in my head, Mei and I decided we would go inspect the locations listed in the report and see how things were progressing for ourselves. The first stop on our itinerary was the Card Repository.

My Unlimited Gacha provided all the food, consumables, magic items, and other things that were needed to keep Abyss life running smoothly, but because it would be nigh impossible for me to keep pulling supplies at the volumes needed, we used a hack that would keep my Gift producing cards around the clock. Before this Card Repository was built, I used to just stuff all of the gacha cards into my Item Box in one big disorganized mess, and pull out whichever card I needed at the time. That system had worked up to this point, but I knew there would come a time when we would need a much more efficient approach for retrieving cards if we wanted the dungeon to be habitable for all of its new residents. So we came up with the idea of adding a Card Repository, where my gacha cards would be neatly sorted out and tracked, and which would become one of the most critical sections of the Abyss. And now that this repository was finished, Mei and I decided we’d check it out.

“So this is the Card Repository, huh?” I said on arrival. “It’s much bigger than I thought it’d be.”

The repository was designed to hold an untold number of gacha cards, which is why there were rows and rows of shelves as far as the eye could see, as well as the ceiling being so high, it was barely visible. Before we strolled in, fairy maids had been placing gacha cards onto shelves according to their type, but as soon as they saw me, they stopped what they were doing and lined up to greet me. At the head of the line was the brother-sister administration team who oversaw the Card Repository. We had informed them in advance that we would be coming to take a look around.

"I'm so glad you came to see us, sweeties!" Annelia said happily.

"Welcome to your new Card Repository, Lord Light," Alth added.

Together, these two were officially known as UR Level 5000, Card Keepers, Annelia and Alth. The head administrator, Annelia, was short of stature and had silver-colored hair, while Alth worked alongside his older sister as the deputy administrator of the repository.

"Thanks for all you're doing, guys," I said, smiling and waving back at them. "I heard they'd finished building this place, so I came to check it out. How's things running so far?"

"They did such a *super* job with this place!" Annelia gushed. "They built it exactly to our specifications! Thank you so much, kiddo!"

"Um, d-dear sister?" Alth intervened gingerly. "Perhaps you should think twice before referring to our Lord and Creator by that particular term of endearment?"

"I'm glad to hear this place is set up how you need it," I replied. "The repository will be the beating heart of the Abyss, and it means a lot to me that you like how it has been constructed, since you'll be the ones in charge of it. And Alth, I've already given Annelia permission to call me 'kiddo,' so you don't have to worry about it sounding like she's disrespecting me or anything."

"I thank you for granting an exemption to my sister," said Alth. He had blond hair and princely features, but it appeared his sister's attitude had given him a stomachache, meaning he could only manage to flash me an awkward smile.

I seriously don't mind that "kiddo" stuff one bit, I thought to myself. Annelia

saw herself as everyone's big sister, so she used "kiddo," "sweetie," and other terms of endearment with the people she liked. On the other hand, Alth treated me like I was his god, probably because I'd "created" him using the Unlimited Gacha. Annelia's buddy-buddy attitude was the polar opposite of Alth, who was more the stuffed-shirt, religious-disciple type, but both siblings had unique magic skills that would be needed to sort and organize the gacha cards that would be flooding in here in droves.

"Annelia and Alth, the Card Repository will be the central pillar of the Abyss," Mei said. "If you discover any problems or if you have any ideas on how to improve this section, please do not hesitate to inform us. We will make any concerns our top priority."

"Why, thank you, honey," Annelia replied. "In fact, there *is* one eensy-teensy little thing I'd like to address." Her expression instantly turned serious, causing the lined-up fairy maids nearby to stiffen nervously. "Mei..." she began. "Is it okay for me to call you my 'kiddo,' like I do with my special little guy, Light?"

Due to the sudden seriousness that had descended over the room, Mei had mentally prepared herself for some very bad news, so when these words left the Card Keeper's mouth, all she could do was stare wordlessly at Annelia. But the expression on the Everseeking Maid's face said it all: *What in the world is this woman talking about?*

Meanwhile, Alth's stomachache seemed to have upgraded to a full-blown ulcer. "D-Dear sister, you cannot say such things to Miss Mei! Her power level is far higher than yours, and she was the first to be summoned by Lord Light! Plus, she is a heroine who rescued our Creator from certain death! So you must not take that attitude with her!"

"It's all good, buddy," Annelia assured Alth, who was tightly clutching his belly. She turned to Mei again and beamed at her, almost triumphantly. "I know your power level's higher and you were summoned before me, but my big sisterly love knows no bounds! So from now on, I'm gonna call you my darling little kiddo, and if there's anything you need, just come and ask, okay?"

Mei was still at a total loss for words, but this time, she felt the need to press her palm firmly to her forehead—an effect Annelia's stubbornness often had on

people. The fairy maids were all looking at Annelia like she'd gone nuts, but she didn't seem to be paying them any mind. Standing between the two of them, I simply chuckled awkwardly, until Mei finally broke the silence.

"I am afraid Master Light and I must leave now to inspect the other construction projects," Mei declared, giving her an excuse to cut the conversation short. "Master Light, shall we?"

"Sure thing," I said. "You guys take care, okay?"

"I suppose I can't hog all your time and keep you two from your work," Annelia said, looking rather peeved about Mei not being very receptive to the whole "kiddo" thing. "But by all means, come and see us again, sweeties!"

I chuckled awkwardly again as Mei nodded at me to signal that it was time to head to the next destination on our tour: the cafeteria. Or to be more precise, we were going to the *new* cafeteria. The dungeon already had a mess hall with a kitchen adjoined to it, but that was something we'd slapped together by throwing a bunch of kitchen utensils, some furniture, and a heap of other appliances produced by the Unlimited Gacha into a room. It was a real patchwork affair and not what you'd call a proper cafeteria—at least, not one that could comfortably feed a huge army of people—so we'd set about constructing a new cafeteria and kitchen that was entirely separate from the mess hall. When Mei and I showed up there, the construction crew had just finished putting the final touches to the place.

"I, Iceheat, am very glad to welcome you here, Master Light and Miss Mei." The maid—whose hair was red on the right side and blue on the left—curtsied to greet us, all smiles. When Iceheat was summoned, we immediately gave her the job of being the site manager for this and some of the other redevelopment projects. Mei also appointed Iceheat as her deputy head housekeeper, likely because she manifested wearing her own maid outfit.

"You've done good work here, Iceheat," I said to her. "I heard the cafeteria was all finished now, so I thought I'd wander down to have a look."

"It's an honor that you have come all this way to see what we've accomplished here," Iceheat said. "Per your specifications, we designed this place to be as well-equipped as possible."

At the outset, I had said the cooking staff summoned by my Unlimited Gacha should have the most say in how the cafeteria would be constructed, with the added caveat that I wanted the place to look as spectacular as it could with the materials we had on hand. To make sure my instructions were followed to the letter, we had put Mei's second-in-command Iceheat in direct charge of refurbishing the space into a cafeteria.

Iceheat proceeded to give me a tour of the new cafeteria, showing me all the tables and chairs where people would sit to eat, as well as the kitchen in the back. Everything I saw was perfectly manufactured and elegantly arranged, and it was obvious just by looking at the room that everyone involved had really put their heart and soul into this project, with a little help from the gacha cards we'd had stored away and a sprinkling of magic that certain summons were capable of.

"Nice work as ever, Iceheat," I said. "Even I can tell this kitchen will be a great place to work. The cooking staff should have no trouble rustling up meals for the whole dungeon in here."

"Thank you very much, Master Light," Iceheat replied. "Your compliments brighten my very soul, and the same goes for all those who helped to design and build this kitchen."

"My compliments surely aren't *that* big a deal," I said skeptically. "But this really is a nice kitchen. I used to live on a poor farm, you see, and the only time I ever managed to actually properly fill my stomach was the one day a year when my village held a festival. I wanted my domain to have a kitchen that allows everyone to eat as much as they want, and I can see that what we have here definitely fits the bill."

"Master Light..." Both Mei and Iceheat said my name with pity in their voices after hearing the real reason for me wanting a bigger kitchen than the one attached to the mess hall. But I hadn't meant to make it sound like a sob story because: A) it was ancient history by this point; and B) there were plenty of people like me up on the surface world who had only ever gone to bed hungry. I quickly changed the subject in order to float an idea I'd had bouncing around my head for a while.

“You know how everyone gets breakfast, lunch, and dinner for free?” I said. “Now that we have this new cafeteria, I was thinking maybe it was time to make luxury items free too. What do you think?”

“Forgive me for sounding blunt, but I am against it,” Mei stated.

“I find myself agreeing with Miss Mei,” Iceheat added. “There is a very real chance that providing indulgences free of charge will lead to lax discipline. In particular, I’m absolutely *certain* there will be those who won’t be able to control their consumption of alcohol.”

“Hm, I thought it would be a good idea to start giving away that stuff, since we have a ton of those kinds of cards piling up,” I said. “But I have to admit, you do have a point, Iceheat.”

With the Unlimited Gacha now producing cards around the clock, we’d been pulling way more Normal cards than we could reasonably get through, and these included indulgences like sweets, alcohol, and cigarettes. Since they were all still in card form, they didn’t take up a whole lot of space, relatively speaking, but I still thought it was a waste to just warehouse them and forget about them. At present, everyone had a certain number of luxury items they were allowed to ask for and they couldn’t exceed that number, but I knew there had to be a more efficient way of distributing these types of cards. To be honest, I’d even been thinking about doing away with the quota system altogether as a way of thanking everyone for their hard work, but Iceheat had reminded me why that might not be such a great idea. Back when I was a struggling adventurer, I saw a good number of wasteoids drink themselves into the gutter. I was *fairly* sure none of my allies down here would turn into alcoholics, but there was no way to be one hundred percent certain.

“I feel as though we do not need to come up with an immediate solution to this problem,” Mei added. “Perhaps I can collect a number of suggestions over the next few days and prepare some draft proposals for you, Master Light.”

“Yeah, it’s not really a pressing issue,” I admitted. “We’ll go with that, then. I can’t wait to see all the ideas that come in.”

“Thank you, Master Light,” said Mei.

Since we were in the cafeteria, the three of us decided to have a meal right

then and there. Normally, fairy maids would have brought meals to my own private dining room and waited on me, so sitting at a communal table was something of an unusual and quirky experience for me.

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The last stop on my tour was the throne room, which was still under construction. I'd left Ellie wholly in charge of designing the chamber, since as the second son of a peasant farmer, I didn't really know what a throne room should look like. This was actually the first time I'd dropped by to see how the throne room was shaping up, and when I arrived, I was in for an unpleasant surprise.

"What is *this*?" I said.

"Hmm? This is the throne room, Master Light," Mei said simply.

"Yeah, sure, the throne, the carpet, the bas-relief, and the other decor all look spectacular..." I said before spinning around to face Mei and pointing ahead of us. "But what I mean is, what is that huge statue doing behind the throne?"

A thirty-meter-tall marble monstrosity towered over the throne, and even though the statue didn't look close to being finished, it was obviously being made in my image. Mei looked at me quizzically, as though she didn't understand what the problem was.

"I believe it will be a magnificent statue that shall show you in all your glory," Mei stated.

"Huh?" I replied, dumbfounded. To my mind, having a giant megalomaniacal statue of myself casting its shadow over the throne wasn't what you'd call "in good taste."

"Keh heh heh heh! Thanks for coming all this way to see me, Master and Miss Mei." Mera—who came gliding over to greet us—was the site supervisor of the throne room project, since Ellie was busy with other tasks. Mera was a two-meter-tall chimera who had been summoned at the same time as Iceheat, and both had the same UR power level. After Mera had successfully maneuvered her hulking frame into a bow, I put the same question to her.

"Thanks for all your hard work, Mera," I said. "But I'd like to know what's

going on with this huge statue behind the throne. Was that part of Ellie's original design or did someone decide to add it in after?"

Mera unleashed another burst of her staccato laughter. "Oh, no, no! It was all part of Miss Ellie's designs and no one had any problems with them. This fabulous statue was the centerpiece of her blueprint."

I clasped my head with both hands and tried to make sense of how this garish statue could have been part of the designs from the very beginning. Yes, it was my fault for not reviewing Ellie's plans before they moved on to the actual construction phase, but I never imagined she'd include an eyesore like this!

While I stood there nursing a slight headache, Mei and Mera gave their opinions on the statue.

"It appears the statue is not yet finished, since there are a number of places that obviously need more work, but I am quite sure that it will be one for the ages once it is complete," said Mei. "Ellie has done splendid work with this monument."

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Miss Mei," Mera chortled. "Of course, we put a lot of work into the throne room overall, but we've given *special* attention to this epic statue. I can't wait to see what it'll look like when it's finished, if I do say so myself!"

These two weren't engaging in empty flattery. They really did think the statue was a true work of art. Even the fairy maids helping out with the construction were nodding along to the conversation. However, the statue was simply too much for me.

I know everyone's worked hard on it, but this statue's got to go, I thought. *I need to see Ellie later and ask her to remove this monstrosity.* I was really glad I'd taken the time to inspect the throne room, more so than the Card Repository and the new cafeteria combined. If I'd failed to spot the statue before completion, there was a very good chance I would've ended up stuck with it, and the mere thought of that was enough to make my skin crawl.

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I broke up Mei and Mera's little art appreciation session and gave the order to

have Ellie sent to my office immediately. Though of course, this meeting wasn't set up to inform her that she was free to take her time figuring out the dungeon core, like I'd originally intended to tell her the next time I saw her. No, no. I sat down behind my desk in my office and waited for the Forbidden Witch to arrive. When she walked in, I skipped the pleasantries and cut to the chase.

"I'm sorry, Ellie, but I must ask you to remove that statue from the throne room."

Mei—who was also in my office—looked just as shocked as Ellie at this order to remove that "magnificent" statue.

When Ellie spoke next, I got the impression she was speaking for the both of them. "B-Blessed Lord Light, I'm very much aware that the statue doesn't capture even a billionth of your true heavenly beauty at present, but if you would just give me a little more time, I swear on my life that you will be pleased with the final result! I throw myself upon your mercy and beg you to please hold off on making a decision until later!"

"No, it has nothing to do with how the statue *looks*," I said, waving away Ellie's frantic but mistaken rebuttal. "I have a problem with *any* statue of me being made. It'd be one thing if it was a small, simple doll that resembled me, but we're talking about an absolutely humongous statue at the rear of the throne room! That thing makes me look like I have an ego the size of a small planet, so can we *please* just get rid of it?"

I said all of this in the least jokey tone I could manage. A doll was something I could easily laugh off, but a thirty-meter-tall statue was a total dealbreaker. Not to mention, I couldn't have that colossal idol looming over me while I was sitting on my throne. My psyche just wouldn't be able to take it. Yes, I knew Ellie and everyone else had made the statue because they loved and worshiped me, and while I was tickled by their adoration, the statue was simply a step too far.

"Master Light, it behooves me to say that not a single one of your allies will think you have an ego problem simply for displaying one or two giant statues," Mei said. "If it does turn out that even one of us harbors such an outrageous opinion, I will personally see to it that their viewpoint is corrected, so I implore

you to authorize the construction of the throne room as originally planned!”

“I have said what I have said, and I’m not going to budge on this, no matter what you say to me, Mei,” I replied.

But instead of having the statue destroyed, we ended up compromising on storing it away somewhere I (or anybody else, for that matter) wouldn’t be able to see it. Mei and Ellie flashed sad looks in my direction, but my mind was made up. I did throw them another bone, however, by allowing them to hang a huge banner behind the throne instead. It was certainly a heck of a lot better than sitting between the legs of a huge marble idol that looked like me.

Book 2: The Human Kingdom

Chapter 1: The Naive Activist

"Father! You must reconsider!" Princess Lilith protested in a raised voice as she discussed a matter with her father, the ruler of the Human Kingdom, in his executive office inside their castle—though truth be told, to call their residence a "castle" was a bit of a stretch, since it was really more of an oversized mansion.

Still a teenager, Lilith was nearly 160 centimeters tall with skin the color of ivory and a long mane of wavy blonde hair. She was the very definition of "a fair maiden" and she wore a colorful dress fit for a princess, though her attire couldn't really be described as extravagant. But what was most distinctive about Lilith was her large, defiant eyes that were presently trained on the king with needle-like focus.

"Please grant me permission to visit the Great Tower that's rumored to have triumphed over the elves!" the princess pleaded.

"Lilith, my answer remains the same as all the other times you have asked me that: it is simply out of the question," the king said with an exhausted sigh. "If you, a princess from the Human Kingdom, were to be seen approaching this 'Great Tower,' the other races may assume you are somehow involved with whoever built it. What do you plan to do if that happens? As princess, you must do everything in your power not to give the other races the wrong impression."

The old, graying king sat down heavily in his chair, even though he was quite slender. Or to be more accurate, he was gaunt, and the monarch's sunken cheeks and scrawny wrists made it seem as though stress was the main reason for his withered state.

Lilith's outrage at this made her eyes grow even wider. "Why is there this constant need for us to be so circumspect in all of our activities? Yes, it's true that we humans are weaker than the other races, but that is no justification for the kind of unfair treatment we receive! If we wish to upset the status quo, we

need a show of force that will make the other races sit up and take notice, and for that, we will need to establish relations with this Great Tower! After all, it was the people in there who flew a swarm of powerful dragons to the heart of the elves' domain and declared absolute autonomy for all humans, freeing the slaves and forcing the Elven Queendom to end slavery for good! If we collaborate with the Great Tower, we will be able to project that awesome power all across the world! But if we fail to seize this opportunity, we humans will forever be exploited by the other races and treated like cattle! We need to stand and fight in order to restore our dignity and pride, and I'm fully prepared to lay down my life to achieve that end, if that's what it takes! So please, father —nay, Your Majesty: I beg you to stand up and take action!"



After listening to his daughter’s rather lengthy rebuttal, the king sat

motionless in his chair for several unresponsive seconds before breathing out another heavy sigh. “Lilith, it is folly to place so much faith in this ‘Great Tower’ that you speak of. What you have told me is little more than rumor, and I do not want you to go starting a needless war over some unconfirmed hearsay.”

“I’m asking for your permission to visit the Great Tower so that I can *verify* this hearsay!” Lilith argued.

“But suppose you discover all these stories are nothing more than tall tales or even outright lies,” the king reasoned. “All you would have accomplished by going there would be to agitate the other races unnecessarily and further damage the standing of your fellow humans. Is that what you want, Lilith?”

“No, I don’t,” Lilith admitted. “But we still need to look into all those reports about—”

“Lilith.” The king stopped his daughter mid-sentence and breathed another sigh that translated to “Don’t be so naive,” before finally putting his foot down. “Humans are too weak to square up to any of the other races. Our only option is to keep our heads down and do what we can to survive.”

The king raised his hand to dismiss Lilith, which was the signal that the conversation was over. Knowing there was no point arguing her case any further, the princess silently padded out of the office and set off in the direction of her private chambers with the attendant that had been waiting outside for her this whole time.

But after only a few steps, she caught sight of her older brother, who was walking down the hallway in the opposite direction. The prince was 170 centimeters tall, had blond hair like his sister, and had the kind of physical proportions and facial features that meant he was considered a handsome youth by many. But even though he was still only eighteen, his hairline had already started to recede, and the fatigue and lack of spirit etched on his face resembled his father’s own weary look. The prince also had an attendant with a set of documents under one arm following him, and it was clear they were heading for the king’s executive office, where Lilith had left her wounded pride moments before.

“Dear brother, do you have a moment you can spare?” Lilith asked, giving him

a pointed look.

“You know very well that I don’t,” the prince replied. “But I can’t say no to my little sister, so make it quick.” The two siblings walked a little further down the hall, leaving their attendants behind so that they could converse in private.

“You need to ask our father to ally our kingdom with the witch that lives in the Great Tower,” Lilith said to her brother. “This is our chance for the human race to rise above our lowly station!”

“If you are asking me to talk to him, I can safely assume that our father has already refused you, yes?” the prince surmised. “As he rightly should have, because I’m against it too.”

“Dear brother, do you really want humans to continue suffering under these conditions?!” Lilith protested.

“This has nothing to do with what *I* want,” the prince replied. “Lilith, you need to wake up and face reality.”

In a bid to talk some sense into his sister, the prince invoked a bit of realpolitik. “Yes, I’ve heard the rumors about how people from the Great Tower were able to menace the Elven Queendom with a swarm of trained dragons. But look at it this way: if they were to send some of those dragons to our kingdom, that might present the elves with an opening and encourage them to lay siege to the tower. There is too much at stake for the people of the Great Tower to even dream of redeploying any of their dragons to provide our nation with protection.”

Lilith realized her brother had a point, but she wasn’t ready to back down just yet. “B-But from what I heard, the tower controls a *multitude* of dragons, and there were enough of them to blot out the sky over the capital of the Elven Queendom! I’m sure they must be able to spare a dragon or two without too much trouble!”

“First of all, there aren’t nearly enough dragons in the whole world to blot out the entire sky, and even if there were, it’d be impossible to maintain a swarm that size,” the prince reasoned. “And even assuming they *are* willing to part with some of their dragons, it opens up the risk of us losing our supply of salt.”

Salt was a very valuable commodity, and due to the Human Kingdom being landlocked, surrounded as it was by six other nations, it was also hard to come by here.

“We are the only nation in the world that has no access to seawater, so we must buy salt from other nations if we want to survive,” the prince said. “What do you think will happen if all those other nations decide to stop exporting salt to us? We have no salt mines, and people can’t live without salt in their diet, so we will all waste away and die without any of the other races even needing to take up arms against us. Thanks to our geography, the other races already have a noose wrapped tightly around our necks.”

“That’s no reason to give up!” Lilith cried. “I mean, do you *like* this situation we’re in, dear brother?!”

The princess knew logic and reason weren’t her friends in this argument, so she tried appealing to her brother’s emotions instead. “The other races don’t allow us to charge tariffs on any exports or imports. We even *sell* our own people as slaves to the other nations whenever they order us to do so! Is that the kind of kingdom you want to rule over? Is this what you call an independent nation? Right now, we’re a de facto puppet state—a chattel nation, if you will!”

“Lilith, for what it’s worth, I empathize with what you’re saying,” the prince admitted. “But the truth of the matter is we are completely under the heels of the other eight races. I loathe the fact that we sell some of our citizens into slavery, but in this case, we must sacrifice an unlucky few in order to protect a much greater number of people. I know that logic sounds callous, but as the rulers of this kingdom, it is our duty to make these kinds of hard decisions.”

Unable to come up with a counterargument to this, Lilith simply seethed in silence. The prince was well aware that his sister was still young and idealistic, and he patted her on the shoulder a few times out of pity before resuming on his way to the king’s executive office. Lilith stood rooted to the spot, unable to fire off a parting shot as she watched her brother disappear through the door with his attendant. Lilith had lost the battle of rhetoric with both her father and her brother, yet she still couldn’t help feeling dismayed about the future of the human race.

Lilith eventually made it back to her private chambers, and when her attendant opened the door, she found a maid waiting on the other side with a young apprentice maid beside her.

“We welcome your return, Your Highness,” the maid said.

“Nono, please serve me some tea,” Lilith said, feeling the need to imbibe something to take her mind off everything that had happened.

“Certainly, Your Highness,” Nono said with a bow, before hurrying off to brew a fresh pot of tea. Lilith trudged across the room toward the coffee table, and the apprentice maid dutifully pulled out a chair for the princess to sit on.

“Thank you, Yume,” Lilith said.

“You’re too kind, Your Highness!” This maid-in-training had velvety black hair that fell down to just above her shoulders, and in it was a ribbon tied into a bow that looked a bit like a butterfly. Her long-sleeved outfit was as plain as a maid uniform could be, though the fabric was completely unfrayed, giving her a sharp, clean-cut appearance.

Yume—who had turned ten by this point—had somehow ended up in the employ of a princess in the Human Kingdom after fleeing her home village under mysterious circumstances.

Chapter 2: Yume's Whereabouts

After Mei had informed me that Yume had been found working as an apprentice maid for Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom, Ellie proposed we should invite the princess—with Yume in tow—to visit the Great Tower. That way, I could reunite with my sister and whisk her away to the safety of the Abyss.

With this plan in place, Ellie had gone to the Elven Queendom as the Wicked Witch of the Tower to order the authorities there to broker a deal for the visit to go ahead, while I'd asked Mei to visit the Human Kingdom to make sure the delegation brought Yume with them, so that I could see her with my own eyes on her arrival at the Great Tower.

As it turned out, everything went exactly according to plan, and the Human Kingdom readily accepted our offer to visit the tower.

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"I can't believe we received a *direct* invitation to visit the Great Tower," Lilith remarked while sipping tea in her private chambers. "This must be an act of divine providence by the Goddess!"

Lilith reread the letter in her hand, which had come from the Great Tower itself and had been delivered directly to Lilith by an envoy from the Elven Queendom. Petitioning Lilith by name, the letter invited her to visit the new settlement that had sprung up around the tower so that she could verify the former slaves were living in a hospitable environment, were well-fed, and were not being mistreated in any way. If the conditions they were living in met with Lilith's approval, these conclusions would be publicized the world over. Naturally, Lilith practically pounced on the invite, because it was everything she could have ever hoped for, and her father, the king, was in no position to refuse a request that came via the Elven Queendom. This development excited Lilith to no end, but the princess's personal maid, Nono, was a little more wary.

"Your Highness, do you really plan to visit the Great Tower?" Nono asked.

“Why, yes, I do,” Lilith confirmed. “Are *you* against the invitation?”

“Not as such, but I do find it somewhat suspicious, personally,” Nono said. “This arrangement seems almost *too* convenient for my liking.”

Lilith had been demanding to go visit the Great Tower, only to be met by refusals every time from other members of the royal family. But now an *official* invitation had arrived, hand-delivered by a nation that neither the king nor the prince could turn down... Well, it had all the hallmarks of a setup.

“You’ve been personally invited to this place by an expert mage who has an army of dragons that fought and beat the elves,” said a worried-looking Nono. “What if she’s luring you to her so she can perform some sort of brainwashing spell on you?”

Lilith stiffened on hearing Nono’s thoughts on the matter. She had a point. After all, anyone able to topple the Elven Queendom would be capable of pretty much anything.

“I cannot rule out that possibility. But it was the Elven Queendom that delivered this letter,” Lilith pointed out. “We can’t possibly refuse the elves, and in any case, I don’t plan to reject the offer. I will visit the tower and be prepared for the worst. But we need to make sure that any maid who wishes to accompany me is aware of the risks, including the worst-case scenario.”

“Understood, Your Highness,” Nono said. “And if I may be so bold, I wish to come with you.”

“I hope you’re not just saying that because you feel it is incumbent on you to join me,” Lilith said.

“On the contrary. The thought of being separated from you has never crossed my mind,” Nono remarked. “After all, I’ve been looking after you ever since you were very young, and I would feel much better coming along on any journey, because I personally worry what trouble you’ll get up to once you’re out of my eyeline.”

“Why must you always treat me like I’m still a child, Nono?” Lilith pouted. “In case you forgot, I’m fifteen years old!”

“You’ll always be my darling little princess, so that line won’t work on me,

Your Highness," said a giggling Nono.

The two were able to share this lighthearted moment due to their strong, almost familial ties, but in a way, Nono was sort of correct to harbor doubts about the invitation. After all, the invite was indeed nothing more than a ruse, setting things up so that Light could reunite with Yume and spirit her off to the Abyss, but where the maid had gotten it wrong was that she was needlessly worried about Lilith's safety. But because Lilith took Nono's concerns very seriously, she spent the next few days recruiting volunteers for the trip with the same somber attitude of a military commander putting together a suicide squad.

On the same night that the letter from the Great Tower arrived, in her room, Nono silently inked a letter of her own, the paper and her blank expression pallidly illuminated by a magic item that served as a lamp. If anyone were to read what she'd written, they would have found Nono exchanging pleasantries with an acquaintance and giving some rather bland updates on her daily travails. At least, that's what it looked like at first glance. In truth, she was using an elaborate cipher to document in exhaustive detail all the new intelligence she had gathered about the Human Kingdom, including word of Lilith's upcoming trip. When Nono had finished penning the report, she stepped outside her room and handed the letter to a soldier accomplice of hers, who was waiting in the hallway.

"You know what to do," she told him.

"Understood." The soldier casually grabbed the letter and slipped away into the darkness.

Even after the soldier had disappeared from view, Nono continued to stare into the shadows, her wooden expression creasing and settling into one of melancholy. She grabbed her left wrist, and her fingers dug into the flesh with such force, her right hand turned pale from the pressure it was exerting.

