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

VOL. 9



Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
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# Table of Contents


Cover

Prologue

Chapter 1: Confrontation

Chapter 2: The Fake Yume

Chapter 3: Departure

Chapter 4: Reunion

Chapter 5: Distress

Chapter 6: Gold’s Special Talent

Chapter 7: Moving the Pieces Into Place

Chapter 8: The Forgotten

Chapter 9: Aldo’s Past

Chapter 10: The Poor Man’s Plague

Chapter 11: The Summit, Part 1

Chapter 12: The Summit, Part 2

Chapter 13: Confronting Clowe

Epilogue

Extra Story 1: The Mohawks Get Their Orders

Extra Story 2: Just in Case

Extra Story 3: Miya and the School of Magic

Extra Story 4: The Ideal Wife?

Extra Story 5: Outcasts at the Great Tower

Extra Story 6: Lucky Charms

Extra Story 7: Lap Pillow

Extra Story 8: Khaos vs Orka

Afterword

Color Illustrations
Bonus Short Story
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

# Prologue

Lying in her canopy bed, the reigning monarch of the Elven Queendom, Queen Lif VII, moaned balefully for help. “My head’s aching again,” she groaned to a nearby maid. “Fetch a healer.”

Although the queen couldn’t see past the lace that covered the canopy bed, she sensed the maid rushing out of the room to fulfill her request. As Lif waited in bed for the healer to arrive, she pressed a hand to her head. *Ever since that Wicked Witch of the Tower mushed up my brain, I’ve been getting these terrible migraines,* she thought. *She must have cursed me with this pain to remind me who’s really in charge.*

After conquering the Elven Queendom with her army of dragons, the Wicked Witch had captured Queen Lif and used sorcery to read her mind. She had said that she wanted to make sure that Queen Lif was telling her the truth, but the elf believed in her heart of hearts that the witch had really done something to her brain to assert her dominance. In truth, Ellie in her disguise as the Wicked Witch hadn’t actually placed a curse on Queen Lif—the migraines were a post-traumatic effect of undergoing Ellie’s excruciatingly painful memory probe. But since Lif did not realize that a traumatic event was the cause of the migraines, the queen was doomed to believe that she was cursed until such a time that the Wicked Witch told her otherwise.

Curled up in bed, Lif kept wincing in pain. *This is all because my poor Hardy-Wardy*—Lif caught herself and turned her heart to stone—*Everything that’s happened is all the fault of that stupid boy! He should never have bothered that witch in the first place!*

The Wicked Witch’s mysterious tower had suddenly appeared in the forest west of the royal capital one night, prompting Hardy—Queen Lif’s son and the commander of the elite White Knights order—to embark on a search-and-destroy mission to the tower after receiving multiple reports that a Red Dragon resided within the hard-to-reach structure. He had felt compelled to take on this mission that turned out to be fatal for him due to the political pressure exerted on him by the chancellor, who was part of the faction that was seeking to end matriarchal rule in the

Elven Queendom.

*Why would he attack the tower just because it had one silly dragon living in it?* Lif rued. *He should have bided his time and made sure he knew what he was getting into! I always let that wretched boy have his own way just because he was a little tougher than most. I can't believe I raised an oaf who would blindly rely on brawn to solve each and every problem under the sun!*

The part that Lif left out of her unspoken tirade was that she had sanctioned the mission to the mystery tower that had ended so disastrously, but due to her traumatic fear of the Wicked Witch, Lif compulsively rationalized away her role in bringing about the present state of affairs by heaping all of the blame on Hardy. Lif was able to maintain a semblance of mental balance by falsely absolving herself of any responsibility.

Lif was still cursing and scapegoating the version of Hardy she had made up in her head, when a chirpy, flamboyant voice drew her out of her thoughts. "If your terrible headache has caused you to be bedridden, perhaps my extra-strength pain medication will provide the relief you are sorely seeking."

"Pain medication?" Lif scoffed incredulously. "I've no need for that stuff. Just summon a healer at once—" It took Lif several seconds to realize who she was talking to. Her face turning pale —and not due to the migraine she was suffering from—she slowly pushed aside the lace curtain of her canopy bed and confirmed her fears. Standing before her was the Wicked Witch of the Tower, clad in a hood that made her face almost totally invisible (as it should, since it was an SSR Faceveil Hood). Flanking her on either side was a young man and a boy Lif had never seen before. The elf queen sprang out of bed like a jack-in-a-box, and knelt on the floor before the witch with her head bowed low.

"P-Please forgive my impertinence, Great Witch!" Lif yelped. "I didn't realize you would be coming to pay me a visit again!"

"We neglected to send notice of our arrival, so there's no need to blame yourself," the witch said. "You may raise your head."

"I thank you, Great Witch," Lif squeaked, deeply relieved that the witch didn't seem angered at all.

"By the way, I meant what I said about having extra-strength medication to help your headache," said the Wicked Witch. "Would you care to try some?"

"No! I'm p-perfectly fine now!" Lif said quickly, visibly sweating.

“One look at your majestic countenance immediately healed me of the pain in my head, my liege!” Lif was deathly afraid of imbibing any drugs or elixirs concocted by a witch who was the cause of her headaches in the first place, but the truth of the matter was that the shock of the Wicked Witch and her entourage turning up in her bedroom had made her forget all about her headache. Her expression convincingly conveyed that she was no longer in pain, so the witch moved on to the reason for her presence.

“I am paying you a visit today to introduce you to my new retainers, and to ask you for another favor,” the Wicked Witch said. “Orka, Khaos, if you please.”

“My warmest greetings to you, Your Majesty,” said the young man. “My name is Orka, and it is an honor to meet you. I provide security for the Great Witch, but I am also authorized to serve as the Great Witch’s surrogate whenever I speak to you in her absence, so I look forward to your cooperation on those occasions.”

Lif’s cheeks unwittingly went a shade redder on hearing Orka’s charming opening remarks. “Oh my. How very gentlemanly of you,” she said in an uncharacteristically high-pitched voice.

It was no mystery why she was so flustered. Orka’s soft features made him more handsome than any elf male in the queendom, and he had the voice to match. He was a good 175 centimeters tall, wore a cloak over his black-and-white garments with matching black boots, and had a fiddle slung to his hip. Orka’s most distinguishing and dashing feature, however, was the fact that his hair was black one side, white the other, and tied into a long, thick braid that stretched all the way down his back. Although Orka was a human, Lif was totally enraptured by his handsomeness, to the point that she even forgot about her abject terror of the Wicked Witch of the Tower.

Next, it was the boy’s turn to greet her. “I’m Khaos,” he said brusquely.

“Oh, um, hello, Lord Khaos,” Lif replied. “I am Queen Lif VII of the Elven Queendom. It is an honor to meet you.”

Her voice still had an unnatural lilt to it, but unlike her astonishment at Orka’s handsomeness, in Khaos’s case, she was shocked at his overly hostile attitude toward her even though he was as short as a preteen. Khaos was wearing a hood, so Lif

couldn’t tell exactly what he looked like, but from what little she could make out, Khaos had silvery-white locks and handsome features that even rivaled Orka’s. However, he seemed so unapproachable that his antisocial attitude appeared to extend even to the Wicked Witch.

*Is he allowed to be unapproachable to someone he works for?* Lif wondered. Orka grinned softly at the elf queen as he sought to smooth things over.

“Please forgive my younger brother, Your Majesty,” he said. “He’s incredibly shy, so he adopts that rather inhospitable attitude to mask his discomfort. He’s still young and inexperienced, so it would be best if you simply disregarded his behavior with good humor.”

“Oh, it doesn’t bother me at all, thank you,” Lif said, extremely aware that Khaos was irked by what Orka had just said.

“Well, now that you have met my two deputies, I will move on to the primary purpose for this house call—namely, the favor I wish from you,” the Wicked Witch said.

Lif gulped nervously. “And might I ask what this favor may be?” The puppet ruler of the Elven Queendom was prepared to do anything for the witch, even if it was something as extreme as handing over a thousand elves to be living test subjects for some experiment or other. She was quite willing to sacrifice a multitude of her own subjects if it meant avoiding having the witch messing around inside her head again.

A trembling Queen Lif waited for the Wicked Witch of the Tower to voice her request.

# Chapter 1: Confrontation

“Father! I refuse to go along with this!” protested Clowe, the crown prince of the Human Kingdom, shrilly airing his objection in the king’s executive office in the palace—though in truth, the royal estate looked more like a slightly oversized mansion than a stately palace.

The prince was sitting beside his sister, Princess Lilith, and the pair were facing their father, the king of the humans. Clowe was 170 centimeters tall and would’ve looked unquestionably handsome as befitting of a prince if it hadn’t been for his receding hairline, his marked lack of charisma, and the fact that he always looked morose and fatigued.

“I have no quarrel with Lilith attending the summit in the Principality of the Nine,” Clowe continued. “In fact, it would serve our purposes well, since there’s an unwritten rule that you must take at least one other member of the royal family with you, father.”

Naturally, this unwritten rule only applied to the Human Kingdom. Ostensibly, it existed to ensure that the king had someone of similar status to provide him with backup during the summit, or to take his place if an issue arose, but the *real* reason for this unofficial convention was so the other nations had a high-value hostage they could seize if the situation ever called for it. During previous summits, both Clowe and Lilith had attended the gatherings, despite being arguably too young to take on the role of surrogate.

“But where I draw the line is Lilith hiring adventurers associated with the Wicked Witch to be her bodyguards!” Clowe fulminated. “The summit is being convened to plan a response *against* the tower witch! The other nations already eye us with suspicion because we toured the tower! We can’t go giving them any more reasons to distrust us!”

“If I may get a word in edgewise, dear brother,” Lilith interrupted sharply, “I have already had the guild seal the agreement with the Black Fools for them to provide me with security throughout the summit. You cannot now ask me to cancel this contract and embarrass my good name and that of

our royal household. And another thing! The Black Fools reached A-rank the fastest out of all the parties on record. I guarantee they are qualified enough to provide me with protection, and you really shouldn't slander them simply because they frequently visit the tower city."

"Those visits are the source of the problem!" Clowe bellowed in frustration. "To repeat myself, this summit is about how to deal with the Wicked Witch of the Tower. If we bring along people that are associated with the witch in any way, the other races may very well accuse us of being accomplices to espionage!"

"They're *not* spies!" Lilith yelled back. "The Black Fools aren't the only party that carry out quests at the city at the foot of the tower, and no party should be punished simply for doing their job! I will ask you to refrain from needlessly maligning the Black Fools like that."

"Nobody's *forcing* you to hire bodyguards who are so closely connected to the witch!" Clowe rebutted. "Our knights are just as capable of providing you with security. Or are you saying that you doubt the abilities of our own soldiers who have sworn an oath of loyalty to our kingdom?"

"N-No, absolutely not. But..." Lilith was at a momentary loss for words since there was no way she could tell him her *real* reason for hiring the Black Fools to be her bodyguards. After all, she was planning to depose her father at the summit and take his place as monarch so that she could carry out reforms for the betterment of her people, and for the plot to go off without a hitch, she needed her coconspirators, the Black Fools, to serve as her security detail. She couldn't risk using the kingdom's own knights as her bodyguards since the royal court was teeming with spies sent by other nations, and if one of those spies ended up serving as her escort and caught a whiff of her scheme, the other nations would likely order her assassination.

Lilith's power level had finally reached 100, though she disguised her elevated stat with the aid of a magic item. Although she had reached the presumed level cap for a human, it still compared unfavorably to the higher power levels common among the other races, and in addition, Lilith was still a beginner as a fighter, which meant she would be totally vulnerable to any trained nonhuman assassins. In particular, Lilith would be exposed to much more danger during transit to and from the

summit than she would face in her own palace. Because of this risk, she needed the Black Fools to provide her with protection, since she had complete faith in their skills and their loyalty.

At the same time, Lilith was in no position to tell Clowe that she didn't trust the knights who served the courts due to their ranks being filled with spies who could have her assassinated at any time, so all she could do was ball up her fists and rebut his protests with some kind of justification, speaking in a livid tone that she hoped would sound convincing.

"I spent my own money on hiring the Black Fools to provide me with top-notch security because of the harrowing amount of danger we face nowadays out in the realms," Lilith said. "Are you suggesting, dear brother, that you have no faith in fellow humans who wish to prove their fealty to the royal family by serving me?"

"That witch was the one who *made* the world more dangerous!" Clowe retorted. "In case you've forgotten, it was that witch and her minions who massacred those beastfolk! Even little children in our own kingdom talk about the slaughter!"

"That's only because the Great Witch punished those beastmen for all of the horrific crimes they had committed against humans!" Lilith pushed back. "And it was the beastfolk who declared an unwinnable war against the Great Witch, so they deserved everything that happened to them. I will not allow you to accuse the Great Witch of being the aggressor in that!"

"How could she *not* be the aggressor?!" Clowe yelled. "That witch killed every single beastfolk soldier on the battlefield. She even admitted it herself!"

Lilith continued to litigate for the Wicked Witch. "But it was the beastfolk who first committed criminal acts—"

"Enough, you two. Settle down," the king interrupted, putting an end to what had turned into petty sibling squabbling. With his hair grayed by many years of stress, the king looked more like an emaciated hospital patient than a monarch, complete with sunken cheeks and bony wrists, but because of his position, his voice carried enough weight to silence his two children. Clowe and Lilith realized they had allowed their passions to get the better of them, and they awkwardly looked away.

"Clowe. Lilith," the king started. "Speaking for myself in a personal capacity, I am very moved by the passion you each display for our kingdom. However, I'm afraid I shall have to side

with Lilith on this issue. Our reputation demands that we do not unilaterally revoke a signed contract without good cause."

"But father, that arrangement was made with adventurers of low birth," Clowe said. "No one would care or even notice if we decided not to honor an agreement with *that* class of people."

The king shook his head. "Even if it was a promise we had made to a commoner, it is our duty as their betters to see it through. Failing to honor an agreement, no matter how trifling it may seem, would sow seeds of rot that would lead this nation to ruin. Clowe, as heir apparent to the throne, you must be more prudent in your discourse."

"F-Forgive me, father," Clowe said. With her brother deciding to fully withdraw from the conversation, Lilith shrewdly used this opportunity to extract a clear assurance from the king.

"Father, does this mean I am wholly free to hire the Black Fools as my personal bodyguards for the summit?" Lilith asked.

"Yes, that is your right," the king confirmed. "However, they must not be treated any differently from the other guards."

"Of course, father," Lilith said excitedly. "I greatly appreciate your support."

"Since the summit primarily concerns the witch, I believe it could work in our kingdom's favor if we were to bring people who know her," the king continued. "The other nations may think highly of such inside knowledge."

"Even so, I can't thank you enough, dear father," Lilith said, smiling brightly like the teenage girl she was.

*He's indulging her too much,* Clowe thought bitterly.

Once the king had dismissed his children, Clowe immediately shot up from his seat and went to leave the room. Lilith was about to follow suit when the king stopped her.

"Lilith," he said to grab her attention.

"Yes? What is it, father?" Lilith replied.

The king didn't answer Lilith immediately, instead regarding her with a gaze filled with weariness, sadness, regret, and hesitation. The silence continued for several more seconds before the king finally said with resignation, "Actually, it's nothing of concern. You may take your leave."

Lilith briefly looked back at him in confusion. "Thank you. I bid you well," she said, before bowing her head and rising from her chair to leave her father's office. The king gazed after his daughter until she had made her way out of the room and shut

the door behind her.

After leaving the office, Lilith made a beeline for her private chambers with the Yume clone following closely behind, and once inside, she took a seat by the window, glad to finally be able to relax.

“Yume, could you bring me some tea?” Lilith said.

“Right away, Your Highness,” Yume replied.

This exchange took place under the watchful gaze of Nono, who was standing some distance away from the two. As Lilith’s head maid for many years, it had been her job to prepare the tea for her charge, but now she could only stand and spectate, feeling a mix of bewilderment and disgruntlement at being replaced. Her reaction didn’t escape Lilith’s notice, but she wasn’t about to tell Nono that she knew all about her double life as a spy working for the Demonkin Nation. Nor was Lilith going to tell her betrayer, who she had once viewed as a sort of older sister, not to make her tea ever again, or in fact, to even come near her. Instead, Lilith pretended this bit of unspoken awkwardness hadn’t happened.

Yume returned with the tea, which Lilith sipped as she internally celebrated her latest victory of getting her father to approve the Black Fools’ appointment as her bodyguards. *I’ve cleared the first hurdle!* Lilith thought excitedly. *I’m drawing ever closer to my goal!*

# Chapter 2: The Fake Yume

Nemumu's brow crinkled, showing her aggravation. "How can they make you wait for so long, Lord Light? Is there no limit to how disrespectful they can be?"