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On the day Princess Lilith was scheduled to set off on her visit to the Great Tower, she was waiting on the lawn in front of the palace with a crowd of people, because the tower had requested that the Human Kingdom grant clearance for someone who was to arrive on a dragon. The kingdom had readily complied with the request and informed not just the people of the palace of this, but the citizens of the royal capital as well. As such, many residents had come to the palace in the hopes of seeing this dragon, which had been the kingdom's aim, since a larger welcoming crowd would help to burnish its international prestige. Though not everybody in front of the palace was there just to see the dragon. Lilith's brother, the prince, had also turned up with a group of soldiers, and were surveilling the scene in silence.

Eventually, the spectators spotted a tiny black dot in the sky, which grew larger and larger until it was clear to everyone that it was a ten meter-long dragon with blue scales swooping down toward the palace. If it hadn't been for the prior warning they'd received and the fact a human woman was riding on the creature's back, this would have been a frightening sight indeed, but instead of screams, the assembled crowd murmured excitedly.

The dragon touched down in front of the palace and the woman on its back—who was wearing a maid outfit—slipped off and glided gracefully to the ground as if she wasn't affected by gravity. This allowed the crowd to get a good look at the woman for the first time, and her appearance drew even more attention than the dragon itself. Her hair was black as midnight and tied into a ponytail with a ribbon, and she was a little taller than the average woman. Her face radiated beauty, from the long, feathery lashes that framed her large, circular eyes, to the lips the color of rose petals beneath a straight, svelte nose. Her skin was so pale, it looked almost translucent, and taken as a whole, she looked as if a higher power had put every last drop of effort it could muster into creating the perfect woman.

Although the woman was wearing a maid uniform, her attire was clearly made of a higher-grade material than what an ordinary maid would generally wear, and the design of the outfit itself made her appear extra-refined. Every man, woman, and child that had congregated on the lawn found themselves enraptured by the beauty of the maid as she bowed gracefully to the crowd.

“I am Mei. I am an envoy sent by the Wicked Witch of the Tower,” the maid announced in a voice as clear as a bell. “I must express our gratitude that you have accepted our invitation to visit the tower.”

“I-I’m also honored that I have been given this chance to see the Great Tower in person!” blurted out Lilith, who was the first to snap out of the trance induced by Mei’s hypnotic beauty in order to be able to greet the maid.

Of course, if the kingdom had been welcoming a representative from one of the eight other nations, this meeting would have been a much more formal affair, but the royals were unsure whether the Great Tower actually counted as a nation in the first place, which made them equally uncertain what kind of reception this wholly unconventional entity deserved. After all, if the Human Kingdom were to welcome this envoy in a more formal setting, the non-human nations (aside from the Elven Queendom) might begin to suspect that the kingdom was in collusion with a non-state actor that was threatening to disrupt the international order. If that were to happen and the Great Tower subsequently entered into a conflict with another nation, the Human Kingdom might end up being dragged into the hostilities as well, despite having no formal ties with the tower. So since a full-on state reception was out of the question, the kingdom had settled on this more informal gathering, attended by members of the royal family as well as a bunch of vassals. Thankfully, the Great Tower had only sent someone who appeared to be a maid (even if she did look as pretty as the Goddess of Beauty herself), so the Human Kingdom could claim plausible deniability over how close the two sides were.

“Forgive me for the abrupt nature of this question, but are you prepared to depart for the Great Tower?” Mei asked.

“I believe we are *almost* ready to go,” Lilith replied, glancing sidelong at her brother, who was still ogling Mei. Lilith nudged the prince standing beside her with her elbow to snap him out of his stupor.

“P-Pardon my manners. Allow me to introduce myself,” Lilith’s brother said, blushing. “I am Clowe, crown prince of the Human Kingdom. I greet you on behalf of my father, the king, who unfortunately cannot be here with us today, due to health reasons.”

After this short introduction, Clowe seized his opportunity to make a request. “Oh, and one more thing. I would be extremely grateful if you allowed me to accompany my sister, Lilith, on her tour of the Great Tower.”

This completely unsolicited proposition made Lilith silently seethe. The invitation from the Great Tower had only mentioned her by name, not her brother, yet here he was, suddenly volunteering to come along so that he could serve as Lilith’s minder and prevent her from engaging in any political dealings. And truth be known, the king wasn’t actually suffering from any medical episodes at that time. It was just a falsehood cooked up to serve as a convenient sob story to assure Clowe’s place on this trip. For her part, Lilith would have much preferred to not have a babysitter peering over her shoulder, so this blatant act of interference by her brother and his allies had her fuming. *Though the dragon doesn’t seem big enough to accommodate my brother and all of his retainers, so perhaps this envoy will see fit to refuse his request*, Lilith thought. However, Mei’s response was rather unexpected.

“You are, of course, free to accompany us, and you are invited to bring along as large a delegation as you desire,” Mei stated. “However, I would like to make one small request.”

Mei scanned the group of maids from the palace that had come out to see the dragon until her large eyes landed on one particular maid who was of a tender age.

“Several young girls roughly the same age as this child have settled around the Great Tower,” Mei explained. “We plan to have these girls meet with the royals from the Human Kingdom while you are on your tour, and it would be greatly welcomed if there were someone close in age to them in the delegation. We hope that you will be able to accommodate this request, and we absolutely guarantee this girl’s safety. We will cover all expenses, and provide everyone with all the food, clothing, and lodging that is needed for the duration of the tour.”

Both Lilith and Clowe were somewhat skeptical about bringing along the apprentice maid, Yume, as part of the delegation. It wasn’t as if there would be absolutely no benefit in having Yume there to entertain the young girls at the tower, but it didn’t strike them as totally necessary either. But to Clowe, Yume

accompanying them would serve to further justify his participation in the trip, and there was no real reason to deny the request and leave the young maid behind.

"Oh, we would be delighted if she came too," Clowe said with a smile. "Don't you agree, Lilith?"

"Of course, dear brother," Lilith said after a slight pause. "Yume, you may accompany me."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness," Yume mumbled, somewhat nervous at suddenly finding herself the center of attention. On hearing Yume's name spoken aloud, Mei got slightly emotional, but because there were only low-level humans around her, nobody noticed the vibes emanating from her.

In the end, the Human Kingdom delegation consisted of Lilith, Clowe, five male knights, one female knight, three maids, and Yume. However, they all couldn't help wondering exactly *how* twelve people were going to fit on the back of a dragon, even if the hulking creature was ten meters long. After all, the delegation would also be taking quite a bit of luggage with them, which only increased the amount of stuff this one dragon would have to carry.

Ignoring all of the confused murmurs, Mei turned and issued an order to the dragon. "You may return to the tower." After the dragon had grunted its assent, Mei pulled out a card.

"I shall now take you all to your destination," Mei announced. "This trip shall only take a moment, and I guarantee that none of you will be in any danger for its duration. So if you will pardon me..." She paused, then raised her voice. "Teleportation—release."

The card glowed with power, startling the delegation, and a second later, the twelve visitors found themselves standing in the middle of an expansive indoor plaza that was completely white. While Lilith and her entourage looked around in astonishment, Mei bowed elegantly once more.

"Welcome to the Great Tower," Mei said. "We would like to welcome you on your tour of this landmark."

This is insanity! thought Clowe. *Did she really just use a teleportation item?*

What kind of resources does this "Great Tower" have?

Teleportation items were very rare and generally only found in dungeons or ruins. Usually, the only people in possession of such items were members of a royal family or other elites who specifically saved them for life-and-death situations. No sensible person would use a teleportation item for a journey you could do by conventional means.

While Clowe was shocked by this turn of events, Lilith couldn't help grinning with a hint of excitement after witnessing the now-verifiable power the Wicked Witch of the Tower possessed. Mei, however, didn't seem to pay the diametrically opposite reactions of the royal siblings any heed as she continued on with the tour.

"We are currently on the first floor of the Great Tower," Mei stated. "A meeting with the witch is scheduled to take place on the third floor. Please follow me."

The first floor was replete with evenly-spaced columns that were as thick as tree trunks. After the fight with the White Knights, the tower was renovated to serve as a welcome center for guests, which came in especially handy now that the structure overlooked a growing human settlement. At the time of the tower battles, there was nothing connecting the five floors to each other—at least, not physically—but now, there were staircases that granted access to each floor (Though Light and his allies still used the Teleportation cards to move between floors because everyone agreed walk-ups are a pain). The renovations also added a reception chamber up on the third floor, where Ellie—better known as the "Wicked Witch of the Tower"—would formally meet any guests, plus there were some waiting rooms, where the servants of the VIPs could retire to. Since Ellie had made this entire tower using her sorcery skills and some gacha cards, redesigning the floors was quite a straightforward task.

When Lilith and Clowe's delegation reached the third floor, they were greeted by the sight of two fairy maids with semitransparent wings waiting in front of a pair of double doors. The fairy maids were so dazzlingly beautiful, every male eye in the delegation was glued to the pair, though admittedly, the fairy maids weren't quite as ravishingly gorgeous as Mei.

“In this chamber, you shall have an audience with the witch of this tower,” Mei said, turning to the delegation. “Though I must ask that only Prince Clowe and Princess Lilith enter through these doors. Inside, you shall find the witch waiting for you. In the meantime, I shall show the knights and servants to the waiting rooms.”

“Um, we appreciate your consideration,” Clowe mumbled, his eyes still firmly fixed on the fairy maids. “Everyone, please follow her until we summon you.”

Meanwhile, Lilith’s mind was entirely focused on what they would find on the other side of the doors, where the Wicked Witch of the Tower was purported to be waiting for them.

“This way, if you please,” Mei said to the royal siblings’ attendants, gesturing down the hall. The maid led the resulting group of ten around a corner a little way further down, and stopped in front of two waiting rooms. A pair of fairy maids stood by each door, all four as equally lovely as the pair that had been standing outside the witch’s chamber.

“This nearest door leads to the men’s waiting room,” Mei stated. “The second waiting room is reserved for females.”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said the sole female knight who had been assigned to escort Lilith. “Why are we being separated into men’s and women’s waiting rooms? Is this really necessary?”

“We believe this arrangement allows everyone the chance to relax, just in case there are those who find being in confined spaces with members of the opposite sex uncomfortable,” Mei explained. “Please rest assured that this is our only intention.”

Mei raised a hand, which was the signal for the fairy maids to open the doors, then turned back to the attendants. “You may now retire to your respective rooms until the prince and princess have concluded their audience with the witch. If you need assistance at all, feel free to let us know.”

The knights briefly glanced at each other, holding a silent conversation just with their eyes, but they weren’t really in a position to demand the waiting rooms be changed to mixed-gender spaces. After all, they were dealing with people who could tame dragons and who used teleportation items like they

were no big deal, so it was obviously more constructive to humor their hosts than to needlessly defy them. However, the knights were all quick-thinking, skilled fighters, and they silently agreed that if anything were to happen, they would mount an immediate joint response.

The women in the delegation walked off toward their waiting room, led by the lone female knight, who entered the room tense and battle-ready. She silently scoped out the room, but all she saw was sofas placed around a coffee table that had fruits and sweets on it that she'd never seen before. Even though the room had no windows, the space was airily decorated with potted plants, paintings, vases, and other objets d'art. The space seemed more appropriate for entertaining socialites than mere servants.

Well, I don't see *any potential hiding places for a person or a monster, and I don't sense any danger either*, the knight thought to herself. She had been selected to serve as Lilith's personal bodyguard because she was a stronger fighter than most of the male human knights in the kingdom, and she frequently accompanied Lilith whenever the princess left the protection of the palace to go serve food to the needy or to do some other charity work. In the knight's personal opinion, she was somewhat against Lilith doing this kind of work, since it tended to take her to the poorer and more unsafe regions of the kingdom, though the knight did respect the princess's sense of justice. Because of this, even here at the tower, checking for danger came naturally to the knight.

After a moment or two, the knight waved the maids into the room, and they were joined by Mei, who closed the door behind her. But as soon as the door clicked in its frame, the knight noticed a black-haired boy standing on the other side of the room.

What in the... thought the knight. *But that's impossible! I scanned this room high and low to make sure there was no possible place anyone could've been hiding! So how is this kid standing right in front of me without me noticing his presence before?!*

The knight reached for the hilt of her sword and moved in front of the maids to shield them. "Who are you?! What's your name?!"

The child appeared to be quite a cute-looking human boy and seemed to be wearing rather expensive clothing. The boy ignored the knight and her questions completely, instead fixing his gaze on the group of maids behind her. Or rather, his large, innocent eyes were firmly trained on the youngest maid in the delegation, Yume. Tears welled up in his eyes and when he finally spoke, his voice cracked with emotion.

“Y-Yume,” Light breathed. “You’re really alive.”

“B-Brother?”

“Yume...”

“Brother!”

Yume ran straight past the knight toward Light, and he dashed to meet her. The knight and the other maids were too stunned to even move a muscle as the two children hugged each other in a tearful embrace.

“Yume!” Light cried. “I’m so happy you’re all right!”

“Brother! Brother! Brother!” Yume sobbed. “I missed you so much, brother!”

It was a very moving scene, but the knight and the maids wouldn’t get to witness all of it.

“Ugh! What the...” the knight spluttered, suddenly feeling faint. She spun around and saw Mei holding up a card that had the words “SR Slumber” on it. It would be the last thing she would see before she and the three other maids in the room blacked out.



“Huh? What’s going on, brother?” Yume gasped, clinging fearfully to her

brother and watching on in horror as her associates suddenly passed out.

"Don't worry. They'll be fine," Light assured her. "They're just taking a little nap. These maids are my allies."

The two fairy maids by the door swiftly caught the four affected women before they hit the deck and gently lowered them to the floor, where they made them comfortable. The original plan had been for Light to wait for the female delegation to all take their seats so that they'd be relaxing on the sofas before Mei hit them with the SR Slumber, so that Light could reveal his presence to Yume without any interference. But the moment Light had caught sight of his little sister, who he had all but given up for dead, his overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around his long-lost sibling then and there meant he had completely forgotten the plan and ended up revealing himself to the rest of Yume's group before they'd been put to sleep. Because it had been a surprise attack, and because the targets were humans with low power levels, this ad-libbed plan had still gone surprisingly well. Mei kneeled before Light and Yume, and the two fairy maids followed suit, their heads bowed.

"Miss Yume, forgive me for waiting this long to formally introduce myself to you," Mei said. "I am one of Master Light's retainers, the SUR Level 9999, Everseeking Maid, Mei. I am most honored to make your acquaintance."

Yume looked at Light, her eyes filled with confusion. "B-Brother, she's your 'retainer'? Did she just call you 'master'? A-And is she really Level 9999?" Yume paused as she realized something now that she'd had a good look at Light. "Gosh, brother. You haven't gotten any bigger since the last time I saw you."

"A lot has happened since I left the village," Light replied, his voice growing softer as he recalled everything he'd been through. "A whole lot."

But Light quickly broke out into a smile again, so that his sister wouldn't start worrying. "Anyway, we have lots to talk about, so let's go somewhere a bit more comfortable."

"B-But I can't leave. I work as the princess's maid," said Yume. "The other maids will get mad at me."

"Don't worry. I've got you covered," Light said as he produced a card from his front pocket. "Here, take this."

“Um, okay.” Yume took the card from him and held it in her hand.

“Now hold it up and say the word ‘release,’” instructed Light.

“Release?” Even though Yume uttered the word with understandable skepticism in her voice, this didn’t stop the card from glowing with magical energy and producing an exact body double of Yume right before her eyes.

“B-Brother?” Yume stammered, grabbing Light in shock once again as she stared at her doppelgänger.

“Don’t worry. It’s an exact copy of you made by that magic item,” Light explained. “It won’t hurt you.”

“Indeed, I am the lookalike you created using the UR Double Shadow card, Miss Yume,” said the copy. “You may proceed to give me commands as you so desire.”

The Double Shadow card had the ability to produce an exact physical duplicate of the user that nobody could tell apart from the real deal. The card faithfully reproduced the anatomy, attire, words, actions, quirks, and even the Gifts of the user. In fact, the whole reason Light was able to have the Unlimited Gacha producing gacha cards around the clock was entirely down to the Double Shadow card. Whenever this particular card got pulled, Light would immediately release a body double of himself and order it to pull cards all day and all night. Even as this scene in the tower was unfolding, these Double Shadows were hard at work, bashing the Unlimited Gacha buttons down in the mana-filled dungeon core room of the Abyss. This hack wasn’t foolproof, however, for the Unlimited Gachas possessed by Light’s clones weren’t perfect copies of his own Gift, meaning his replicas pulled high-rarity cards at a lower rate than Light would himself, but given the volume of resources needed to keep the Abyss running smoothly, Light needed a way to generate as many cards as he could, even while he was busy with other things up on the surface world.

“This copy will behave exactly the same as you, so no one will ever find out it’s a fake,” I said. “All you have to say is, ‘Take care of everything’ and you’re good to go.”

“Um, okay,” said Yume. “T-Take care of everything.”

“As you command,” Yume’s copy said, bowing to acknowledge that the order had been received and understood. “I shall serve under the Human Kingdom’s princess as Yume.”

Light turned to Mei and the two fairy maids. “Mei, I need you to make *absolutely* sure these sleeping beauties are dealt with before they wake up.”

“Understood, Master Light,” Mei replied. Although the ambiguous wording used might have made it sound as if Light had asked Mei to bump off the four snoozing visitors, Light had actually ordered the SUR maid to use the SSSR Memory Control to erase all recollection of having seen a young boy in this waiting room. It should be noted that the card in question wasn’t quite as useful as its rarity suggested, since it could only manipulate a person’s short-term memory, and it wasn’t all that effective against high-level targets, but with that said, the SSSR Memory Control card was certainly good enough to use on a group of humans who had briefly caught sight of Light only a few minutes before.

Light pulled out the SSR Teleportation card and gripped his sister by the shoulder. “It’s time for us to go, Yume. Make sure you don’t let go.”

“Um, okay. I won’t,” said a still-flustered Yume as she tightly wrapped her arms around Light.

In his mind, Light called up images of the bottom tier of the Abyss. “SSR Teleportation—release.”

The maids’ heads remained bowed in their direction as their view of the waiting room in the tower instantly dissolved and turned into the rocky training grounds in the Abyss, where a crowd consisting of Light’s subjects was waiting for them. Because he didn’t want to needlessly frighten Yume, Light had explicitly forbidden his more monstrous-looking allies from joining the throng, albeit apologetically. Due to this, most of those gathered were human—or at least, *humanlike*—summons. Even so, Yume stiffened with shock when she saw the huge assortment of people in this welcoming party.

“Mrroow!”

“Hiya, Master! Is that your sister wit’cha?”

Aoyuki and Nazuna came rushing up to Light and Yume as the group's representatives, since they were the two SUR deputies still in the Abyss.

"Yup, that's right," Light said. "Yume, this girl with cat ears is Aoyuki, and this silver-haired girl is Nazuna. They're two of my closest allies, so you should greet them properly."

"P-Pleased to meet you," Yume said timidly. "I'm my brother's little sister, Yume."

"Mnyeew!" Aoyuki purred like a kitten and nuzzled her head against Yume. Although Aoyuki appeared to be slightly older than Yume, this one affectionate act was enough to win over the young girl.

Gosh, she's so cute, just like a real kitty, thought Yume. She stroked Aoyuki under the chin and on her cheek, making the monster tamer cuddle up even closer to her. Aoyuki typically didn't like it when anyone other than Light touched her, so this was a fairly unusual sight.

"Since you're Master's sister, that makes you family to us," Nazuna said. "So if ya ever need any help, just come to me!"

"Okay," Yume said. "Thank you, Nazuna, ma'am."

"Sh-She called me 'ma'am'..." Nazuna said, letting out a smug, nasally chuckle. "She called me 'ma'am'!" Nazuna slapped both hands to her jelly-like cheeks, blissfully reveling in her new title.

In terms of physical age, Nazuna clearly appeared older than Yume, so it would normally go unremarked on that Yume had used that particular term of respect for the Vampire Knight, but since nobody in the Abyss had ever thought to address Nazuna as "ma'am" before, the experience was entirely new and exhilarating for her.

"Don'tcha fret, little sister! You come straight to Auntie Nazuna if ya ever need anything!" Nazuna told Yume.

"Um, okay, will do," Yume mumbled, smiling nervously in the face of Nazuna's unbridled enthusiasm.

Others looking to greet Yume included the various fairy maids, Jack, Suzu,

Gold, Nemumu, and Mera, but as a veritable horde of allies had crowded around Yume by this point, it would've taken her an inordinate amount of time to say hello to everyone, and since he feared the endless meet-and-greets would wear Yume out, Light brought an end to this little gathering.

"Okay, guys, the rest of you can introduce yourselves to her later," Light called above the clamor of voices. "I should show her to her room now, so that she can get some rest. Iceheat, could you lead the way?"

"Certainly, Master Light," replied the housekeeper he had just addressed, who then turned to Yume. "I, myself, am your elder brother's faithful servant, UR Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat. It is a pleasure to meet you at long last, most eminent sister. Please allow me to guide you to your room, milady."

"Oh, um, thank you very much," mumbled Yume, who reacted fretfully at this loftily-worded salutation.

I remember I used to act like that whenever they overpraised me, Light thought with a wry smirk, Yume's hand grasped in his as they both followed Iceheat.

Reaching Yume's bedroom marked the completion of Light's mission to retrieve his younger sister and secure her in the Abyss, the safest place in the world for her. In her specially-prepared room, Yume would get the chance to rest and calm her nerves ahead of the long and rather weighty conversation she would soon have with her brother.

Chapter 3: The Meetings

On entering the Great Tower's reception chamber, Lilith and Clowe met a young woman whose face was obscured by a hood, but who was wearing a dress that complimented her shapely figure and accentuated her sizable chest.

"Welcome to my tower, Your Highnesses," Ellie greeted them. "I am the one you seek to speak with: the Wicked Witch of the Tower."

I should've expected that the witch controlling this tower would be every bit as ravishing as the maids who serve under her, thought Clowe, though what he actually said was, "We thank you for inviting us to tour your tower, my lady. I am Clowe, crown prince of the Human Kingdom."

"My thanks also. I am Princess Lilith," his sister said, following her brother's example.

The three seated themselves around a table and engaged in a formal discussion, though there was little about their exchange that could be viewed as remarkable. Ellie briefed the royal siblings on how the Great Tower was treating the humans in the surrounding settlement, on the particulars of the "absolute autonomy" decree, on the policy positions of the Great Tower, and on the vision going forward. The conversation was congenial, with Clowe and Lilith largely just listening to what the witch had to say while reclining on their respective sofas, and once their meeting had wrapped up, Ellie invited the siblings to retire to the guest rooms.

"We can conduct a full tour of the tower and its surroundings tomorrow," Ellie told them. "You must be exhausted from your trip, so I insist you get some rest before then."

"We deeply appreciate your consideration, my lady," Clowe said, though in his head, his comeback was more along the lines of: *You brought us here using a teleportation item, so we're not in the least bit tired*. But while their conversation had been a pleasant one, Clowe had been unable to get a good read on the witch, so he decided to keep his thoughts private out of an abundance of caution.

“We shall see each other again at dinner,” Ellie said.

On exiting the reception chamber, Clowe and Lilith found a handful of fairy maids and the rest of their delegation waiting for them. The fairy maids led the twelve-strong party down to the second floor, which had been remodeled and now consisted entirely of guest rooms. The delegation’s luggage had already been placed in their respective rooms.

Lilith’s guest suite had fancier furnishings than her own private chamber back in the Human Kingdom palace. The furniture, the artwork, and the varieties of fruit on the table—many of which she had never seen before—all looked to be of superior quality. In fact, the only thing that let the room down was the complete lack of windows, which gave the space a somewhat claustrophobic feel, but this was easily outweighed by the opulent trappings. With Nono’s assistance, Lilith changed into bedroom wear, since the gown she had been wearing up until that point was rather stuffy. The princess planned to change into a different dress for dinner.

“Your Highness, what do you think of the Wicked Witch of the Tower?” Nono asked.

“I didn’t get a look at her face because she wore a hood the whole time, but she was quite sophisticated, knowledgeable, and erudite,” Lilith said. “But more importantly, I now know she’s the genuine article, because she can control dragons and uses teleportation items for normal trips! I need to have a serious discussion with her about forming an alliance with my kingdom. But for that to happen, I need to do something about my brother.”

Yume handed Nono a comb, and the head maid positioned herself behind Lilith, who had taken a seat in front of a mirror.

“Did anything exciting happen to you and the other maids while you were waiting?” Lilith asked.

“No, it was uneventful,” Nono said. “Though I did doze off for a minute or two in the waiting room. Perhaps all of today’s shocking experiences have worn me out.”

In truth, Mei had put Nono and the other witnesses to sleep with the SR Slumber card and rewritten their memories with the SSSR Memory Control

card. Those who weren't meant to see the reunion between Light and Yume simply believed they had taken short naps.

Lilith giggled. "Who would ever have thought someone like *you* would fall asleep on the job?" she teased. "Did anything else happen?"

"Anything else?" Nono racked her brain for a moment, but couldn't think of anything out of the ordinary.

Still staring into the mirror, Lilith asked Yume the same question, and the young maid replied with an innocent smile on her face. "The sweets they had on the table were very yummy! But the tea was too bitter, so I put in a lot of milk and sugar."

"You're still too young to properly appreciate tea," Lilith said, giggling again. "It's that particular hint of bitterness that makes tea so exquisite. Though I have to say, I simply love the tea the tower has been serving us. The flavor and the aroma surpasses even the most expensive tea leaves I know of. It does make me wonder what variety of tea they used and where they purchased it."

"Your Highness, you should avoid buying things that are too expensive," Nono warned.

"Yes, yes, I know," Lilith said, sounding a little exasperated. "That money would be better spent on sweets for the poor and for orphans."

"You're such a kind person, Your Highness!" Yume said, a beaming smile plastered across her face.

Out of Lilith, her trainer, Nono, the other maids, and the female knight assigned to protect the princess, no one had noticed anything off about Yume. The Yume serving the princess in her guestroom was the clone that had been produced by the Double Shadow card, and this replica could perfectly mimic the real Yume's speech patterns, behaviors, and gestures, and it even retained all of her memories. Even a magic item or an Appraisal spell would have had a difficult time identifying a Double Shadow copy as a fake, though that didn't mean the gacha card wasn't without its flaws.

For one thing, a replicated Gift was always of lesser quality than the original it was copied from, and a duplicate wouldn't perform as well in battle either.

Another drawback was if the user of the Double Shadow card had any kind of magic items on their person, those items would not be replicated. One easy way to expose a clone was to kill it outright, since a copy would disintegrate rather than leave behind a corpse. Furthermore, a copy could only be made if the intended person physically had the card in their hand at the point of release, which sorely limited the application of the Double Shadow card. In other words, this card exemplified the rule of thumb that there was no such thing as a perfect magic item.

After Nono had finished combing Lilith's hair, the princess stood up and went to find a sofa to recline on while waiting for one of her maids to prepare some fresh tea. "Nono, since we have a few hours until dinner, we should use this time to plan our next step. I need to come up with a way to give my brother the slip so I can set up a private meeting with the tower witch. Now more than ever, we need to extract a commitment from her that she will join forces with our kingdom."

"Certainly, Your Highness," Nono said. "Yume, you may wait in the other room until we call for you again."

"Yes, Miss Nono!" Yume's imposter replied, bowing to the older woman. "I'll take my leave now."

The replica left the princess's bedroom and waited in the suite's living room for when she would be needed again. Once the two of them were alone, Lilith and Nono discussed ways the princess could converse with the Wicked Witch of the Tower without the watchful eyes of Clowe and his men being on them, though neither woman was aware at this point that this weighty conversation would turn out to be all for nothing.

☆☆☆

After the royal siblings had dined with the tower witch and engaged in a little bit more informal conversation, Lilith retired to her guest suite again to sleep. The princess tossed and turned in her bed, while in her mind, she went over the food she had been served. All throughout the full-course meal, the witch had displayed table manners that were even more impeccable than Lilith's, but what had surprised the princess the most were the dishes themselves. *None of the vegetables tasted bitter at all, and the seafood and the various meats were even slightly sweet,* thought Lilith. *And I can't believe you can bake a cake using cheese, much less that it would taste* that *good! I mean, it was so absolutely divine, I couldn't stop myself from going back for a second piece! Perhaps I should've been a bit more modest?*

Cheese was Lilith's least favorite food, largely because she couldn't stand the smell of it, and she always tried to avoid any dishes containing it. But the tower witch had introduced her to this strange dessert called a "cheesecake," and after just one bite, Lilith swore that this cake must have come from the heavens, for nothing so tasty could possibly exist in the mortal world. Lilith made very short work of her piece of cheesecake, and without even considering how it would look, she asked her host for another piece. Her brother, Clowe, was wide-eyed with shock at seeing his little sister enjoying a dish with cheese in it, of all things, and this astonishment surpassed even his own surprise at how delectable the food was.

I was unable to show restraint in front of the witch, and now she might think I'm unworthy of joining forces with her, Lilith lamented. *It would be awful if my gluttony has ruined any hope for the human race.* Lilith curled up on the mattress in self-pity, but her doleful thoughts were soon interrupted by a familiar voice.

"How are we faring tonight, Princess Lilith?"

Lilith sat bolt upright and caught a glimpse of a woman through the gap in the bed curtains. "Madam Witch?"

"Forgive me for disturbing your slumber," Ellie said. "However, I am here to inform you that my lord wishes to speak with you."

"What?" Lilith gasped. "The Wicked Witch of the Tower has a *lord*?"

The princess got out of bed and faced Ellie as a show of respect, though she was slightly taken aback by the sorceress's present appearance. Instead of the hooded garment she had worn during their formal meeting and at dinner, Ellie was dressed in her conventional witch's outfit with her face on full show, revealing golden locks tied up in twin ponytails, and large, beguiling eyes framed by long, dark lashes. Although Lilith had been frankly dazzled by the sheer beauty of the fairy maids who seemed to come in all shapes and sizes, the witch was more breathtaking than any of the servants and arguably even rivaled Mei in the looks department.

"Indeed, Blessed Lord Light—whom I serve—wishes to speak to you directly. This is to be a non-official meeting, conducted in the strictest secrecy, thus making it necessary to visit you at this late hour, despite how discourteous it is. I have taken measures to prevent the servants keeping watch in the other room from noticing your absence, so you are entirely free to take part in this meeting."

"A secret, non-official meeting?" Lilith said. "Does that mean my brother will not be in attendance?"

"Correct. My Blessed Lord only wishes to meet with you," Ellie told her.

Lilith silently wondered why the *true* master of the tower wanted to meet with her, and in secret at that. *Is his intention to kidnap me? Or maybe he thinks I'll be easier to manipulate for his own political ends than my brother? Are they going to brainwash me?*

Ellie smiled gently at Lilith, as if she could read her like an open book. "Please do not worry so much, Princess Lilith. My Blessed Lord does not wish you any harm. In fact, he wants to thank you for everything you've done."

"What? Thank me?" Lilith couldn't recall any favor she might have done for this mystery lord who held sway over the tower witch, who herself was powerful enough to subjugate the Elven Queendom. In her mind, it was still far more plausible that she was being taken for brainwashing.

"I don't blame you for doubting me, since this must all be very confusing for you," Ellie said, still smiling. "But my Blessed Lord really does want to thank you for saving Miss Yume. You see, the girl you took on as a maid is his younger

sister by blood."

"Yume is his younger sister?" Lilith said.

"Yes, indeed," Ellie confirmed. "A series of unfortunate events led my Blessed Lord to become separated from his younger sister and elder brother for several years, but after a long search for his siblings, my Blessed Lord discovered the whereabouts of Yume, and found out that you had sheltered her in your palace after healing her injuries."

"Hm, I do remember Yume saying she had two older brothers," Lilith said. "Her eldest brother carried her out of the village while it was under attack, and she hadn't seen her middle brother since he left the family home to start a new life."

It seemed completely far-fetched to Lilith that one of Yume's brothers could in fact be the true lord of the Great Tower. *I thought Yume's parents were peasant farmers? So how could the son of a peasant farmer hold authority over this powerful witch?* Hearing the reason for this clandestine meeting caused a flood of new questions to swirl around Lilith's mind, but Ellie pressed on without addressing the princess's bewildered state.

"We invited you on a tour of the tower because we had received word that Miss Yume was working as an apprentice maid in your palace," Ellie explained. "Blessed Lord Light wanted to see for himself that his dear sister was alive and well, so we sent you an invitation and asked you to bring Miss Yume along as part of your delegation."

Yet again, Lilith looked stunned by this. "So that's the reason I'm here?"

"Yes, and we hope you will forgive us for this ruse," said Ellie. "But thanks to your cooperation, Blessed Lord Light was able to reunite with his long-lost sister. We have replaced her with a clone, and the real Miss Yume is safe and sound with us."

"W-Wait a second! A clone?" Lilith gasped. "So the Yume that has been serving me all day today was a *clone*?!"

"Correct, Your Highness," Ellie said. "We ask that you please take into consideration why we thought it would be wiser not to seek your permission

before replacing Miss Yume with a clone."

"But... But that's not possible!" Lilith protested. "When did it happen? I never even had an inkling that Yume had been replaced with a clone. She acted so normally..."

"The clones we produce are designed to be completely indistinguishable from the original," Ellie explained. "You needn't blame yourself for not being able to tell the difference."

If the people of the tower could make clones completely indistinguishable from the originals, that meant they could replace not just Lilith, but the *entire* royal family with clones. *Exactly how much power does this witch have?* Lilith thought, a chill running up her spine, though her reaction wasn't one of fear, but one of excitement born out of her overwhelming sense of justice. *If we can make good use of this power, we will be able to give the human race a better future to look forward to.*

"From your reaction, I take it you sympathize with the choices we made?" Ellie asked. "Then we must go, for I do not wish to make Blessed Lord Light wait any longer than he has already."

"W-Wait, hold on a minute!" Lilith practically yelled. "Yes, I totally understand why we must meet in secret, but I can't go meeting your lord dressed like *this.*" Even in the darkness, the princess's cheeks glowed red as she clasped her arms around her nightgown, as if trying to cover up her shame. Ellie cast an understanding eye over Lilith, knowing it would be too much to ask a maiden in her mid-teens to show up in front of a male in just her nightwear.

"You are of course right, Your Highness," said Ellie. "Forgive me for not realizing sooner. Allow me. This will only take a few seconds."

With a snap of her fingers, Ellie transformed Lilith's nightgown into a full ball gown that was fancier than any the princess had in her wardrobe back at home. Lilith looked down in awe at the various jewels and trimmings that adorned the dress, all of which gave it a sophisticated, high-fashion feel, rather than looking garish like it so easily could have. If Lilith were to wear this gown to a debutante ball, every eye in the room—both male and female—would be on her.

"I hope this is to your satisfaction, Your Highness?" Ellie said, a softly satisfied

smile on her face.

“Y-Yes, of course it is...” At that moment in time, Lilith was too shocked to focus on any misgivings she might have.

Ellie’s smile broadened. “In that case, my Blessed Lord Light awaits.” Lilith simply nodded in silence at the witch’s authoritative tone. Ellie then held up a card. “All right, shall we? Teleportation—release.”

Both Ellie and Lilith disappeared from the second-floor suite, leaving only a quiet bedroom behind.

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Lilith found herself instantly transported to a dark, underground world, where the only light seemed to come from glowing orbs affixed to walls which—along with the floors and ceiling—appeared to be made of a black, glasslike material that looked smooth to the touch. Lilith didn’t know it at the time, but she had arrived at the bottommost level of the Abyss, the largest and most notorious dungeon in the known world.

“Follow me, Princess Lilith,” Ellie said as she strolled gracefully onward, her footwear clacking ominously on the glassy floor. It took the two of them a few minutes to reach the giant double doors that led to the throne room, which appeared to be made of some sort of metal Lilith didn’t recognize, while the bas-relief artwork on them was so intricate, it simply couldn’t have been sculpted by an artisan working in any of the ten nations.

Ellie turned to face Lilith and treated her to a friendly smile. “Waiting behind these doors is the most august, distinguished man you will ever encounter. I must ask you to take care not to adopt any attitude toward him that might come across as disrespectful.”

This warning made Lilith tense up with fear. She had spoken at length with the Wicked Witch of the Tower throughout the day, but this was the first time she had heard this particular note of caution in her voice. The witch continued to smile at her in a friendly manner, but there was zero warmth in her icy, aquamarine eyes. These were the eyes of a rabid true believer, who wouldn’t hesitate to kill Lilith if she failed to adhere to proper protocol, and the princess knew her status as a member of the Human Kingdom’s royal family wouldn’t be

enough to save her from such a fate.

Lilith nodded furiously at this request, and Ellie smiled approvingly, as if the princess were an obedient child. Ellie stepped to one side and the double doors swung open silently like they were on well-oiled hinges. Lilith gasped at the fairy tale-like scene beyond the doors, and her thoughts and breathing ceased just long enough that you could have medically pronounced her dead on the spot, though it was only for a moment.

The throne room was so spacious, the entirety of the Human Kingdom's palace could've fit inside it with plenty of room to spare, especially given how the ceiling was so high, it was difficult to say where it ended. A long red carpet led up to a throne, and standing on either side of this carpet were row upon row of creatures, which included an assortment of monsters, dragons, giants, a massive three-headed dog, and a humongous snow-white wolf. Any one of these mythical beasts could have decimated the Human Kingdom, before going on to cause untold destruction the world would never be able to recover from.

Mixed in with the monsters was a vast array of extremely attractive fairy maids that resembled the ones seen in the Great Tower, as well as a few humans—or at least, some people who *looked* human. There was an unusually tall woman standing next to a statuesque maid whose hair was red on one side and blue the other; an extremely cute-looking girl carrying a weapon that looked sort of like a hollow spear; a trim, muscular man who was wearing a coat like a cape; a short, busty, platinum-haired beauty who was standing next to a tall, blond, princely-looking adonis; and a knight in armor with a blindingly golden sheen to it, who was standing alongside a tanned bombshell whose mouth was hidden behind a scarf.

This whole motley crew of humans and nonhumans were standing to attention in orderly columns as if they were palace guards, and all of them were giving off the same ultra-zealous vibes as the tower witch beside Lilith. If ordered to, any one of these individuals would gouge out their own beating heart and serve it up on a platter to their lord and master. Lilith felt deep down in her soul that if she didn't express the same radical devotion as this mass of disciples in front of her, she would likely pay dearly for the affront. *If I show even a hint of discourtesy to this "Lord Light" character, they will slaughter me*

without a moment's thought, Lilith told herself.

At the end of the red carpet and barely within hearing distance right at the back of the chamber, a throne made of gold and other precious metals, as well as embellished with iridescent jewels, sat atop a dais. Seated on the throne was the overlord who commanded absolute fealty from this horde of apocalyptic monsters.

Wait, is that a human *boy?* thought Lilith. *He doesn't look older than thirteen.* But even from this distance, Lilith could tell the boy was the manifestation of overwhelming power and darkness. In other words, this child was a god made flesh. *The tower witch was right to call him her "blessed lord,"* she thought. *This boy is a god. There's simply no other word to describe him. If you told me this was the lovelorn Undergod of Evil, as described in the legend, I'd believe it.*

The sheer intensity given off by the young lord on his throne completely overwhelmed Lilith, to the point where she found herself trembling from head to toe. It was only when Ellie spoke that the princess was able to snap out of her fearful stupor.

"You may proceed, Your Highness," Ellie said. "Blessed Lord Light is waiting for you."

Lilith glanced at the witch and her completely uncovered face. Earlier in the day, the Wicked Witch of the Tower had worn a hood which obscured her whole face from view aside from her mouth, but even so, the sorceress smiled the entire time. But Lilith was learning that the smile she'd witnessed back then was just the sort of polite, perfunctory one that any host would reserve for a guest, for in the presence of her lord and god, the smile on the witch's face was truly captivating and filled with absolute, almost sensual love and adoration for the person sitting on the throne.

In the face of such fanatical devotion, Lilith had no choice but to comply. To settle her nerves, Lilith quietly reminded herself that she was a princess who must maintain her dignity and poise even in a situation like this, before setting off down the carpet at a gentle stroll, taking care not to stumble despite the tension in the room. She walked silently between the rows of monsters who stared at her curiously from both sides, their gazes bringing sweat to her

forehead and armpits. Now that she was seeing the monsters up close, she could tell that a single sneeze from any one of them would probably be enough to kill her, let alone a regular strike with a fist. No one would blame her for being fearful in this situation.

Lilith finally reached the end of what seemed like an interminable trek down the red carpet, and now at the throne, she encountered three more maidens standing beside it who were every bit as beautiful as the tower witch. Lilith instinctively stopped a few paces away from the maidens, one of whom she recognized as Mei, the envoy-slash-maid who had transported her royal delegation to the tower. Standing next to Mei was a blue-haired girl wearing a hood with cat ears sewn onto them. The tower witch walked past Lilith and took her place beside the third maiden, a pretty silver-haired girl with blood-red eyes and clad in armor.

Perhaps I should kneel? thought Lilith. Normally, it would be unthinkable from a national prestige perspective for a member of a royal family to kneel to a leader of another nation, because it signified subservience, and even in a secret meeting like this one, and even if she lacked the arms, wealth, and manpower to prevail over the opposite party, as she did in this moment, it was an act to be avoided.

Unsure of what she should do, Lilith simply stood perfectly still where she was for a few awkward seconds, while the thousands of eyes around her started to fume with impatience over why she wasn't kneeling. If this crowd of all-powerful beings seriously wanted to, they could give in to their uninhibited fury and unleash enough dark energy to stop Lilith's heart and kill her on the spot, but luckily for the princess, the loyalists were only slightly peeved by this point. Though she could tell it was only a matter of time before they became properly enraged. Lilith began desperately weighing up the prestigious reputation of her kingdom against her desire to make it out of here alive, when the young lord on the throne suddenly spoke up.

"Hey, that's not how we treat guests."

The pressure that had been crushing Lilith instantly vanished like it had never existed. The dark-haired youth straightened up in his ornate chair and addressed Lilith.

“Sorry for summoning you here this late,” the boy said. “Welcome to my home, Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom. I’m Yume’s brother, Light.”

The boy named Light got up from his golden throne and padded down the dais steps until he was standing face to face with the princess, though he was somewhat shorter than she was. All of a sudden and without any hint of hesitation, Light bowed his head.

“Yume told me everything,” he said. “You saved my sister’s life by giving her a healing potion, and you let her work as a maid in your palace. I can’t thank you enough for protecting her from harm.”

Light’s actions prompted Ellie and everyone else in the room to bow their heads to Lilith. Light was powerful enough to be considered a god, and the Wicked Witch of the Tower along with every single mythical-looking creature in the room were lowering their heads in gratitude to the princess. Lilith’s first reaction to this was a confused fidget, but then a rush of pride washed over her at the treatment she was receiving. However, Lilith didn’t think she was out of the woods just yet, so she felt she had to say something.

“O-Oh, no, I just did what anybody would do,” she said, waving her hands in front of her. “You don’t have to bow to me.”

“Once again, I find myself grateful that you have such a noble spirit,” Light said, lifting his head and flashing her an angelic smile.

Lilith drew breath, softly but audibly. The boy looked cute enough to be mistaken for a little girl, and it made the princess’s cheeks flush.

Light didn’t seem to notice Lilith’s reaction as he continued. “I’ll never forget what you did for my sister for as long as I live. In return for the healing potion you used on her, I’ll provide you with whatever high-grade healing potions we have in stock, and I’ll also give you an honorarium as a show of thanks. I insist you accept both.”

Light activated his Item Box and produced a barrel of gold coins and a few healing potions, which he gently placed on top of the coins. Lilith looked agape at the thank-you gifts. *I only used a standard healing potion on Yume, not these clearly very expensive potions,* thought Lilith. *And that’s* literally *a barrel full of gold! Is this stuff all real?!*

The potion bottles were trimmed with gold, and the barrel appeared to contain as much money as the Human Kingdom's entire national budget, if not more. Princess or not, Lilith would be unable to take these gifts home simply because she wouldn't be able to explain how she came to be in possession of them. Nobody would believe that saving a poor farm girl merited being rewarded with a bunch of expensive healing potions and a barrelful of gold, and if Lilith mentioned that the tower witch was involved, that would introduce political complications that wouldn't go down well with her father, the king.

As the grimacing Lilith wrestled with this quandary, Light flashed a reassuring smile at the princess, since his team had already anticipated the potential problems she would have with these gifts. "The potions are for you to keep for yourself in case of emergencies. You don't need to tell anyone about them. As for the gold, I think it'd be best if you treated it as your own personal source of funds. I'll introduce you to a merchant who I'll get to set up shop in the Human Kingdom. He can be the one who safeguards the barrel of gold for you, and whenever you need to access the money, all you'll have to do is contact him and he'll provide you with the funds."

"Why, thank you for being so considerate," Lilith said, smiling politely.

Since Light had prepared a rationalization for her to take the gifts, she could see no reason to refuse, and it meant, once she returned home, she would have all the money she needed to independently fund her activities. From Light's perspective, he needed Lilith to accept these thank-you gifts for rescuing his sister. Simple words of appreciation would be beneath the overlord of the Abyss, so Light had to arrange something that went beyond the expectations of the princess, while also smoothing the way for her to be able to accept these riches.

"However, I still don't feel this is enough to adequately show my appreciation," Light said. "So I'm also willing to give you anything you want. Just name it. You can have a Bracelet of Youth, a Reverse Aging Elixir, a Poison Cancellation Earring, or anything else that springs to mind."

"I-I can't believe what I'm hearing..." Lilith breathed. "Those things all sound like stuff from a fairy tale. I wouldn't know which one to choose." Lilith looked visibly unsettled as Light rattled off the names of these fantastical items. If

anyone else in the world had made her the same offer, she would have treated it as some kind of unrealistic joke, but she knew deep down that this young boy who ruled over giant monsters was perfectly capable of giving her any of those things.

"Whatever you want, it's yours," Light reiterated. "You saved my sister's life, so I'd even be willing to give you all of those things if you find yourself unable to pick just one." He didn't sound like he was sacrificing an arm and a leg though. His attitude more closely resembled that of a parent letting a kid pick what they wanted at a candy store.

H-How many valuable items does he even have? Lilith thought to herself, her perfectly polite smile twitching at the corners. She took a few breaths to calm herself down. *No, I should be* glad *he's making me this offer. I mean, it doesn't even have to be a magic item, right? I could ask for one or two of those monsters over there to come serve as my kingdom's protectors. That way, none of the other races would ever look down on us humans again, nor force us to sell our crops for practically nothing. We'd be able to levy tariffs, and put an end to the slave trade. I could truly solve several problems at once if I went down that route. I could, but...* Lilith balled her hands up into fists. *Am I making the right choice?*

The princess launched into what was perhaps the most intense internal debate she had ever had in her life. *There's no predicting what kind of negative consequences might result from joining hands with this living god of darkness. But he is offering me more than I could ever have dreamed of, a-and as the princess, the most important thing is to secure a better tomorrow for humans. I have to do whatever it takes to realize that future, even if it means kissing the devil himself and having people curse me as an abomination!*

"Lord Light, I request just one thing," Lilith said as she turned and looked the boy straight in the eye. "I want you to lend me your strength so that us humans can enjoy a better future! I implore you!"

"Very well," Light replied, smiling brightly. "I wish I could do more for you, but you have my word."

Light's answer came so swiftly, Lilith almost believed she'd just been tricked

into asking him to join forces with her. But now that she had solicited this favor from him, she couldn't just back out. At that particular moment in time, Lilith had no idea whether her choice would prove to be a blessing or a bane for the human race.

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The next morning, Lilith ate breakfast, then joined Clowe on a tour of the human settlement that had sprung up around the Great Tower, with Ellie in her Wicked Witch garb serving as their guide.

"I see the dwellings here are made out of either metal or wood," Lilith noted.

"The metal buildings are what we call 'prefab' homes," Ellie explained. "They are used as temporary shelter for new arrivals. We also construct homes out of lumber we source ourselves, but these are given to families with young children on a priority basis."

Light's allies in the tower used the R Prefab cards to create interim housing for the former slaves brought to the settlement. They also chopped down trees in the forest and used magic to process the resulting lumber into suitable building material to make permanent homes out of. The plan was to give these homes first to families, then eventually to people who didn't have dependents. The custom-built homes also provided work opportunities for the slaves who used to be builders and craftspeople, in the form of making furniture, utensils, and other essential items.

"Apparently, you have golems plowing the fields," remarked Clowe.

"Indeed we do, because humans simply lack the brute strength needed to perform such a task," Ellie explained. "And as you know, golems never tire from physical labor. But we employ humans to perform the more delicate tasks, like planting seeds and watering the crops. We don't assign golems to perform all the work, and we expect everyone to contribute wherever they are most proficient."

"I truly admire your way of thinking, my lady," Clowe said. "I don't suppose you could see your way to lending us a few of those golems?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Highness," Ellie replied. "I have no plans to deploy my

golems outside of this settlement."

"That is rather unfortunate," Clowe said. "A few of those golems would have greatly helped in furthering our kingdom's development."

Although Clowe was disappointed by the response he'd received, there was a very good reason why Ellie had refused to lend him some of the golems: if these automatons were to take over the work of developing a nation, even temporarily, humans would find themselves robbed of jobs and with no money to feed themselves as a result. That particular scenario ran counter to the tower witch's belief in the "absolute autonomy of humans." Furthermore, she did not want other nations to get the mistaken assumption that the golems were to be used for military purposes. The last thing the witch wanted was to go to war with a nation so soon after the erection of the tower, nor did she want to invite the possibility of a faction of humans despising her.

Whenever any of the fairy maids noticed the procession led by Ellie, they would stop whatever it was they were doing and bow their heads. By contrast, any humans dropped to their knees, lowered their heads, and folded their hands together as if in prayer. Ellie waved nonchalantly at them, as if all this attention came quite naturally to her. Lilith gazed at the witch with a dazzled expression lighting up her face, her eyes practically shouting her yearning to team up with Ellie for the sake of the human race. Meanwhile, Clowe looked somewhat peeved that the people in the settlement seemed to be blithely ignorant of the fact that Human Kingdom royalty was walking among them.

Ellie ignored Clowe's reaction and led the way to the next destination. "I will now show you the outer edges of the settlement."

All the while, a keen pair of eyes was watching the tour group from the main entrance to the tower. "I can't believe neither my brother nor Nono has so much as an inkling that I've been replaced by a clone," whispered the real Lilith.

Chapter 4: A Future for Humans

Her face shrouded by a hood, Lilith watched Ellie guiding the royal delegation around the settlement from her position at the entrance to the Great Tower. The princess had created a lookalike using the Double Shadow card and gotten the clone to take her place on the prescheduled tour. Lilith required a duplicate of herself to free her up to take part in a series of discussions with Light concerning the next steps they would need to take if they wished to secure a better future for the human race. The talks were expected to take an extended period of time because the two parties needed to discuss a wide range of topics and ensure they were on the same page regarding each other's opinions. If circumstances demanded it, the copy would be sent back to the Human Kingdom with the delegation to act in Lilith's stead, and as the duplicate was equipped with a number of gacha cards, it would be a fairly straightforward task to switch Lilith back in at a later date.

"Princess Lilith, have you finished confirming that everything is proceeding to your liking?" asked Mei.

"Yes, and thank you for allowing me to do this first," Lilith said.

"There is no need to thank me," Mei replied. "Master Light was happy to accommodate your request."

The princess wanted to make sure nobody could tell the clone wasn't actually her. She was quite willing to believe that the Double Shadow card was as powerful as advertised, but she felt much more comfortable seeing the clone in action—with Light's permission, of course—than simply taking their word for it. Once Lilith was satisfied that neither her brother nor her own head maid, Nono, had any idea that she was missing, she rejoined Mei inside the tower so that the maid could take her to see Light in his office on the fourth floor. Instead of wasting time taking the stairs all the way up there, Mei used the SSR Teleportation card to deposit the two of them at their destination.

I still find it hard to believe that they use teleportation items just to get around the tower, thought Lilith. *Lord Light and his allies are truly something else.*

After their surroundings had transformed from rows of thick white pillars to a long and winding hallway, Mei led Lilith to Light's office.

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"I can't even imagine how such a terrible thing could ever happen to anyone..."

A pale-faced Lilith was sitting on a sofa opposite me. I'd just finished recounting how I was almost murdered in the Abyss, as well as telling her about the journey I was on to find out not only the truth behind my assassination attempt, but also why my home village was razed to the ground.



Of course, I only told Lilith the bare minimum that I felt she needed to know,

but when I asked her directly about Masters and the international conspiracy to seek one out, she couldn't offer me any information that might be of use.

"Forgive me," Lilith said. "I know nothing about those things, despite being royalty. The other races almost never treat me, my father, or my brother as equals when in diplomatic settings. Though just to be sure, I'll try to ask my brother and the others about them when I return. Indirectly, of course."

"No, there's no need to do that," I said. "Even hinting at them might cause people to become suspicious of you."

After casually forbidding Lilith from breathing a word of what we'd discussed, I gave my account of how the human settlement around the Great Tower came to be. Over the course of all of my intelligence gathering operations, I started to grow more and more furious at how humans like myself were being treated, so I'd sent Ellie to declare absolute autonomy for all humans and thereby free the slaves.

"I want to raise humans out of the mire, but I don't want to cause turmoil in the process that might end up conversely hurting humans," I said. "I'm taking care to minimize the blowback as much as possible, though I will still get my revenge all the same."

"I understand you perfectly," Lilith said. "As for myself, I do not plan to immediately seize the throne by force by removing my father and brother. After all, if I *were* to do that, the other races might question my authority, and I wouldn't win the support of all of our retainers."

Lilith paused and grew more somber. "It shames me to say this, but I have no idea how many 'weeds' the other nations have planted in the royal court, and unless I eradicate all of these 'weeds,' I won't be able to sit on the throne with anything approaching peace of mind."

"Weeds" was Lilith's euphemism for "spies." She was perfectly willing to take over as the ruler of her kingdom in order to secure a better future for all humans, but as long as there were spies running rampant in the palace, she'd only be exposing herself to the risk of being poisoned, assassinated, or kidnapped once she became monarch. And as Lilith alluded to, it was hard to imagine her royal subjects accepting what would basically amount to a coup

d'état, meaning she wouldn't be able to function as a normal person—much less, as a leader—if she had to constantly watch her back.

"I must first focus on identifying and rooting out the spies in our midst," Lilith stated. "I also need to lay the groundwork that will allow me to ascend to the throne as the rightful queen. We need to make sure we have enough votes by the time the nations gather for the next quadrennial meeting in the Duchy." Lilith furrowed her brow sadly before adding, "The Human Kingdom doesn't even have the right to choose its own ruler."

With these words hanging in the air, Lilith gritted her teeth bitterly. Like she said, the nations of the world held a giant summit once every four years in the Principality of the Nine to discuss the issues of the day. If the Human Kingdom wished to crown a new ruler, the name of the appointed successor would have to be announced during that summit. The other eight nations would then express their acceptance of the incoming ruler in a process that was supposed to be merely ceremonial, though in practice, the custom gave the other nations a de facto veto they could use to bar anyone seeking to reform the status quo from taking the throne. In any case, Human Kingdom rulers were essentially chosen by the other eight races by majority vote. *How can a sovereign nation not even get to pick its own leader?* I thought, an ache making its presence known in the middle of my forehead. *I had no idea we humans were treated* this *horribly.*

"The situation shames me to no end," Lilith admitted. "But we can also use this process to our advantage. We can depose the king using proper channels, then usher me in as the rightful ruler, and be recognized as such."

This might have seemed like a monumental task, but it wasn't as hard as one would think. We could repeat what Ellie had done with the Elven Queendom and strong-arm some of the other nations into agreeing to grant a higher status to humans, because we only needed to influence four more nations in order to get Lilith approved as the lawful queen. If taking the throne by force would prove problematic, we could just work in the background and win official backing from other nations for Lilith that way.

"We still have plenty of time before the next summit in the Duchy, so there is no need to rush things," said Lilith. "First, I need to dig up all the weeds that

have infiltrated the palace. Lord Light, I hope I can count on your assistance for that."

"As I promised, I'll do everything I can to aid you," I assured her. "But I can't help wondering what you'll do with any spies you manage to unearth."

"I'll just find some excuse to dismiss them from their roles," Lilith told me. "I'll even..." Lilith hesitated to speak the next words aloud, but she quickly regained her composure and said them anyway. "I'll even behead them in secret if I have to. Even if it's my head maid, Nono, who turns out to be a spy. I will stain my hands with blood in order to attain a better future for humankind."

The princess was prepared to do what needed to be done, which just proved how much she wanted to join forces with me. As for myself, I wanted to join her in forging a better future for the human race, though there was only so much I could do on that front.