"It's fine, Nemumu," I assured her. "Remember, we're supposed to be a party of adventurers. Even if we are A-rank now, we shouldn't expect to be treated like royalty by *actual* royalty."

Myself and the two other members of the Black Fools were staying in a suite at an upmarket inn in the Human Kingdom's royal capital. We had come here to serve as bodyguards for Princess Lilith during the international summit that was scheduled to take place shortly in the Principality of the Nine, and we were waiting to hear from Lilith about whether the plan to depose the king of the Human Kingdom during the summit and install her in his place was still on track. Due to the sensitive nature of the mission, I was using my gacha cards to make sure the suite we were in was secured against eavesdropping, surveillance, and all other kinds of magical snooping. Naturally, Lilith was eager to have our assistance in usurping her father, but due to her standing, it would only have raised suspicion if she had reached out to us the moment we had arrived in town. But Nemumu obviously wasn't taking this seemingly dismissive treatment too kindly, even if it wasn't necessarily intentional on the princess's part.

"I'd much rather Her Highness take all the time she needs to contact us, m'girl," Gold said. "That way, we can relax and take in the sights of the city while enjoying the local drinking and dining establishments."

"Well, unlike you, Gold, I don't care for the food and drink they have up here on the surface," Nemumu said snippily. "In fact, I can't believe you actually *like* eating and drinking the garbage they make up here. Is something wrong with your taste buds?"

"Indeed, there are times when the food is absolutely ghastly or the options are sparse due to a lack of ingredients, but other times, you'll find grub that is genuinely delectable," Gold said. "For example, I remember you enjoying that dried octopus you

had at the Dwarf Kingdom port city, milord."

"I did like that a lot, yeah," I said. "Each bite was jam-packed with flavor."

"So do you still wish to denigrate all the food up here on the surface world, m'girl?" Gold asked Nemumu. But even though he had managed to rope me into being on his side of the argument, Nemumu stood her ground, albeit by going off on a wildly different tangent this time.

"Any food that Lord Light enjoys is the only exception to that rule," Nemumu sniffed. "In fact, if there is a particular food that Lord Light likes, I'll make it my favorite dish for the rest of my life, however terrible it tastes!"

"Ah, well, my apologies, then, m'girl," Gold said, clearly exasperated. "I was wrong to try and debate such a committed fanatic of milord's."

Nemumu inhaled sharply through her nose in triumph, thinking that this meant she had won the argument. But before any of us could utter another word, there was a knock at the door. Nemumu got up and answered it, opening the door to a member of the inn staff who told us that a messenger from the palace had arrived to see us. Because the staff member was male, he blushed the moment he laid eyes on Nemumu and relayed the news in rather a nervous fashion, but for her part, Nemumu didn't pay any mind to the man's behavior, simply telling him to send the messenger up to our suite.

Normally, we would come downstairs to meet the messenger since protocol demanded we do nothing to inconvenience someone from the palace, but in this case, we needed the messenger to come up to our suite since it was a secure space where we could have a highly confidential conversation. A few minutes after the staff member had left, there was another knock at the door, and when it was opened, we found Yume in a maid uniform standing in the doorway. Or more accurately, the messenger who had arrived at the door of our suite was a clone of my sister that had been made using the UR Double Shadow card.

While I idly watched the fake Yume crossing the lounge, I posed a question to Nemumu. "Can you sense anyone trying to listen in on us?"

"I do not detect anyone attempting to eavesdrop on this room," Nemumu said. "Although there are people watching the

inn from outside."

As the Level 5000 Assassin's Blade, Nemumu was top of her class when it came to tracking the movements of bad guys from a distance. If Nemumu told me that nobody was actively trying to listen in on our conversation, then I could trust what she was saying was true, with the counterespionage gacha cards just adding that extra layer of protection. After being assured that it was all clear, the fake Yume dropped to one knee and bowed her head to me.

"Permission to speak, Master Light?"

Her choice of words made me hesitate briefly. "Uh, sure, go ahead."

"My sincere thanks," said the fake Yume. "I believe the people running surveillance on this inn are agents in the employ of Crown Prince Clowe of the Human Kingdom."

I momentarily struggled with how to engage with this fake Yume. While it was true that she was here to give us invaluable information, I couldn't get past how this Yume acted more like a stuffy servant than my own flesh-and-blood sister. The UR Double Shadow was able to make a near-perfect copy of a person down to their looks, voice, and gestures, but I simply wasn't used to seeing my baby sister kneeling down before me and treating me like I was her lord. Maybe I'd get used to it after a few more encounters like this, but it was definitely going to require some time to adjust.

"Master Light?" the fake Yume said with a touch of concern. I snapped out of my stupor and did my best to smile back at her.

"Sorry, I was just thinking about how the Double Shadow card had done a *little* too good a job when it made a physical copy of my sister," I said. "Look, I'm afraid this is all a bit too weird for me, so could you maybe not act so formal?"

"I beg your pardon, Master Light," the fake Yume said. "It should have occurred to me sooner how jarring this might be for you." The fake Yume stood up, closed her eyes, and briefly scrunched up her face. Then she cleared her throat and adopted a bright smile like the real Yume would have done in this situation.

"Hi, brother!" she said sweetly.

I invited the fake Yume to take a seat on the sofa. After thanking me, she sat down and began her report.

"Prince Clowe says he doesn't want to take your party along to

the summit, since you've shown up in the city at the Great Tower a whole bunch of times," the fake Yume started, acting more like the real Yume now. "He reckons it wouldn't look good to the other races if Princess Lilith hired you. In fact, Princess Lilith said the prince was so against the idea of hiring your party that he argued with the princess in front of the king. She said you should keep an eye out for her brother tomorrow when you come to the palace to discuss your bodyguard duties before the journey."

"I see," I said. "Then, yes, it's pretty much a given that the people watching this inn work for Clowe."

"Even if she *is* a clone, I can't bear the thought of those lookouts doing any harm to your dear sister," Nemumu said coldly, a hint of homicidal intent about her tone. "Should I go and eliminate our stalkers to make sure that doesn't happen?" I knew I could trust Nemumu to kill the lookouts without anyone noticing even though it was broad daylight, but I shook my head at the idea.

"I agree. It makes my blood boil that there are people out there who might try to lay their hands on Yume, even if this one was made using a gacha card," I said. "But I think it's safe to assume they won't try anything, so we should do our best to keep out of trouble too."

"I'm with you on that, brother," the fake Yume piped up. "If they'd wanted to do something to me, they would've done it before I got here. Plus, I don't think Prince Clowe would want one of Princess Lilith's maids getting hurt because it'd cause a huge ruckus."

"But we can't rule it out either," I concluded. "Nemumu, watch over Yume as she heads back to the palace, but stay out of sight. If those guys do try to attack her, just stun them instead of killing them. We don't want to cause a stir."

"Understood, Lord Light," Nemumu said. Truthfully, I'd rather put any attackers through enough pain and suffering that they would regret ever being born, but a healthy captive was much more useful as a potential bargaining chip. In any case, having Nemumu as a lookout was just a precautionary measure to ensure the fake Yume's safety, nothing more.

In the course of our meeting with the fake Yume, she told us about all of the other things we should watch out for during our visit to the palace the next day, as well as a few other key details. Once we were done and I'd given her permission to leave, the

fake Yume reverted to her professional royal maid persona and left our suite. Soon after Yume had left, Nemumu departed from our suite as well, disappearing like smoke without even opening the door in order to tail the clone of my sister.

☆☆☆

Late in the afternoon the next day, the Black Fools and I arrived at the palace right on schedule. I was frankly pretty underwhelmed by the size and look of the building, but it housed the royal family all the same. Because we had an appointment, all we had to do was answer a few of the gatekeepers' questions before they promptly let us in. Though if we were going to encounter any issues during our visit, it was probably going to be Prince Clowe's doing, according to fake Yume's report. And as it happened, our guide didn't lead us directly to Lilith, who we were supposed to be meeting in a conference room to have an in-depth chat about the trip. No, our guide first took us to what seemed to be a training ground for soldiers, where Clowe stood waiting for us with his arms crossed and a bunch of knights behind him. If I were to venture a guess, the manservant who had led us through the palace was either one of Clowe's underlings or he'd been paid off.

"Are you people these 'Black Fools' Lilith has hired to provide her with security?" Clowe asked in a low voice. "If so, why does your party consist of a child with a creepy-looking mask, a knight who'd look laughably out of place on a *real* battlefield, and a scrawny, feeble-looking woman who..."

Clowe stopped mid-sentence, which was puzzling since I thought he was gearing up to use his authority to remove us from Lilith's security detail, if this sudden fault-finding session was anything to go by. But after bad-mouthing me and Gold, Clowe suddenly became tongue-tied when addressing Nemumu. His hostile scowl had softened, and he even started to blush as his eyes fixated on her. Clowe uncrossed his arms, self-consciously straightened his hair, and cleared his throat.

"So you're a member of the Black Fools too, are you?" Clowe asked.

"Yes, she is one of my partymates," I said, speaking for my crew.

"I wasn't asking *you*!" Clowe boomed. "You lowborn

adventurers aren't allowed to address a member of royalty without our say-so! Humble yourself!"

This belittling comment obviously irritated Nemumu, but for the record, we *were* supposed to be commoners who had just happened to rise to the level of A-rank adventurers. This meant for the sake of appearances, Clowe was *supposed* to be our better, though I couldn't help thinking that the prince was definitely overcompensating for a bunch of other issues. I knelt and bowed my head in deference to him, and Gold and Nemumu followed suit.

"Woman, are you a member of this party?" Clowe asked again. "You are permitted to speak."

"Yes, I am a full-fledged member of the Black Fools," Nemumu said, a noticeable edge to her voice. Anyone else would have been able to tell how pissed off she was, but due to how completely enamored he was with her, this little detail flew completely over Clowe's head.

"You are as beautiful as a million flowers, and your voice puts the sound of fairy wings to shame," Clowe gushed. "I never would have guessed that a stunning woman like yourself would choose to toil away as an adventurer."

Clowe drew closer to Nemumu, his cheeks glowing hotly. "Might I ask your name, my belle?"

"Nemumu." I could tell that she was resisting the urge to simply click her tongue in indignation at him, and she answered in such a way that made it crystal clear that she would rather be left alone. But Clowe was unable to pick up on such signals.

"A lovely name for an exquisite woman with such a charming voice," Clowe marveled. "My dear Nemumu, I wish to invite you to become my personal maid. If you accept, you will no longer have to expose yourself to the dangers that come with being an adventurer, and I guarantee you will have a safe and secure lifestyle in this palace—"

"Not interested," Nemumu said curtly. Clowe apparently hadn't been expecting to be turned down so quickly, for his smile turned stiff for a few seconds. The faces of the knights behind him all twitched in surprise as well. But Clowe soon recovered and beamed at Nemumu once more.

"It would be better if you reconsidered, Nemumu," Clowe said. "I'm next in line to the throne, and if you were to become my maid, you would no longer have to worry about continuing your

filthy, dangerous life as an adventurer. Here in the palace, you won't encounter any monsters or bandits or anything else that would do you harm. Come to me and you will open the door to an extravagant life that is well beyond the reach of any normal adventurer. You will be given dresses and fineries of a kind you can only imagine, and your beauty will blossom even more. So I implore you to rethink my offer, my dear Nemumu."

"I have already considered it, and I refuse," Nemumu said bluntly again.

"But why?!" Clowe screeched. Despite the prince literally screaming in her face, Nemumu kept her cool and explained herself as if she were reading from a prepared list.



“As far as I’m concerned, my only place in this world is serving at Lord Dark’s side,” Nemumu explained. “There is nowhere else that is safer, more extravagant, or more meaningful than serving under Lord Dark. I will not leave him for anything, even if you were to move the heavens and this mortal plane for my sake. Even in death, my soul will continue to serve my one and only master, Lord Dark.”

*Tone it down, Nemumu,* I begged her in my mind. *You’re going to reveal yourself as the Assassin’s Blade from the Abyss, not someone from an adventuring party if you keep saying things like that.*

“What? Who’s this ‘Dark’ character?” Clowe asked.

“The one wearing the mask is Lord Dark,” Nemumu replied. Clowe and his entourage shifted their gazes to me, and I looked up at them too. His eyes were full of jealousy that a boy like me could command the loyalty of a woman as beautiful as Nemumu, to the point where she was even dedicating her body and soul to me. Since I’d been through much worse treatment than a few dark glares, his envious eyes meant nothing to me. I was curious about one thing, however.

*Why has Clowe brought us all the way over here?* I wondered. *I thought he was trying to stop us from becoming Lilith’s bodyguards. I can sense other people lingering around these training grounds besides the knights, but they’re showing no signs that they’re about to reveal themselves…*

“Is that you, brother?”

Everyone in the practice arena turned toward the source of the voice, which turned out to be Princess Lilith walking toward us, accompanied by the fake Yume. The princess went pale and a nervous sweat formed on her brow when she saw me and my party kneeling before Clowe, who had been glaring at us up to this point, but now that Lilith had arrived, the prince looked somewhat worried, as if he had just been caught doing something inappropriate.

*Seriously, what did he want from us?* I thought again, still clueless over why we had been led to this particular location.

“D-Dear brother!” Lilith screeched. “What is the meaning of this?!” She looked even more ashen-faced as she drew closer, her knowledge of my real identity obviously causing her to feel mortal terror over my reaction to her brother not only making me of all people kneel before him, but also the glaring and

sneering that had been aimed at us up to this point. Lilith probably assumed I would be so angered by my reception that I would retaliate by literally wiping the Human Kingdom off the map. *She has nothing to worry about,* I thought. *Stuff like this is way too mild to send me over the edge.*

With a sour look on his face, Clowe turned his head, leaving Lilith to address me and my party. "You may all rise. I grew concerned when you were late in coming to see me, but I never imagined you had been brought to this part of the palace." Lilith turned to Clowe, positioning herself in front of us, as if to shield us from him. "Dear brother, I expect there is some reasonable explanation for this?"

"I apologize for *relocating* your bodyguards without your say-so." The sour look disappeared from Clowe's face, but he sounded far from apologetic. "But as your brother, it is my duty to make sure they are skilled enough to take care of my precious sister. I brought them out here to the training grounds to put them through a trial."

"There is no need for them to prove themselves," Lilith retorted. "The Black Fools are an A-rank party. Or are you suggesting the guilds don't know how to grade adventurers?"

"No, I don't doubt their rank," Clowe said. "But please understand that I will continue to worry about your safety until I have seen how capable they are with my own eyes. If they fail to pass the test, I shall have them return from whence they came."

*Oh, now I get it,* I thought. *Clowe was trying to give us the boot by setting us a "trial" that was no doubt all but impossible to pass. And he would even have done it behind Lilith's back if he hadn't gotten sloppy and allowed himself to be caught in the act.* Clowe had wasted time hitting on Nemumu, temporarily forgetting all about the trial he planned to put us through, which gave Lilith enough time to find us and intervene. But that was all beside the point. A stupid trial would never have tripped us up in a million years. I had been needlessly racking my brain over why Clowe had brought us here to these training grounds, but it turned out he was just being a jackass who was unknowingly setting himself up for failure.

"Father already gave his permission for me to hire them as my security detail!" Lilith protested. "It is not your place to interfere!"

"I have every *right* to be concerned for your safety, Lilith," Clowe insisted. "Why are you so against the idea? Are you

worried that your bodyguards aren't really up to the task of passing the trial I have set for them?"

"No, I'm not worried at all!" Lilith clapped back. "Their capabilities have already been guaranteed by how the guilds have ranked them!"

"I have already said that I do not question their rank," Clowe intimated. "But as your brother, I…" They continued speaking past each other like this, simply reiterating their points over and over—a telltale sign that the argument was going nowhere. Clowe, in particular, seemed determined to do everything he could to stop us from attending the summit due to the Black Fools' connection to the Wicked Witch. But before their verbal spat could go much further, I raised a hand to interrupt them both.

"May I have a word?" I said.

"Lord L— Um, Mr. Dark?" Lilith said. "Everything's perfectly fine. I'm just trying to set my brother straight!"

"Of course, Your Highness," I said amicably. "But we are running short on time if we wish to discuss how we will keep you safe during the trip. I believe this disagreement will be settled much more quickly if we simply tackle this 'trial' Prince Clowe has set for us and gain his trust."

The prince clicked his tongue in disapproval at this, prompting Lilith to shoot a confused look in his direction. "Dear brother?"

If I were to hazard a guess at the reason behind his reaction, I would say it was down to Clowe still having it in for me due to Nemumu proclaiming her undying loyalty to me, meaning he didn't want to hear my voice period. But as Lilith lacked this key bit of context, her bewildered eyes bounced around between me and Clowe, trying to work out what was going on.

"Princess Lilith, do we have your permission?" I asked.

"Mr. Dark…" Lilith hesitated before finally giving in. "Very well. I will allow you to undertake the trial."

"Thank you, Lilith," Clowe said. "Now I'll get to see for myself whether you truly have the mettle to safeguard my sister." The expressions of prince and princess couldn't have been more different: his marked by a triumphant grin, hers remaining dour. But I hadn't been kidding: we had come to the palace to take care of important matters, and I had no time for these petty attempts at one-upmanship.

"But don't forget, dear brother, that I need to speak with the

Black Fools about my voyage," Lilith said. "If this trial turns into a prolonged affair, I will insist that you end it prematurely."

"Oh, don't worry on that score. I assure you the trial will be quite simple and won't take long at all," Clowe replied. "And in the short amount of time it takes, we will find out for sure just how skilled they are, which is why I had them brought to these training grounds in the first place."

"Wait..." Lilith said, her eyes narrowing. "What are you planning to do with them?"

Clowe treated her to a haughty smile. "Merely testing how qualified they are to provide you with protection." He snapped his fingers, which turned out to be the signal for the people who had been hiding to show themselves. The lurkers were three demons who looked alike in appearance, so I figured they must be triplets. All three were 170 centimeters in height, with two of them wearing light armor, and one wearing a robe and carrying a staff, making him look like a mage. In short, they looked like a typical adventuring party.

"Allow me to introduce the Northern Wind Stormwinds, an A-rank adventuring party," Clowe announced pompously. "I paid a king's ransom to get them here to test your might against them in a mock battle. I'm certain they will ensure this trial is short and definitive. Don't you agree? And if the Black Fools lose the mock battle, they will resign as your bodyguards. But there's no need to panic, because the Northern Wind Stormwinds have agreed to replace them as your security detail if it comes to it."

"Brother!" Lilith yelled. "How could you arrange this without consulting me?!"

"And why should whether or not you were consulted matter?" Clowe asked. "All your hired hands need to do is beat them."

Clowe smirked uncontrollably at Lilith's protests. While the siblings were having this little back-and-forth, I sized up our opponents. *Looks like Clowe's planning for them to be Lilith's minders rather than her bodyguards. And why the heck did they pick a name like "Northern Wind Stormwinds," anyway? That's like saying, "My head aches from a headache."*

Gold and Nemumu chimed in with their own thoughts, both signaling that they were all in with going along with Clowe's test.

"His Highness is bally right when he says we couldn't ask for a simpler trial, what?" Gold remarked, stroking the part of his helmet that was covering his chin.

“And not only that, but this’ll be the *perfect* opportunity to unleash some pent-up stress,” Nemumu added, cracking her knuckles as a faintly evil smirk spread across her face.

*I’m not too worried about what Gold does, but there could be some serious injuries if Nemumu gets into a fight with these guys,* I thought. *She’s got a good reason to be steamed after getting hit on by Clowe, but I’d rather this didn’t descend into a bloodbath and get us into a whole new mess.* I wanted to have a word with Nemumu before any actual fighting took place, because the last thing I wanted was to see dead bodies littering the ground—but Clowe beat me to the punch by unwittingly giving me an out.

“I appreciate everyone’s willingness to go along with this trial,” Clowe said, smirking again. “But I don’t intend for the gold-plated knight or Nemumu to take part. Only the boy will fight.”

“Wait, just me?” I said. Lilith also seemed blindsided by this stipulation.

“Now wait just one moment, dear brother!” Lilith yelled. “Why must Mr. Dark take this test *alone*? I specifically hired a party of three to provide me with security. This is utterly unacceptable!”

“It has to be done,” Clowe said. “Out of the three, I’m most worried about this child’s ability to protect you. Providing security isn’t just a matter of how skilled you are; it’s also about projecting an intimidating exterior. If this juvenile were part of your security detail, he would needlessly invite more attacks from people who would naturally underestimate him. As such, I will not entrust my dear sister’s safety to this kid unless he thoroughly demonstrates he has the necessary strength to ward off such attacks.”

“Just in case you’re laboring under some misconception, dear brother, Mr. Dark happens to be the Black Fools’ most powerful fighter,” Lilith shot back. “If you feel Mr. Gold and Ms. Nemumu do not need to undergo this trial of yours, that should mean Mr. Dark would pass the test as well.”

Clowe scoffed. “You’re telling me this *child* is the most powerful out of the three of them? Lilith, if you’re trying to bluff your way out of this trial taking place, you need to come up with an excuse that’s at least halfway convincing. Do I look so easily fooled?”

Clowe turned to the Northern Wind demons and shared a good chuckle with them. I couldn’t really blame them for thinking they had the upper hand, since anyone looking at my

party would think the two adults, Gold and Nemumu, would be the toughest to beat, but it went without saying that I could easily beat everyone present—including Gold and Nemumu—even if they all decided to attack me at the same time. But unsurprisingly, Lilith was unable to convince Clowe that I was powerful enough, and I could sense that both Nemumu and Gold were getting peeved about Clowe making fun of me. I had to speak up before things escalated.

"Okay, I accept," I said to Clowe. "I believe now would be a good time to begin this trial, don't you?"

"M-Mr. Dark?" Lilith stammered.

"Hmph. Well, I admire your guts," Clowe admitted. "Follow me to the appointed area." He emphasized his command by motioning in the desired direction with his chin, and I followed the prince to the center of the training grounds. Since I had agreed to fight alone, Lilith was in no position to complain about my treatment, so all she could do was stand and watch. I signaled to Nemumu and Gold with my eyes to stick close to the princess to make sure that no harm befell her, and was satisfied that my two partners had gotten the message. Meanwhile, the Northern Wind Stormwinds were already in position.

"So we came all this way to the Human Kingdom just to fight some inferior toddler?" scoffed one of the demons, who was holding small, curved swords in both hands.

"The prince has already paid us handsomely, brother, so we should do what he says," said another of the triplets who was wielding a spear. "Even if it does mean wasting our time with a human flea who's still wet behind the ears."

"Even a dragon fights giants and goblins equally," the mage of the party pointed out. "Let us complete our work like professionals, my brothers."

I ignored the bigoted remarks from the demons and used an SR Appraisal card on them. *They're all Level 1000, and that mage is carrying an epic-class Whirlwind Staff. Other than that, these guys have no weapons or items worth noting.* This "Northern Wind Stormwinds" party would definitely have an overwhelming advantage if they were facing the kind of run-of-the-mill opponents they got up here on the surface world, but if I was allowed to toot my own horn, I was way out of their league.

While I was busy with my Appraisal, Clowe sidled up to the demons and whispered something in their ears. If I were to

guess what he had said, I'd venture that he probably gave them instructions on how to take me out. Once he was done, he drew back and cleared his throat. "The only rule to remember is that no one is allowed to intentionally slay their opponent. Other than that, anything goes. But bear in mind that we are only here to test the strength of the boy."

With the rules clearly set out, the Northern Wind Stormwinds and I put some distance between us. "You may begin!" the prince announced.

The Northern Wind mage infused his staff with mana. "Mighty whirlwind, form a tempest!" he chanted before unleashing his attack, which turned out to be a strong, twisting gale circling my position. The three demons hopped into the windstorm and orbited me by riding the spinning air currents.

"Unfortunately for you, no one can withstand this attack pattern!" called out the triplet with the twin blades.

"Using the strength of the wind, we can strike quickly and defend ourselves. It even boosts our attacks!" added the one with the spear.

"As for you, inferior, the one who hired us has ordered us to kill you where you stand!" the mage sneered. "He wants us to make it look like an accident, but also to ensure that you suffer before you die. The prince may be just another one of your cursed race, but you're the poor sap who is unfortunate enough to have incurred his disfavor, you miserable— Gwaaah!"

Before the mage could finish his spiel that was dripping with prejudice, I performed a roundhouse kick on the triplets, timing it just right so that I caught all three demons with one movement, pile-driving them into one another. The kick sent them hurtling out of the whirlwind and into the wall at the far end of the training area. I made sure to hold back just enough so that I wouldn't kill them, but the impact was hard enough that they were out cold by the time they flopped to the ground, their whirlwind disappearing the same instant as their consciousness.

*So* that's *what Clowe whispered to them, huh?* I mused. *So much for his one rule being no killing. Also, is it ever a good idea to just announce your real battle plan out loud like that?* Maybe they figured no one else would hear them over the noise of the wind. At any rate, it just highlighted how much of a grudge Clowe held against me for "stealing" Nemumu from him, though I supposed that didn't matter much anymore, since I'd just knocked the

demons' lights out in less than a minute. The spectacle had shocked Clowe and his knights into silence.

"Does this prove I can pull my own weight as a bodyguard?" I asked.

"You..." Clowe spluttered.

"Yes?" I said innocently.

"You wretched son of a jackal!" the prince finally managed to spit out. So instead of telling me I had passed with flying colors, he flipped his wig. Typical. And I'd even gone out of my way to end the test promptly *and* make sure my "testers" lived to tell the tale. So why was he so mad at me?

"You're dressed as a mage, yet you just beat an A-rank party without using a single spell!" Clowe thundered. "You're not really a mage, are you? You're a warrior who dressed up as a mage to fool me! You sneak! You weasel! This trial is null and void due to fraud! It doesn't count!"

I sighed audibly in astonishment. I wasn't dressed as a mage to fool anyone. After all, thanks to my gacha cards, I could perform magic far beyond what normal mages were capable of, so by any definition of the word, I was a full-fledged mage, meaning I had every right to dress the way I did. Clowe didn't have a leg to stand on. I hadn't used magic simply because I hadn't needed to. Clowe's pronouncement was so arbitrary and shockingly stupid, I couldn't help feeling rather peeved.

Lilith panicked when she saw my grumpy expression and quickly intervened. "D-Dear brother, please calm yourself! You're wrong! Mr. Dark is most definitely a mage. He simply had enough talent not to need to use his magic on this occasion."

"You expect me to *believe* that?" Clowe screamed. "Do you know of any mage who's *that* proficient in close combat?"

*Huh. That sounds a lot like what someone else yelled at me before,* I reflected.

"In that case, why don't we get Mr. Dark to *show* you some of his magic?" Lilith said. "That should convince you that he's a true mage. Mr. Dark, if you would be so kind, could you cast a spell and settle this debate? If possible, one that's particularly powerful and flashy."

"Powerful and flashy?" I echoed. I could certainly do that, if it would shut Clowe up once and for all. "In that case, everybody stand back and cover your ears. This spell makes a pretty loud bang."

I turned and focused my attention on an area that was directly opposite to where the Northern Wind Stormwinds were piled up unconscious. Lilith and fake Yume did as I had said and clapped their hands over their ears, but Clowe and his knights were a different story—all they did was eye me with suspicion.

"Detonation Inferno!" I yelled, activating the relevant SSR card.

Almost instantly, a massive plume of flame manifested in front of me, the towering fire ascending high enough to scorch the heavens themselves. The explosion was so loud, I could feel it reverberating in my belly, and the flames turned the earthy ground underneath to soot, which got kicked up everywhere. Once the fire was out and the waves of smoke and dust had finally died down, a huge crater in the middle of the training grounds was revealed to the watching crowd. If I'd used the SSR Detonation Inferno on the Northern Wind Stormwinds, they would have been totally vaporized, along with their little whirlwind.

I turned to Lilith. "Is that satisfactory, Your Highness?"

"Um, yes. That's more than acceptable," Lilith said in a small voice, which just went to show how startled even she was at the force of the detonation inferno, and after covering her ears, no less. I turned to Clowe to get his thoughts, only to find that the prince and a number of his knights had literally been knocked backward onto the seats of their pants, and were too scared to say anything. While it was true that Lilith was a little more timid than before, at least she was still standing, which was more than I could say about her brother. Despite how undignified they looked at present, it was clear that Clowe and his gang weren't in the right headspace to worry about acting strong in front of the princess, since it seemed like their souls were about to depart from their corporeal bodies.

"Dear brother, I believe Mr. Dark has thoroughly proved himself, yes?" Lilith said pointedly. "If he wanted to, he could defeat the North Wind Stormwinds even if they had a hundred or a thousand members, let alone three. So do you still have a problem with his party serving as my bodyguards?"

"N-N-No, I don't," Clowe stammered. "They're free to provide you with security..." The prince and his knights were still trembling on the ground, but I had at least secured a passing grade this time. From then on, my party was officially recognized as bodyguards for Princess Lilith.

☆☆☆

After participating in that (completely trumped-up) bodyguard trial, my party and I followed Lilith out of the smoldering husk that had been the training grounds in order to discuss the princess's itinerary in private. As we left, we told Clowe and his crew to take care of the Northern Wind Stormwinds—who were still unconscious—but whether they got the message was anyone's guess, because they could seemingly only gawk at me like I was some kind of mythical creature. We ignored their stares and promptly made our way to our next destination: Lilith's private chambers. However, before we could enter them, a maid stood in our way.

"Your Highness, I will not allow you to engage in this folly," the maid said.

"Nono, step aside," Lilith said. "We need to enter through these doors."

"As your head maid, I cannot allow any male to set foot in your private rooms," the maid named Nono replied. Well, she did have a point. After all, an adolescent boy and a full-grown man were attempting to enter what was considered the most personal of personal spaces for the princess of the Human Kingdom. Moreover, Lilith was a teenage girl of marrying age who had a reputation to maintain. If, for example, Lilith's hand in marriage had already been offered to some high-profile suitor, her fiancé would be well within his rights to cancel the betrothal if it ever got out that a couple of random men had entered Lilith's private rooms. However, Lilith had a strong rebuttal prepared to address Nono's concerns.

"These are people I have hired through the guilds to serve as my bodyguards, so it goes without saying that I trust them with my life, even in my personal chambers," Lilith explained. "In any case, I'm simply taking them into my lounge so that we may discuss matters. We will not be entering my bedroom. I have chosen my chambers as the place to hold these talks because I do not wish for my brother to disturb us again. We must be left to discuss matters openly and thoroughly, without any interference, because my personal safety is on the line here. So as the princess of the Human Kingdom, I order you, Nono, to step aside."

Nono didn't say a word in response, partly because she had

just been given a direct order, but also and in no small part, because Lilith had made an unimpeachable argument for letting these people into her rooms. Like Lilith had said, she was only taking us into the lounge, not her bedroom, plus my party included Nemumu, so it wasn't as if she was inviting just guys to enter. Nemumu's presence would give Lilith enough plausible deniability if anyone were ever to raise questions on the matter. In any case, Lilith was the one who controlled the comings and goings of her private chambers, so that lessened the potential of any outsiders barging in and disrupting our talks, and it was the princess who had suggested we use her personal chambers in the first place, because it offered us more privacy.

Nono stepped aside, allowing the fake Yume to open the door and lead us to the lounge inside. "All of you may take any seat you like," Lilith said before turning to her head maid. "Nono, you and the other maids will please wait outside until I tell you to come back in."

"Your Highness, we won't be able to serve you and your guests if we are outside the room," Nono pointed out. "I kindly ask that you reconsider your request."

"I will have Yume take care of all of our needs," Lilith said curtly. "And I will likewise kindly ask you not to embarrass me any further in front of my guests."

Nono blinked. "I beg your pardon, Your Highness." She bowed, then led all of the other maids aside from Yume out of the princess's private chambers, shutting the doors behind her.

"Nemumu?" I queried.

"The maids are standing outside the door, but I believe they're far enough away that they won't be able to make out our conversation," Nemumu said. "I'm also sensing that there are others monitoring this room from outside, but they aren't close enough to present a threat of eavesdropping."

"Thanks, Nemumu, but we can't be too careful," I said. "R Silent, R Detection, SR Magic Jamming—release."

The Silent and Magic Jamming cards safeguarded us against espionage through both magical and nonmagical means, and the Detection card swept the area for any magical surveillance items, meaning we were now truly free to discuss sensitive matters.

I sat down on one of the sofas and took off my mask. "So Nono's the maid who's working as a spy for the Demonkin

Nation?”

“Yes, to my utter shame,” Lilith said, taking a seat on the sofa across the coffee table from me. “Some of the other maids that just left the room are spying for other countries too. Because of that, the only person I can truly trust is this Yume you made for me, Lord Light.”