I noticed Mei suddenly react to something. She was also in attendance in my office, quietly listening to the conversation between Lilith and myself. Her reaction was so slight, Lilith failed to notice it, but since I was Level 9999, I picked up on it immediately.

Looks like she just received some kind of report, I thought. *I wonder if that means we have a problem on our hands.* I continued to listen to Lilith as she talked about what she planned to do for the human race and for her own kingdom while keeping one eye firmly fixed on Mei.

"But once I'm on the throne, the first thing I will do is institute a rules-based tariff system," Lilith said. "Then I will abolish slavery in the kingdom, do away with the unfair price-fixing on our crop exports, and..."

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It had been a message from Aoyuki via Telepathy that had made Mei blink in the executive office. She had caught wind of an unwanted intruder lurking in the woods near the Great Tower.

There were some elves who couldn't stomach the thought of the queendom completely forgoing the slave labor they had relied on for centuries, still clinging to the past where they had the power to oppress humans, and as it turned out,

one such elf had struck out on a quest to bring down the Wicked Witch of the Tower.

Chapter 5: Silent Killing

Most of the Elven Queendom's liberated human slaves had flown to the Great Tower settlement on the backs of dragons, since out of all the feasible transportation options available, that was the fastest. Of course, it would have been much faster to use SSR Teleportation cards every time, but Light's team had decided that particular approach would overplay their hand. However, a number of former slaves flatly refused to mount the dragons, so they were given horses and bodyguards who escorted them through the wild forest to the Great Tower. This compromise was costlier and more time-consuming, but it was better than having fainthearted people dying of a cardiac arrest atop a dragon midflight, or pregnant women going into labor prematurely from the shock of it all. The infamy arising from such avoidable mishaps would muddy whatever goodwill had been gained from the "absolute autonomy" declaration.

On this particular day, while the royal delegation toured the Great Tower settlement, some new arrivals were trekking through the forest on foot in a silent procession that included pregnant women, the elderly, and the enfeebled. Due to the presence of the Snake Hellhounds, the wooded area surrounding the Great Tower was entirely free of monsters, but that didn't mean the terrain was entirely free from threats, as evidenced by the pair of vengeful eyes watching the traveling party from afar.

I will not stand by and watch as my proud race pays fealty to these inferiors! To hell with that Wicked Witch of the Tower! To hell with "absolute autonomy for humans"! You inferiors were better off when you were our slaves, before that damn witch went and ruined everything!

Jeunome was what one might call an "elf supremacist"; in other words, he was a textbook example of an overly conceited elf. Jeunome was a Level 300 adventurer who was usually active outside of the Elven Queendom, but who had returned to the motherland on hearing that the nation of his birth had bent the knee to this so-called Wicked Witch of the Tower. Upon his homecoming, he observed that ownership of human slaves had been totally prohibited by law, and it wasn't just in the royal capital, but all across the queendom. In the

capital itself, cautious elves were constantly peering up at the sky, and they showed fearful deference to any human adventurers and merchants, apparently because they didn't want to anger the tower witch after she'd attacked the capital with a hundred-strong swarm of dragons, blotting out the sun. She had also demonstrated the destructive power of her dragons by putting on a coordinated fire-breathing display over an uninhabited area on the edge of the city—an act so ferocious in its intensity, it caused tremors and kicked up a giant cloud of inky smoke and dust that obscured the skies above the royal capital once more. This display prompted all the elves in the city to show a newfound obeisance toward humans, and this sudden change in attitude didn't sit well with Jeunome at all. *How can we elves allow ourselves to live in fear of the lowest of all the races? Don't we have* any *pride? Have we really fallen so far? I must do something to restore our dignity as a race!*

Jeunome had also heard that the White Knights had been eliminated by the tower witch, and while he hadn't confirmed the veracity of this rumor, he decided it'd be best to steer clear of the witch altogether and focus on targeting humans traveling to the Great Tower, because that meant he could return home having achieved tangible results, instead of gambling his life away fighting a potentially dangerous enemy.

That lousy witch promised she'd keep her precious humans safe, so if I kill these slaves right here, it'll throw mud in her face, thought Jeunome. The deaths likely wouldn't spell the end of the "absolute autonomy" decree, but they would at least raise serious questions about the cause itself. People would naturally start doubting if the witch really *was* committed to protecting humans and if she truly stood by her stated principles.

A mighty fortress being toppled by a bunch of small cracks is a tale as old as time, thought Jeunome. *If I kill these inferiors, I'll sully the witch's reputation, and that might eventually lead to the collapse of this whole "absolute autonomy for humans" nonsense. If my plan works, I may even become immortalized as a hero of my race!* Jeunome's eyes brightened as his hatred for humans along with his lust for glory glowed in them, and he continued to fantasize about the illustrious future awaiting him. *Rejoice, you inferior parasites. You're about to turn me into a legendary hero!*

The procession of former slaves was accompanied by two beautiful young women in maid uniforms, one leading the way, while the other guarded the rear. Both of them looked like formidable fighters, but luckily for Jeunome, nobody had noticed his presence yet, which allowed him time to work out his escape route before loading his bow.

Jeunome took a deep breath, then shouted, “Death to inferiors! This is what you get for fawning over that damn witch!”

Jeunome fired off multiple arrows, and as a Level 300 archer, he was sure all of them would hit their marks with deadly consequences. But over the course of the next few moments, he watched on as each of the arrows just vanished, and it wasn’t a case of Jeunome’s eyes playing tricks on him—the arrows really did literally disappear into thin air right in front of him. What was more, it seemed as though the procession hadn’t heard him, despite shouting his threat to rain death down upon them at the top of his lungs. It was almost as if he didn’t exist.

“What the hell is going on he—”

But before he could reach the end of his sentence, Jeunome’s head popped off his neck like a cork shooting out of a wine bottle. Though because severed heads still retain consciousness for several seconds after decapitation, Jeunome managed to catch a glimpse of a gorgeous, tanned woman standing behind his headless body before his face rotated away again in midair, the young, platinum-haired woman meeting his fleeting glance with an icy, pitiless glare.

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The Assassin’s Blade, Nemumu, sighed in annoyance at the actions of the elf she had just beheaded. “This rank amateur didn’t even know what a Silent Killing is. This maggot just had to pick *today* to cause trouble, didn’t he? Any other day, we would’ve just let a Snake Hellhound take care of him.”

As Nemumu said, Aoyuki would normally deploy the Snake Hellhounds to kill and devour any monsters or hostile intruders in the forest surrounding the Great Tower, but with the tower hosting a royal delegation from the Human Kingdom, Aoyuki had instead contacted Mei via Telepathy the minute she detected an intruder, and the two had decided to send Nemumu out to

assassinate the attacker quietly, so their guests wouldn't be disturbed by screaming while on their tour.

Before slaying the elf, Nemumu had activated the R Silent card to dampen all sound, then intercepted every arrow midflight, and it was only after doing these things that she had neutralized her adversary for good. Even though all this was going on very close by, nobody in the procession of former slaves noticed that anything was amiss, and they all continued their hike toward the Great Tower. After making sure the danger had passed, Nemumu took out an SSR Teleportation card, intending to leave the dead body behind for a Snake Hellhound that was just arriving on the scene to gobble up and get rid of.

"So I guess that elf just couldn't accept humans having absolute autonomy," Nemumu muttered to herself. "The world's clearly changing, yet people like him still cling to this illusion of a master-slave relationship. I simply don't get it."

Nemumu understood perfectly well that all living things had a natural tendency to dominate those weaker than them. What she couldn't comprehend was why certain people believed they would always hold the superior position. Surely it was only logical that the "weaker" side wouldn't put up with being slapped around forever, and that there would inevitably come a time when the victims would start punching back, right? Yet this elf had ignored this universal truth, clung on to the dream of perpetual dominion over another race, and gotten himself killed as a result.

"Seems he's not the first elf who's failed while trying to restore the old order," Nemumu muttered to herself. "If these people will *insist* on attempting to do us harm, then it'd be best if we frightened them into submission again. I'll recommend the idea to Miss Mei and Miss Ellie."

With these words that would have sent chills down the spines of the entire population of the Elven Queendom still hanging in the air, Nemumu teleported away. Her sudden absence from the scene canceled the effects of the R Silent card, and the sound of the Snake Hellhound munching away on the dead elf filled the forest.

Chapter 6: Yume's Memory Probe

After concluding my private meeting with Princess Lilith, I teleported back to the Abyss. By this time, the royal delegation from the Human Kingdom had already returned home, taking the Double Shadow version of Lilith with them, because the real Lilith had decided to stay at the Great Tower for a little while longer so that she and I could continue our discussions about what would happen next. And so, I was back in my office again in the bottom tier of the Abyss, talking with Mei and Ellie.

"I'll admit, I wasn't expecting Lilith to ask me to do *that* as a favor to her, but then again, we'll be locking horns with a number of nations while trying to uncover the truth about everything anyway, so I say we should help her out along the way while we're fulfilling our own objectives," I said. "In any case, I can't stand the way the world treats us humans."

Of course, due to being subjected to all kinds of antihuman bigotry in my time as a fledgling adventurer, including right up until my final moments with my former party, it was painfully obvious to me that humans were on the bottom rung when it came to the racial hierarchy. However, even I could never have imagined that the Human Kingdom itself wouldn't be permitted to choose its own ruler. That sort of treatment was unconscionable, and I figured it wouldn't hurt to lend Lilith a hand if doing so diminished the bigotry from the other races and improved the lot of humans.

"Setting that aside for now, there's still the problem of getting Yume to remember exactly what happened to her," I said.

I had reunited with my baby sister the day before, and sent a Double Shadow clone to take her place in the royal delegation, meaning that Yume was now free to live with me at the bottom of the Abyss. When I broached the subject of the fate of our village, she told me the attack had happened around six months after I'd left home to become an adventurer.

"There was this loud explosion at night that woke everyone up, and we all ran outside," Yume said. "Then there were more explosions, and we heard screams

from all around us.”

Yume’s face stiffened as she tried to recall that painful night. “Els grabbed me and held me real tight until the explosions stopped. When they did, he ran off as fast as he could with me in his arms. But it was dark and he couldn’t see where he was going, and we fell into the river...” She hesitated. “When I woke up, the princess had made me all better again.”

Our frontier village was close to a tributary that was fed by snowmelt off a nearby mountain. Somewhere downstream, this tributary joined a river that flowed into the sea, though before it got that far, the river had to pass through most of the Human Kingdom, skirting the border with the Duchy. Maybe both Els and Yume had been saved before the river could spit them out into the ocean.

I also wondered what could have been the source of the mysterious explosions Yume had described. Who had attacked my village and how many of them had there been? Was it a gang of conspirators or soldiers? Lots of questions tumbled through my mind, but Yume simply couldn’t remember most of the details. After all, it had happened three years ago, give or take, and to a ten-year-old like Yume, that was practically a lifetime ago. On top of that, I was willing to bet that Yume was still repressing many horrible memories from that night.

In truth, I was just glad Yume was alive and well, and if she’d made it out of that hellish situation, there was a good chance Els had survived as well. However, I still needed to know more about that night, so I instructed Ellie to conduct a memory probe on Yume. Through the use of forbidden magic, Ellie was able to scan people’s memories, and we’d extracted valuable intelligence out of Kyto, the White Knights, Lif the elf queen, and Yude’s party using her memory probes, though in those cases, the process had invariably caused each of them excruciating pain.

I leaned forward in my chair and addressed Ellie. “It is vital we get more information out of Yume about the attack on my village and my big brother’s whereabouts. But I must ask you again: are you *sure* tonight’s spell won’t hurt my sister at all?”

“You have my word, Blessed Lord!” Ellie stated. “I would never dream of causing any kind of pain to your precious little sister. You do not need to worry about her, Blessed Lord Light.”

Despite Ellie’s assurances, I was still uneasy about the procedure, and picking up on my angst, my deputy continued to reassure me. “The way I read memories can be likened to how a physical book is read,” Ellie began. According to the superwitch, the previous times she had rooted around in people’s memories, she had basically flicked, folded, and rushed haphazardly through the pages of these imaginary “books,” before painfully ripping out bits she wanted to keep. This approach lessened the amount of time it took to scan through the memories, but at the cost of the process being tantamount to torture for the subjects. This time around though, Ellie would treat Yume as if she were an ancient tome with pages that might crumble to dust if handled too roughly. Ellie would take her time carefully turning over each page of Yume’s memories, and copy down the relevant information in a way that would not hurt her.

“I’ll also use your gacha card to place Miss Yume into a deep sleep, which will further ensure she won’t feel any pain during the procedure,” Ellie said. “I’ll take every precaution while I am probing her memories, though I predict that the process will take me quite a while to complete. Are you okay with that, Blessed Lord?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need,” I told her. “All I care about is Yume not getting hurt in any way. You may also use unlimited gacha cards and personnel to make sure the whole thing goes off without a hitch. I’m counting on you, Ellie.”

On hearing this last remark, the superwitch just about managed to suppress a squeal in the back of her throat, though she couldn’t help shuddering with joy. “Thank you so very much, Blessed Lord Light! I will do everything in my power to live up to your expectations!”

Ellie turned and practically skipped out of my office, heading off in the direction of Yume’s bedroom. In the back of my mind, I still had reservations over whether the brain probe would *truly* be pain-free, but as I watched her go, I decided I would place all my trust in Ellie.

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Lilith ended up spending a week in the tower, during which we discussed a wide range of topics over several sessions. I found her perspective really valuable, but I couldn't have her hanging about the tower for too long, so we started making preparations to switch her in for her copy at the Human Kingdom's palace.

We also spent that same week gently probing Yume's memories, though while we were able to extract some major clues about the perpetrator, our findings threw up a whole bunch of other questions. Once she'd prepared her report on the memory probe, a pale-faced Ellie walked into my office, and started off with a bit of earth-shattering information.

I jumped out of my chair, leaned over the desk, and practically yelled in Ellie's face the second she had finished her opening statement. "A Level 9000-plus *human* destroyed my village?!"

"Y-Yes, but that's just going on what I could make out from your dear sister's memories," Ellie replied.

Mei—who was in the office too—also reacted to this new information with a rarely-seen shocked expression, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Ellie continued to explain how she had come to this conclusion. "According to your dear sister's memories, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure that looked human floating in the air while your dear elder brother carried her to safety."

Apparently, someone had attacked my village from the air, and judging by the look of this figure, the attacker didn't have wings, horns, a tail, or long ears. The assailant wasn't particularly short or tall, but was in fact about average height for a human, as well as having a similar physique. From this set of clues, Ellie was able to safely rule out the potential of this adversary being from any of the other eight races.

"How I arrived at this person's power level is a little more complicated to explain," Ellie said. "But I estimated it by looking through the mind's eye of your dear sister."

According to Ellie, it went without saying that it was very difficult to determine a person's power level just by going off what you could see in someone's memory. She likened the feat to being able to tell different species of fish apart in the murky depths of the sea. In that scenario, it'd be impossible to know exactly what kind of fish you were looking at, but if you were an expert on fish, you could at least tell the size and color of the fish and make a deduction based on that.

"If this person had been trying his or her best to conceal themselves, it'd be nigh-on impossible to estimate their power level," Ellie explained. "But this individual didn't seem to bother with any kind of camouflage, and I was able to place their power level in the 9000 range based on their actions and the remnants of mana that had been discharged. Though I should warn you that this is merely an estimate and therefore highly subject to error."

I sat back down in my chair, lost in thought. Sure, Ellie said there was a good chance the attacker might *not* be above Level 9000, but I was willing to bet the farm that she was pretty much on the mark, given her ability to analyze trace mana.

"If your guess is correct, that just throws up a whole heap of new questions..." I said after a little thought. The first question on the list would be: how in the world could a human like that have surpassed Level 9000 in the first place? I was also eager to know why a human would destroy a village inhabited by fellow humans, considering all the bigotry our race had to put up with. If that power level was accurate, did that mean the assailant was a Master? If so, why did a Master raze my village to the ground? And how did my brother and Yume even manage to get away from a Level 9000 Master? Was there really no chance of it being a member of some other race just *pretending* to be a human Master?

"I know I was able to level up to beyond Level 9000, but I thought it was next to impossible for a human on the surface world to achieve that feat," I muttered, largely to myself. "If this is a Master we're talking about, then why destroy my village? Was it because I was labeled as a potential Master? Am I so much of a threat that they felt the need to wipe out my village and everyone I knew? Does this mean we have a Master as one of our enemies?"

If this attacker was really over Level 9000, then the fact that my brother and Yume had escaped was totally baffling. If it had been me on village-destroying duty, I was in no doubt that I would've been able to kill every single person living there. There would've been absolutely no survivors on my watch. Even at Level 5000, that job would've been easy for me. So did the bad guy allow Els and Yume to flee? And if so, why? I just didn't get it.

"This *is* a huge clue about the identity of the person that decimated my village, but it opens up way too many questions," I groaned. "Honestly, it's so complicated, I feel like my head's about to explode."

"P-Please forgive me, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie mumbled as she lowered her ghostly-pale face.

"Oh, no, it's not your fault, Ellie," I replied quickly. "Sorry, I should've been a bit more careful about what I was saying." I honestly hadn't meant to make it sound like I was blaming Ellie for anything. I was happy we'd gotten this information, even if it was so confusing, it was giving me a headache.

"In any case, I now have an important clue about who destroyed my village and killed my parents, thanks to you," I said to Ellie. "I swore vengeance on the Concord of the Tribes, but I also need to avenge the deaths of my parents and the people of my village. I swear on my life I shall avenge them all!"

I lifted my self-imposed power suppression and filled my executive office with the dark energy that was boiling up inside me, the electricity of it laced with bloodlust, fury, and vengeful spite. I was free to unleash my deadly wrath in my office, since the only people in here were my two Level 9999 deputies, and the only effect it would have on them would be to make them sweat a little in fear. If a normal human had been here in the room with me, he or she would've keeled over by this point, their heart stopped dead.

Within this pressurized environment, Mei made a suggestion. "Master Light, if you wish to continue with your revenge, shall we make the dwarves your next target?"

Still wallowing in my wrathful energy, I shifted my gaze to Mei, who carried on with an impassive expression firmly affixed to her face. "Based on the information pieced together by Ellie, we will need some more in-depth

intelligence regarding Masters," Mei stated. "When Ellie probed the mind of the elf queen, Lif, she recovered a memory suggesting that there is a separate entity that does not fall under the bracket of 'Master.' This entity could be the person that destroyed your village, Master Light."

Yeah, she might be right on that, I thought, nodding wordlessly at Mei's deduction.

Queen Lif VII had attended a secret meeting between the various heads of state during the world summit held once every four years at the Principality of the Nine. During this rather hush-hush gathering, the heads of state exchanged information about Masters, and just as the meeting was wrapping up, Queen Lif heard someone say, "We can't rule out the possibility that he might be something *other* than a Master."

"We can reasonably assume that either the dark elves, the onifolk, the dwarves, the demonkin, or the dragonutes know more about this entity," Mei continued. "One of those five races might have some more pertinent information, or indeed, several of them could. Ellie will make contact with the dark elf leaders soon in order to strike them off that list, and as for the remaining four races, we learned from your conversations with Princess Lilith that the dwarves might be enticed over to our side without the need to go to war with them, based on their particular racial characteristics."

The "racial characteristics" of the dwarves could largely be summed up in one phrase: their voracious thirst for knowledge. Mei was proposing using this trait of theirs to our advantage.

"Therefore, I humbly suggest we engage with the Dwarf Kingdom for the dual purpose of exacting revenge on Naano and obtaining intelligence regarding Masters plus this separate yet equally dangerous entity that was mentioned," Mei concluded.

If all went well, we might not even have to fight the Dwarf Kingdom to get the intelligence we needed. If we could work behind the scenes to either gain control of the kingdom or have the nation freely ally with us, I'd be able to settle my score with the dwarf Naano whatever way I wanted.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, as they say," I mused aloud. "It'd

be fun seeing the Dwarf Kingdom betraying Naano in the same way the kingdom sent him to betray me.”

A smile of sheer delight crept over my face as I imagined the look on Naano’s face when he realized his own nation was rewarding his loyalty by throwing him to the wolves.

Chapter 7: The Dark Elf Islands' Comeuppance

During my quest to take revenge on Sionne in her lab-turned-dungeon, we had captured an A-rank party of dark elves known as the Blade of the Isles, and when Ellie probed their memories, we got confirmation that their leader, Yude, and his two henchwomen had heard rumors about a Master roaming around the northern part of the Human Kingdom. Ellie had also found out that Yude highly suspected that one of the dark elf leaders, Gighis, had more info on Masters.

Moments before I was told of Yume's whereabouts, Ellie had volunteered to establish contact with the Dark Elf Islands in order to blackmail Gighis and the other clan leaders for this info. She planned to use the fact that Yude and his party had been conducting espionage for their homeland on the side as a pretext to use her forbidden magic to probe the memories of the black elf bigwigs for any mention of Masters.

"That'd be really awesome of you, Ellie," I'd said that day in my office in the Abyss. "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."

This effusive praise had made Ellie blush. "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 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—"

Before Ellie could finish that thought, Mei had barged into my office to give me the news on Yume. At first, Ellie had been extremely pissed about Mei interrupting her, but her tune quickly changed once she heard my long-lost

sister was alive and well.

Because securing Yume had taken priority over everything else, we had placed Ellie's intelligence-gathering operation on the dark elves on hold temporarily, but with Yume now living with me in the Abyss, we were free to engage with the Dark Elf Islands' leaders, so I ordered Ellie to extract all the information she could from them about Masters.

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Located just south of the mainland, the Dark Elf Islands consisted of over a

hundred islands of varying sizes, and due to its unique geography, the nation wasn't ruled by a single government, but the islands were instead divided up between four clan leaders. These four leaders established a council that convened at the beginning of the year and at other regular intervals, as well as the occasional hastily-called session to address national emergencies.

It was one such crisis that had compelled Gighis to call an emergency council meeting of the clan leaders, which took place in a conference hall located in a neutral city. It was no ordinary hall though, as it was surrounded by thick barriers made of stone and guarded by elite soldiers that had been handpicked by each of the four clan leaders. The dark elves had also made use of the latest magical items invented by the nation's top scientists to provide the building with an extra layer of protection. In the event that an intruder slipped past these soldiers and magical defenses, the conference hall also had countless hidden rooms and secret passageways, so even getting close to the clan leaders would prove to be an overly complicated task.

"Thank you everyone for showing up at such short notice," Gighis said, getting the proceedings underway. He had long hair tied at neck level, and a bush of a beard covered his chin. A loose traditional garment that looked a bit like a habit hid a lean, muscular physique, and he had regained the shrewd, predatory look in his eye that made it plain to everyone that nothing escaped his notice. When Gighis had met Yude before, the clan leader had been sporting huge dark circles under his eyes due to losing sleep over the dungeon-lab incident, but once that had been resolved, Gighis was able to rest up and recover his usual poise.

Gighis's falcon-like eyes stared down each of his three counterparts who were seated at the round table, the shape of which had been chosen to emphasize that this was a conclave of equals. All of a sudden, the graying dark elf woman next to Gighis broke out into a burst of soft snickering.

"We're not here 'cause you sent us a simple invite, son," said Dinay, who was wearing a traditional habit like Gighis. "But this whole 'Wicked Witch' business was a good enough reason to show up, I'd say."

Dinay, the oldest of the quartet, was known as the biggest money-grubber among the dark elves, always scheming and trying to find ways to get ahead of others financially. She had a habit of chuckling between statements, but her

laughter often sounded more sinister than jovial.

"I happen to be in agreement with Ms. Dinay's observation, but please do note that I am currently sacrificing precious time that could have been better spent on my research," said the clan leader known as Madney, who unlike the others had come to the meeting in a white lab coat. Considerably younger than his counterparts, Madney had a somewhat bug-eyed look about him and a shrill, priggish voice. "If the agenda put forth fails to live up to the implied urgency of this meeting, I shall be expecting you to pay a penalty of some sort or other, Mr. Gighis."

When it came to research, the islands under Madney's control went far and beyond the output of the other dark elves in the nation. Madney often feuded with Gighis in order to extract "penalties," or in other words, favors that would grant his scientists more resources.

"Now, now. It isn't prudent to jump to conclusions," interjected Tikoh, the last of the clan leaders to speak. "I understand where you're coming from, Madney, but I suggest waiting until Gighis has had his say before we start judging him."

Compared to Madney, Tikoh had a more polite and easygoing attitude, his whole demeanor accentuated by his resting wise-guy squint. Despite how he presented himself, however, Tikoh was every bit as fit and muscular as Gighis, and he was known as the fiercest xenophobe of the four clan leaders. Tikoh's temperament took a truly frightening turn whenever he launched into one of his bigoted tirades.

Yecch, every time I see these people, I'm repulsed by them, Gighis thought to himself, though he managed to remain expressionless. *They're always looking out for their own, and always trying to one-up each other. They're like rabid goblins slavering over any pound of flesh they can get their claws into. I can't stomach these jerks. I really can't.*

Although the other leaders definitely wouldn't hesitate to kick down one of their peers if it would benefit their clan, Gighis was in no position to cast blame, for he was every bit as willing to sabotage the other clans if it worked to his side's advantage, and the only alliances he ever formed were ones of

convenience. All four clan leaders were birds of a feather.

Still badmouthing his counterparts in his mind, Gighis passed around documents that outlined his concerns regarding the Wicked Witch of the Tower. “Here. This should make it plainly obvious why I called this emergency meeting.”

After scanning the documents, Dinay chuckled throatily. “Okay, gotta hand it to you, kid: this is as good a reason as any for a meeting.”

“I never wish to divert any of my allotted time away from my research, but I must agree with Ms. Dinay,” Madney added. “This does not bode well for us. Not in the least.”

The documents were copies of correspondence from the tower witch, describing in damning detail how Yude’s party had been using their A-rank status to conduct espionage under the direction of the Dark Elf Islands. This accusation was backed up with irrefutable evidence, and the witch had concluded her letter by demanding to know how the dark elves wished to respond.

“I thought Yude and his girls bought the farm down in that old lab-dungeon,” Dinay said, chuckling darkly. “Are we supposed to believe that, in actuality, they double-crossed our nation and fell in with that witch?”

“That’s highly improbable,” Gighis said. “It was concluded that Yude’s party was indeed killed deep in that lab-dungeon, their bodies eaten by monsters. Even if they *did* fake their own deaths through some kind of elaborate hoax, why would they freely team up with the Wicked Witch? Even assuming she captured them, they’re a party of A-rank adventurers, so they should be able to withstand torture and hypnosis. At the very least, any confession they coughed up would be full of lies.”

Yude, Eyrah, and Rayeh had illegally kidnaped humans with Gifts and razed entire human villages to the ground in the process if they deemed it necessary. There was no reason to believe the Wicked Witch of the Tower—who believed in the absolute autonomy of humans—would ever consider joining forces with Yude’s party, given their history. Not to mention, Yude’s party were consummate bigots who looked down on “inferiors,” meaning their racial pride

would never have allowed them to join forces with this shadowy human witch, and since they were high-level adventurers and intelligence operatives, they would've known how to feed their captors false information under duress.

"In other words, the likelihood that Mr. Yude and his band betrayed us to the witch would be close to zero," Madney summarized. "Which begs the question: from where did the witch glean this information?"

"It's a conspiracy," Tikoh muttered, before his eyes suddenly grew wide and he screamed at the top of his voice, "It's those miserable *elves*!"

Although his conclusion was entirely based on his racial animus toward the elves, it was the only feasible theory they had at the moment, since the idea that Yude would betray sensitive information to this extent could be safely dismissed. Plus, for all intents and purposes, the tower witch had vanquished the Elven Queendom and held sway over the nation, so it was entirely plausible that the queendom might have handed over any and all information and evidence about the Dark Elf Islands' espionage activities to the witch. But at the end of the day, there was a more important matter that overshadowed pinning down the exact source of this leak.

"Anyway, leaving all of that aside, it's safe to say we do *not* want any of this going public," Gighis said, resting his cheek on the palm of his hand. "Otherwise, we will find ourselves in a very deep hole to clamber our way out of."

Of course, the Dark Elf Islands was hardly the only nation engaging in espionage—it was safe to say that no nation could function effectively without getting its hands dirty in some way—but the nature of spying relied on operatives not getting caught in the act. If the tower witch were to publicize Yude's espionage work, the Dark Elf Islands would have mud on its face, and the other nations would be forced to condemn these clandestine activities. The Elven Queendom in particular would stridently call upon the dark elves to take accountability for their actions, and having their bitter rivals turning the screw was the last thing the clan leaders wanted.