Lilith had taken my mask removal as a signal that the coast was clear to tell me what was really on her mind. Nemumu and Gold took up their usual positions behind my sofa, while the fake Yume placed cups of freshly brewed tea in front of both Lilith and me. Once Yume had finished serving us, she whisked herself off to stand in one corner of the room where she could remain inconspicuous for the rest of the meeting.

Lilith sighed as she picked up her teacup. “Nono has been my maid ever since I was a child, but it turns out she’s a spy who was assigned to assassinate me if the order was ever given,” Lilith explained. “After finding out about Nono, I can no longer drink tea she has made for me, so I get Yume to take care of my personal upkeep. I honestly cannot thank you enough for allowing me to keep this copy of Yume, Lord Light. Without her, my mental health would have been in total shambles before the spies could even do anything to me physically.”

“Oh, but I thought I gave you a poison cancellation necklace?” I said, recalling the magic item I had given to Lilith because I was worried about her safety. Leaving aside the fact that we were coconspirators in a plot to depose the king, Lilith had saved the life of my sister, so giving her stuff like the necklace was the least I could do.

Lilith stroked the necklace dangling from her neck and smiled wanly. “I don’t doubt the power of this item to protect me in such a circumstance, Lord Light, but just the thought of having people around me with a mind to poison me has worn away at my nerves.”

“I can see where you’re coming from,” I said. While the necklace worked against poison, it did nothing to prevent the psychological barrier that stopped a person from knowingly ingesting something that might be poisoned. If someone dared me to eat food that was poisoned while wearing the necklace, I would still flatly refuse, as any normal person would.

Lilith cleared her throat and bowed her head deeply in apology. “Please forgive my brother for how dreadfully rude he

was to you," Lilith said. "But on the upside, he has now at least accepted you as my bodyguard. My brother will stay here to run the kingdom while my father and I attend the summit. That duty is part of his grooming to inherit the throne, but at least it means he won't be able to personally intervene at any point during my trip to the summit. My father, the king, already agreed to let me hire your party as my bodyguards, so I beg you to overlook how awful my brother was to you."

"You don't need to bow to me, Your Highness," I said. "That whole thing with your brother didn't bother me in the slightest. In fact, I actually sympathize with him in a way since I have a younger sister myself. So there's no need to worry about me being angry."

"Thank you for being so considerate, Lord Light," Lilith said, openly breathing a sigh of relief. I guess her intention was to treat me with the utmost respect so that she wouldn't fall victim to the "wrath of the Abyss" so to speak, but she really didn't need to be so scared of us. I *could* have told her that I wasn't the type to unleash my army against anyone who looked at me the wrong way, but I had a feeling that wouldn't help to change her attitude toward me. Lilith and I were coconspirators, yes, but there was still a huge imbalance of power between us, and that had obviously affected her understanding of the situation she was in.

"Well now. With that out of the way, let's discuss your schedule for the summit, as well as our day-to-day assignments for providing security," I said.

"Of course. Let's get started," Lilith agreed. With no fear of Clowe barging in and ruining things again, we finally got down to the business we had come to the palace to conduct in the first place.

☆☆☆

Nono had first met Lilith when the princess was only six years old, the young maid picked out to exclusively serve her young charge. At the time, Lilith was grieving the recent loss of her mother, the queen consort, so at first, she became attached to Nono and treated her as sort of a replacement maternal figure. As time moved on, however, Lilith's feelings for Nono evolved, and she became more like a respected older sister to her. In turn, Nono treated Lilith like she would a younger sister, which

entailed doting on the princess as well as scolding her whenever necessary. Even if a few choice words were occasionally traded, Nono's relationship with Lilith had never been intractably strained, because the princess had always trusted her head maid with the whole of her heart.

The close ties between Nono and Lilith had begun to fray a short time after the princess took a tour of the Great Tower.

"Nono, I will have Yume make my tea from now on," Lilith had said at the time. "That way, you can take care of other tasks."

"Your Highness?" Nono had replied, stunned by this unexpected directive. But that had only been the beginning. Lilith had gradually assigned more and more duties and responsibilities to Yume, who was still only just an apprentice maid. In time, Yume started being treated as a full maid and serving as Lilith's primary assistant, essentially taking over the position Nono had once held. It got to the point where Nono felt she couldn't let these changes pass without comment.

"Your Highness, could you tell me why you seem to be distancing yourself from me in favor of Yume's services?" she asked. "Have I unwittingly done something to incur your disfavor?"

"*That's* why you wanted a word in private?" An exasperated Lilith took a sip of the tea the fake Yume had brewed for her. It was nighttime, and the princess was sitting on the sofa in her bedroom, while Nono stood before her, the head maid having requested that Lilith send Yume away, so the two of them might converse alone.

"You've made a sizable number of dramatic changes to my work assignments over the past weeks, and I felt the need to inquire about it," Nono said. "I will say to her credit that Yume has been conducting herself splendidly as a maid, but she is much too young and inexperienced to serve as your close personal attendant. I wish to know the reasons behind your decision to bring her closer at my expense."

"Honestly, Nono. Don't you think you're overexaggerating?" Lilith said, sounding more like she was speaking to an overbearing elder sister than her maid. "You always get so fussy over the smallest things."

Lilith placed her teacup back on its saucer and proceeded to give a much fuller answer. "There's no need for you to look so deeply into it. As you say yourself, Yume has the makings of an

excellent maid, so I thought I should take her under my wing and develop her skills further. Even you have complained how hard it is to find a useful maid."

Nono paused. "Yes, I may have perhaps made that observation in the past," she conceded.

Lilith was specifically referring to all of the episodes where a number of young maids had been caught shirking their duties behind Nono's back. Each time there was such an incident, Nono would air her grievances about the maids to Lilith in those exact terms, though they had been intended as offhand comments of the type made to a confidante in private. Nono was perfectly willing to live with a certain level of unprofessionalism displayed by her junior maids, but she couldn't deny that, at times, she had made less-than-charitable remarks about certain members of her staff.

"I'm helping to train up Yume so that she can lessen your workload," Lilith said, smiling gently. "Right now, you're able to devote more time to your other work instead of constantly looking after me. I feel you should be thanking me, not finding fault with my actions."

"But I..." Nono found herself stuck for what to say in response to this. There was no arguing that she was able to get more work done with Yume handling Lilith's personal affairs, and it did make sense to train up a maid who could be useful to Nono in the future. But the head maid wasn't thoroughly convinced by Lilith's explanation.

*She isn't telling any provable lies, but I don't think she's telling the whole truth either,* thought Nono. Because she had served Lilith ever since the princess was a young girl, Nono could instantly tell if she was hiding something, and at that moment, the head maid knew Lilith was not being entirely forthcoming.

"Nono, why have you stopped talking?" Lilith asked.

"Oh, forgive me, Your Highness," Nono said. "Nothing to be concerned about. I thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak with you. You have cleared up all of my misunderstandings."

"Really? Well, thank heavens for that," Lilith said with a smile. It wasn't exactly an awkward smile, but Nono could see it wasn't a smile from the heart. However, Nono knew instinctively that this was neither the time nor place to ask any more questions, so she gave a bow and left the princess's bedroom.

Nono walked down the hallway, lost in thought. *Her Highness is definitely hiding something from me. This is just like that time she tried to keep a kitten as a pet.* When Lilith was ten, she found a snow-white kitten that had become lost in the palace yard. She thought the palace wouldn't let her keep the baby cat, so she hid it in her room and took care of her new pet. By age ten, Lilith had learned that the best way to lie was by omission, so she pretended she knew nothing about any kitten, but Nono knew the princess was concealing something, and it wasn't long before she discovered the kitten and confiscated it. The fact that there was a kitten in the princess's rooms wasn't exactly a well-kept secret anyway, due to all the cat hair that had made its way onto dresses, mattresses, and carpets. There were also scratch marks etched into furniture and the unmistakable odor of an animal that had yet to be housebroken. The kitten ended up being adopted by the family of a maid working under Nono, and as of the present day, the full-grown cat was living a leisurely, stress-free life.

Now that Lilith was fifteen, her rhetorical acumen was several times more polished than when she was younger, meaning she excelled at keeping things close to the vest while still presenting herself as an open book, but due to her years of serving the princess, Nono wasn't fooled by her verbal sleights of hand at all. Even so, the maid had no idea what Lilith was hiding from her.

*I don't think she's hiding a pet, like that time she found that kitten,* thought Nono. *So perhaps she's fallen in love with a man, but she's keeping it a secret out of embarrassment?* To Nono's mind, she found it plausible that Lilith could be consorting with a boyfriend but didn't want her stern, older sister figure to find out and was keeping Nono at arm's length to spare her from uncovering what would be a potentially scandalous revelation. However, the attitude Lilith had adopted during their chat in the bedroom just then had suggested something else entirely.

*Why else would Her Highness push me away in favor of Yume?* Nono wondered. *Is it possible she knows I'm a spy?* She stopped dead in her tracks, a wave of electricity coursing through her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Droplets of cold sweat formed on her brow and she had to force herself to swallow the saliva that had pooled in her mouth before she could continue to contemplate what had previously been unthinkable.

*No, there's no way Her Highness could have found out about me!* Nono argued in her head. *My reports to the Demonkin Nation go through my family, outside of the palace. The princess couldn't have picked up on those.* However, the Human Kingdom's royal palace was a veritable paradise for spies hired by other nations, so it was entirely possible that another spy could have tipped Lilith off about Nono's activities.

*I suppose I can't completely rule out the possibility that someone is trying to drive a wedge between me and Her Highness so that Yume can get closer to the princess and gain access to intelligence,* Nono surmised. *But there's no point in going to all that trouble.* Gathering any intelligence regarding Lilith was incredibly easy, to the point where it didn't matter if the agent was working closely with the princess or not. In any event, there was no actual evidence to suggest that Nono's cover had been blown, but despite this, her instincts continued to assail her nerves.

*This is all just a bad premonition,* Nono told herself. *I can't prove anything yet, but…*

Nono was in no position to outright ask Lilith if she was sidelining her because she had found out that her head maid was a spy, but just the thought that the princess might know about her secret line of work caused Nono's chest to tighten so painfully, she had to pause for a moment and prop herself up by pressing her hand against the nearest wall. But in spite of how much emotional pain potentially being found out was causing her, she knew that quitting her espionage activities wasn't an option. Her family had spied for the Demonkin Nation for generations, and she knew that the penalty for treachery against the state was for assassins to be sent to massacre her and the rest of her family. As a human, there was no way Nono could possibly ward off demon assassins, so she had been left with no option but to continue spying for their nation. Yet she knew those circumstances didn't amount to an excuse for betraying Lilith's trust, especially as Nono had even been assigned the duty of personally assassinating the princess if the need ever arose.

*No, there's still no way of knowing if the princess knows about my secret,* Nono reminded herself. *I just need to perform my maid duties to the best of my abilities and regain my former place at Her Highness's side. Once there, I can observe her closely and uncover the real reason she has distanced herself from me.*

Nono settled on the provisional conclusion that she was

mistaken and Lilith was telling the truth about giving Yume more responsibilities in order to lessen Nono’s workload—this was by far the most plausible explanation, after all—before removing her hand from the wall and plodding heavily to her own private room in the servants’ quarters.

## Chapter 3: Departure

On the day their voyage to the Principality of the Nine to attend the international summit got underway, Princess Lilith and her father, the king, attended a sending-off ceremony that was held outside the east gate of the palace, where a crowd had gathered to witness the event. As Lilith's security detail, Nemumu, Gold, and I stuck close to the princess while Prince Clowe—who was to act as regent in his father's absence—delivered a theatrically somber and overblown farewell message to the departing royals.

"Your Majesty, king of the humans," Clowe began. "You are about to depart for the emergency summit, leaving the peace and security of this great kingdom in my care. But I vow with all of my strength and soul that I will let nothing stand in the way of me administering this kingdom as masterfully as you have. So leave for the summit safe in the knowledge that this great nation is in capable hands."

"Very good, Clowe," the king said, nodding with approval. "I trust you to govern the kingdom well in my stead."

This was my first time seeing the so-called "king of the humans" up close, and I couldn't help noticing that his voice sounded rather more imposing than his stature suggested. In fact, the monarch appeared so graying and frail, he would have looked more at home in a hospital bed than a throne room. At the same time, the king was managing to stand up straight for the crowd, as if someone had stuck a metal rod up his spine, and although it was clear he had slowed down with age, the king still conducted himself as regally as one might expect. Strangely enough, the king's voice and his comportment helped to make up for a poor first impression of him.

"And Lilith," Clowe continued, "I expect you to conduct yourself wisely as royal deputy to His Majesty."

"I only wish to serve, dear brother," Lilith replied.

The two siblings appeared friendly enough on the surface, but I sensed tension in this exchange, likely because Clowe was purposely trying to act high-and-mighty in front of Lilith to compensate for what had happened when he'd tried to make me

go through his “trial.” At the time, I had sufficiently proved my ability to safeguard Lilith by unleashing the SSR Detonation Inferno, the explosion from the gacha card causing Clowe and some of his guards to topple backward onto their butts. Since Lilith knew how powerful I was, she had smartly covered her ears, and as a result, had remained standing in the aftermath of the Detonation Inferno in sharp contrast to Clowe, who had looked frightened and pathetic on his derriere to the point where some of the knights started whispering among themselves about whether Lilith would be a more worthy successor to the throne than him. The story had also spread to the townsfolk, leading some citizens to secretly hope that Lilith might become their queen. So given the circumstances, Clowe felt he *had* to appear assertive and authoritative in front of Lilith in order to stop the idea that he was weak from taking hold. He needed to knock Lilith down a rung to make himself look powerful and in command.

Just in case you were wondering, my team and I had nothing to do with spreading the rumor that suggested Lilith would make a better monarch—largely because we didn’t need to. We already had five nations ready to back Lilith’s coronation at the summit, so running a roundabout whisper campaign in the Human Kingdom would have been a complete waste of time.

Clowe’s last act of the ceremony was to steal a glance at me and my party, and click his tongue in annoyance at us, his brow furrowed. I ignored him, though beneath his helmet, Gold had to work hard to suppress a giggle, while Nemumu softly tutted, obviously too vexed by the prince’s glare to worry about decorum. Thankfully, the cheering from the crowd drowned out Nemumu’s response, meaning Clowe didn’t hear it. But even so, I couldn’t help wishing she’d stop purposely trying to make enemies, since there really was nothing more to prove. On our return from the summit, we would force Clowe to step down from his position, and he’d have to take up a hobby for the rest of his days.

Once the sending-off ceremony had wrapped up, Lilith and the king climbed aboard their own horse-drawn carriages surrounded by fifty knights, which was a woefully small contingent compared to the number of military guards the other nations were likely to bring with them. That was just one of the many reasons the rest of the world viewed the Human Kingdom

as weak. Instead of joining the knights, Gold mounted a horse behind Lilith's carriage, while Nemumu and I mounted another horse in front of the carriage, with Nemumu sitting behind me.

I watched on as Lilith boarded the carriage with the fake Yume. "Really wish I'd learned how to ride a horse..." In the three years that I was stuck down in the Abyss, I studied all sorts of subjects, practiced magic, had leadership training, and learned how to fight in situations where I was both armed and unarmed, but unfortunately, horseback riding had never been part of the regimen because, well, I had no need for a horse in the Abyss. If I wanted to go someplace far away, I could activate the SR Flight or SSR Teleportation cards, and for shorter distances, thanks to my power level, I could actually run much faster than a horse. But of course, if I was going to maintain my cover on this mission, I would have to travel using normal means, just like everybody else. Meanwhile, horseback riding was part of both Gold's and Nemumu's built-in skill sets, which is why I had ended up sharing a horse with Nemumu, who was absolutely giddy that she had me all to herself.

"I'm always happy to help you travel by horse, Lord Dark," Nemumu said as we set off. "And if you ever need me to carry you when we're on foot, don't be afraid to ask!"

I turned and saw Nemumu beaming at me. For my part, I couldn't help noticing that I was practically being hugged from behind by Nemumu in this position, and furthermore, my head was pressed up against her chest. It was a soft sensation and she smelled nice, and in all honesty, it made me a little bashful. And if that weren't enough, I could tell that Nemumu was taking in lungfuls of my scent, which only added to my mortification. Meanwhile, some of the knights were glancing in our direction with unmasked jealousy, which was pretty much the cherry on top of an embarrassing sundae.

"The way you're feeling is perfectly understandable, milord," Gold said, noticing how uncomfortable I was. "Any man would be ashamed at not being able to ride a bally horse. Perhaps I can give you some equestrian lessons whenever we get some time off from this guard duty lark, what what?"

"Gold! You stay out of this!" Nemumu snapped. "I already promised Lord Dark that I'd be his legs that'll carry him anywhere he wants to go if he ever needs them!" She was so psyched at having me so close to her that she was nearly spitting fire and

brimstone at Gold for, in her mind, trying to rob her of that experience. The golden knight sighed at her attitude and promptly admonished her.

"Your feelings notwithstanding, m'girl, you shouldn't stand in the way of milord's opportunities to learn new skills," Gold warned. "You must keep in mind that you won't always be around to serve as his legs, so to speak."

"I'll *always* be there to serve Lord Dark, even if he calls on me early in the morning or late at night when I'm asleep!" Nemumu thundered back.

"You don't need to be so blinking emphatic about it, m'girl," Gold said, visibly flinching.

I smiled at the pair's antics before deciding enough was enough for the time being. "I can always think about horse riding lessons later," I said magnanimously. "So, Nemumu, do you sense any enemies or monsters on the road ahead?"

"No, I don't detect any issues," Nemumu said in a calm, professional voice. "There are a few goblins lurking in the woods, but that's all."

We had started moving away from the east gate in a straight line at a trot, and like Nemumu said, there were no signs that any real threats awaited us.

"Milord, the plan is to ride east to the river, then to take a boat the rest of the way to the principality, yes?" Gold asked.

"Yep, that's right," I said. "An overland route would take us more than ten days, but if we go by river, it's an easy one-day trip."

The whole reason for leaving from the east gate of the palace instead of the main gate was because the river lay to the east. The waterway began in a mountain range somewhere up north and emptied into the sea, south of the mainland, and transport by the river was so quick and easy, there were lumbering villages on the northern banks that took their timber south to sell.

Even I had sailed along this river when I'd first struck out on my own as an adventurer, for it was a whole lot safer than going by foot and running the risk of encountering bandits and monsters. Plus, unlike the ocean, there were no sea monsters lurking in the river.

*Too bad I was so poor back then that I had to settle for being stuffed into the bottom of a riverboat when I first left for the city,* I recalled. *There wasn't even a window I could look out of.* And even

though it was the cheaper option, a ticket for steerage had still cost me half the money I'd had on me at the time. This unfortunate memory made me sigh heavily beneath my mask.

"Lord Dark, are you not comfortable?" Nemumu asked. "P-Please forgive me. I should have picked a gentler path."

"No, you're fine," I said. "I was just reminded of a bad experience, that's all. Sorry for giving you the wrong idea. I am comfortable, even though riding double like this *is* a little embarrassing."

"L-Lord Dark!" My reassurance caused Nemumu's eyes to grow wide and twinkly with emotion.

"Milord, you shouldn't placate her like that," Gold said, but Nemumu ignored him and worked the reins, pleased as punch. I was just glad that even in her present buoyant state, Nemumu was able to detect any potential enemy ambushes from miles away.

After hours of riding without incident, we finally reached the town by the river where we would board the boat to take us to the Principality of the Nine.

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The town we had arrived at handled imports shipped in from other nations, as well as serving as an export point for the wheat, timber, and slaves shipped out from the Human Kingdom. Although this town was the closest settlement to the royal capital, it was a surprisingly small community. Normally, a port town would be an economic capital awash with people, goods, and money, but because we humans were a mostly impoverished race, scraping by as best we could, few people had the money to engage in standard commerce. At most, people bought food and other essentials, but almost no luxury items. Therefore, only a very limited number of imports came into this town, and whatever was exported from here tended to be sold at extremely discounted prices, leaving the sellers without much money for their efforts. As a result, this town had never developed into a full-fledged city, and definitely not a trading hub. This was my first time seeing a human mercantile center after becoming Lilith's bodyguard, and I had to admit, there wasn't a whole lot going on in this town.

"I see a few folk flitting about here and there, but there's a

notable lack of life to this place, despite it being supper time, what?" Gold remarked.

"The people here are so lifeless, they're practically comatose," Nemumu noted. "To be honest, this place gives me the creeps."

My two partners had pretty much taken the words out of my mouth. The mayor of the town met the royal entourage at the gates, and after leading us all inside, I took in the sights as we rolled toward the mayor's manor, where the royal family would be staying for the night.

We eventually arrived at the manor, which was your average aristocratic estate. The king, Lilith, and a group of maids were set to stay in the manor, while the bodyguards—including me and my party—had been assigned rooms in a nearby billet for soldiers. The townspeople all seemed to know what to do, since they routinely housed the king's traveling party whenever he had to attend an international summit at the Duchy.

One of the mayor's maids offered to escort Lilith up to her room, but I decided it would be best to get permission from the princess anyway. "Your Highness, are we allowed to relocate to the billet? I would recommend you at least take Nemumu as your guardian."

Lilith hesitated, then looked off to one side. "I thank you for your consideration, Mr. Dark, but I will be perfectly safe in this town, so I will not need any guards by my side for this stay."

"Understood, Your Highness," I replied. "Forgive me for being presumptuous."

"There is no need to apologize," Lilith said. "I know you meant well."

Before replying, Lilith had stolen a glance at the mayor, who hadn't noticed since he was conversing with the king. It appeared Lilith was being deferential to the mayor because it would have reflected poorly on the town's leader if she had insisted on taking her own bodyguards into his residence, for such an act would imply the mayor lacked the security apparatus needed to keep his high-profile guests safe.

After all the greetings were taken care of, Lilith and the king entered the manor, while one of the mayor's maids showed us to the billet we would be staying in, which turned out to be a single-story building with one large room for a bunch of the soldiers to bed down in, plus a number of smaller rooms for the commanders and VIPs. As luck would have it, my party had been

assigned a private room, since we counted a woman among our number. I was thankful for that since it meant I had some privacy to remove my mask and relax, which I wouldn't have been able to do in front of a crowd. The maid offered to show my party to the mess hall, where a welcoming banquet had been prepared for us, but I politely declined.

"Thank you for your gracious hospitality, but I prefer to eat at my own convenience, for I cannot remove my mask in company due to my disfiguring facial scars," I informed her.

"If Lord Dark will not attend, I won't either," Nemumu said.

"In that case, I'll shuffle off to this banquet and come up with a good excuse for why both of you aren't there scoffing the grub with the rest of us," Gold said. "As you know, it's my calling to carouse with soldiers, mercenaries, and adventurers of all stripes."

Looking light on his feet, Gold followed the maid out of the room with the mess hall as his destination. He always loved drinking with the more rough-and-tumble crowds in taverns, and on top of that, he seemed to have a knack for livening up the atmosphere, even when confronted by a bunch of disappointed men wondering why they weren't presently rubbing elbows with Nemumu.

As for Nemumu herself, she was the total opposite—at least up here on the surface world. She absolutely despised noisy taverns since she had to put up with random men making passes at her the whole time she was in one. Though, strangely enough, Nemumu was often the one to liven things up and drive the conversation whenever she and the fairy maids had get-togethers on the bottom tier of the Abyss.

I used my Unlimited Gacha cards to secure our room from any potential eavesdroppers or magical surveillance, took off my mask, then joined Nemumu in eating the food that had been brought to our room by the mayor's maid. Unfortunately, the food was so bland that I couldn't help smirking in spite of myself. And since I wasn't wearing my mask anymore, Nemumu noticed my expression and led the conversation in that direction.

"I swear on my life, the food they make up here on the surface is absolutely terrible," Nemumu muttered, openly grimacing as she spoke. "Feeding you this filth is the height of effrontery, Lord Light."

"Well, at least they mean well by it," I said, seated across from

Nemumu. “They’re trying to be welcoming with this food, so it’d be a waste not to eat it. And besides, we wouldn’t want to raise suspicions.”

To illustrate Nemumu’s gripes, they had served us soup that had almost no flavor to it, hardtack bread, meat that was giving off a strange odor, and mashed potatoes that tasted like creamy sawdust. We had wine to wash it all down with, but as soon as she took a sip, Nemumu grimaced. It was true that compared to the culinary delights on offer in the Abyss, the meal we were eating was dismally plain and lacked any sort of variety, but if I had been served this food back in my days as a fledgling adventurer, I would have considered it a feast.

“Maybe you’d rather have the food they’re serving to Lilith and the king?” I suggested to Nemumu.

“I can guarantee that whatever they’re eating, it won’t remotely compare to what we have down in the Abyss,” Nemumu sniffed. “I still can’t believe people on the surface have to spend their whole lives eating this dreck. I’d go crazy after one day.”

I laughed. “If everyone up here on the surface knew how well we eat, they’d probably feel the same way too.” Once I’d finished chuckling at this, Nemumu changed the topic of conversation to Lilith.

“Speaking of the princess, do you think I should sneak over to the manor and watch her from the shadows, despite what she said about not needing our protection?” Nemumu asked.

I thought about this for a second. “Nah. Like she said, there are no threats in this town, and she should be able to protect herself anyway since she’s now Level 100. Besides, we gave her that anti-poison necklace and a bunch of other items and gacha cards she can use in emergencies. I think she’ll be safe here without us hanging around her.” We had originally planned for Lilith to attain a much higher power level before the summit, but unfortunately, she couldn’t find a way of breaking through the presumed level cap for humans, so we had instead given her an abundance of items to add an extra layer of protection.

“No, if there’s any problem here, it’s with the town itself,” I said as I gnawed at my rock-hard bread. Nemumu silently waited for me to continue. “It’s like this town symbolizes everything that’s wrong with the present and the future of the human race.”

We humans were forever forced to export our goods at dirt-

cheap prices, which had led to human laborers working for a pittance, meaning they couldn't afford higher living standards. Whenever disease, injury, or other issues beyond their control afflicted a human family, their choices were to either give up and wait for death, or sell their children into slavery to cover the expense of simply surviving. The adults in this town knew they had no hope of escaping their fates, and they had resigned themselves to meaningless toil, their eyes no more than dark pools of emptiness.

"Since I'm the second son of a peasant farmer, I know all about the pain and hopelessness they're suffering," I said. "That's why we need Lilith crowned as the queen, so that this kingdom can transform itself into a respectable nation that can stand before the other races without any fear."

Since I and the rest of my allies in the Abyss were prioritizing my vendetta against my betrayers as well as the search for the truth behind Masters, we weren't as fanatical as Lilith was about winning a brighter future for humanity. On the other hand, it wouldn't mean much if we only helped Lilith temporarily. But as long as she was willing to do the heavy lifting of improving humanity's lot, then I was perfectly willing to provide her with support. I was human too, after all, and if secretly helping to install Lilith in the king's place meant a better tomorrow for the human race, then so be it.

"We'd better make sure Lilith gets the votes she needs to become queen at the summit," I added. "And we shouldn't forget to make Diablo suffer for what he did either."

"Perfectly put, Lord Light," Nemumu cooed. "I hope to contribute in any way I can!" Her eyes were glowing with passion, and I nodded my approval at the sentiment. In fact, I was getting as excited as Nemumu just from imagining my upcoming encounter with my sworn enemy, and at the same time, my soul was inflamed with white-hot anger and a lust for vengeance.

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We ended up spending three days in the port town before the entire royal entourage—including the horses—boarded the privately chartered riverboat that would ferry us down the river to the summit in the Duchy. The king and Lilith were given

deluxe suites, while my party was once again assigned a private room.

"Nothing beats taking a riverboat in fantastic weather like this," I remarked. At that particular moment in time, I was standing at the rail up on deck and watching the scenery drift past as we glided downriver under a cloudless sky. Unfortunately, because of my SSR Fool's Mask, I couldn't feel the freshwater breeze against my face.

Gold was standing at the bow of the ship and gazing into the water. "I can't sense any monsters in this river either, even when I strain every sense. I must say I'm rather intrigued as to why that is."

"Yeah, nobody really knows why there aren't any water-dwelling monsters in rivers when there are tons of them in the sea," I said.

"Is that true, Lord Dark?" Nemumu asked.

"Yup. I'm afraid it's a complete mystery," I confirmed. "Monsters large and small live in the ocean, but not a single monster has ever been found in a river. Researchers have proved that sea monsters on the whole are more powerful than land monsters, so they believe there must be some unimaginably powerful monsters lurking around at the bottom of the sea."

"But no one has ever been able to prove such deep-sea monsters exist, milord?" Gold queried.

I nodded. "People can't go deep enough into the ocean with the technology we have at the moment, so it's all just guesswork by the researchers. And besides, you two saw for yourselves how dangerous dealing with sea monsters could get on our trips to the Dark Elf Islands and the Onifolk Archipelago. You'd be pretty much committing suicide if you traveled farther out to sea than those islands." Of course, it wouldn't be suicide for *us* if we were to use my gacha cards...

"Wow, Lord Dark! You know so much!" Nemumu marveled, her eyes as bright as the midday sun.

"Thanks, Nemumu," I said with a laugh. "But I'm just repeating what I heard years ago. It's not like I'm an expert on the subject or anything."

As it happened, I learned a lot about sea monsters several years back, when I was still in the Concord of the Tribes. I forgot exactly when I had learned that little tidbit, though. Maybe it was a conversation that was had over one of our meals, or maybe it

came up when we were having drinks to celebrate the completion of a quest. Back then, I didn't even think to doubt the words of my partymates, because I trusted them completely, and I wasn't just questing with that party, I was having the time of my life. At least, I *was*, right up until they...

The memory of their betrayal brought a swift end to my happy reminiscing, and I was quickly consumed by anger, sadness, and pain once more. Before I knew it, I'd placed a hand on my chest as the bitterness of it all weighed heavy on me again.

"L-Lord Dark, is something wrong?" Nemumu asked, nearly in tears because of my reaction. "Did I say something awful?"

"Sorry, Nemumu," I said, forcing a smile onto my face. "It's not your fault at all. It was just yet more bad memories."

Thankfully, Gold quickly changed the subject. "Anyway, milord, I'm famished and taking the air up here is starting to wear a little thin, so what do you say to going inside and grabbing a bite to eat?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I think I could use some food," I said. "Let's have an early lunch."

"I will eat whenever you eat, Lord Dark!" Nemumu exclaimed.

"Then you should learn to be a bit more independent-minded, m'girl," Gold said.

"I'd give up my very independence for Lord Dark!" Nemumu retorted.

"Oh. Well, carry on, then, love," Gold said resignedly. Like always, I laughed at their back-and-forth, and completely forgot about the pain from the past.

It took us about a day to reach the principality, and once the riverboat had moored up, I alighted and laid eyes on the Duchy for the first time in my life.

"So this is the most prosperous enclave in the whole world, huh?" I said. The Principality of the Nine was founded and constructed using investment from all of the nine races, although it was officially controlled by the dragonutes as it served as the gateway into the Dragonute Empire, since it was only possible to cross into the nation by river, passing through the Duchy. The principality itself was home to the School of Magic, as well as a number of other academies and large libraries, and it wasn't just considered an international city but also a center for research and innovation that was on par with

the Dwarf Kingdom and the Dark Elf Islands. Plus, not only did the Principality of the Nine border the human, elf, dragonute, and beastfolk nations, it also had canals that connected to the transcontinental river that flowed all the way to the southern sea, which meant the Duchy also served as a commerce hub that drew people there from the world over.

After off-loading all of the carriages from the riverboat, our royal delegation headed for the villas that were located at the center of the Duchy. Each race had their own villa, which served as housing for any dignitaries who were temporarily visiting for summits, and all of these villas surrounded the summit's venue: a conference hall where national leaders all sat around a circular table to discuss matters of great importance, according to Lilith. Speaking of the princess, she and the king made the short journey to the villa in a stagecoach, while the rest of their entourage—us included—followed behind on foot. I took this opportunity to take a look around at the sights the Duchy had to offer.

"So we're surrounded by huge walls, and this place is filled with buildings, shops, and crowds," I noted. "So this is what the principality is really like, huh?"

"Look, milord. They're selling skewered fish there, caught fresh from the river," Gold pointed out. "They look scrumptious enough to warrant buying a skewer or two, what, what?"

"This is no time to be making side trips, Gold!" Nemumu hissed. "We're supposed to be bodyguards, not tourists!"

"She's right. We're technically on duty still," I said. "We can always go out to eat once things have settled down a little."

"If you say so, milord. I'm sure we can wait," Gold said.

As we neared the villas, we had to pass through a gate to the southwest that was restricted to visitors from the Human Kingdom, but on the approach to it, we noticed a hubbub nearby.