"The witch says she wants to speak with us in person," Gighis said. "But we all know she plans to come and hang this explosive secret around our necks like a leash."

Dinay chuckled. “Now why would I want to be lorded over by a human without at least making some good money off of it?”

“We cannot call ourselves dark elves if we bow our heads to some stinking, lowlife *inferior*!” Tikoh roared, his eyes bulging and the veins on his forehead pulsating. “Just the thought of ever being at the mercy of an inferior makes me shake with fury!”

The other clan leaders clearly shared Tikoh’s sentiments over abasing themselves before a human, even though they declined to voice these thoughts. In that moment, the four dark elves reached a tacit agreement.

“Apparently, this Wicked Witch defeated the Elven Queendom by siccing a hundred dragons on them,” Gighis pointed out. “Now, we’d never be able to ward off a hundred dragons either, but if we were dealing with just one female inferior, she should be easy enough to put in her place.”

“Yep, and all we gotta do is invite her for a little sit-down here on home turf, then do away with her,” Dinay laughed. “Dead men tell no tales, so to speak. Or in this case, dead gals. And if her lackeys try to spill the beans about the whole spying affair, we can just act like they’re making it all up to take attention away from their bumbling lady boss. Shoot, we can even claim Yude’s spying was all the witch’s doing, if we want.”

“If we wish the elimination of the witch to go without a hitch, I propose dispatching the Shadow Unit,” Madney suggested.

“If the Shadow Unit is ready to mobilize, we can kill the witch and be rid of our problem once and for all,” added Tikoh, who had reverted to his squinty, laid-back demeanor. “In that case, I concur.”

“Then I think this calls for a vote,” Gighis announced. “Do we all agree to activate the Shadow Unit, invite this so-called ‘Wicked Witch of the Tower’ to a meeting, then assassinate her on arrival?”

Dinay tittered in assent. “Count me in, son.”

“I subscribe to this plan,” Madney said.

“Goes without saying that I agree too,” Tikoh piped up.

In a council meeting, it was customary to cast a vote on an agenda item by raising one's right hand, and on the motion to snuff out the Wicked Witch of the Tower, all four hands stretched upward into the air.

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In a former era, a party of dark elf adventurers known as the Spear of the Isles won renown for their exploits on the battlefield, and because of their impressive reputation, laboratories under the control of the Dark Elf Islands tended to give the party the latest magical prototypes to test. The dark elf leaders also thought very highly of the Spear of the Isles' fighting prowess until an incident occurred one fateful day.

While on a quest, the Spear of the Isles ran into the White Knights, with the then newly-appointed Hardy as commander and Mikhael as vice commander. The two parties crossed swords, and even though nobody was killed in the skirmish, members of the Spear of the Isles were left severely wounded while the White Knights walked away virtually unscathed.

Thanks to some high-level talks, the Dark Elf Islands and the Elven Queendom managed to avoid any further flare-ups, but the incident was still a devastating blow to the dark elves. The Spear of the Isles, a party armed with the most cutting-edge magical weapons developed by the dark elves, had lost in a completely one-sided battle with the White Knights. Hardy—who was yet to earn his moniker of "The Silent" at the time—didn't so much as suffer a scratch during the battle. In fact, Hardy didn't even allow a speck of dirt to land on his attire.

In light of this overwhelming gap in military prowess, the Dark Elf Islands' leaders scrambled to set up a secret project to develop a unit of expert fighters that would be able to rival the White Knights. For this project, they selected orphans who exhibited a raw talent for fighting, then trained them in conditions harsh enough to kill all but the strongest at the same time as indoctrinating them, so that they would swear absolute fealty to their homeland.

These supersoldiers formed what became known as the Shadow Unit: a squad known only to the four dark elf clan bosses, plus a few selected others. Behind the scenes, this unit received unlimited funding and training time, plus the latest technology, all of which proved enough to see these specialists reach power levels that surpassed even Yude, who was recognized as the top adventurer in the known world.

As far as the dark elf leadership knew, the Shadow Unit exceeded the White

Knights in terms of strength—which suggested they would be more than capable of slaying a mere human witch—and it was easy to keep the Shadow Unit under wraps, since they could be housed on one of the many islands that were inaccessible to unauthorized personnel. For this assassination plot, the dark elf leaders mobilized the four top warriors in the unit.

On a forested island where the trees cloaked everything in shade and hid the midday sun from view, a masked dark elf woman made her presence known.

“Is everyone present and accounted for?”

The leadership had sent this woman as a messenger to summon the Shadow Unit. On this island, she went by no name, and the only thing she possessed was loyalty to her island nation.

“Number Four, present.”

The first to respond was a three meter-tall goliath who was clad from head to toe in skintight metal armor that was so much smoother than conventional armor, it made the warrior look more like a child’s doll than a soldier. But despite appearances, the armor was reinforced with monster flesh that had been optimized and refined by top dark elf scientists, granting the wearer untold speed and power, as well as protection against physical and magical attacks.

“Number Three.”

The second supersoldier to speak up was wearing more traditional dark elf garb, though white bandages covered his head, hands, and feet. A warrior of very few words, he specialized in sorcery and his entire body had been branded with magical runes. Tattooing runes onto someone’s skin would normally drive them to madness—and inevitably, death—but Number Three had an unparalleled strength of mind that allowed him to stay sane, and he had developed his abilities by making full use of sorcery, elixirs, and magic items since youth. That said, he was only able to unseal his magical charms in the heat of battle, which is why he was forced to keep himself entirely bandaged up at all other times.

“Number Two, at your service.”

Unlike the first two, this warrior announced himself much more casually, raising two fingers in a half wave. Number Two was a below average height young adult with a baby face, and his pure white armor and giant scythe seemed to be traditional battle gear, which matched his appearance perfectly, though this was a somewhat false impression, since everything he wielded was magic-imbued, courtesy of the dark elves' cutting-edge research. Even though these magic weapons were guaranteed to bestow overwhelming might on the bearer in battle, only Number Two was capable of wielding this equipment effectively.

The last warrior, Number One, leaned against a tree trunk without even bothering to announce himself, simply raising a finger to acknowledge the arrival of the messenger. He was a young adult too, with hair covering one of his eyes, and he was wearing traditional dark elf attire, plus a scarf that hid his mouth from view. Although these clothes didn't appear to offer much protection on the face of it, Number One's defensive and offensive capabilities surpassed those of the others.

Long ago, a phantasma-class magic item with the ability to produce vast amounts of mana was discovered in a dungeon on Dark Elf Islands, but it only did this under one condition: it had to be implanted inside of a living body. Dark elf scientists searched high and low for a subject that could survive the implantation, and ended up killing several potentials in the process, since the only way to find out if a person was suitable for the magic item was to physically embed it within them and see if it took.

After many years of deadly trial and error, the scientists came across Number One, who was able to survive the magic item being implanted inside him. The object infused this orphan with a monumental amount of mana which could be used for offensive and defensive purposes, creating what was basically the perfect soldier. The dark elf leaders believed that Number One's powers even exceeded those of Hardy the Silent.

Number One's power didn't just come from surviving the implantation of a single item though. Because he possessed a body that was capable of housing magical objects, scientists had inserted several more items inside him, and thanks to these enhancements, Number One could activate several magic items

all at once without ever having to worry about running out of mana. In fact, the reason his hair cascaded down over one of his eyes was because that eye was actually a state-of-the-art magical weapon created by dark elf researchers.

Not one of the Shadow Unit had a name, only a number, and the title of Number One was bestowed on the top warrior in the unit.

"A few days ago, our leaders held a meeting concerning a human calling herself the 'Wicked Witch of the Tower,'" the masked messenger relayed. "Our leaders have taken the decision to assign you four with the mission of assassinating this witch."

"Us *four*?" Number Four queried, his voice muffled by his full-body armor. "I alone can complete the task."

The other three members of the Shadow Unit shared this sentiment. They saw no reason to send four operatives to kill a single female inferior.

The masked woman shook her head. "Our leaders wish to make extra sure that the witch is assassinated, which is why they are conscripting all four of you for this assignment."

"Then I guess we have no choice but to listen to our bosses," said Number Two. Number Three and Number One simply nodded, the former naturally taciturn while the latter wasn't able to speak due to all of his implanted magic items. Although Number Four still seemed rather reluctant, he didn't utter another word.

After confirming that all four operatives had consented to carry out the task, the masked woman outlined the particulars of the assignment. "You will assassinate the witch in the chamber where our leaders hold their council meetings. You four will be lying in wait in hidden rooms that are located within the chamber itself, in the hallway, and in the waiting room. When the time comes, you will eliminate the Wicked Witch of the Tower and all of the servants in her delegation. You four must kill the witch at all costs, even if it means harming the others on your team to complete the mission."

The messenger continued to outline the exact timing of the assassination attempt as well as answering various questions posed by the Shadow Unit themselves, the five of them completely unaware that a pair of eyes was quietly

surveilling this supposedly top-secret gathering.

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A few weeks after authorizing the assassination attempt, the dark elf clan leaders reconvened in the council chamber once more. As they had expected, the tower witch had agreed to meet with the four governors, and although these high-level talks were to be conducted strictly off the record, what would happen in this room would have a decisive impact on the very future of the nation. Despite the importance of this meeting, the four dark elf chiefs sat at a rectangular table in the council chamber and waited for the witch to enter through the double doors in front of them, for they felt it was beneath them to go out and welcome their guest to the fortified conference hall. There was nowhere for the tower witch to sit, and the hosts hadn't even bothered to prepare tea for their visitor's imminent arrival. It was as if the clan leaders had summoned a subordinate to stand in front of them to be reprimanded, instead of preparing to engage with a high-profile dignitary. Which wasn't all that surprising, if you thought about it. After all, since they were planning to assassinate the Wicked Witch anyway, the dark elf leaders were hardly going to waste resources on rolling out the red carpet. *Especially* for an inferior.

Number One and Number Three were already lying in wait in the secret rooms installed in the council chamber, and would burst forth in the middle of the talks to obliterate the witch with as much firepower as they had in their arsenal. If these two failed, Number Two and Number Four would emerge from their own hiding places to finish the job. The four clan leaders would be kept safe from the ensuing battle by the chairs they were sitting on, which were equipped with dark elf technology designed to produce magical barriers that could ward off attacks. These shields were strong enough to even withstand direct hits from Number One or Number Three.

While they waited for the Wicked Witch, the clan leaders engaged in a bit of small talk. That is, until Gighis started rubbing his temples irritably. "Remind me again why we need Numbers One *and* Three to unleash their full powers on this witch?" Gighis grumbled. "You do realize they'll completely destroy this building, leaving us with a headache-inducing bill for reconstruction, yes?"

"Heck, I'd call that money well spent if it gets rid of that conniving witch girl,"

a chuckling Dinay remarked.

“So you say, but I cannot help noticing that you have already awarded the reconstruction contract to builders under *your* patronage, Ms. Dinay,” Madney noted. “Never one to miss an opportunity to profit from a crisis, hm?”

Dinay laughed heartily at this sarcastic comment. “You’ve got me dead to rights, sonny. So you don’t always have your nose stuck in a beaker, huh?”

“I suspect he’d find it difficult to control an entire clan if he really did nothing other than research,” Tikoh pointed out, his tone relaxed as usual. “In any case, we saw with our own eyes that the Shadow Unit possesses powers far surpassing those of ordinary dark elves. I believe they’ll be fully capable of ridding us of this tower witch.”

The clan leaders had met the Shadow Unit in person beforehand, and the superwarriors had conducted a pseudo-rehearsal of how they would go about destroying the witch on the appointed day. This display had fully convinced Tikoh and the other clan bosses that the operatives would be able to accomplish the mission.

“In that case, we should put One and Three on standby, and just get Two to behead the witch with his scythe,” Gighis said with a grimace. “Number Two should be able to slay the witch by himself without destroying the entire building in the process.”

Dinay sniggered darkly. “You should’ve thought of that before we all settled on One and Three. We don’t need to go rejiggering the plan at the eleventh hour, young whelp.”

At the planning stage for the assassination attempt, the clan leaders had agreed that the overwhelming nature of Number One and Number Three’s attacks was necessary to kill the Wicked Witch instantly. At the time, Gighis had hesitated about it, but he’d ultimately voted with his peers.

“Yes, the financial setback will indeed be painful, Mr. Gighis, but we cannot back out of a scheme that is already set in stone,” Madney said. “If we were to change our plan of action at the last minute, people would rightfully question our decision-making abilities. I say it is too late to worry about any potential damage to this building.”

“For what it’s worth, I share your concerns about the reconstruction costs,” Tikoh added with an empathetic smile.

Not only was the Shadow Unit made up of all-powerful fighters, the tower witch had foolishly agreed not to bring her swarm of dragons with her, under the guise of the meeting remaining a secret. Because of this, the mood was relatively breezy inside the council chamber.

At last, there were a few knocks at the door, and a dark elf attendant wearing a habit entered the chamber.

“The Wicked Witch of the Tower has arrived with two women who appear to be her maids,” the attendant announced. “We shall escort them here shortly.”

With that, the attendant bowed and exited the chamber. This set a clock going in each of the clan leaders’ heads, for they knew the witch’s arrival meant she would be meeting her end in a little over ten minutes. After a brief wait, there were another few knocks at the door.

“You may enter,” Gighis called out brusquely on behalf of all the clan leaders. Two dark elf attendants on either side of the double doors opened them wide to reveal the tower witch and her entourage standing beyond them. The witch was wearing a dark sorceress’s gown with full-length sleeves and a hood that obscured her face save for her mouth. One of the maids accompanying the witch had hair that was red on one side and blue on the other, while the other servant seemed to be a fairy with translucent wings growing out of her back.

One of the dark elf attendants by the door gestured to the Wicked Witch that she may enter the council chamber alone and leave her two maids to be led to a waiting room shortly. Number Two was on standby in a hidden space connected to said waiting room, ready to slice off the maids’ heads once he received the signal. Once he had done that, he would stay on alert and lend a hand if the tower witch survived the initial assassination attempt.

As for the witch herself, she didn’t seem the least bit perturbed that there was nowhere for her to sit and relax, almost as if she’d known about the arrangement from the start. Her two maids impassively moved away from the entrance to the council chamber, leaving the witch alone with the dark elf leaders. Once the attendants had shut the doors again, the tower witch

launched into a rather grandiloquent introduction.

“A very good day to you, my dear fellows,” the witch said. “I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to you for answering my request to host this meeting. You are welcome to refer to me as the Wicked Witch of the Tower for the duration of these discussions.”

“Hmph. Still going by the ‘Wicked Witch of the Tower,’ are you?” Gighis huffed. “You won’t tell us your real name, and you show up wearing a hood of all things. Either you have horrible manners, or there’s a more—let’s call it *cosmetic*—reason that you won’t show us your face.”

Gighis would have rather dispatched the two Shadow Unit operatives right away to get the assassination over and done with, but the two maids had yet to reach the waiting room, so the clan leader had no choice but to keep up the charade and kill a few minutes until that part of the plan was concluded. At the same time, however, Gighis didn’t feel particularly obligated to reciprocate the pleasantries offered by the tower witch.

“Yeah, I bet our lady friend here is an unattractive sight,” Dinay snickered. “Not that it makes a difference anyhow, as I’ve yet to see an inferior who’s *not* a homely-looking animal.”

“You are quite correct, Ms. Dinay,” Madney concurred. “Every inferior I have experimented on has been uglier and weaker than even the lowest dark elf, which I suppose is hardly surprising for a race of unevolved subprimates.”

“I’m in the column of this woman being too ignorant to know proper etiquette,” Tikoh said. “She’s apparently spent a number of years—too many, it seems—deep underground, researching sorcery. It’s regrettable the first people she encountered were the elves. If she’d met us first, we would’ve taught her how to be more respectful.”

Tikoh made sure he snuck in a sly dig at the elf race he hated so much while making his scornful remarks about the hooded sorceress. She, however, seemed to brush off the ridicule that was being heaped on her.

“Before we move forward with these discussions, there is one inquiry I would like to make,” said the witch. “Do I have your permission to do so?”

Dinay tittered. “An ‘inquiry,’ you say? Are you thinking of joining our side or something?”

“Perish the thought,” the witch replied. “On the contrary, I’ve been meaning to clarify something that’s been nagging away at me since I set foot in here.”

“And what might that be?” asked Gighis, who suddenly had a very bad feeling about what was coming next. Despite the naked contempt she was being shown, their guest seemed completely composed. Any other negotiator would have immediately commented on the poor treatment, maybe even used it as a bargaining chip. *It’s like we’re not even an afterthought,* thought Gighis.

Before Gighis could figure out the tower witch’s true motives, however, the hooded woman raised a hand above the carpet she was standing on, activated her Item Box, and produced four severed heads that fell to the floor. The dark elves nearly jumped out of their seats, for they immediately recognized that these heads belonged to the Shadow Unit assassins they had conscripted to take out the witch. Gighis rubbed his eyes several times in disbelief, but there was no mistaking the identities of the faces beset by rigor mortis.

No! No, no, no! This can’t *be right!* Gighis screamed inside his head. *She came directly to this room on arrival! How the hell did she get to each Shadow Unit fighter, chop off their heads, and place those heads in her Item Box?! We haven’t seen her move from that spot!*

Gighis briefly entertained the idea that the severed heads could be fakes, but that posed a number of other questions, not least how the witch had managed to copy their likenesses quite so closely. Furthermore, Gighis kept activating the magic item that was meant to signal Number One and Number Three to launch their attacks, but the assassins weren’t responding. There was no sign the maids in the waiting room had come to harm either, indicating the Shadow Unit members really had been killed. By this point, the other clan leaders had all arrived at the same conclusion, even though none of them would have imagined beforehand that the Wicked Witch of the Tower might kill her would-be assassins *before* being attacked and end up presenting their heads to the plotters in such a gruesome manner. The clan chiefs found themselves sweating at the unknowable power of the witch.

The tower witch herself—namely, Ellie—was every bit as confused as the dark elf leaders, though her puzzlement stemmed from how incompetent this nation's defenses were. *These dark elves allowed me free rein to spy on their fortress, so I knew exactly where all of their hidden rooms and crawl spaces were,* thought Ellie. *I realize I did set up magical traps in those hidden rooms to automatically decapitate those members of the Shadow Unit and teleport their heads to my Item Box, but I never imagined killing them would be* that *simple.*

Ellie had been monitoring the dark elf leaders ever since she'd sent them the correspondence regarding their espionage activities. Thanks to that, she had been well aware in advance of the clan leaders' plans and the order that was sent to the Shadow Unit to have her assassinated.



Ellie’s objective wasn’t to take over the Dark Elf Islands, however. No, she had

only come here to probe the memories of the dark elf leaders for information regarding Masters. But just as she had done with the elf queen, Ellie needed an excuse that would make it seem reasonable for her to want to root around inside their heads. This assassination plot was as good a pretext as any, so she had allowed the scheme to develop right up until the moment she had killed the Shadow Unit warriors. But toying with the dark elves had seemed almost *too* easy, so Ellie had approached her mission with a bit more caution than usual.

This fortress is just like the Elven Queendom castle, thought Ellie. *The magical defenses here are so weak, they're downright infantile. I thought the brittle safeguards were a ploy to lower my guard, so I developed a number of backup plans just in case they discovered my magical traps, but it seems it was all a waste of time, after all.*

Setting aside her slight irritation at this, Ellie continued with her act as the Wicked Witch of the Tower. "I *thought* I was summoned here to have a serious conversation with the four of you, but I sensed my life was in danger the moment I entered this room. Because of that, I took it upon myself to behead these people that I considered a threat to me. I truly hope that these heads do not belong to assassins that were hired by your distinguished selves to kill me."

The last part of this sentence sent shivers up the spines of the four clan leaders, but before the dark elves had a chance to respond, Ellie replied for them. "Let me guess: you mistakenly thought I would be weaker without my dragons, and assumed it would be simple to assassinate me if I were alone. Well, unfortunately for you, my pets are nothing more than a mode of transport, and this act of skulduggery has thoroughly displeased me."

A markedly chilly aura started to emanate from the Wicked Witch, causing the dark elf leaders to shiver uncontrollably in spite of the fact that they lived in a tropical climate. The four clan leaders found themselves genuinely fearing for their lives.

"I would have gladly thrown you a bone if you had quietly acquiesced to my demands," said Ellie. "But you have gone and wasted the opportunity."

"W-Wait! Stop! I mean... *Please*!" Gighis shot up from his seat and raised a

hand in front of him. He was dripping with sweat all over, and his voice sounded hoarse. “W-We don’t know who those people are! They’re likely renegades who hatched a plot without our knowledge! We would never, *ever* dream of trying to kill the great Wicked Witch of the Tower! You *have* to believe us!”

Dinay chuckled nervously. “What he said! In fact, we couldn’t *wait* to meet up with the gal who put those dastardly elves in their place for us! Why would we want to ruin such a joyous occasion by rubbing you out?”

“As Ms. Dinay rightly says, this assassination attempt is simply unacceptable!” Madney added. “We shall find the criminals behind this plot and hand them over to you!”

“It wasn’t us, we swear!” Tikoh yelped. “The elves must have been behind this plot! Those wretches would never want us to ally with you!”

By this point, each of the dark elf leaders was on their feet and essentially pleading for their lives. After listening to their entreaties, Ellie eased up a little on the chilly vibes she was sending out into the room and placed a hand on her cheek in mock surprise.

“Oh, is that so?” she said. “My apologies for making such a mistake. I shouldn’t have embarrassed myself like that.”

“N-No, it’s fine. We’re glad we were able to clear up the misunderstanding,” Gighis said, rubbing his hands together nervously and bending his tall frame to lower his head. “I’d like to add that we are preparing a banquet in your honor in one of the other rooms. I believe now would be a good time to relocate so that we can prepare for the meal.”

Of course, there was no banquet on the agenda, since the dark elf leaders had planned to assassinate the tower witch basically as soon as she set foot in the council chamber, but with that plan undone, Gighis now found himself forced to lie about planning a warm reception for her instead. However, this fiction wouldn’t hold any water in a room where there was nowhere for the guest to sit down, so Gighis had decided to improvise by leading the witch to a “VIP room” and stall for time while a makeshift dinner party could be put together.

“A welcome party thrown by the dark elf nation would be delightful,” Ellie replied, smiling broadly under her hood. “However, I would like to *verify* a few

things first, if that's okay with you all."

"V-Verify, you say?" Gighis asked.

"Yes, indeed," said Ellie. "I need to make sure you four *weren't* the ones who ordered those assassins to make an attempt on my life, and for that, I will need to read your minds. If those plotters were indeed renegades like you say, there should be no issue, yes? Though if I find out that any of you *have* lied to me, I hope you realize that I will make you pay for it with your lives."

Ellie already knew the clan leaders had lied to her, but she was rolling with it so that she could probe their memories for information regarding Masters. On hearing Ellie's pronouncement, the dark elf chiefs stiffened and went pale, quickly realizing that they were doomed unless they made a run for it.

"Dorn Fesseln!"

Before the clan chiefs could take so much as one step, Ellie cast a spell that would bind the four dark elves in thorny vines as tough as steel. The protective shields created by the chairs were no match for the vines, which broke through the barriers in less than a second. Dorn Fesseln was a strategic-class spell that immobilized any target—even one with a power level of 9999—so normal magical defenses were totally useless against it. Once the dark elves were ensnared, Ellie strolled up to her foes and sneered at them with contempt. The clan chiefs began to protest loudly in a last-ditch effort to save themselves.

"W-We're innocent! We don't know any—"

But that was as far as Gighis got, for he and his peers suddenly found they couldn't hear themselves talk anymore.

"Reading your memories will involve a great deal of pain. For you, that is," Ellie said in the mawkishly tender voice. "I don't wish for anyone outside of this room to hear you screaming, so I went ahead and cast a Silent spell to give us all some privacy. You are now all quite free to shriek and yell as much as your lungs will allow."

When Ellie probed Queen Lif's memory back in the Elven Queendom, the monarch's baleful moaning had been so distracting, the witch was forced to use the Silent spell just to be able to finish her work in peace. Having learned from

that experience, Ellie had decided to activate the spell in advance this time.

All of a sudden, Ellie noticed Madney was attempting to mouth an attack spell. She quickly manipulated the steel vines to break both of the dark elf's arms, and the sheer pain from this caused Madney to scream in his little bubble of silence instead of completing the chant.

"Your attack magic won't work against me, but I absolutely will not appreciate it if any of you try to struggle, so I'll make sure you all cooperate. If you don't wish to experience any extra pain, I recommend you don't make my life harder." Ellie accompanied this warning with the cruelly serene smile of a goddess about to rain fire and brimstone down on the heads of sinners. "I shall now proceed to probe your minds," she announced.

Ellie first extended her fingers toward Gighis, who struggled in vain to escape from the Dorn Fesseln trap holding him. Gighis's attendants standing outside the council chamber doors tried to peek inside to see what was going on, but the force field Ellie had put up prevented any backup from entering. In effect, the four dark elf clan chiefs had been doomed the moment the witch had walked into the council chamber. Gighis had no choice but to let Ellie lay her hands on his head as he looked on in anguish, while the three other leaders trembled and waited for their turn to experience the same horrific treatment.

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Sometime later, I was sitting in my office in the Abyss, listening to Ellie as she summarized her findings from probing the memories of the dark elf clan chiefs. Oh, and for those wondering, we put all four leaders to death due to their history of persecuting and killing humans, either for profit or research. Though even if they hadn't been guilty of that, their plot to murder Ellie would have been enough to sign their death warrants. In their places, we installed moderates, who were much easier to work with.

"Okay, so there *was* a recorded sighting of a superpowered human in the Onifolk Archipelago in the past," I said, scanning the document Ellie had prepared for me. "For all we know, that human could very well be a Master."

"Yes, your Blessedness," Ellie agreed. "Everything else I could gather was similar to the intelligence I gleaned from the elf royals."

The onifolk lived on an island nation in the western sea. From what I'd heard, one member of the Concord of the Tribes, Oboro the oni, had returned to his homeland after the party's attempt to assassinate me, and while it would have been nice to kill two birds with one stone by exacting my revenge on Oboro while getting to the bottom of that Master sighting, at this particular moment in time, I already had my hands full with my next mission.

"I'm about to take a swipe at Naano, with preparations already underway to make contact with the Dwarf Kingdom," I said. "I think it's probably a little too late to switch plans now."

I was of course still curious about the Master sighting in Oboro's nation, but equally, I knew the Dwarf Kingdom might hold the secret behind this mysterious "non-Master" entity Queen Lif had heard about in passing.

"We could strike the dwarves and the onifolk at the same time, but I don't think we need to risk spreading ourselves thin," I said. "We should stick to the original plan and engage the Dwarf Kingdom first. As for the Onifolk Archipelago, you can order our intelligence operatives to step up our activities in that nation."

"As you wish, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, bowing politely.

Now that I had officially signed off on the revenge plot against Naano, I leaned back in my office chair and contemplated what I should expect from the upcoming campaign to exact retribution on the dwarf.

"So Naano's next on the block, huh?" I muttered to myself. "Ah, I can't *wait* to take him down."

Extra Story 3: Nazuna and Yume Tour the Abyss

"Master! Is it okay if we give your little sister a tour of the Abyss?"

I was sitting in my office taking care of a few things when the platinum-blonde Nazuna showed up hand-in-hand with my sister, Yume, who was wearing a dress and had a ribbon tied lovingly on one side of her hair. Both the dress and the ribbon were made of fine material, making her look like a princess standing next to a knight in shining armor. In fact, the pairing was so adorable, I wished I could have painted a portrait of it. The two girls were accompanied by fairy maids standing behind them, and the entire entourage was waiting for my response.

"Oh, sorry. I've been a little busy lately," I replied. "I know I should've given you a proper tour of the Abyss by now, but I haven't found the time."

Not only was I busy holding talks with Princess Lilith, I also had to oversee Ellie's mission to engage with the dark elf leaders, then there was the plan for establishing contact with the Dwarf Kingdom, and last but not least, I had made a start on crafting my revenge plot to take down my next target, Naano. I simply had too much on my plate to be able to afford Yume much attention.

"I'm sorry I haven't been spending a lot of time with you," I said to Yume. "I don't want to put off the tour of your new home any longer though, so if you like, why don't you get Nazuna and the maids to show you around instead?"

I thought it'd be nice if Nazuna was Yume's tour guide, since they were already so close. It was certainly a much better option than postponing the grand tour indefinitely.

Yume smiled sweetly and agreed almost immediately. "Of course! I'd love Auntie Nazuna to give me the tour!"