"We of the Church of the Goddess have every right to attend this summit!" a male human proclaimed. "Every nation of the world should heed the gospel of the church!"

"Heed the gospel!" repeated the man's followers. Sentries that had been deployed by the principality's authorities stood by with their spears pointed directly at the evangelists to prevent them from entering the compound, but it seemed to me like they were used to dealing with this rabble. My party and I looked on wide-

eyed at this unusual scene, prompting one of the Human Kingdom's knights to give us a concise overview of what we were seeing.

"The seat of the Church of the Goddess is here in the Duchy, so you always get these busybodies demanding to take part in a summit every time one is held," the knight explained. "They think the church is entitled to a seat at the table, since it's in charge of the largest religion."

"Oh, now I get it," I said. "Thanks for filling me in."

The Church of the Goddess was indeed the world's biggest religion—or at least, if we were talking about among humans. There weren't many adherents to the church from the eight nonhuman races, since they saw religion as secondary to their own racial customs and traditions. As such, the Church of the Goddess was mostly considered a human religion, since we had nothing else to cling onto in the face of race-based adversities. But since the Goddess was the creator of all things, not just the human race, it was agreed that the seat of the church would be in the principality to prevent any one nation from using the religion for its own political ends.

The most famous teaching of the Church of the Goddess was how the world and the nine races were created, which also outlined how the Undergod came to be an evil entity that coveted the Goddess and wanted her for himself. The next most famous epic that the church was known for was "The Magnificent Four and the Dark Lord," which told the tale of a quartet of heroes and a maidenly saint defeating a dark lord after facing a number of trials. I remembered my late parents recounting the tale to me a lot as a bedtime story when I was a kid, and personally, my favorite hero of the four was the one who wielded a sword. Since we had some time before the summit got underway, I decided I wanted to go see for myself the main cathedral of the religion responsible for putting that saga on record.

Anyway, back to where I left off. The protestors were still leading calls for the Church of the Goddess to participate in the summit.

"We of the Church of the Goddess have every right to attend this summit! Every nation of the world should heed the gospel of the church!"

"Heed the gospel!"

*It's not that I don't sympathize with their cause—well, sort of—but this looks like the kind of crowd that'd disrupt proceedings at the summit every chance they got if they managed to get a foot in the door,* I mused. *If I were a representative of any of the nine nations, I wouldn't want them anywhere near the meetings either.*

I glanced at the young man in priest vestments who was leading the call and response, and saw that he was a good 190 centimeters tall and his face was decidedly oblong. But that was the extent of our engagement with the protestors as we made our way through the gate and headed onward to the villa.

# Chapter 4: Reunion

The venue for the international summit was right at the heart of the Principality of the Nine and surrounded by villas that housed delegations from each nation. All of the villas were exactly the same size, which was probably a nod to the ideal that all nine races should be equal under the sun. However, the interior decor of each villa was left up to the individual races, which in practice meant that the more powerful races decked out their villas in such a way that showed off the opulence and status of their nation to any visitors they might host. Conversely, the interior of the Human Kingdom's villa was, well, purposely understated, if we were being generous, though those of a less tactful nature might describe the inside of our villa as looking woefully unadorned.

*I suppose they tried their best, but even so... It looks more like the inside of a trading firm,* I reflected as I took a look around the villa. Though considering the financial straits the nation was in, the kingdom could certainly have done worse.

Since the Black Fools were Lilith's personal bodyguards, we were assigned a room right next to the princess's suite. Naturally, the villa couldn't accommodate everyone in the royal entourage, so the leftover personnel were sent to stay at a local inn—or more accurately, the human soldiers were forced to bed down in a large shared room in a cheap dormitory, partly because the kingdom didn't have much money to spare, and partly because the much larger delegations from the other nations had already booked up the nicer lodgings for their own personnel. This meant my party having its own private room in the villa pretty much amounted to an A-list reception for us.

After stowing away all of our luggage in our room, we proceeded to rid ourselves of the grime that had built up on our bodies in the course of our journey. Usually, this would involve a sink full of water and wiping ourselves down with towels, but since I didn't want to go through all that hassle, I simply activated R Wash cards on all of us. This particular card was a favorite of Mera's, since she hated taking baths, and if anyone saw fit to ask how me and my party had washed ourselves, I'd

tell them we magically created a bunch of hot water spheres and used that as bathwater.

*For what it's worth, I really like a nice, long soak in a good, hot bath, since it feels so incredible,* I thought. *The only downside is how insistent the fairy maids are about washing my body, shampooing my hair, drying me off, and literally dressing me ready for the day ahead.*

I'd taken my first hot bath in a tub three years before, when it was still only me and Mei in the Abyss. At the time, I believed everything she told me about a maid being entirely responsible for bathing her charge, and it was only when I did some more book learning and gained a bit of worldly knowledge later on that I came to realize that maids assisting you in taking baths only made sense if you'd had servants waiting on you for your entire life. Since I had been born on a peasant farm, I was not used to this kind of treatment, and by the time I summoned Aoyuki, Ellie, and Nazuna, I had transitioned to taking baths alone and changing my clothes by myself. Mei was disappointed we weren't taking baths together anymore, but my modesty outweighed everything else, especially with more people around. Even to this day, the fairy maids regularly wanted to help me bathe, but I stubbornly refused their requests.

After cleaning ourselves with the Wash cards, my party and I decided to relax in our room for a bit, when all of a sudden, we heard a knock at the door. It turned out to be a maid informing us that Lilith had invited us to come with her to get a preview of the venue for the summit. This wasn't unexpected, since I had been the one who had mentioned before the trip that I would like to get a look around the forum prior to the summit talks beginning, and since Lilith was all done changing and felt suitably rested from the journey, she had sent her maid to come and collect us.

My party left our room and met Lilith as she was exiting her own suite, along with the fake Yume, who she had chosen to serve as her personal attendant for the duration of this outing. Lilith's head maid, Nono, was also present, and she looked none too pleased with this arrangement. In fact, judging by Nono's expression and overall mood, it seemed the maid knew Lilith was up to something, but hadn't quite figured out what it was yet. *Thankfully, we've finished laying all of the groundwork for Lilith to be crowned as the queen,* I thought as I regarded the head maid out

of the corner of my eye. *It's too late for Nono to warn anybody about any potential plots.*

We strolled down an outdoor roofed passageway that connected the Human Kingdom's villa to the assembly hall of the convention center where the summit was due to be held. The building itself was more than triple the size of any of the villas, and as galling as it is to say, even bigger than the Human Kingdom's palace. The conference building was huge, which was perhaps unsurprising, because there needed to be plenty of space to accommodate all of the guards and officials who accompanied their national leaders to the summit. The venue also required space for holding other discussions and sideline negotiations, rooms where other, lower-level talks could be held, and an infirmary in case anyone became unwell. As for where the main summit meeting itself would be held, only the world leaders were allowed to enter the roundtable room, so we visited there first.

We walked in through the entrance reserved for the human representatives and found ourselves in a spacious meeting room with a high ceiling. The round table itself appeared to be made of marble, and along with the chairs around it, it looked stately and rich with history. *It's as if this table is at the exact center of the world,* I thought.

The meeting room itself, however, was spartan by design and decorated simply, indicating that this was a place of business, rather than just for show. Or rather, first impressions suggested this place hosted constructive discussions between equals, instead of simply being the equivalent of a soapbox where self-appointed tyrants launched into browbeating diatribes.

As I peered around the room, Gold cupped the chin part of his helmet with his hand and aired his thoughts as a bodyguard. "There's no bally windows in this room, and the only light source seems to be those magical devices installed up on the high ceiling," he noted. "At least it means we won't have to worry about any surprise attacks from outside. Instead, we'll have to watch for any assailants who get mixed in with the guardsmen the other races bring with them."

"Mr. Gold, I would *appreciate* it if you didn't say such things out loud," Lilith said, her smile noticeably twitching.

"Oh, forgive me, Your Highness," Gold said. "But I only say it out of concern for your safety, so I hope you will take it into

account.”

“Gold, don’t bother trying to explain yourself,” Nemumu said brusquely. “Any mistake you make reflects poorly on Lord Dark.”

Since Gold had immediately apologized for his slight faux pas, Lilith ended up letting the remark slide. There was no one else in the meeting room who could have overheard us, anyway. *I was just thinking the exact same thing as Gold, so I can hardly blame him for speaking his mind,* I thought with a grin, though I suddenly noticed something that instantly wiped the smile off my face.

“Lord Dark?” Nemumu queried, but I didn’t react at all. I simply continued to stare fixedly at the door leading to the Demonkin Nation’s villa in the knowledge that someone familiar was approaching. Several more seconds passed before that same door swung open without a sound and an entourage of young, pompously dressed demons strode into the room. They didn’t seem at all surprised to see us there, which was likely because they had sensed our presence in the main conference room before they had even reached the door. If anything, the response of the demons ranged from sneering at us and expressing their displeasure at encountering humans here to flat-out ignoring us. But I looked past their grimaces and focused on one member of their entourage in particular: Diablo, one of my sworn enemies that I hadn’t seen in three long years.

*Wow, even after all this time, his appearance hasn’t changed a bit,* I thought. Diablo was still the tall, lanky, young demon I remembered, complete with ghostly pale skin and two devil-like horns sticking out of his head. He was wearing impeccably tailored clothes, and his eyes resembled dark slits, never seeming to miss a thing. It was clear from a glance that Diablo was the type to pick every nit, no matter how trivial it might seem. Back when we were both in the Concord of the Tribes, Diablo was regarded as the details-oriented guy with a very long memory, to the point where he would frequently bring up long-forgotten mistakes whenever he wanted to get under someone’s skin. And he had a tendency to direct that level of pettiness at *everyone*, even if they were partymates of his. But at the same time, he had looked after me in his own way by teaching me table manners, general etiquette, and the proper way to escort a lady, as well as a number of other valuable life lessons. Before I was betrayed and left for dead in the Abyss, I viewed Diablo as

an all-around nice guy at his core, if a tad aloof.

But I stared at Diablo in silence, my teeth gritted to conceal the murderous rage I felt toward him. If I were to lose control in that moment and unleash the entirety of my Level 9999 dark energy, I would have certainly caused Diablo to have a heart attack, since back when I knew him, he was only around Level 400, and it was unlikely he had leveled up much. But I couldn't allow Diablo the mercy of a quick death, so I concentrated all of my energies on keeping myself calm.

Altogether, there were five young demons in the group that walked in, all of them wearing fancy clothes as well as jewelry and other accessories that marked them out as self-important. One of the demons, who had batlike wings on his back, kept glancing over at us with naked contempt until he suddenly threw his hands up in an exaggerated fashion and circled the round table to approach our group. The other four demons followed.

"My goodness. Are you perhaps Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom?" the lead demon asked.

"Indeed, I am," Lilith replied. "Might I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking, kind sir?"

"Pardon my manners. I should have introduced myself first, my lady," the demon said. "I am Freede, firstborn son of the count of the Demonkin Nation." He bowed deeply to Lilith like some ham actor and allowed a wide smile to take root on his face, revealing fangs longer than those of a dog. The other four demons—including Diablo—also introduced themselves.

"We are the elites who will one day rule our nation, but alas, we are not allowed to attend the high-level talks that will be taking place in this room," Freede explained, speaking for his group. "So we all decided to take this opportunity to preview this space for our own benefit as future leaders of our nation. Can we assume that you are here for the very same purpose, Your Highness? Oh, but that could only apply to your elder brother, so perhaps you are here on a simple tour of this iconic spot?"

The demons behind Freede snickered, underscoring the meaning behind his snide remark. The implication was that Lilith would never inherit the throne of her nation because she was female, so there was pretty much no point in her "previewing" a conference room that she would never be invited into. Of course, Lilith had picked up on the fact that Freede had basically just called her a moron who wasn't supposed to be here, but she

maintained her polite smile and ignored the tacit insult.

"Actually, we are on less of a tour and more of a preliminary inspection," Lilith said. "No one can possibly predict what the future may hold, and as princess, I always endeavor to do what is best for my people and prepare for all outcomes."

"My, how impressive," Freede said. "You are such a high-minded soul who strives hard for her countrymen, Your Highness. And to think this is how you spend your surplus of free time. If only we had such leeway in our schedules to engage in such honorable pursuits, but alas, we are not so lucky."

Freede had moved on to belittling Lilith as a completely irrelevant figure who had nothing going for her, unlike himself and his entourage, who clearly had more *important* responsibilities. *Is sarcasm the only form of communication for these guys?* I wondered. But I had to hand it to Lilith, she was handling these bozos smoothly and with an unflappable smile like the member of the royal family she was. While all of this was running through my head, Freede's interest shifted from Lilith to Nemumu.

"By the way, might I inquire about the people you have brought on your little excursion? In particular, the other lady in your group?" Freede asked. "Is she part of your security detail, perhaps?"

"Yes, these three are the Black Fools, an A-rank party of adventurers," Lilith replied. "They are serving as my protectors for the duration of the summit."

"My, my. She must be quite the phenomenon if she has attained A-rank at such a delicate young age," Freede said, before addressing Nemumu directly. "Young lady, would you care to join me for drinks tonight? You can regale me with tales of your adventures. Your ravishing beauty would pair well with the fine brandy I brought from my fiefdom."

I could tell from his attitude that he not only intended to share the bottle of brandy with Nemumu but a bed too. And of course, Freede barely acknowledged the existence of me or Gold before hitting on Nemumu like it was second nature to him. Speaking of Gold, he had his hand pressed to his mouth to stop himself from guffawing loudly at Nemumu's string of bad luck. Not only had Clowe made a pass at her back in the Human Kingdom but now a demon declaring himself as part of the "elite" of his nation was making unwanted advances too.

*Nemumu, you really know how to reel in the good ones, don't you, m'dear?* went my imitation of what I imagined Gold must have been thinking. *P'rhaps you should ask milord to use his cards to cure you of whatever jinx must be affecting you, what what?*

As for Nemumu, she was just about managing to hide her disgust behind her muffler, though her hostility still shone through by how tightly knitted her brow was.

"I must decline your offer," Nemumu said. "I will be fully occupied with safeguarding Her Highness."

Freede's jaw stiffened mid-smile, eliciting snickers from his peers. He never in a million years imagined a human woman would refuse a solicitation from a demon scion, and without a second thought at that. The reactions of his peers—including Diablo—also suggested his entourage was not as buddy-buddy as they presented themselves to be. Normally, people as prideful as these demon aristocrats would step up and defend one of their own in such a situation. *If I had to guess, they're all probably rivals for whatever top position lies in their futures,* I mused.

Before Freede could get another word in edgewise, Lilith deftly interjected to remove us from the present situation. "Forgive me, kind sirs, but I believe it is time for us to return to my suite. I bid you all a pleasant day."

This return to pleasantries allowed Freede to recover some of his composure. "Oh, um, so you say. Pardon us for taking up your time." He turned and openly glared at Nemumu, enraged that a lowly human would dare to wound his pride in the way that she had done. But he knew there was little he could do about it, since Nemumu was serving as an official bodyguard for royalty, and if he were to cause a scene over someone of Nemumu's status, it would tarnish his reputation among the rest of the dignitaries. For her part, instead of Freede's scowl scaring her, Nemumu looked extremely close to rolling her eyes in irritation at him. After all, to the Assassin's Blade, Freede was no more threatening than a snarling puppy dog. Nemumu took Lilith's words as her cue to walk away and leave the room, but I placed a hand on her arm to stop her before she could take another step toward the door.

"Lord Dark?" Nemumu queried. I didn't say a word as I walked past her toward the door. Gold and Nemumu quickly realized that I wanted to open the door myself, and even though they weren't quite sure why that would be, they obediently waited for

me to do so.

I grabbed the doorknob with my left hand, took a step back with my left foot, then took the next step with my right as I opened the door. This simple series of actions elicited a look of shock on Diablo's face, since I had purposely opened the door in a way that ran counter to what he considered proper etiquette. When we were both in the Concord of the Tribes, Diablo used to scold me over the correct way of opening doors, and just as I'd predicted, this little detail hadn't escaped the demon's notice.

"Y-You in the mask!" Diablo screeched. "Stay where you are! Don't move!"

A toothy, wolflike grin secretly spread across my face on hearing Diablo's shrill voice directed at me.

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"Y-You in the mask!" Diablo shrieked. "Stay where you are! Don't move!"

The other demons in his group turned to Diablo in wide-eyed surprise, wondering what the boy could possibly have done to warrant such a reaction from their cohort. Diablo paid no heed to how awkward he must have looked to his peers, choosing to keep his eyes firmly fixed on the dark-haired boy in the fool's mask and hooded black cloak instead.

*That child just opened that door the exact same way that Light used to!* thought Diablo. *I know because I told him* repeatedly *how that was not the proper way to open doors when escorting a lady of good breeding!*

Because Diablo had an astoundingly good memory, there was no doubt in his mind that this boy's faux pas was an exact copy of what Light used to do. Back when they were both part of the Concord of the Tribes, Diablo had taken the time to teach Light the respectable and sophisticated way of opening doors. But for some reason, despite his best efforts, Diablo was never able to actually fix Light's door-opening habits, which was especially strange since the boy was a quick study when it came to table manners. And here before him stood a human boy who shared Light's cretinous door-opening habit that had so irked Diablo in the past. If that wasn't bad enough, this boy also had the same black hair and stature as Light.

*No, this cannot be! It is utterly impossible!* Diablo wailed in his

mind. *We left that young inferior to face certain death in the Abyss! There is no way he could still be alive!*



But Diablo had always known in the back of his mind that Light's death hadn't been confirmed beyond all doubt. When the Concord of the Tribes attempted to assassinate Light over three years before, Sasha the elf had shot the boy in one of his legs, forcing him to crawl away slowly but desperately through a pool of his own blood. But before Garou the wolfman could land the final blow with his gauntlet blades, Light had accidentally triggered a teleportation trap that made him disappear in front of his would-be killers' eyes. After that, the party had naturally searched all the parts of the Abyss that were accessible to them, but they couldn't find hide nor hair of Light, leaving them to conclude that he must have been teleported to the deepest levels of the deadliest dungeon in the world and there was no chance a Level 15 human boy would be able to survive being attacked by the vicious monsters that spawned in those depths.

The Concord of the Tribes had subsequently reported Light's fate to their superiors, who had agreed with the party's assessment that Light was as good as dead and rewarded each member for their part in getting rid of him. Diablo had been given a peerage as his prize, but if his nation were to find out that Light was still alive, he knew he would lose his newfound status. In fact, he would potentially be at risk of the authorities punishing him for filing a false report. *If Light has indeed survived his time in the Abyss, it will be all over for me!* Diablo thought, his eyes wide with anguish.

The boy in the mask halted as Diablo had instructed, then turned around, seemingly puzzled. "Is there something wrong?" he asked innocently.

"Tell me your name!" Diablo barked. "And you will remove that mask this instant!"

"Um, pardon me, kind sir, but has my bodyguard done something to offend you?" a flustered Lilith asked him. "If he has, as his employer, I apologize in his stead. We did not mean to cause any affront."

Lilith was of course aware of Light's animosity toward Diablo, but in the moment, she was unaware of Light's impromptu plan to expose his true identity to his foe, so the princess was understandably shocked by Diablo's reaction and took what she believed to be the appropriate action in the circumstance. On hearing Lilith's voice, Diablo remembered himself and immediately clammed up, because even though she was an

inferior in his eyes, she was still royalty and therefore entitled to a certain level of decorum. If Diablo gave in to his emotions and pushed Lilith away to stop her from interfering, either verbally or otherwise, it would be seen as unbecoming in the eyes of the other demon nobles present, and Diablo wasn't foolish enough to cause a scene in front of his rivals which would provide them with ammunition they could use to score points against him.

Diablo concentrated on his breathing for a few seconds before speaking again. "This summit is a forum where world leaders will be gathering," he explained. "If I see a suspicious character in a mask, I am well within my rights to inquire about their identity."

"In that case, you can rest easy," Lilith said. "Mr. Dark is the leader of the Black Fools, a party of adventurers that has been granted A-rank by the guilds. There is nothing suspicious about him in the slightest."

Diablo was plainly unconvinced by this. "My intention is not to cast doubt on you or the guilds, Your Highness, but in the interest of security, it would be best if we took a look at the face underneath the mask. If the boy has nothing to hide, I am sure he will be willing to cooperate to ensure that the event proceeds with the utmost safety and integrity."

"Sure, I can do that," said the boy named Dark, before placing a hesitant hand on his mask. "But just to warn you, my face is horribly disfigured by burns I have sustained in the past, and I'd rather avoid showing people what I really look like. Are you *sure* you'll be able to handle seeing my scars? Because I wouldn't recommend it otherwise."

"You may remove your mask," Diablo said. "Despite appearances, I have witnessed more than my share of carnage and butchery in my various travails, to the point where I cannot imagine being surprised by anything anymore."

Diablo was exaggerating his tolerance for gore to see how Dark would react, but since the boy was still wearing his mask, he couldn't get a good read on his expression. Meanwhile, Freede and the other three demons started badgering Dark to take off his mask, though unlike Diablo, who was trying to verify his suspicions, the others saw an opportunity for a bit of gross-out entertainment, as if they were at a freak show. But the banter he was receiving from the other demons left Dark with no more room to back out.

“Fine, if you say so,” Dark said with a shrug. “But I’ll warn you one last time: my face isn’t for the faint of heart.”

“Pardon me, Your Highness,” the fake Yume said as she dutifully moved in front of Lilith and placed her hands over the princess’s eyes to spare her from the gruesome sight. Once Dark saw that Lilith was taken care of, he removed his mask with both hands.

Diablo’s peers gasped in shock. A few went pale, and one even looked on the verge of fainting. Gold observed their reactions and jeered at them in his head. *So these are their so-called elites?* Gold chuckled inwardly. *More like elite softies, if you ask me.*

Even Diablo, an experienced adventurer, reflexively averted his gaze as soon as he saw Dark’s unmasked face. Given his reaction, it would have been somewhat unreasonable to vilify the other, more sheltered demons for not being able to stomach the horrors of Dark’s disfiguring scars. Though in truth, the face they were seeing was all an illusion produced by the SSR Fool’s Mask, and his real face didn’t have a single scratch on it.

After several seconds, Dark decided the demons had seen enough and replaced his mask. “Sorry you had to see that, even though I *did* try to warn you.” Dark bowed deferentially to the demons. “Now if you will excuse us, we’d like to take our leave. Your Highness?”

Lilith and her entourage swept out of the meeting room, leaving the demons still recovering from the shock of seeing the repulsively scabrous skin of Dark’s face. Only Diablo had the presence of mind to contemplate what he’d just witnessed. *Was that really a different boy?* he wondered. *I couldn’t tell due to the burns. But what if he got those scars when escaping the Abyss?*

Like his youthful peers, it took a while for Diablo to be able to rouse himself to leave the conference room, but for a completely different reason.

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*Perhaps that boy in the mask wasn’t Light after all,* Diablo thought. *Is it possible I rushed to judgment without any real evidence?*

He was sitting on the edge of his bed in his private room in the manor reserved for the Demonkin Nation that was adjacent to the main conference hall. Because he was a noble, he had his

own room, like his peers.

*No! That boy* had *to be Light!* Diablo decided. The masked youth had shared Light's speaking patterns, his gait, and most importantly of all, his deplorable method of opening doors. Diablo's impeccably sharp memory did not lie. *Light must have burned his face badly when he escaped from the Abyss,* thought Diablo. *And if my theory proves to be correct...*

Diablo grabbed his head, messing up his immaculately groomed hair, as his face contorted into a harrowing mask of despair. *This is awful. Truly, unmistakably awful. If Light really did make it out of that dungeon, I'm ruined!* And this was no exaggeration on his part, for he really would lose everything he had fought for up until this point.

Diablo was born the second son of a baron, but he never got along with the firstborn son, his older brother. In fact, he might have hated his brother even more than any other rival, since he was the biggest obstacle to Diablo assuming control of the household.

His older brother was also aware that Diablo might prove to be a stumbling block to inheriting his birthright. And with good reason too, for Diablo had spent a lot of his earlier days maneuvering in the background to orchestrate his brother's fall from grace, though these efforts ultimately came to naught. His older brother eventually married and sired a son, solidifying his position as heir apparent. Still single and childless, Diablo found himself vulnerable to his brother's newfound authority, which he subsequently used to strip his younger brother of all claims to the barony and relegating him to the status of a commoner, a class Diablo had disparaged his whole life. To survive the drudgeries of his new life, Diablo turned to adventuring to earn some money. On the whole, the demonkin were a prideful race, and as a former aristocrat, Diablo had more pride than most, meaning he had never even considered becoming an adventurer before his fall from grace, yet due to the comforts that had been afforded to him by his former life, not only was Diablo well educated, he had also mastered the arts of sorcery, sword fighting, and unarmed combat. These skills served Diablo very well in his new career as an adventurer, and he quickly rose up the ranks at the guilds. But no matter how much renown Diablo gained as an adventurer, his reputation was never quite on the same level as the prestige that came with being a nobleman.

“Why must a high-status elite like me be reduced to questing for a pittance?” Diablo repeatedly lamented to himself in private.

But one day, he found himself being offered the opportunity of a lifetime when he was invited to join a covert team to search for a Master. In reality, Diablo couldn’t have cared less whether such a thing as a “Master” actually existed or not, since all he was interested in was the prize that came with accepting the mission: if he successfully found and took custody of a Master, his nation would grant him a peerage and his own fiefdom.

Unfortunately, this covert party—which was known as the Concord of the Tribes—found Light instead of a real Master, and the party was ordered to dispose of the human boy before permanently disbanding. But as a reward for following orders, Diablo’s household was upgraded from a barony to a viscountcy, and furthermore, the king of the Demonkin Nation banished Diablo’s brother and his family from the fiefdom they once ruled in order to make Diablo the new head of the household. Ordinarily, it was unheard of for the king to get involved in squabbles over succession among the aristocracy, but the monarch had made an exception on this occasion, since Light’s extermination was an extremely valuable accomplishment in his eyes.

His elder brother’s young family was subsequently forced to move in with his wife’s family, and since his elder brother had been a near-despotic baron who had abused his power to get ahead, the thought of him humbling himself at the feet of his in-laws delighted Diablo to no end and made all the wine he sipped taste a hundred times sweeter.

But if the authorities found out that Light had turned up alive, they would rightly assume that Diablo had failed in his mission, strip him of his peerage, and restore his brother to his previous place as head of the household. When he’d been in charge previously, his elder brother had not ordered Diablo’s death out of the minuscule amount of familial devotion he felt toward his younger sibling, but if he were to regain power, he would rid himself of a potential rival like Diablo for good, sparing no expense in hiring the best assassins for the job. Since they were related by blood, Diablo knew in his heart of hearts that his brother would not show mercy if given a second chance.

“Does this mean I must murder my brother first?” Diablo asked himself in his room at the Duchy. That would prove easier

said than done, however, because like himself, Diablo's would-be opponent was an accomplished fighter. And even if he did succeed in murdering his brother, it would almost certainly lead to a feud breaking out between Diablo's house and that of his brother's in-laws. The monarchy would have to get involved and Diablo would be banished for the heinous crime of fratricide. He would never be able to live down the infamy.

"Curse my life!" Diablo cried out. "If only my brother had been stripped of his status and reduced to being a commoner, I would be entirely free to take his life!" He suddenly had the sinking feeling that his elder brother might have purposely swallowed his pride and chosen to live with his in-laws in the knowledge that he would still be protected by their gilded status.

"Curse my brother and his devious wiles!" Diablo spat. "Why wasn't *I* the firstborn? If not for the wretched order of our births, I would have led a worry-free life with everything handed to me. So why must I suffer like this? And that accursed Light! Why could he not just stay dead right where we left him? That damned inferior is like a parasitic worm that regrows itself after you've cut it to pieces! Why couldn't he just die and leave me alone?!"

Diablo bit down on his back teeth so hard, he nearly drew blood, but he knew that sitting around feeling bitter about the situation wouldn't get him anywhere. After all, his very life was on the line if he didn't spring into action!

"I must gather all the information I can on these 'Black Fools,' especially their masked leader," an ashen-faced Diablo muttered. "I must know everything about who I am dealing with!"

With a wild sense of urgency, Diablo rushed out of his room without even bothering to fix his disheveled hair. But what the demon didn't know was that someone had been watching him stew in his anguish from afar. The masked boy known as Dark grinned uncontrollably as he savored every second of the spectacle.

# Chapter 5: Distress

“Man, SSR Clairvoyance is actually really handy at times like this,” I said. “Kinda wish it’d also let me hear what he was saying…”

My party and I were currently in the private room assigned to us at the Human Kingdom manor in the Duchy. We had just come back from our big encounter with Diablo in the central conference room, and I was lounging on a couch and using a Clairvoyance card to watch my sworn enemy practically ripping his hair out in his own private room. His fingers were trembling and he looked so destroyed mentally, even the blacks of his eyes looked bloodshot. I couldn’t stop smiling at seeing Diablo in such a state.

At one point, he got up and summoned one of his servants. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but from his lip movements, I could tell that he was likely instructing the servant to gather as much intelligence as he could find on the “boy in the dark mask.” Once the servant had left again, Diablo went back to sitting on the edge of his bed, where he nervously started tapping his foot to distract himself from his dire predicament. It was insanely fun watching Diablo squirm, but I knew I couldn’t spend all day doing it, so I decided that was a good place to leave it and canceled the card. Beside me on the couch, Nemumu was watching me with a happy look on her face as she placed cups of tea on the coffee table in front of us.

“What’s making you smile?” I asked her.

“Seeing you so happy makes me happy too,” she replied.

“Seeing milord enjoying himself wholeheartedly would be pleasing to anyone’s eye, but that’s no excuse for ogling him like he’s some kind of bally sideshow, m’girl,” said Gold, who had the couch opposite all to himself. His comment initially irked Nemumu, but then it caused her to second-guess her conduct, and turning pale, she hurriedly apologized to me.

“F-Forgive me, Lord Light, for making you feel so uncomfortable!” she said, bowing her head.

“It’s fine. It’s no big deal, really,” I said with a smile. And that wasn’t me trying to be nice. I actually didn’t mind at all. I was

used to having fairy maids staring at me while I was in the middle of thinking about something.

Nemumu breathed a sigh of relief, and Gold promptly changed the subject. “So, milord, what do you propose we do with this dastardly rotter? We could apprehend him now and spirit him away on a one-way trip to the darkest reaches of the Abyss if you like.”

“Lord Light! I would be honored if you granted me that assignment!” Nemumu piped up, jumping at the opportunity to redeem herself, but I shook my head.

“I don’t plan to lay a finger on Diablo just yet,” I said. “In fact, the idea of simply capturing him and whisking him away to the Abyss sounds extremely boring if you ask me.” I grinned beneath my mask. “And remember, Diablo came to this summit with a group of young muckety-mucks who are all in the running for ruling positions in the Demonkin Nation someday, and I can guarantee they don’t like each other all that much.”

If they had been even halfway friendly with each other, at least one of them would have angrily spoken up on Freede’s behalf after Nemumu flatly rejected his invite for “brandy.” Instead, they all snickered at his expense.

“Diablo is a representative at an emergency summit originally proposed by his own nation,” I said. “If he were to stumble hard at a huge event like this, it would be catnip to his so-called ‘pals.’ Diablo would forever be the butt of their jokes, and his pride would never survive the beatdown.”

Of course, my plan wasn’t *just* to cause Diablo to fumble big time at the summit and have everyone laugh at him. “We’ll make sure that Diablo ends up as a broken man who has no future, status, or honor to speak of,” I explained. “He’ll be the envy of no one, and his family name will be in disrepute. We’ll rob him of everything that’s precious to him, so that he can endure a small taste of the absolute despair I felt the day he and his coconspirators tried to kill me.” I was basically ranting by this point, but I didn’t care. I wanted to drop-kick Diablo from high society and shove his face in the dirt before capturing him.

“But, milord, how do you plan to make a fool of him?” Gold asked.

“I know that Diablo will be sitting at the round table during the summit,” I said. “I already planned to have Ellie crash the meeting masquerading as the Wicked Witch of the Tower, so we

could always have her cut Diablo down to size when she arrives. Perhaps we could even imply that he has been in cahoots with the Wicked Witch all along." I chuckled to myself. "I wonder how broken Diablo will look after we spring *that* surprise on him. In any case, however we do it, we have to make sure that his pride takes an absolute pounding!"

That wretched demon needed to feel at least a tenth of the pain I'd suffered when I was betrayed, and that was never going to happen if I captured him at this juncture. A vision of Diablo sobbing with anguish at the summit meeting once again drifted up before my mind's eye, and I allowed a fiendish smile to creep across my face.