"Ya got it, little sister!" Nazuna said, beating her chest with pride. "I *am* your auntie, y'know!"

Hmm?

Yume had readily agreed, and Nazuna seemed happy that someone was treating her like a responsible adult. Even though Nazuna's short stature made her look roughly around Yume's age, it seemed as though Yume had grown attached to Nazuna in the same way a kid does to a grown adult. But I got this feeling that something was weirdly off about Yume's behavior, and I couldn't shake it.

"Master Light, is something the matter?" Iceheat had been assisting me in my office when Nazuna had arrived with Yume. Normally, it would have been Mei in here with me, but she was busy making the necessary preparations to establish contact with the Dwarf Kingdom. Iceheat had decided to pipe up after noticing that I'd been looking at Yume a tad longer than was considered normal.

"Oh, no. Everything's fine," I said, deciding to keep my thoughts to myself. I still couldn't put my finger on what exactly was weirding me out about Yume, but in any case, there was a much bigger worry standing next to my sister.

"I'll have ya know that Master has given me the duty to protect everyone in the Abyss," Nazuna declared proudly. "'Cause of that, I go out on patrols every day, so I know the Abyss like the back of my fingernails!"

"Golly, you're so amazing, Miss Nazuna!"

"Ya know it!" Nazuna boasted. "I *am* your auntie, after all!"

Nazuna had never been given the opportunity to play "auntie" with anyone before meeting Yume, and she was thrilled to no end. But Nazuna was obviously letting it all go to her head, and I didn't want my foolhardy lieutenant to take Yume somewhere dangerous just so she could show off.

"Iceheat," I whispered.

"What is it, Master Light?" Iceheat murmured back.

"Sorry to do this to you, but could you follow them and make sure Yume has a *safe* tour?" I asked.

"Understood, Master Light," Iceheat replied. "I myself shall see to it that those two do not get into trouble."

Nazuna and Yume were also being accompanied by fairy maids, but they'd be too powerless to stop the Level 9999 Vampire Knight if anything happened. But I didn't want to put a damper on Nazuna's eagerness to conduct a tour by issuing her with a bunch of warnings, so I elected to send Iceheat as a secret minder instead. Luckily, Iceheat understood the subtext of what I was asking her to do.

I feel a whole lot better now Iceheat is with them, I thought as I watched the group head off on a merry tour of the Abyss.

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After leaving Light's office, Nazuna showed Yume around Light's living quarters, the recreational facilities, the training grounds, the laboratory, the meeting room, and the experimental farm. The bottom tier of the Abyss had been developed so much by this point that it looked nothing like the vast interconnected maze of rock-filled caverns that Light had arrived in a few years previously. Since the Abyss was the largest dungeon in the world, there was zero chance of Nazuna showing Yume the whole place in a single day, but the Vampire Knight and the maids delighted in proudly showing off as much of the underground citadel as they could to the sister of their beloved dungeon lord.

The group eventually wound up in the Card Repository. "This is where we keep all the cards Master pulls from his Unlimited Gacha!" Nazuna announced, her chest puffed out with pride.

"Gee, this place looks so different from all those other parts you've shown me," Yume noted, her eyes like saucers as she stared up at the cavernous space.

While Nazuna was correct in what she said, to be more specific, the Card Repository had been built to organize and house the Unlimited Gacha cards that were being produced by Light's *clones* around the clock. Fresh loads of cards were brought in every morning and night for the repository workers to process, and the cards ranged from disposables, food, spices, and recreational goods, to low-level weapons, and magic items. Because of the sheer volume of cards that needed to be cataloged and parceled out, the Card Repository was one of the busiest sections in the Abyss.

One of the maids in Nazuna and Yume's entourage had gone on ahead to let the administrators of the repository know that they were coming, and as soon as the tour group arrived, the sister-brother team paused in their work to come and greet their visitors.

"Yume! Nazuna! I'm so glad you two sweeties came all this way to see me!" cooed Annelia, the head administrator.

"Hello—wah!" Before Yume could finish greeting Annelia back, the silver-haired card administrator had already glomped Yume and was rubbing cheeks with her. Annelia's younger brother and the repository's deputy administrator, Alth, went pale at the borderline inappropriate treatment his sister was showing to Light's younger sibling.

"D-Dear sister!" Alth called over to her frantically. "That is not how you should be treating Miss Yume on our very first encounter with her!"

"Alth, buddy, you're fretting over nothing," Annelia retorted with a broad smile splashed across her face. "Since Light is my special little kid brother, that makes his sister my sister too. And as Yume's big sister, it's only natural that I should give her a great, big bear hug. There's nothing rude about it!"

"Huh?" Yume said. "Are you really my brother's big sister? Does that mean you're my long-lost sister?"

"That's right, honey. I'm your big sister!" Annelia replied, not even bothering to correct the young girl's misconception. Meanwhile, Iceheat and the fairy maids were practically pulling their hair out over Annelia's overly chummy reception, while Alth found himself nursing a sudden stomachache. It took a few more minutes before it settled down enough for him to offer a proper introduction.

"Greetings, Miss Yume, younger sister of our Creator," Alth said, and he dropped to one knee before his young guest as if he were her servant. "I am the deputy administrator of the Card Repository. My name is Alth. I wholeheartedly welcome this opportunity to make your acquaintance."

Blushing in the face of Alth's princely features and his greeting, Yume lowered her head slightly in response. "You can call me Yume. I-It's nice to meet you too."

“And I’m Annelia, the big sister to everyone in the Abyss,” Annelia jumped in. “I’m in charge of the Card Repository and I run it with my younger brother, Alth, by my side. Since you’re my brand-new kiddo, you can ask me for anything you want. And since everyone calls me their big sister, it’d be really wonderful if you’d call me your big sister too, sweetie.”

“Okay, I will, big sister,” Yume replied.

Annelia squealed in delight, then squeezed Yume tight again and rubbed cheeks with her. “You’re absolutely *adorable*, Yume! And you look just like a princess in that cute little dress!”

Now that Yume had a good understanding of what Annelia was all about, the second hug didn’t surprise her as much as the first had, so she was more compliant this time and accepted the embrace. It was at this point that Yume was corrected on her misunderstanding—that Annelia was not *actually* her long-lost relative, but merely thought of herself as everyone’s older sister, using “kiddo” and similar terms of endearment for the people she liked. In fact, Annelia’s personality was similar to Jack’s, but Yume hadn’t met him yet. Jack thought of everyone as his “bro” to look after, regardless of their age or rank.

After she was all done fawning over Yume, Annelia turned her attention to Nazuna and Iceheat. “You two sweeties should be more like Yume and let me treat you like the precious little kiddoes you are.”

“Unfortunately, I’m in the middle of an assignment,” Iceheat said after a hesitant pause.

Nazuna was much more straightforward in her response. “How come *I’m* the ‘kiddo’? My power level’s higher than yours and Master summoned me way earlier. If anything, *you* should be *my* kiddo, don’tcha think?”

Leaving aside Nazuna’s total lack of tact, she was completely correct in her observation: she was Level 9999 while Annelia was only Level 5000, and because Nazuna was an SUR warrior, she was one of the first Light’s allies that he had released during his first year in the Abyss. Annelia and Alth were only released later, once the dungeon was considered safe enough to redevelop into a full underground fortress.

Nazuna’s logic failed to register at all with Annelia though. The Cardkeeper

straightened up awkwardly and slowly, like a wraith, and tittered darkly as she turned toward Nazuna. “It seems, no matter what I say, you *don’t* want to be my kiddo,” Annelia said. “But just so you know, I’m prepared to do *anything* it takes to make you my kiddo.”

“Anything, ya say?” Nazuna replied. “Well, I’d sure like to see what’cha got up your sleeve.”

Sensing the electricity developing between the two maidens, Yume jumped in the middle to de-escalate the situation. “P-Please calm down, big sister, Auntie Nazuna.”

Despite Yume’s pleas, Annelia reached into her pocket, pulled out an object, and thrust it toward Nazuna. “You can have this if you agree to be my kiddo.”

Annelia was dangling a lollipop in front of Nazuna, and the Vampire Knight’s serious expression immediately morphed into a beaming smile at the sight of it.

“Can I really?” Nazuna asked, taking the lollipop. “Okay, sure! I’ll be your kiddo! Thanks a bunch!”

Yume—who had only arrived at the Abyss a few days before—wordlessly gazed at the two of them with a look of sheer bewilderment on her face, as Nazuna happily rolled the lollipop around in her mouth, while Annelia stroked the Vampire Knight’s silver locks. This renewed cordiality between the pair only heightened the awkwardness the rest of the entourage was feeling—if that were even possible—so it was up to Iceheat to step in and wrap things up.

“Miss Yume,” Iceheat said, “I believe this is a good place to conclude your introduction to the Card Repository administrators, so I suggest we proceed to the next destination on our tour—”

“Iceheat, sweetie?” Annelia interrupted her. Iceheat feared what was coming next, for she assumed Annelia wanted to nuzzle Yume again, but in fact, Annelia stayed where she was and cast a tender, maternal look over the young guest of honor.

“Yume, are you starting to get tuckered out, honey?” Annelia asked her. “Maybe you should finish up your tour of the Abyss another day.”

Iceheat and the fairy maids were startled by this observation. Nazuna was the

only one composed enough to ask the obvious follow-up question, “Are ya really gettin’ tired, little sister?”

“Yeah, a little,” Yume replied truthfully. Even though Yume had grown up on a farm and was very used to walking everywhere, she was still a low-level human and she had been led on a hike through an absolutely massive dungeon. It was only a matter of time before she would start feeling drained, but unfortunately for her, Nazuna and the other tour guides had been having too much fun showing Yume around to notice that she was flagging.

In her mind, Iceheat was beating herself up. *Master Light entrusted me with the task of keeping Yume safe, yet I failed to make sure she wasn’t becoming too fatigued!*

Nazuna, however, was impressed by Annelia’s keen observation. “Wow, Annelia! Ya sure got good eyes, knowin’ that she was tired like that!”

Annelia harrumphed boastfully. “As everybody’s big sister, it’s my job to know if something’s wrong with any of my kiddoes! You sweeties can take an itty-bitty break in here, if you like. Oh, and another thing, Nazuna, I’d appreciate it *awfully* if you called me ‘big sister,’ like Yume does.”

But Nazuna had already finished the candy Annelia had given her and didn’t see any need to pay attention to the Cardkeeper anymore. “Anyhoo, I’ll take ya to my most favoritest spot of all, little sister,” the Vampire Knight said, taking Yume by the hand. “I *know* you’ll like it too, and ya can take a load off there!”

“A-Auntie Nazuna?!” Yume cried out in confusion as Nazuna led her away from the group and toward the Card Repository exit.

“Miss Nazuna! Miss Yume! Please wait for us!” Iceheat called out as she chased after the two of them with the accompanying fairy maids hot on her heels.

“I said you could rest in here!” Annelia shouted after them. “A-At least let me join you kiddoes—”

Alth grabbed Annelia by the shoulders and stopped her in her tracks before she could get very far. “Sister dear, we still have work to do.”

Ignoring the hubbub behind her, Nazuna continued dragging Yume along by

the hand until they reached the Vampire Knight's intended destination.

"Here we are! My favoritest resting spot!" Nazuna announced.

The two of them burst out of the dimly lit corridor into brilliant sunlight that flooded Yume's vision and forced her to close her eyes until she got used to the brightness. Once she managed to open her eyes again, she saw a wide-open, natural-looking green space much like the ones found up on the surface world.

"G-Golly! We're still underground, right?" Yume asked, gasping at the sprawling landscape in front of her. "It looks like we're actually outside!"

"Master and Ellie told me the light comes from a fake sun," Nazuna explained. "And all the trees and grass you see here were all made by magic."

Prior to Light's arrival, the entirety of the Abyss was a mess of dark caverns connected by equally dark passageways. There were no vast spaces like this one that harbored natural plant life or things like that. Once Ellie had finally deciphered the dungeon core—which made redeveloping the Abyss possible—one of the first things the Forbidden Witch did was transform a section of the dungeon into an area containing forests, meadows, a river, a waterfall, and even a swamp. This area was created with the intention of housing all the monsters and creatures Aoyuki had tamed. The artificial sun was generated by one of Light's Unlimited Gacha cards, and it rose and set like the real sun did up on the surface world, meaning mornings, afternoons, and evenings existed in this area.

"I can't believe they created this place that looks like the outside world inside a dungeon," Yume marveled. "No wonder this is your favoritest spot, Auntie Nazuna."

"I patrol the Abyss every day to keep everyone safe, so I know a whole buncha places I can take ya," Nazuna said. "But trees and grass aren't the only things ya can find in here. Heeey, yooou guuuys!"

Nazuna's yell was directed toward the forest, and it was so loud, her voice reached all the way into the cluster of trees. Several seconds later, a group of giant creatures emerged from the woods. There was the God Wolf Fenrir, who was covered in snow-white fur from head to toe, as well as the massive three-headed hound known as Cerberus, and swooping down out of the sky was the

Phoenix, a humongous winged creature with red feathers. Although the creatures were still quite some distance away, the sight of them terrified Yume and she grabbed Nazuna's side, which made the tour guide laugh.

"There's no need to be scared, little sister," Nazuna told her. "They're all good pets that Aoyuki's tamed, so they ain't gonna hurt ya. And if any of them *does* try to lay a paw on ya, I'll give 'em a good hiding, don't ya worry!"

On hearing Nazuna's threat, the creatures whined like chastened dogs and approached the two girls cautiously before rolling over onto their backs submissively, so that Yume could rub their bellies. This entire display was to show Nazuna and the rest—who had caught up to their runaway pair by this point—that they would never dream of hurting Yume, who had the same scent as the dungeon's master, Light. Curiosity soon got the better of Yume and she timidly reached out her arms to pet Fenrir's belly. On realizing that the fur was finer and softer to the touch than even freshly-made silk, Yume's face brightened up.

"Wow! I really like how it feels on my skin," Yume said. "It's so nice and smooth."

"Y'see?" said Nazuna. "I use this pup as a pillow whenever I wanna take a nap. Try it! You'll really like it!"

Looking to prove her words, Nazuna took Yume's hands and made the young girl lie down in the middle of Fenrir's fur. Not only was Fenrir super fluffy, but the God Wolf felt warm and gave off a pleasant scent that brought to mind a nice, sunny spot, instead of that gamey smell animals usually reek of.

"This *does* feel really nice," Yume agreed. "Thanks for bringing me here, Auntie Na—"

A soft snore from Nazuna interrupted Yume before she could finish her sentence, and she turned around to find her guide already fast asleep on top of the mass of white fur. On seeing Nazuna taking a lightning-fast trip to slumberland, Yume turned her gaze toward Iceheat, the fairy maids, then Fenrir in that order. None of the others said a word or tried to wake up the Vampire Knight, since they were used to letting someone who, regardless of how happy-go-lucky she was, was still *technically* their superior do her own thing. Yume

was quick to pick up on the reactions of the others and kept quiet as well, deciding to just smile gently at Nazuna’s sleeping face.



Just like she used to do with the younger kids back in her village, Yume let

Nazuna have her daytime nap in peace, while Iceheat activated her Item Box and retrieved a blanket to throw over Nazuna. The group was forced to hang around in that spot until Nazuna woke up, but Yume didn't mind too much, because it meant she was free to nuzzle and cuddle with Fenrir and the other furry creatures to her heart's content.

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Later on, I was told by the fairy maids that Yume wanted to share a bed with me that night for old time's sake. I agreed to the suggestion, since I still owed my sister for being too busy to keep her company and I wanted to hear what she thought of what my allies and I had done to the dungeon. A couple of fairy maids brought Yume to my private chamber, and wearing some long-sleeved pajamas with butterfly prints on them, she climbed into my bed. After telling the maids they could leave, I joined her, and Yume and I finally had some alone time for the first time in over three years.

"Then Auntie Nazuna lay down on Fenrir's belly and drifted off to sleep almost straight away!" Yume recounted, excitedly telling me about her day in great detail.

I laughed at this punchline ending. "Yup, that's just like Nazuna all right."

"So I let Auntie Nazuna sleep, and went to nuzzle Cerberus and the Phoenix," Yume continued. "Cerberus's fur looked dark and stiff, but it was actually really soft. The Phoenix felt more feathery than furry, which meant it was really nice and fluffy!"

Yume's eyes twinkled as she talked, and I could tell that she'd had a lot of fun touring the Abyss, but all of a sudden, she had to stifle a yawn. This came as no real surprise, since it was late at night, and she'd had a long day without having any real rest, but instead of lying down to sleep, Yume rubbed her eyes to try to stay awake. I guessed that, now she had me all to herself, she really wanted to spend as much time talking to me as she could.

I pulled the blanket up to Yume's shoulders. "It's getting late. Time for sleep, I think. I'm afraid I'm going to be too busy again tomorrow, but I promise to make some time so we can finish our chat."

"You promise, brother?" Yume asked sleepily. She clasped my hand as she

fought in vain to stop her heavy eyelids from drooping. I gently squeezed her hand and was about to answer, but she wasn't done asking questions.

"Are we going to be together forever?" she asked in a voice that seemed to come from the little girl I'd left back in the village three long years prior. "You won't be taken away from me like mommy, daddy, and Big Brother Els were, will you?"

"Of course I won't," I said. "We will always be together as a family. Nothing can tear us apart. Everything will be all right, so you can go to sleep now."

"Okay," Yume said, accepting this answer. "Good night, brother." Only a few seconds had passed before I heard the sound of her snoozing softly, her hand still in mine. I didn't loosen my grip on Yume's hand at all, and watched her sleep for a bit.

So that's what was bothering me about her today, I thought. When Nazuna and Yume first walked into my office, I had found Yume's behavior kind of strange, but I couldn't figure out why. I was ready to dismiss it as unfounded paranoia on my part, but after hearing her ask me that question while sharing a bed, it all made sense.

Yume had always been a sweet girl that, as the youngest child, everybody in the family doted on, and it was fair to say that everyone in my old village had harbored something of a soft spot for her too. In other words, she had spent her whole childhood never having to worry about whether people would like her, since her natural charms had won everybody over already.

But then, our village was attacked, and Yume had almost died before being saved by Princess Lilith. At age seven, Yume became an apprentice maid, but she was estranged from all of her blood relatives and found herself having to navigate an environment where she could get thrown out at any time. The only person Yume could rely on was herself, so she had used every asset she possessed to her advantage. From that point onward, what had previously been her natural charm—that Yume had never really thought about—became a tool for her survival. Yume started *consciously* acting cute around people to get in their good graces, which went to show how quickly she was forced to grow up. What I'd witnessed in the office earlier that day was Yume using her charm

offensive on Nazuna. She had honed that skill over the past three years, and it now came almost automatically. But here, sharing a bed with me, she had opened up her heart and exposed her more vulnerable side to me, like she used to do when she was younger, which allowed me to finally connect the dots between the way she had acted earlier in the day and the old Yume I'd known back in the village.

Yume looked completely at peace as she slept, and as I gently stroked her hair, I wondered how much hardship and despair she had been forced to endure over the last few years. Yume may have been good at bottling up such feelings, but imagining what she had gone through almost brought tears to my eyes.

What if I didn't have my Unlimited Gacha? I began to wonder. *What if I'd never left home? What if I'd never been recruited by the Concord of the Tribes? What if I'd stayed as a regular adventurer? What if I* had *gotten killed in this dungeon, way back when?*

But all these "what ifs" wouldn't change the fact that my village had been razed to the ground, my parents were dead, and Yume had been forced to spend three years alone, fending for herself. That was all in the past, and there was only one thing I could do for her now. I squeezed Yume's warm hand, though I was careful not to squeeze it too hard, for fear of waking her.

"Mom, dad," I said to the air around me. "I'm going to protect Yume, just like Els protected her. I will never allow her to feel sad ever again. I swear on my life that I will protect her."

In my heart, I vowed once more to destroy anyone and anything that dared to stand in our way, whether it be whole nations, a Master, the Undergod of Evil, or even the Goddess herself.

Extra Story 4: Iceheat and Mera's Release

Ellie was still a year and a few months away from being able to totally control the dungeon core, and in the meantime, my allies and I were busy building my army in the Abyss.

"Mei, Ellie," I said to the two of them in my office. "I'm going to summon two more people who will serve under you."

"You are very kind, Master Light," Mei said.

"I still can't believe that your Gift is able to furnish us with such talented people in the blink of an eye!" Ellie marveled. "It truly is the work of a god, Blessed Lord Light!"

Although we were adding to the ranks without too much trouble, we were severely lacking in terms of supervisors who could direct my allies to perform the redevelopment work that was needed in the dungeon. Up to this point, Mei and Ellie had been overseeing the expansion work, but their workloads had become too great for them to speed up progress on any individual project. My Unlimited Gacha had produced two high-level beings who could assist Mei and Ellie, however, so I finally took the decision to summon them from their cards, so they could help lighten the load weighing down my deputies.

"UR, Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat! UR, Level 7777, Chimera, Mera—release!" As soon as I voiced these commands, the two cards disintegrated into glowing particles and created two magical seals that lit up the whole room. A second later, once the light had subsided, two women were standing before us. Both of them quietly dropped to one knee.

"UR, Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat," the first woman said, announcing herself. "It is my greatest honor to be summoned before you!"

The second woman cackled then also introduced herself. "UR, Level 7777, Chimera, Mera, at your service, Master."

Iceheat—who sounded overly serious and earnest—had hair that was as red as a bonfire on the right side and blue as a frozen glacier on the left. By

contrast, the roughly two meter-tall Mera seemed to have more of a devil-may-care attitude, which caused Iceheat to turn her head and glare at the chimera.

From the looks of it, Iceheat's super serious while Mera's much more carefree, I thought. *It feels like their clashing personalities might prevent them from getting along.*

But I kept my observations to myself as I addressed my new allies. "I know I've only just summoned the two of you, but I need to put you to work immediately. Can I count on your help?"

"Of course you can, Master Light!" Iceheat replied. "I, Iceheat, offer you this body to do with as you please."

This response elicited a chortle from Mera. "'Iceheat,' was it? Are you *sure* you wanna go with that phrasing?"

"What is amiss with how I phrased my reply?" Iceheat retorted. "It is my duty to literally offer my body and soul to Master Light. I myself will gladly serve my master in whatever way he desires. I am in no way similar to an unserious character like yourself."

"Utter nonsense!" Mera snorted. "I don't have to prove my fealty to Master, and you'd better hope for your sake that you're not all talk, sweetheart."

"Come again?" Iceheat said.

"Hmm?" Mera replied menacingly. By this point, the two women were staring daggers at each other, even though they were still kneeling in front of me.

Whoa, I didn't think it would get this awkward so fast, I thought. I was rubbing my forehead and despairing at their conflicting personalities, when all of a sudden, the two women flinched with fear. Standing behind me, Mei and Elllie were radiating palpable fury, both of them plainly fed up that Iceheat and Mera were badmouthing each other in my presence. Due to their respective differences in power levels, Iceheat and Mera immediately put their bickering on hold, and made a show of how reverentially they were kneeling as sweat formed on their brows. I raised a hand to signal to Mei and Ellie to ease off, then took it upon myself to admonish my newly-released allies.

"I did not summon the two of you here to fight each other," I began. "I

brought you here to help build an army large enough for me to carry out my future plans. I won't force you two to get along, but I will ask that you at least try to respect one another enough to refrain from fighting every time you cross paths. Morale will start plummeting among the troops if you two are constantly at each other's throats."

"I-I apologize for acting so disrespectfully," Iceheat said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry you had to see that," Mera added, chuckling nervously.

As both Iceheat's and Mera's shoulders slumped in shame, I turned around and gave my two deputies their orders. "Mei, Ellie, I leave it to you to assign them duties and show them the ropes."

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei said.

"We'll take care of everything, Your Blessedness," said Ellie.

Both Mei and Ellie were smiling broadly, but I could tell from the looks on their faces that they weren't just going to assign work to this pair. No, they were going to give the two summons a full dressing down to make sure they never disgraced themselves in my presence again. For a moment, I considered instructing Mei and Ellie not to be too hard on their new charges, but I thought better of it, and let my two deputies escort Iceheat and Mera out of my office without so much as another word.

I shouldn't try to meddle, I thought. *It could make things worse.*

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It wasn't long before Iceheat and Mera became two of Light's key allies in the Abyss. Mei piled enough duties and responsibilities onto Iceheat to warrant making her the deputy head housekeeper, and while Ellie didn't go as far as making Mera her permanent subordinate, the two of them did develop a good collaborative relationship while working on the construction of the new throne room, which saw Ellie take charge of the designs, while Mera oversaw the actual building work as the site supervisor on the project. Of course, normally, Ellie would have thrown herself wholeheartedly into a project for her beloved dungeon master, but her first priority was researching how to completely control the dungeon core, so Ellie had to settle for having Mera assisting her

with constructing the throne room. And because Mera was a chimera, she could produce multiple disembodied eyes and ears that, when used with the SR Telepathy card, could serve as Ellie's eyes and ears, which allowed the superwitch to keep tabs on progress and pass down instructions while still beavering away in the dungeon core room.

Both Iceheat and Mera were highly-skilled members of the team who quickly meshed with the inner workings of the Abyss. However, the two women had less luck meshing with each other.

"Honest to goodness, why does Mera find it so hard to fill out a simple form correctly?" Iceheat muttered. She had been sorting through that day's documents that had piled up on her desk in her private office, when she had come across a requisition form sent by Mera. "I thought I told her last time that she needed to be precise with her numbers when filling out this form! Why must she always *insist* on approximating when requesting material? If she carries on being this sloppy with numbers, we may run out of materials which will delay the whole construction project! Doesn't she realize how much responsibility she has on her shoulders to get that throne room completed for our master?"

At this point in time, the Card Repository had yet to be completed, so the materials listed on the requisition sheets came directly from Light's Item Box. This system was good enough for a relatively small population, but it would eventually become unfeasible as Light's army of allies grew. Normally, Mei would be the one to sign off on these requests for items, but since she was busy with other things, the SUR maid had delegated the task to Iceheat.

Even though Iceheat had warned Mera previously about the requisition sheet, the chimera had still submitted a document with the exact same numerical irregularities on it. But since other than that, Mera had filled the sheet in correctly, Iceheat had no choice but to stamp the document and approve it, in spite of her annoyance with it.

Later that same day, while drinking beer in her bedroom, Mera was grumbling to herself about what she deemed a slight by Iceheat. "Holy hell, that Iceheat is such a tightass," Mera complained, lounging on the sofa in a decidedly unladylike way. "Who the crap has time to figure out the *exact* amount of

material you need just so you can write it down on some dumb sheet? There's nothing wrong with putting down an estimate or asking for a little extra. I mean, we have to cover for mistakes, overruns, and changes to our plans, anyway. If construction projects always went as planned, we'd all be golden!"

Although Iceheat had approved Mera's requisition, she had also decided to relay her complaints to the chimera via the fairy maid who delivered the materials that had been requested.

Mera chuckled evilly as she thought about her colleague. "That stubborn little fathead. The only thing stopping me from washing down one of her limbs with this beer is because Master ordered me not to."

Mera ended her thought by draining the last of her beer, then munching the bottle as if it were a light snack. Mera had a belligerent side to her, so she would have been more than willing to settle her differences with Iceheat using her fists, but Light had warned the two of them not to fight. And what's more, Iceheat seemed to get along well with the other denizens of the Abyss, so Mera was a little hesitant to ruin the whole camaraderie of the dungeon just to settle her own personal grudge.

Of course, these two limiting factors didn't change the fact that Mera just couldn't stomach Iceheat's uptight personality. When it came to the question of meal times, the two women went to great lengths to make sure their schedules didn't overlap, but on the rare occasion that Mera and Iceheat *did* happen to bump into each other in the mess hall, they made a point of ignoring one another and sat at different tables. Naturally, they had the option of one leaving the mess hall altogether and waiting for the other party to finish up their meal, but that would have created the unmistakable impression that the two of them were purposely avoiding each other. In other words, Mera and Iceheat took pains to ensure they didn't cause a scene or make things awkward for others, but in spite of this, Mera still considered Iceheat to be a complete annoyance.

Mera cackled as she stretched out and draped her huge frame across the sofa. "Seriously, me and Iceheat must be the two most incompatible people on the *planet*!"

Iceheat shared that sentiment. Or at least, they did both think that right up until a major incident occurred that would prove completely devastating to the two women.

☆☆☆

"Mera!"

Yelling at the top of her lungs, Iceheat took giant strides down the hallway toward the chimera. Mera—who was shuffling along, looking crestfallen—stopped and turned toward the colleague she hated.

"What is the meaning of removing Master Light's statue from the throne room?!" Iceheat bellowed irately at the chimera. "It would've been one of the great wonders of the universe if we had completed it! Do you have any *idea* what you have deprived me and the rest of the world?!"

Mera chuckled dolefully. "I know damn well what I did. We worked ourselves to the bone building that entire throne room, but more than anything else, me and the construction crew really poured our hearts and souls into carving that statue. But it was Master himself who ordered us to remove the statue, so we had no choice in the matter."

Because she hadn't known all the details, Iceheat had assumed Mera was the one who had decided to remove the thirty meter-tall statue of Light from the throne room, but after hearing this explanation straight from a rather dispirited Mera, Iceheat could only splutter in shock. "Wh-What? Master Light *ordered* you to remove the statue?"

"Yeah. I guess he must have hated the way it looked," Mera said glumly. "If I were more of an artist, Master would've fallen in love with our masterpiece and we would've been able to keep the statue. It would've been fabulous to have that historic work of art standing tall for future generations to marvel at, but alas, all that has gone up in smoke. I know, I know. I messed up and let everyone down. I wish there was a hole somewhere I could just crawl into and rot. Nah, maybe it'd be better if I just quit my job, or ended myself for good." Mera's broad shoulders drooped further, like wilting petals.

"Mera..."

The usually brash and carefree chimera was wallowing in self-loathing, causing Iceheat's expression to soften out of sympathy. Iceheat was vicariously feeling the pain Mera was going through because the two of them had sworn an undying oath of loyalty to Light.

Speaking of Light, he hadn't actually ordered the statue to be removed because he felt it held no artistic appeal. No, Light would've gotten rid of *any* gigantic statue that was made in his likeness, because sitting on a throne under such a colossus would've been so humiliating that it would count as an unspeakable kink. But the two women were unaware of this context, so the statue's removal signaled to them that it had been a monumental failure on the part of the workers.

"I don't think you should resign your position or commit self-harm. At least, not unless you ask for Master Light's permission to do so," Iceheat said in an attempt to cheer up Mera. "The only time it would make sense to take our own lives is if we get captured by an enemy that seeks to extract information from us. Otherwise, our lives are not for us to take, because our lives belong to Master Light. So if you really wish to kill yourself, you should first get authorization from Master Light."

Iceheat paused, then tried a different tack. "In any case, I happened to witness Master Light's statue before its removal, and I could sense the amount of respect and devotion the creators—namely, you, Miss Ellie, and all the rest—had put into the creation. It was a truly magnificent sight to behold. I myself would never say you were lacking as an artist, therefore I sincerely believe the reason the statue was removed couldn't have been due to anything aesthetic. Master Light must have had a deeper rationale for his decision that none of us will be capable of understanding. So there is no reason to look down on yourself."

"Iceheat..." Mera said with a quiet chuckle.

"If I were in your position, I myself would naturally find it impossible not to be depressed as well," Iceheat added. "I apologize for taking out my anger on you. I'm willing to listen to you griping about the matter for as long as you want. I've just exchanged my luxury item ticket for fine tea leaves, so we can continue this chat over some tea in my room."

At the time, the Abyss had yet to create and circulate its own currency, so the way the denizens of the dungeon received any luxury goods they wanted was by trading in ration tickets that were distributed on a regular basis. Iceheat tended to use her ration tickets on tea and acquiring new additions to her tea set collection.

Mera chortled bashfully at Iceheat's suggestion. "Thanks, hun. But if it's all good with you, I'd rather kick back with some booze." Mera's mood had recovered somewhat after listening to what Iceheat had to say. For her part, Iceheat couldn't help a sheepish smile creeping onto her face herself, but she tried to hide her feelings by pushing back against Mera's proposition.

"Well, unfortunately, I myself do *not* prefer alcohol," Iceheat stated. "I shall brew some tea for us that will taste better than any beer you've ever drunk."

"Tea that tastes *better* than beer?" Mera guffawed. "Now this I gotta see! Or rather, taste!"

By this time, Mera has completely regained her old spirits, thanks to Iceheat's little pep talk. As the two of them strolled to Iceheat's room, the maid told her partner all about her interest in tea and teacups.

And so, the removal of the statue had ended up being the impetus that melted the animosity between these two people with polar opposite personalities and eventually led to them calling each other close friends. In time, Mera and Iceheat began eating meals at the same table, and before long, the two were practically inseparable. As for the statue, Light had heard on the grapevine that the throne room workers felt that it had been removed because they had personally done something wrong. Feeling chastened over causing this misunderstanding, Light gathered the workers together later on and explained to them at length how their work had nothing to do with his decision, and how he truly appreciated the show of love and devotion that had been conveyed through the creation of the statue.

"But you have to understand, it was really, *really* embarrassing seeing that humongous statue of me," Light said, which seemed to satisfy the workers as an explanation.

Extra Story 5: Mei's Inner Feelings

Soon after Light summoned the SUR Everseeking Maid, Mei, had his first conversation with her, and was urged to pull a few more cards from his Unlimited Gacha, the young adventurer started feeling faint. He had been through a lot that day, having not only survived an assassination attempt by his former party, the Concord of the Tribes, but also an attack by a Snake Hellhound on the bottom level of the Abyss. Once the adrenaline rush from these near-death experiences had worn off, Light suddenly found himself drained of energy, and would have fallen to the ground if Mei hadn't reacted so quickly to catch him and keep him on his feet. Mei suggested he should sleep, but Light was worried about being attacked by the dangerous monsters that were prowling around in the world's deadliest dungeon. However, Light had reached the limits of both his physical and mental stamina, which meant fatigue soon won out and he nodded off.

"Magistrings."

With Light balanced on one arm, Mei used her ability to make bedding for her sleeping charge. Since her Magistrings were made using mana, Mei could manipulate the shape, texture, softness, and firmness of the strings to make a wide range of objects, meaning she was able to make a set of bedding in an instant, which is what she did. Well, all except for one item: a pillow. Instead, Mei lay Light's head down on her lap and sat stock still, gazing contentedly down at the young boy in silence as he slept.

I can feel Master Light's warmth in my lap, thought Mei. *I could happily gaze down upon him sleeping like this until the end of time itself.*

Mei lovingly stroked Light's forelocks, while in her head, she swore an undying oath of fealty to Light, because to her, he was a god who had summoned her into this world. The Level 9999 maid also felt a strong sense of fulfillment in supporting a young boy with such enormous ambitions. Light sought to take revenge on his sworn enemies, find out why he had been the target of an assassination attempt, and uncover the truth behind Masters. To do all that, he had decided that he would build an army that was capable of

waging war against entire nations in the bottom tier of the Abyss. Although Light was armed with a potent Gift in the Unlimited Gacha, the path he was taking was sure to be filled with suffering and hardships, yet the young boy hadn't flinched when choosing to depart on this new journey, and Mei found that sense of determination deeply exhilarating.

I shall make those reprobates pay dearly for what they tried to do to Master Light, Mei vowed to herself. *If I could, I would capture every single one of those ne'er-do-wells myself and make them regret ever being born into this world.*

However, it was Mei herself who advised Light to forge his own kingdom at the bottom of the Abyss in order to fulfill all of his objectives. She couldn't allow herself to go against her master's will by taking her substantial anger out on the eight who had betrayed Light herself.

Light mumbled in his sleep, seemingly all snug and cozy in Mei's lap. The maid bottled up all of her anger and buried it deep inside so that her dark energy wouldn't disturb his rest. Mei continued to look down lovingly at Light, though another concern had entered her mind.

It appears monsters have noticed our presence and mistaken us for prey, thought Mei.

Because Mei had suppressed her murderous aura, the monsters in the Abyss no longer saw her as a threat. The smell of blood from the Snake Hellhound Mei had killed earlier was also drawing the creatures toward Light's location, their eyes glowing with the anticipation of getting to feast on their next meal.

I do not wish for these impudent beasts to disturb Master Light's slumber, but this does present an excellent opportunity to prepare some targets for Master Light that will help him to level up, thought Mei.

While Mei's eyes remained glued on the snoozing Light, another part of her mind focused on the nearest of the prowlers approaching them. Still kneeling with Light's head resting in her lap, Mei quietly wiggled her fingers and shot out Magistrings toward the monster's mouth, binding it shut before the creature could cry out and wake up Light. Before the monster had time to scrabble around in confusion, Mei's Magistrings immobilized all four of its legs, then enclosed its entire body in a white cocoon, similar to what a spider makes to

ensnare its prey.

Once Mei had finished entrapping this monster, she used her Magistrings to clean up all the blood and viscera left behind by the first Snake Hellhound she had killed, then scooped up the remaining chunks of flesh and deposited them further away to use as bait to capture other monsters, all while making sure not to disturb Light.

I shall endeavor to capture as many monsters as I can before Master Light wakes up, Mei thought to herself. More targets would naturally make it easier for Light to level up, but above all else, being useful to her master like this gave the Everseeking Maid an electric sense of fulfillment. Mei spent a highly meaningful first night with Light, her eyes continuing to gaze down warmly at his peacefully resting face.

☆☆☆

A few days after Light had finally reached Level 9999, he faced off against Mei in the middle of the dungeon's training grounds. "I hope we have a good fight today, Mei," Light said.

"Of course, Master Light," Mei replied. "I shall devote all of my heart, soul, and efforts into sparring with you."

"Okay, settle down," Light said, chuckling awkwardly. "We're only doing this to find out how strong I actually am, now that I'm Level 9999. We don't have to turn this into an all-out battle."

Light had finally made it to this power level thanks to fighting the deadly interdimensional monsters conjured by Ellie's Koshmar Summon. The Forbidden Witch had helped Light to battle these monsters, alongside Mei, Aoyuki, and Nazuna, and now Light wanted to see how he would fare against Mei, his longtime trainer. While Light was still underleveled, Mei had held back from using her most powerful moves for fear of injuring her master, but for this session, Light had chosen Mei to be his first Level 9999 sparring partner after reaching the milestone himself, and the maid couldn't help expressing her excitement over being given this honor.

"I thank you for your consideration," Mei said. "However, now that my master has chosen me to be his opponent, I cannot constrain myself."

As if to prove her point, Mei hitched up the cuffs of her white gloves in a vaguely intimidating manner and took up a battle-ready position a short distance away from her master. Across from her, Light gripped his UR Uragan spear and nodded to show he was fine with this.

“Master Light, you may engage me at any time,” Mei stated, facing Light with both arms down by her sides, ready to fire her strings.

“Ready when you are,” Light declared, raising the Uragan. “Let’s do this!”

“Magistrings!”

Mei made the first move, firing threads from all ten of her fingers, and the strings formed a web, ready to ensnare Light. A low-level fighter wouldn’t have been able to see the ultra-thin Magistrings, or even feel when the threads came into contact with their flesh, but Light immediately noticed his senses had gotten an upgrade at his newly-attained power level. *I can see the Magistrings! So this is what it’s like to be Level 9999!*

Light had sparred with Mei countless times before, but he had never been able to see or sense the Magistrings Mei shot from her fingers. This time around though, Light could clearly see the trace mana from the strings, as well as the distortions in the air. This heads-up allowed him to easily launch a counterattack.

“I know I said this is a mock battle,” Light shouted. “But that web attack isn’t gonna catch me!”

Light infused the Uragan with mana, leaped into the air, and sliced through the Magistrings where they were least concentrated, causing the threads to fall to the ground like bits of cobweb. Light landed again and was about to rush toward Mei when he discovered his feet were glued to the ground.

“What?!” Light cried out. “My feet are stuck on the Magistrings?!”

Mei had purposely created webbing with obvious weak spots so that Light would rip apart the Magistrings, then once the torn-up threads had fallen to the ground, Mei secretly modified the properties of the Magistrings to make them highly adhesive, thereby creating a trap for her unwitting opponent.

“Master Light,” Mei called over to him. “I *will* use every trick I know!”

Mei's next move was to cause the sticky Magistrings surrounding Light to dart toward him in an attempt to mummify and immobilize him. Knowing he wouldn't be able to slice and dice his way through all of the Magistring clumps barrelling toward him, Light decided to pour mana into his phantasma-class weapon instead.

"Uragan! Full Power!" Light yelled. "Blow these strings to kingdom come!"

The Uragan produced a whirlwind that whipped through the incoming Magistrings and blasted them away. The gusts of wind also caused Mei to lose her balance, giving Light a slight opening. He infused the Uragan with more mana to strengthen its blade, then cut through the strings gluing his feet to the ground. This move caused a giant fissure that stretched all the way to Mei to open up in the ground.

"Very good, Master Light!" Mei commended. "But our battle is not over yet!"

Since Mei was Level 9999, Light escaping from her trap was unlikely to make her lose heart. She waved her arms around to gather up all of the scattered Magistrings, then instantly clumped them together into a large whip. Mei's Magistrings were capable of forming almost any object—blankets, clothing, a sofa, even a bathtub—but they had one drawback, if you could call it that. Even though Mei could freely manipulate the shape and hardness of the strings, she couldn't add mass to the threads by infusing mana into them. This meant the only way she could make the Magistrings heavy enough to withstand the Uragan's gusts of winds was by physically bunching them into a single object—namely, this Magistring whip.

"Here I come, Master Light!" Mei called out. Moving both hands in tandem, Mei lashed the whip toward her opponent, the tip of it easily breaking the sound barrier.

"Wrong move, Mei!" Light yelled over the mini-sonic boom. To Light, the whip was moving so slowly, he had plenty of time to react. To Mei's complete shock, Light effortlessly tossed the Uragan toward the whip, and much like an arrow, the phantasma-class spear pierced the whip in midair and pinned the makeshift weapon to the opposite wall.

As a result of this unexpected turnabout, Mei lost her balance, which turned

out to be a fatal slip in a contest between two top-level warriors. Screaming at the top of his lungs, Light materialized a broadsword from his Item Box and rushed at Mei. A split-second later, the sword was a hair's breadth away from Mei's neck, Light stopping the blade just short of the skin, as if there were an invisible barrier protecting Mei from certain death.

"I surrender, Master Light," Mei said resignedly.

Savoring his first ever victory against an opponent who had previously been unbeatable, Light breathed out slowly and relaxed his muscles. "Thanks, Mei, for putting up such a good fight."

☆☆☆

After Light had stowed away his Uragan and the broadsword, Mei handed the young dungeonmaster a white towel. Light wiped the sweat off his face, which still had a broad grin spread across it at his victory, and Mei responded by treating him to an equally delighted smile.

"You were magnificent, Master Light," Mei said. "I never imagined you would perform with such skill and poise so soon after reaching Level 9999."

"Thanks, Mei, but it's all thanks to you, Ellie, Aoyuki, and Nazuna for helping me to become more powerful," Light replied. "Even so, I'm still finding it really hard to believe that I actually beat you, even with all that training and my new power level."

"It is all down to your diligent efforts, Master Light," Mei insisted. "And as I told you a long time ago, while I am capable of performing most tasks, this aspect of my competencies prevents me from becoming a highly capable fighter."

Mei wasn't merely being modest in saying this. She was simply relating a sober truth that Light was only now finally able to grasp after fighting the SUR warrior on an equal footing.

Oh, right. She used to deny she was all that strong, even though she was damn near unbeatable, Light thought as he continued wiping his face. *I thought she was only saying it to make me feel better, but now that I'm at the same level as her, I can tell that she's at least one step behind the other three when it comes*

to combat skills.

Of course, this wasn't to say that Mei was weak in any real sense of the word. If Iceheat and the other Level 7777 supersoldiers were to gang up on Mei, she would still beat them comprehensively. But when compared to the other SUR warriors, Mei's role as a jack-of-all-trades put her at a relative disadvantage in terms of combat capabilities. Mei would have an extremely tough time beating either Aoyuki or Ellie in one-on-one battles, while Nazuna would absolutely obliterate Mei in a match. So even though Mei had lost to Light in a mock battle, she wasn't ashamed that she had been beaten at all, instead raining down praise on her master.

"You not only had the capacity to reach the maximum power level, where you have displayed superior fighting abilities, your scholarly level has reached heights incomparable to where you were before," Mei said, a genuine smile on her face. "I can hardly contain my pride at how much you have grown and developed. I feel so honored to serve you."

Light laughed out loud at this. "Oh, stop. You're making me blush. And besides, none of that would've been possible without your help. I can't thank you enough for teaching me all of it."

"Those words mean the world to me," Mei replied with deep emotion in her voice as she pressed her hands to her chest.

"We still can't teleport to the surface, thanks to that stupid dungeon core, so I've still got a long road ahead of me if I want to get back at my enemies, uncover the truth, and expand my army," Light reflected. "For that, I'm still gonna need all the help you can give me, Mei."

"Of course, Master Light!" Mei replied effusively. "On my honor as a maid, I vow to dedicate my body and soul to the advancement of your exalted pursuits." Mei smiled from ear to ear as she once again reiterated her absolute affection and fealty to Light.

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Mei's blissful, uneventful days with her beloved Light came to an abrupt end the day the young overlord took his four lieutenants to see his family, only to find his village razed to the ground.

“I’ll *kill* them!” Light shouted to the skies, hellish anguish in his voice. “I swear I will *murder* every last one of the bastards who destroyed my village! I’ll kill those wretches who slaughtered my family! They’ll never get away with this! I’ll search high and low for those murderers and execute them on the spot! They’ll pay for what they did here a thousand times over!”

The sheer amount of dark energy Light released in that painful moment forced his four SUR warriors to stand completely motionless, and compelled any animals and monsters in the general area to flee. Light paid no heed to what his uninhibited fury was doing to his allies, continuing to rant and curse until his throat was too sore to speak another word. At that point, he returned to the Abyss, ordered his allies to assemble a team to investigate what had happened to his village, then collapsed into bed with a fever.

Because Light was Level 9999, it was presumed that he was impervious to basically all ailments, yet he had developed a temperature that was well above normal. Mei and the others tried every healing card the Unlimited Gacha had spat out, even resorting to anti-curse cards for good measure, but nothing seemed to work. Ellie—who was an expert on healing as well as sorcery—tried diagnosing Light, and when she hit upon the cause and nature of his affliction, she summoned the other lieutenants to a separate room.

“I’m afraid to say Blessed Lord Light isn’t suffering from any injury, illness, or magical attack by a third party,” Ellie explained. “I believe the shock of seeing the devastation wrought on his village has triggered a psychological reaction that has left him bedridden with a fever.”

On hearing Ellie’s diagnosis, Nazuna tried placing herself in Light’s shoes. “It’d be like if I came back to the Abyss after being away for a long time, only to find that Master and everyone else had been killed. I-I can’t even imagine what that’d be like! Oh, poor Master...” Nazuna began weeping on Light’s behalf.

“Yes, I understand how you feel, Nazuna, but there’s no need to get yourself upset,” Ellie said. “See? Now you have a runny nose.”

Ellie produced a handkerchief and wiped Nazuna’s nose, the Vampire Knight gratefully letting her do it. “Thanks, Ellie...” she blubbed.

Aoyuki tilted her head forward so that the brim of her cat-eared hood

covered her eyes. When she spoke, her soft voice trembled with rage. “I will kill them. I will find whatever monsters, raiders, or nations destroyed Master’s village and I will inflict enough pain on them to tear their souls apart before ending their lives. I will make the pain of death so traumatic for them that their souls will reject any second chance at life they might be offered.”

“Aoyuki, I know exactly how you feel, but I must ask you to ensure your unbridled anger does not escape the confines of this room,” Mei said. “If we were our low-level associates, our hearts would have stopped, seized by panic.”

“Mrrow,” a prickly Aoyuki agreed before forcibly repressing her emotions again, since she didn’t want to see any more of her allies hurt.

Once Aoyuki’s dark energy had subsided to an acceptable level, Mei continued addressing her. “In any case, I shall ask you and Ellie to form fact-finding teams and send them to Master Light’s village to comb for clues. Nazuna, I need you at the ready here in the Abyss so that you can provide backup in case there is an emergency. I, along with some of the fairy maids, shall provide round-the-clock care for Master Light on a rotation basis. If Master Light takes a turn for the worse, we will contact you, Ellie.”

“Understood, Mei,” Ellie replied. “I will entrust my Blessed Lord to you.”

“Meeow,” added Aoyuki.

Nazuna sniffed. “All righty, Mei!”

Ellie’s assignment was to use her magic to scour the village for any evidence that might have been left behind by the attackers, while Aoyuki would lead a team of monsters with superior vision, hearing, and smell to search for clues, as well as to find bodies of villagers over a wider area. Because Nazuna was completely unsuited to detective work, Mei had decided to have her stay in the Abyss as “backup.” Some other allies who had the skills to assist with the probe were also dispatched to the surface world.

Although Ellie and the two other deputies would have preferred to be the ones looking after their beloved master, prior to crawling into his sickbed, Light had already given them orders to find out who had destroyed his village, so they followed Mei’s instructions without complaint.

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Even after three days of scouring the village, Light had yet to wake from his fever. Mei soaked a towel in a bucket of cool water beside Light's bed, wrung out the excess liquid, then placed the damp towel on Light's forehead. He groaned in response.

"Master Light..." Mei breathed.

Seeing her master in such a distressed state caused Mei to feel a pain worse than if she'd had a chunk of her own flesh gouged out. If she could, she would have taken all of Light's suffering onto herself, but there was no magic or gacha card in the world that could grant Mei's wish, so all she could do was look on as her master's face twisted with anguish as he slept. Mei bit her lip, angry at herself for not being able to do more to make Light feel better.

"D-Don't..." Light whispered.

"Master Light!" Mei said, raising her voice. "Are you finally awake?"

Light raised his arm and continued dryly talking in his sleep. "Don't leave me, mom, dad. I don't wanna be alone. It's all my fault. Because of this stupid Gift, I left the village and got everyone killed. Yume, Big Brother, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

"Master Light!"

Mei realized Light wasn't awake at all, but was having a nightmare, and tears streamed down Light's cheeks as he apologized to his family for all of his imagined wrongdoings. Mei couldn't restrain herself any longer, and she grabbed Light's outstretched hand with both of hers.

"Master Light, I will always be by your side, even if the whole world turns against you," Mei told him. "If you choose to journey into hell, I will gladly accompany you there. I shall never leave you. So please, I implore you, stop weeping in pain and believe that I will remain by your side for the rest of eternity. No matter what happens, I will always be with you, Master Light, because..."—she paused—"I'm just so happy to be with you."

Still holding Light's hand in hers, Mei retrieved a handkerchief and wiped the tears from the boy's face. "Master Light. My beloved Master Light. As a bird can

never be without its wings, and a tree never without its branches, you shall never be without me by your side, so allow me to serve you from now until your dying day.”

After repeating the oath she had made to Light on the first day she met him, Mei kissed Light on the forehead, the cheek, then the fingers that were gripped gently in her hand. Mei’s words had seemingly gotten through to Light, since he stopped groaning almost immediately and his sleep became much more peaceful. Mei placed Light’s hand back underneath his blanket and gazed lovingly down at his face until it was time for her to swap with the fairy maids.

Extra Story 6: The Fairy Maids Play a Prank

"My Master in the dell! My Master in the dell! Hi-ho, the derry-o! My Master in the dell!"

A fairy maid, who was so unbelievably cute it overshadowed whatever personality she actually had, was working a field of crops with a hoe, and the maid's outfit she was wearing as well as the farming ditty she was singing aloud served to make this scene extremely surreal. Another fairy maid with bookish glasses paused in her own hoeing to turn and admonish her work partner.

"Must you sing that made-up song?" Glasses complained. "It's distracting me from my work."

"What? How is it distracting?" Supercute protested. "I think the song shows just how much I love serving Master Light. Plus, I believe it makes me work all the harder. Maybe you're just not very dedicated to our master."

"Well, unlike *some* people, I'm able to work extra hard for Master Light without singing some insipid tune," Glasses said pointedly. "Perhaps you're the one who's lacking dedication."

"What did you say?!" Supercute erupted.

"You heard me!" Glasses said defiantly, matching Supercute's glare with one of her own. Although fairy maids were some of the lowest-level servants Light had among his retainers, their power levels still hovered around the 500 mark, making them strong enough to be classed among the top adventurers on the surface world. That meant the current tension between Glasses and Supercute was nearly enough to make actual sparks fly.

For those wondering what's going on here, the fairy maids were in the middle of doing some tilling on an experimental farm that was being cultivated on the bottom level of the Abyss. At present, all food, clothing, and magic items were provided by the Unlimited Gacha, but since there was a non-zero chance that the Gift might one day cease functioning, the inhabitants of the dungeon had started exploring ways that they could maintain their self-sufficiency in such an

event. But instead of tending the farm like they were supposed to, the two fairy maids had raised their hoes in front of them like weapons, attracting the attention of two of their other work colleagues.

“H-H-Hey, no fighting!” said one fairy maid, who looked like a cute geek and had long, disheveled “loner girl” bangs. “If Miss Mei sees you, she’ll p-punish us again!”

“And you do know those are epic-class hoes, yeah?” said the other fairy maid, who looked and acted like a trendy Japanese kogal. “So could you, like, seriously *not* fight with those things, ’cause you’ll make a huge mess and get all of us in trouble?”

As soon as the name of the head housekeeper, Mei, was spoken, the two hoe-wielding fairy maids suddenly rediscovered their composure.

“S-Sorry for being so rude to you,” Supercute mumbled.

“No, I should apologize,” Glasses replied. “I’m sorry for questioning your devotion to Master Light.”

Geeky exhaled in relief. “Thank h-heavens you two made up.”

“Miss Mei’s, like, super freaky, so of course they would?” noted Kogal, who had a bad habit of putting practically everything she said in the form of a question.

“If you keep saying stuff like that out loud, Miss Mei will eventually hear you, you know,” Glasses warned with an exasperated sigh.

“Anyway, are those the vegetables you two picked from the farm?” Supercute asked, referring to the baskets Geeky and Kogal were carrying.

“Y-Yes, they are,” Geeky stammered. “We were finally able to gather the f-first b-batch from our farm!”

Geeky and Kogal were each carrying a bushel of bell peppers, carrots, and squashes. The experimental farm also had sections for wheat, but that crop wasn’t ready for harvest yet. However, the output of the farm was still a drop in the ocean compared to what was needed to feed all of the denizens of the Abyss. It was apparent that those overseeing the farm would need to do some

research into how to boost yields to a meaningful level. All the seeds up to this point had come from Unlimited Gacha cards, but the seeds for the following generation of crops would come from the current harvest.

"Well, they do appear ripe, but I wonder what they taste like," Glasses mused as she pushed her frames up her nose with her usual punctiliousness.

"Um, I did sorta, like, nibble on one, and I think the veggies from Master Light's Unlimited Gacha taste better, you know?" Kogal said.

"May I have a bite?" Supercute asked.

"Uh, s-s-sure thing," Geeky replied.

Supercute picked up a green pepper and bit a chunk out of it, and Glasses did likewise. The two fairy maids chewed on the freshly picked bell peppers very deliberately, making sure that their palates could fully absorb its flavor.

"You're right. This tastes rather bland and derivative," Supercute decided. "Maybe it retained too much water?"

"And it doesn't look very plump and crisp, either," Glasses remarked. "We could never serve our master food like this."

"RReally?" Geeky said. "Then, I guess we have to do a whole b-bunch more research."

"We've still got plenty of time, yeah?" said Kogal. "It's not gonna take, like, y'know, *forever* to grow something Master would actually like?"

"Hey, what'cha doing out here, you guys?"

The SUR Vampire Knight, Nazuna, had approached the fairy maids after spotting them deep in discussion. She was in the middle of carrying out one of her daily patrols around the bottom tier of the Abyss, which was totally *not* a meaningless job intended to keep her occupied while others were engaged in much more important work. When the fairy maids turned toward Nazuna and revealed what they were doing, the Vampire Knight looked aghast at the bell peppers they were munching on.

"Yuck! How couldja eat that bitter, disgusting thing *raw*?" Nazuna said, looking repulsed. "Wasn't there anything better to eat?"

Seeing how thoroughly grossed out Nazuna was, the mouths of the fairy maids slowly curled upward into mischievous grins.

“Miss Nazuna, haven’t you heard?” asked Supercute.

“You’ve only ever eaten bell peppers that have been prepared in the kitchen to be served in the cafeteria,” Glasses said.

“So, like, the thing with freshly picked peppers is they’re actually super sweet?” Kogal continued. “Like, y’know, they get more bitter the more time has passed, yeah?”

“B-B-But a pepper picked straight from the vegetable garden tastes really juicy and sweet, e-especially if you eat them raw right away,” Geeky added.