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A few days later, Diablo sat down at a table and pored over all of the available intel on the Black Fools that his agents had managed to compile for him. The documents contained the basic facts: the party was composed of a young boy in a mask, a knight in golden armor, and a woman so beautiful that people referred to her as a "fairy princess" straight out of a fantasy tale, and both the knight and the fairy princess were subservient to the boy. The party had come to be known as the "Black Fools" due to the fool's mask and black hood the boy wore, as well as his dark hair. This information had been fairly easy to obtain since the Black Fools were a well-known A-rank party, and they always worked out in the open. But Diablo cradled his head in despair as he continued reading the dossier.

The Black Fools appeared to be on friendly terms with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, and not only had they frequented the city at the foot of the Great Tower on a number of occasions, they had also helped to rescue human slave soldiers in the battle waged on the tower by the beastfolk army. There were even reports that the tower witch favored the masked youth to such an extent, she had been sighted speaking to him directly.

"So if I attempt to attack Light and his Black Fools, the Wicked Witch may retaliate..." Diablo mumbled to himself. This would be the same witch that had toppled the Elven Queendom and massacred the Beastfolk Federation's army in battle. The thought of incurring the Wicked Witch's wrath was so horribly discomfiting to Diablo, he had to quickly cover his mouth to quell

his sudden onset of nausea. Diablo just about managed to keep the contents of his stomach where it was supposed to be, but the whole thing still made him feel ill.

If he left Light alone, the only thing awaiting Diablo was an ignominious death at the hands of his brother. If he went on the offensive, he risked butting heads with the Wicked Witch and involving his own nation in the feud. The witch might even declare all-out war on the Demonkin Nation under the banner of achieving “absolute autonomy for humans,” and if things escalated to that extent, Diablo’s homeland might end up serving his head to the witch on a silver platter to put an end to the matter.

“That can’t happen…” Diablo breathed. “I won’t *allow* that to happen!” He leaned forward so far, his forehead was practically touching the table, bitter tears staining the documents he had just read.

“I finally regained the place that was once robbed from me on the path to glory,” Diablo wailed. “Why must I suffer this misery? Those inferiors breed like gutter rats, so why must fate see fit to keep Light of all people alive?”

Diablo continued to weep in his room with no idea of his next move, feeling the kind of anguish Light had hoped he would.

# Chapter 6: Gold's Special Talent

Once the leaders of all nine nations had arrived at the Principality of the Nine, the powers that be decided that the summit would be held in a few days' time, leaving the nations to hammer out the exact schedule among themselves. My party and I decided to use the downtime before the summit to tour the principality, which we thought would help us to get to know the lay of the land in case we needed to make a quick escape for whatever reason.

"This open-air market appears to be fairly bustling," I said, peering around at the various stalls. "Though compared to some of the markets I've seen in other cities, it looks pretty modest. Still, I'm surprised at the number of merchants selling magic items here."

"Indeed, there has to be several times more magic stalls here than at other big markets," Gold agreed.

At that particular moment in time, we were standing in the middle of a market that was packed with stalls selling foods, spices, and other products that had made it to the Duchy via the river. A lot of the products were ones you wouldn't find at a market in the Human Kingdom, but compared to markets in other nations, the selection on offer was more or less average. The only thing setting this market out from those ones was the unusually large number of stalls selling magic items, as Gold had confirmed.

"But why would there be so many magic stalls?" Nemumu asked.

"It's probably because the School of Magic is in the Duchy," I deduced. "The stall owners here must get the latest magic items that have been developed at the academy." After all, it was often said that the latest tech came from the Dwarf Kingdom, the Dark Elf Islands, and the Principality of the Nine.

"It'd be one thing if these stalls sold new magic items or secondhand ones," I remarked. "But there are a few places here selling some really kooky-looking items, and one or two are even purposely selling duds. Are people *really* allowed to sell defective items?"

These stalls sold magic items that would never normally be displayed by a respectable merchant, yet they were attracting a number of people, most of whom looked like scholars. To untrained eyes like ours, we could only guess at why customers would even consider buying junk like that.

After we had passed through the market, we made our way to our first destination: the head church of the Church of the Goddess. The holy seat was located right next to the slums in the Duchy's northern region, but it wasn't as if the principality's authorities had forced the religion's main headquarters to be built in the poorer part of town. No, the building had been constructed first, and it was due to the church ministering to the poor that the slums naturally developed nearby. My party and I took care not to wander into the slums as we made our way to the headquarters of the very institution that was responsible for spreading the legend of the Magnificent Four.

"Oh, so this is the head church of the Church of the Goddess?" I said charitably.

"It's not as *stately* as I imagined," Nemumu said decidedly uncharitably, though she was right. The building was about the same size as a regular church—which was somewhat underwhelming for a holy seat—and while it stood in the middle of an estate with a yard that was plenty big enough, the whole thing looked surprisingly modest, even given our lessened expectations.

*Lilith did warn us the holy seat wasn't all that majestic due to it being headquartered in a neutral area where no state can use its power for its own purposes,* I thought. *She also told us she personally didn't have a very good impression of the religion, since its members always seem to gather in crowds to make a commotion whenever a summit is held. I have to say, Lilith has been right on both counts.*

But even with that warning from the princess, coming here was something of a letdown, like visiting a tourist spot that didn't live up to the hype. In fact, the only impressive thing about this holy seat was that the walls of the building were so pristine, they looked practically new. I chalked this up to all the nations of the world extending token funding to the church to maintain the appearance of support, since the place *did* represent the main religion on the continent. If we were talking about a regular church, it'd be a really nice one, I admit.

“Have you come to worship, young friends?” said a gruff male voice behind us. “The Church of the Goddess is always open to the faithful, so you’re more than welcome to come inside.”

We turned to face our interlocutor, who turned out to be a man in his fifties or thereabouts. He was bald and of below average height, but I immediately sensed he had a muscular physique under the simple garments he was wearing. He was definitely a human, but if he had been sporting a large bushy beard and carrying an axe or war hammer, I would have mistaken him for a dwarf. Around his neck, he wore a pendant with the symbol of the church on it, but his clothing suggested he was simply an adherent rather than a priest. The man continued to smile at us, likely because he thought we were a bunch of out-of-towners who were unsure if we should enter the church. I smiled back at him and politely refused his suggestion.

“Thank you, kind sir, but we only came to view the building from the outside for our own personal edification, nothing more,” I said. “We’re sorry if we’ve given you the wrong impression.”

“But why let this blessed opportunity go to waste?” the man said. “Don’t limit yourself to just looking at it from the outside! Come inside and pray with us. Since she is the one who gave us life, it is our duty to give our thanks to the Goddess.”

*Oh, great. He’s never gonna leave us alone, is he?* I thought, frowning inwardly. The Church of the Goddess had a lot of followers among humans, since our race had precious little else to cling on, and as such, there were plenty of religious zealots—like this guy—among the faithful, but personally speaking, I didn’t care about the church one way or the other. To my mind, the Church of the Goddess could do what it liked, as long as its followers didn’t go bothering other people. I did have a problem with stubborn devotees, however. *But this man seems nice enough, so I’d feel bad if I just told him to back off,* I thought.

“The way young people are straying from the church is a terrible thing indeed,” the man continued. “The other races should pay more respect to the church, but their leaders never take the initiative in demonstrating their fealty to the Goddess. That’s why we urge the summit to allow us a seat at the table so that *all* races may hear our message. And then, the leaders of this world will rediscover their faith, and spread the gospel to all the races, and—”

Nemumu's gaze narrowed as she watched the man wildly gesticulating, though it wasn't because she was angry at the man for taking up our time. No, Nemumu's look was one of concern, as if she thought this man might actually be a threat. While I was busy wondering what exactly was going through Nemumu's head, Gold jumped into the conversation as soon as the man eventually took a breath.

"Your passionate words have moved me greatly, good sir, but unfortunately, we have an appointment over at the School of Magic shortly," he told the man. "Of course, if it were up to *me*, I would gladly stay here and tour what I'm sure is a delightful church, but alas, we have a prior commitment, and breaking a promise would be a sin not only to others but to the Goddess herself. So begging your pardon, but we'll have to take you up on your offer another time, dear fellow."

"I suppose if you have a prior engagement, there is nothing I can do," the middle-aged man admitted. "But if you are ever blessed with the opportunity again, I would welcome your visit to our church. Our prayer session would be much more lively if young folk like yourselves were to join our ranks. We could easily spread the word of the Goddess with more like you among our number."

I should add at this juncture that we had never scheduled an appointment to meet anyone at the School of Magic, but since it was one of the stops on our itinerary, it was *technically* an appointment, in the broadest sense of the term. Gold had managed to gently let this guy down without outright lying to him (I guess?), and the man treated us to a smile and a bow before heading off inside the church. As soon as the man was out of earshot, I sighed, then complimented Gold on his silver tongue.

"Thanks, Gold, for getting us out of that one," I said. "I'm not so good at turning down well-meaning people like him."

"It was indeed a rather delicate situation, milord, but there's no need to thank me," Gold replied. "Handling chaps like him is no sweat off my brow. On another note, that gentleman seemed to arouse your suspicions, Nemumu. Am I right?"

"I wondered about that too," I said, turning to Nemumu. "I thought he was just an ordinary man. His level didn't seem all that high either." Sure, the guy had looked tough, but not enough to warrant me activating an SR Appraisal card to check

out his stats. But Nemumu was still looking concerned, and she even had her eyes glued to the church doors where the man had disappeared from view.

"Even though he hides it very well, I think that man is a trained assassin," Nemumu said. "I noticed a number of tells when he first approached us, as well as when he launched into that speech, and again as he strode away from us. I don't *believe* he's anyone we should be too worried about, but I kept a close eye on him regardless."

"He was an assassin?" I repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Ninety percent positive," Nemumu said. "He definitely matched the profile of an assassin."

My brow furrowed at Nemumu's assertion. If the UR Level 5000, Assassin's Blade said that guy was an assassin, I could bet the farm she was right. But what was even more alarming was the notion that there was an assassin just wandering around the place right before a huge summit.

"I don't *think* he has the power level to disrupt the summit," I said warily. "But we should check him out, just to be on the safe side. If the summit ends up being canceled because of something he does, all of our plans would go up in smoke."

We hid ourselves behind another building, and with Nemumu and Gold shielding me from any prying eyes, I used an SR Telepathy card to contact Aoyuki and instruct her to send one of her miniature spy monsters to run surveillance on the man we had just encountered. She immediately sent a creature to our location using the SSR Teleportation card, and once I had told it what the man looked like, it darted off to track our suspect.

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When we were satisfied that the suspected assassin was under surveillance, my party and I set off for the School of Magic, since sticking around any longer would have made *us* look suspicious. The school was in the upscale residential area opposite the Church of the Goddess. For those interested in the layout of the Duchy, the southern region resembled your run-of-the-mill town, the north had the slums and the holy seat, the west was the hub for the river transport industry, and the eastern quarter—which was where we were headed—was more upper-class. If you considered the venue of the summit to be in

the center of the Duchy—which it more or less was—then the School of Magic was about halfway between the conference hall and the wealthier neighborhoods. The school itself looked like it belonged in the more prosperous part of town, since many of the professors and students at the academy were from wealthy families. Since the school also accepted commoners as students and teachers, we saw a lot of mages from this place at the open-air market earlier.

When we finally made it to the front gate of the academy, I peered inside. "So this is the School of Magic, huh?"

Beyond the gate was the main building, which looked larger than an aristocrat's mansion, and more mages than I had ever seen in my life were crisscrossing the campus, each one wearing an academy-issued cloak. It seemed to me that this place was the very epitome of the Principality of the Nine.

"It's pretty neat seeing this many mages in one place, isn't it?" I observed. "This is definitely the kind of thing you don't see every day, unlike those other places we've been to."

"If only they would let you inside so you could take a closer look..." Nemumu muttered.

"Couldn't agree more, love," Gold piped up. "I suppose it won't hurt to ask. Wait here a tick, milord."

Before we could stop him, Gold strode over to the main gate and hollered at whichever students were nearest. At first, the students were leery of this knight in flashy gold armor who was suddenly interrupting their day, but it only took a few words being exchanged for a conversation to break out between Gold and the students that was so lighthearted, you would have thought they had known each other for years. Nemumu and I looked on in awe.

"I don't know if I could ever run up to a bunch of strangers and talk to them as easily as Gold does," I said. "You could raise your power level to infinity and *still* not have the kind of people skills you'd need to pull it off."

"Maybe I should follow his example and learn to take a slightly friendlier approach with people up here on the surface," Nemumu mused.

I never imagined someone as standoffish as Nemumu was with surface folk would be so impressed by Gold's enterprising social skills. Then again, due to her looks, all of the unwanted attention she received from men tended to make her chillier

toward others than she was in the Abyss. To be honest, rather than having her go through the emotional struggle of pretending to like people she found repellent, I figured it'd just be better to let Gold carry on handling the crowds.

The students eventually took Gold to the security guard who was manning the gate, and two struck up a conversation. The guard eventually seemed to relent to a request made by Gold, and he was allowed inside the gate so he could follow some of the students to the main school building. Before he disappeared inside, Gold pointed at the building to signal to us that he'd be back shortly.

"Are they taking him to meet someone who will give me a tour of the place?" I wondered.

"It would appear so," Nemumu said. A few minutes later, he did indeed return with someone who looked like an authority figure in tow.

"My apologies, milord, for the long wait," Gold said.

"No, it's fine. It was only a few minutes anyway," I said. "So who do we have the pleasure of meeting?" Gold had brought over a demon with a beard, dusky skin, and a pointy tail sticking out beneath his robes. He was about 175 centimeters tall and looked to be around thirty, if we were talking human years. Another thing that stood out about him was that he was wearing rings on both hands, and I don't mean just one ring on each. He had multiple rings on multiple fingers.

"Greetings to you. I am Domas, an instructor at this academy and a researcher in attack magic," the demon said in a friendly tone. "I believe you are Mr. Dark, leader of the A-rank party, the Black Fools?"

"Yes, I'm Dark," I confirmed. "Nice to meet you."

My self-introduction caused Domas's eyes to twinkle like a kid's. "I hear you are able to perform combat-class and tactical-class spells without the need to vocalize the chants for them! I would like to see this talent for myself, since it is practically unheard of for a human to perform such a feat! Of course, I am willing to pay for the privilege of witnessing you in action, and you are more than welcome to tour the school! I am even willing to recommend you for enrollment into the academy!"

Domas was speaking so fast and with such passion, he reminded me of how Dagan, the dwarf king, reacted whenever he came across a shiny new magic item. I stole a quick glance at

Gold, who gave me a thumbs-up, seemingly proud of his work. If I were to guess at what had happened, I'd say the moment Gold found out Domas was an attack magic researcher, he strung him along by telling him I was a human mage capable of casting powerful unvoiced spells, for not only was Gold adept on the battlefield, he was a master negotiator as well.

We managed to get Domas to calm down enough to work something out. In the end, he agreed to give me a tour of the School of Magic if I would first perform one combat-class spell and one tactical-class spell in front of him. *At least I don't have anything to hide, since I've already performed magic like that in front of Miya's party,* I thought. *And if I get a tour of the academy out of it, all the better.*

It turned out Domas had known about my adventuring alter ego long before he met Gold, and he had been wanting to meet the human mage known as Dark and have him put on a little magic show ever since he had first heard about him. Gold showing up at the school had been an opportunity Domas couldn't afford to miss, so he led my party inside the main school building where we were given armbands to show we were officially sanctioned guests of his. Though, just to be clear, the School of Magic wasn't some kind of secret society that rarely if ever allowed outsiders to set foot beyond its doors, and to emphasize that, the school even had a guidebook for visitors. But at the same time, the academy didn't just allow everyone and their grandma to roam freely around inside the campus, so we had to follow the protocols set out in the guidebook.

Armbands firmly affixed, we followed Domas to a magic laboratory that had been built deep underground, where the walls had been reinforced using modern technology as well as the latest wizardry to withstand almost any offensive spell. From what Domas told me, few people had ever managed to leave so much as a scratch on the walls. It was understandable why they would build an underground lab for their purposes, since if the school were to start testing magic outdoors, they would undoubtedly get complaints from the owners of the nearby mansions. Even then, the really powerful magic spells weren't tested here, but at a remote location somewhere outside of the Principality of the Nine, according to Domas. When we reached the lab, I got the all-clear to hold up my end of the bargain, so I unleashed one of my combat-class spells.

“Fire Arrow!” I yelled as I activated an R Fire Arrow card. Next up was a tactical-class spell. “Firewall!” The SR Firewall card created a giant curtain of flames within the underground facility, causing Domas’s eyes to glint with unbridled