Nazuna listened to the quartet, deeply intrigued by what they were telling her, not suspecting for a single second that she was being fed a pack of lies. Geeky reached into her basket of vegetables and retrieved a fresh green pepper, which she held out toward the Vampire Knight.

“H-Here, you can have a taste, i-if you like,” Geeky told her. “We’d a-also like to know what you think of how it tastes.”

“Oh, so all I hafta do is tell ya what I think after eatin’ it?” Nazuna asked. “In that case, don’t mind if I do!”

Nazuna grabbed the bell pepper from Geeky’s hand and took a huge bite out of the fleshy vegetable without a second thought. A moment later, tears were welling up in Nazuna’s eyes from the shock of how unbearably bitter the raw pepper tasted, her devastation only doubled by the fact that she had truly believed the vegetable was going to taste sweet, like a succulent fruit. In other words, a group of Level 500 fairy maids had successfully managed to inflict damage(?) on the Level 9999 SUR warrior.

As for the fairy maids, they all burst out laughing and blurted out their thoughts whenever their giggles allowed.

“That’s so *adorable*!” Supercute laughed.

“I need to record this somewhere!” Glasses added.

“I wish Master Light could’ve seen that?” Kogal said.

Because Nazuna wasn't the kind to waste food by spitting it out like some naughty kid, she dutifully chewed and swallowed the hunk of bell pepper in her mouth, before glaring at the fairy maids all weepy-eyed and yelling, "Why wouldya twick me wike zat?!"

Nazuna's tongue was clearly still numb from the awful taste of the pepper, which made her sound like a lisping toddler. Nazuna's regrettable diction drew even more hoots of laughter from the fairy maids, but they also knew when it was time to stop pushing their luck against a Level 9999 supersoldier.

"We're sorry, Miss Nazuna," Supercute said. "The way you acted just now was really very cute. Here, have a piece of candy as an apology."

"Indeed, your reaction was extremely adorable, but ours was inappropriate," said Glasses. "I would also like to offer you this sugar candy to express my regret over what just happened."

"Yeah, you were, like, *so* unbelievably cute that we couldn't *not* laugh, y'know?" said Kogal. "I'll give you this piece of chocolate if you'll forgive us?"

"A-A-And here's a candy from me too," Geeky added. "I-I thought you were really cute t-too, if that makes you f-feel any better."

The fairy maids each placed a piece of candy in Nazuna's hand, making the tears in her eyes sparkle with joy. "You guys are really givin' me *this* much?"

"Yes. It's to show that we are truly sorry," Supercute told her.

"Then, I forgive ya!" Nazuna said cheerily. "But ya better not do anything so mean to me again, or else I'll get really, really, *really* mad!"

"We're sorry, Miss Nazuna," Supercute said.

"We shall endeavor to be more discreet going forward," said Glasses.

"Miss Nazuna, we're, like, really sorry, yeah?" said Kogal.

"I-I regret my actions," said Geeky.

With her hand full of treats and freshly showered with apologies, Nazuna departed from the farm in good spirits. Once the fairy maids were sure she was out of earshot, they excitedly began to chatter about Nazuna's cute and hilarious reaction after being tricked.

Extra Story 7: A Day in the Life of Aoyuki

There was one bedroom in the Abyss that was filled with a huge array of cat-inspired items, such as mugs with cats on them and a whole host of super-deformed cat dolls. There was even a table with catlike legs nestled within the assortment of knick-knacks and collectibles that clearly belonged to a diehard cat enthusiast. But instead of looking like a hoarder's room, the space was neatly organized and stylishly decorated, as if it belonged to a girl who just happened to like cute things—albeit entirely kitty-themed things.

The owner of the room stirred under her fluffy blanket, which it probably went without saying was covered in pictures of cats. She finally rose from the bed, in nothing but her birthday suit. "Fnyaah..."

Aoyuki was the type of person who always slept in the nude. Her unmistakable blue hair framed her babyface, and her chest was perfectly in proportion with her petite frame. Aoyuki's arms and legs were willowy, and her waist was so narrow, it made you doubt if she had any internal organs at all in there. The waifish maiden rubbed her eyes sleepily in a way that would be better described as charmingly amusing than breathtakingly adorable, before changing into clothing that was already washed and neatly folded. She put on her undergarments, then donned her distinctive cloak with the cat-eared hood.

The SUR Genius Monster Tamer, Aoyuki, made a habit of waking up early, but she made sure to go to bed early at night too. Thanks to her Level 9999 powers, Aoyuki could stay up for days if she wanted to, and there were Unlimited Gacha cards that could get rid of the need for sleep entirely, but Light had told his subjects that they should make sure to have a good night's sleep every night in order to stay healthy, and everybody followed the words of their master to the letter. Even if Light were to say up was down and vice versa, no one would question it, so everyone in the dungeon slept at night, except for those who had been specifically assigned overnight duties.

Aoyuki in particular considered Light's words to be absolute. Every single one of Light's subjects that had been summoned by his Unlimited Gacha had sworn undying fealty to their master, but Aoyuki was the type of person who would be

first in line to punish anyone who even so much as thought of betraying Light. She was part of a select group of loyalists who revered Light as the king of all gods, meaning that going to bed early was a sacred decree she felt she had to dutifully adhere to. This meant that Aoyuki woke up early to carry out her assignments, but this schedule worked well for Genius Tamer, because there was another good reason for rising so early.

The first thing Aoyuki did that morning was head to the cafeteria for breakfast, and even though it was still early, she found a smattering of fairy maids sitting at the long tables, chatting over their food. Aoyuki grabbed a plate and went up to the counter to order her food from the cook. Similar to a typical cafeteria, there was a menu above the counter that listed all the items you could choose, but the one major difference was the food could either come out ready-to-eat or still in card form. Sometimes, once a food order was placed, a bunch of cards would get piled up on a diner's plate, which would seem a very odd sight to any outsiders.

Aoyuki ordered her usual morning meal: bread, salad, bacon, eggs, orange juice, and some fruit jelly for dessert. The bread, bacon, and eggs were cooked by the cook, but the rest of the items came in card form. Aoyuki padded as soundlessly as a housecat over to one of the tables with her food and sat down. Like Suzu, Aoyuki preferred to eat her meals in silence without chatting to anyone, but unfortunately for her, on this particular day, her peace and quiet was about to be stridently interrupted.

"Aoyuki! Ever the early bird, I see!"

The monster tamer turned to see that Nazuna had taken a seat next to her. Nazuna was usually a late riser, and it was rare to see her eating breakfast at this hour, which was the aforementioned "other" reason that Aoyuki made a point of getting up early every morning.

"Yeah, I just kinda woke up early today for some dumb reason," Nazuna explained without being asked, grinning broadly. "Gotta hand it to ya though, for gettin' up at this hour every day."

Nazuna started gobbling down her bowl of rice with pork cutlets, which couldn't exactly be described as a light breakfast. Nazuna's presence peeved

Aoyuki, who just wanted to eat in peace, but the monster tamer couldn't just tell her talkative colleague to get lost because she knew she meant well.

"So me and Ellie had a fight yesterday, and she tried castin' this crazy spell on me..." Nazuna blathered on. Aoyuki didn't jibe well with Nazuna, largely because she considered the vampire to be a brainless simpleton with no filter, who always insisted on pestering Aoyuki due to laboring under the mistaken notion that the two of them were on friendlier terms than they actually were. However, Nazuna was a powerful ally, so rather than pushing her away completely, Aoyuki compromised and engaged with Nazuna at arm's length. But there were times like that morning in the cafeteria where Aoyuki was forced to put up with Nazuna's clueless personality, regardless of whether she had the patience for it or not.

Aoyuki finished up her breakfast a lot quicker than she would've liked, and wordlessly got up from the table.

"What? Ya done eatin' already?" Nazuna remarked. "Ya sure ya had enough for breakfast?"

"Rowr," Aoyuki mewed bluntly.

Nazuna guffawed. "Seriously, I never get what you're tryin' to say!"

Some of the fairy maids in the cafeteria were watching the scene with knowing smirks on their faces, while others had started to get a bit panicky, though this second group had no cause for concern, since Aoyuki wasn't about to let her irritation lead to her coming to blows with Nazuna, because the monster tamer would never do anything that might upset her beloved Master Light.

After breakfast, Aoyuki headed to her intelligence unit to start work for the day. She was responsible for collecting information from the multitude of familiars that had dispatched all across the world. Aoyuki's five senses were linked to these familiars, meaning a continuous stream of information filled her head, telling her about the situation on the ground, and Aoyuki was also able to send instructions telepathically via these same links. In other words, the Level 9999 Genius Monster Tamer could control and manipulate her multitude of familiars as if they were simply extra pairs of eyes and arms attached to her.

Of course, this setup had plenty of drawbacks, one of which being there was a limit on the volume of information Aoyuki could process at any one time before the flood of data totally overwhelmed her. Another drawback was that Aoyuki had to expend the same amount of mental energy on each monster under her control, regardless of the creature's power level, and she was fully dependent on the abilities of the monster themselves when it came to puppeteering them in combat or for other purposes, meaning she was unable to give her monsters a power boost from a distance. But despite these weaknesses, Aoyuki possessed a powerful set of abilities that saw her put in charge of several key assignments. In addition to gathering info using her familiars, Aoyuki led patrols around the wild forest that surrounded the Abyss, kept watch over the periphery of the Great Tower, and collected information from Light's intelligence operatives that had been sent up to the surface world disguised as adventurers and merchants.

When it came time to engage foes in battle, Aoyuki was capable of devastating enemy forces by conducting a mighty army of monsters in a highly organized fashion, though the destructive powers of Aoyuki's monster army still fell one cut short of the cataclysmic spells Ellie could unleash. But the Forbidden Witch knew better than to look down on Aoyuki, especially as Nazuna's peerless fighting prowess loomed over both of them. Aoyuki and Ellie would need to team up to even stand a ghost of a chance of defeating the berserker.

Aoyuki slinked into the office that housed the intelligence unit, and found that dozens of fairy maids assigned to the tamer were already there, waiting for the arrival of their boss. They were seated at long tables, and each had a stack of blank paper in front of them and a pen in hand. The arrangement basically looked like any other office, except for one slight variation: each fairy maid was paired with a thirty centimeter-tall parrot perched on the table. The parrots came in a whole range of colors, with no plumage being identical to any other.

When Aoyuki entered, the fairy maids rose from their seats and bowed to their supervisor. The parrots also turned toward the monster tamer and lowered their heads.

With a wave of the hand, Aoyuki signaled to her team that they could sit back down again. "We will now begin compiling intelligence for our exalted master."

“We’re ready, Miss Aoyuki!” the fairy maids said in unison, none of them showing any surprise that Aoyuki was using plain language instead of meowing like she usually did. With pens at the ready, hovering over the topmost piece of papers, each scribe sat face-to-face with their respective bird, which was in fact a Level 30 Psion Parrot. This creature was capable of reading a person’s mind and vocalizing their thoughts, which proved quite useful in keeping enemies away, though the bird was otherwise useless in battle. Aoyuki closed her eyes as her breathing became shallower, and then a few seconds later, the Psion Parrots all began talking at once.

“No movement to report, evening or morning hours. Recommend plan of action—”

“Market survey indicates wheat is experiencing a jump in price—”

“Criminal activity detected on a Human Kingdom highway, origin unknown—”

“No scent of any elves near the tower—”

“Removed monster attempting to trespass on turf. Its description is as follows—”

Aoyuki had linked her mind up to each of the parrots and was allowing them to read the memories of the reports she had received from her familiars, while in turn, the fairy maids furiously transcribed the reports the parrot were vocalizing verbatim. Aoyuki had instructed her familiars to transmit reports at more or less regular intervals, and the communications mostly came from undercover intelligence operatives, as well as a smattering of other reports from monsters patrolling the woods around the Abyss and the Great Tower.

While her mind was being read by the parrots, Aoyuki busied herself with writing down any intel she believed to be of critical importance. She also scribbled down bits of info that at first glance might seem trivial—such as barroom rumors, unusual scents in one of the forests, or whether it had rained on a particular highway—but which piqued Aoyuki’s interest in some way or another enough for her to note them down, so that she could cross-reference them later with past info and determine if this new intelligence held any value.

In addition to all of this, another part of Aoyuki’s consciousness was simultaneously passing down telepathic directives to her monsters and

contacts. While the Card Repository was regarded as one of the busiest sections of the Abyss, Aoyuki's intelligence unit was every bit as frenetic in its activities.

Her team spent the morning compiling all of the latest intel into a report that Aoyuki would hand over to Mei, the SUR maid who performed the administrative duties in Light's executive office. It might have made more sense to send a fairy maid to deliver this daily intel report to Mei, but Aoyuki liked to handle it personally, so that she—the top intelligence officer—could brief the head housekeeper responsible for managing the dungeon's day-to-day affairs.

"Meeow," Aoyuki uttered as she passed that day's report to Mei.

"Thank you, Aoyuki," Mei replied. "I shall peruse the document immediately."

Mei speedily flipped through the lengthy report, which contained enough pages to fill a thick, encyclopedia-sized tome. The information came from over a thousand sources and included all of the material written down by Aoyuki's rather sizable staff of fairy maids. Despite this, Mei calmly worked her way through the report, memorizing each page in a single glance.

Aoyuki glanced at the desk Mei was sitting at, which was where she carried out her work in Light's office. It was worth noting that it had been Light who had wanted Mei to have her own desk in his office, rather than her personally requesting to work there. His thinking was that it would enable him to take action and give orders the moment he walked into his office. Since Light's words were absolute, Aoyuki hadn't questioned his decision, simply acknowledging Mei's favorable position, though she couldn't help being somewhat disappointed by it.

If Master had summoned me first, I would be sitting where Mei is now, thought Aoyuki. *But it was Mei who was summoned first, and Master owes her his life.*

Because of this history between Light and Mei, Aoyuki begrudgingly held the head maid in a certain level of esteem. By contrast, Aoyuki had absolutely no respect for Ellie, and she angrily recalled the conversation she'd had with the superwitch while sitting on the edge of the first tier of the Great Tower.

I can understand the desire to be Master's only woman, monopolizing all of his love for yourself, and I will admit that she is extremely powerful and talented,

thought Aoyuki. *But she wears those desires on her sleeve and shamelessly competes with Mei, who she sees as her rival. Her attitude is totally unacceptable, and it invites displeasure from Master.*

Wrapped up in her thoughts, Aoyuki carelessly released enough murderous energy for Mei to take notice of it and look up from the intel report. “Is something wrong? Have I done something to upset you?”

“Mrroww,” Aoyuki purred, shaking her head. Mei chose not to pry further and went back to reading the report. Just as Aoyuki respected Mei as a reliable ally, the Everseeking Maid saw the Genius Monster Tamer as a dependable colleague. Once the two maidens had discussed the particulars of the report, they parted ways in order to take care of their afternoon duties.

Later that evening, Aoyuki compiled yet more intelligence into a new report, and once again delivered the document to Mei, whereupon the two deputies discussed upcoming operations as well as activities up on the surface world. Once this task was complete, Aoyuki had supper, bathed, and returned to her bedroom, where she crawled under her cat-patterned blanket to sleep—in the buff, naturally.

Master returns this week, Aoyuki thought, her eyes closed. *And when he does, I’ll have him dote on me until I’m fully satisfied.*

Extra Story 8: The Mohawks and the Beastmen

In an alleyway in the Dwarf Kingdom border city famous for its vast, five-floor dungeon, a fight had broken out between a pair of beastmen and two humans.

“You shitborn inferiors better go back where you came from, ya hear me?!” the lionman roared.

“You filthy mudworms should stick to being dirt farmers, or whatever the hell it was you were doing before ya got the dumb idea of becoming adventurers!” the tigerman growled.

The two beastmen towered over the young human adventurers, who had just recently started plying their trade after leaving their farming village. To put it bluntly, calling this altercation a “fight” wasn’t quite accurate, since the beastmen had approached the humans completely unprompted in an attempt to force them to leave town.

“Wh-Why are you hassling us? Wh-What did we even do to you?” said one of the rookie adventurers.

“Y-Yeah! Is it a crime to be an adventurer now?” the other added.

Although the human pair were doing their level best not to seem too intimidated, they were facing two burly beastmen questers, and it was clear as a summer’s day who had the upper hand here. In fact, this overwhelming advantage in their favor was precisely why the beastmen had chosen to badger these human adventurers in the first place.

Suddenly, a third group intervened, giving the rookie adventurers a faint glimmer of hope.

“Hey, c’mon. What’s the deal? Did I *say* you guys could take a break?”

“I tells ya, young’ns these days are just the worst slackers.”

“You’re killin’ us here, y’know that, boys?”

“Ya got a lotta explainin’ to do, so get over here!”

A party of five human adventurers sporting mohican-style haircuts and wearing sunglasses placed themselves between the novice adventurers and the beastmen, forming a wall between the two. A man with a red mohawk and a small bird perched on his shoulder turned to the lionman and the tigerman.

“These two are our junior associates, so we’ll take it from here,” he told them. “You can take it easy now, fellas.”

“Huh? Um, what?” While the two beastmen blinked at each other in confusion at the scene unfolding in front of them, the four other Mohawks started pushing the two young adventurers in their backs to guide them out of the alleyway and to safety. Unfortunately, the beastmen weren’t about to let them get away with this ruse.

“Hey! What’s the big idea?!” the lionman cried. “We ain’t done talking!”

“We still have a bone to pick with those dirt farmers!” the tigerman shouted.

The red-haired Mohawk sucked air through his teeth. “Guess they’re not gonna fall for the okey-doke. Men, time for Plan Omega!”

“Yahoo!” the other four Mohawks hollered as they turned to line up behind their leader and face the beastmen.

“In case ya hadn’t noticed, bub, there’s seven of us and only two of you,” the red-haired Mohawk pointed out. “Think you stand a chance against those odds?”

“G-Go to hell, inferior!” the lionman roared.

“Plan Omega” was merely the signal for the Mohawks to group together, show their strength in numbers, and hopefully intimidate a potential opponent. The name had no meaning beyond this simple concept, and the Mohawks had decided to dub it “Plan Omega” simply because it sounded cool. But since the two beastmen were the type to look down on all humans, they weren’t about to back off just because they were outnumbered. The Mohawks inwardly clicked their tongues, frustrated that their plan hadn’t worked, but just as this potentially explosive situation was threatening to rapidly go south, a totally unexpected fourth group showed up on the scene.

“All right, people, break it up! If yer gonna go around disturbin’ the peace in this city, take it somewhere else!”

All nine men in the alley turned to see a second group of beastmen strolling up, consisting of a tall bearman leading a monkeyman, a raccoon-dogman, a foxman, and a ratman. The bearman folded his arms and flashed a toothy, “tough guy” kind of a grin.

“We were just passin’ by and happened to hear you two clowns pushin’ these innocent humans around,” the bearman explained. “If the two of ya don’t take a walk, we may hafta side with these humans, if that’s what’cha want.”

“B-But you’re beastmen too! Why the hell wouldja side with a bunch of *inferiors*?!” the lionman yelled.

The bearman snorted. “Unlike you lowlifes, a kind gentleman taught us the ABCs of chivalry,” he sneered. This “gentleman” he was referring to was Gold, a member of Light’s adventuring party who had previously dealt with this same group of five beastmen when they had attempted to mug Light and his team. Gold had then spent the entire day beating the finer points of chivalry into the beastmen—literally. After this “lesson,” they turned over a new leaf, and the bearman and his four henchbeasts now spent their days going around town and doing good with their newfound sense of chivalry. Their reputation improved tremendously as a result, though more than a few people questioned exactly what kind of “chivalry” Gold had instilled into the party.

Realizing they were truly outnumbered now, the lionman and the tigerman opted for a tactical retreat.

“Shit! This ain’t over!” the lionman spat before turning to his partner. “Let’s get going.”

“Uh, right,” the tigerman replied, then followed the lionman around the corner. The Mohawks and the two newbie adventurers bowed in gratitude to the bearman’s party.

“Thank you for getting us out of that jam, sirs,” the red-haired Mohawk said.

“Th-Thanks for saving us!” one of the rookies piped up.

“Aw, shoot. Knock that off. If anything, ya guys showed real chivalry lendin’

these youngsters a hand, despite how ya look," the bearman said. "In fact, I think it'd do you guys wonders if ya met our mentor, 'cause it'd mean ya could learn even more about chivalry from him!"

Instead of pestering the humans for thank-you money, the bearman displayed a magnanimous attitude while spouting off cryptically about "chivalry" and some unnamed "mentor." The five beastmen left the scene with their heads held high, leaving the Mohawks to take care of the rookie adventurers. The two young men thanked the Mohawks and tried to give them some money as a token of their appreciation, but the Mohawks flatly refused. Instead, they took the two novices to a dining hall, where they coached the lads at length on what it takes to be an adventurer.

"We wouldn't be able to sleep at night if you boys kicked the bucket the minute after we'd rescued ya!" one of the Mohawks explained with a horselaugh.

☆☆☆

The Mohawks returned to their inn later that evening, and the leader conversed with the small bird in the room all five of them shared. The bird was actually a monster that had a mental link to Aoyuki, and the Mohawk leader relayed intelligence to the Genius Monster Tamer through it.

"They still believe Kyto and his partner are lurking somewhere deep in the dungeon," the leader said to the bird. "This assumption has meant that the number of adventurers traveling through to the fourth tier has dwindled, because the jungle on that floor offers poor visibility, leaving them vulnerable to surprise attacks."



Kyto was an elf Submaster and a former member of the Elven Queendom’s

elite order, the White Knights. He was currently wanted by the Dwarf Kingdom guild for committing a series of murders in the dungeon, mainly involving human adventurers, but unbeknownst to them, Light had already captured Kyto and his dark elf partner, Yanaaq, in the dungeon, brought them back to the Abyss to probe their memories, then executed them for their crimes. So that they didn't blow their own cover, Light's team had provided the Dwarf Kingdom guild with testimony they had concocted about witnessing Kyto and Yanaaq fleeing to an unknown area of the dungeon. As a result, the adventurers in the city still feared the prospect of becoming the next victim of the serial killings.

"It appears the elves who have heard the news about the fall of the Elven Queendom have split into two camps: those quietly disheartened by the news, and those thoroughly enraged," the Mohawk leader continued. "In the saloons, the dwarves make fun of the queendom's plight, while the humans following developments take what they hear with a grain of salt. No demonkin or dragonutes have been spotted in the city lately, so we have no read on what their reaction to the news is. The biggest problem, however, is the beastfolk."

The leader paused briefly, then continued with a slight air of distress. "For some reason, the overwhelming majority of the beastfolk have been on edge ever since absolute autonomy for all humans was declared in the Elven Queendom. If they see a human adventurer that looks like an easy mark, they'll bully and harass them, even in public. Before, they just called us "inferiors" and carried on about their business. We'd never seen beastfolks openly quarreling with people like this until now."

Once the Mohawk leader had finished giving his report, the bird flapped over to the window and waited for the leader to open it, whereupon it flew off into the night, as if signaling that it was finally off the clock. The red-haired Mohawk watched as the inky sky swallowed up the bird, then shut the wood-framed window again.

"Yo, boss," piped up one of the Mohawks, who was sitting on the corner of a bed. "You talk about those beastfolk being on edge and all, but d'you really think it has somethin' to do with that human autonomy thing? If that's true, why're they so agitated over somethin' that has nothin' to do with 'em?"

"Oh, it has a lot to do with them, believe me," the leader replied. He grabbed

the pitcher that was on the table, poured water into a cup, and drank some of it. After wiping his mouth, he continued with his explanation. “We humans were supposed to be the lowest rung, you see. But then we went and forced the Elven Queendom to declare ‘absolute autonomy’ for us, of all things, so if the beastfolk don’t act, they might find themselves as the new bottom-tier race. That’s what they’re so afraid of.”

“They treated us humans like garbage whatever way we turned, and now, there’s a chance they’re gonna get a taste of their own medicine,” another Mohawk said. “So they’re slapping us around outta fear.”

“Yup, that’s about the long and short of it, brother,” said the leader. An uncomfortable silence descended on the room as everyone imagined the worst-case scenario.

“So, boss, does that mean y’think there’s a real storm brewin’ with the beastfolks?” a Mohawk asked.

“Can’t rule it out, doc,” the leader admitted. “Things haven’t gotten to that point just yet, but tensions are already at boiling point, and with how things are going, it looks like they’re staying that way.”

“So I assume our next trip is gonna be to the Beastfolk Federation to gather info from there, yeah?” another Mohawk guessed.

“Talk about a tough task, huh?” said a third Mohawk.

“I hear that, brother,” the leader said. “But remember who we’re doing this for. We’ll go through hell or high water, into a warzone, or to the very bottom of a dungeon, if that’s what our lord tells us to do.”

The determination in the Mohawk leader’s eyes was apparent even through his sunglasses, while his voice sounded every bit as resolute even though he couldn’t raise it all that much for fear of people in the surrounding rooms overhearing them. Despite not having particularly high power levels, the Mohawks’ loyalty to Light rivaled that of all the denizens of the Abyss.

The Mohawk leader gulped down another glass of water before pondering to himself: *That said, I wonder what’s gonna happen from here on out*. Despite his misgivings, their course of action was set, and all he could really do was pray

that they would be able to do their jobs without losing their lives in the process.

Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here. I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading and/or purchasing the fourth 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 volume marks one full year since the light novel came out in print as well as the launch of the manga series, and we couldn't have reached this milestone without you, the reader, so I wish to express my appreciation to you once again!

As you may have noticed, this commemorative volume is somewhat different in format from previous volumes. The first thing to note is that it starts out with a dungeon building arc, which is basically a compendium of Light's flashbacks, before transitioning to the Human Kingdom arc, where Light reunites with his younger sister, Yume, and meets Princess Lilith.

In this volume, not only have I added all-new scenes that were not in the original web novel version of this series, I have also included a number of short stories that I hope you will enjoy. Personally, I greatly enjoyed writing the additional flashback scenes which showed Light developing the bottom tier of the Abyss, as well as the backstory between Iceheat and Mera after they were first summoned. For the web novel, I didn't have the opportunity to write "first summon" moments for most of the characters, so I was very pleased I was able to write more of these kinds of stories in this fourth volume. And with that said, I hope all of you get a kick out of reading this volume, including the new scenes and extra stories.

And now, on to the acknowledgments!

First up is the one and only tef, who provides the illustrations for my novels! Once again, thank you so much for lending me your talents. Your wonderful color and black-and-white pictures are awesome and adorable in equal measure! One of my personal favorites is the double-page spread of Light

versus the Orochi, which is incredible and bursting with intensity (I really love the designs of the Uragan and the other weapons). Looking at that color spread made me realize just how much I like having my characters fight with multiple weapons over the course of a single battle. Yet again, thank you for providing such amazing artwork!

Next to thank is HJ Novels' editorial team. I wouldn't have been able to mark my first year in print by putting out this fourth volume without your cooperation. This time around, I had to do the final author proofs using an all-digital format, and I am in no doubt that I gave the team a few headaches as I got used to the different processes. I'm pretty sure I'll continue to be a nuisance in the future too, but I look forward to our continued collaboration on *Unlimited Gacha*.

I also wish to thank Takashi Ohmae for authoring the manga version of *Unlimited Gacha*, new chapters of which come out on the Magazine Pocket app every Tuesday! As with the publication of this fourth light novel volume, the manga has now completed its first year as well. The manga has lasted so long thanks to Ohmae producing the best adaptation one could ask for, due to some superb artwork and scene execution! And I don't just appreciate your work; I always look forward to reading each new chapter myself! (I'm not kidding. Every Tuesday morning when I wake up, the first thing I do is excitedly open the Magazine Pocket app to read the latest *Unlimited Gacha* chapter.)

I must also give some much-deserved credit to the Magazine Pocket editorial team and the supervising editor in charge of the *Unlimited Gacha* manga for shepherding the series through its initial year. I have been made aware of a few mistakes on my part that have caused problems, so please accept my apologies for that! I will endeavor to minimize any mistakes in the future, so I appreciate your kind cooperation going forward.

Last of all, I would like to acknowledge all of you reading this for supporting *Unlimited Gacha*! Thanks to everyone's support, both the light novel series and the manga have been going for a full year now. I cannot thank you all enough, and your continued support is the reason I am able to keep writing. For what it's worth, I wish to return the favor by putting every effort into *Unlimited Gacha* so that we can celebrate the series' second anniversary and beyond! I

look forward to your support right through to the very end.

Thank you so much for everything!

P.S.: Just like in the previous volumes, 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 *Shosetsuka ni Naro* website, click on the entry which has a date of or around May 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 past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **yume**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired]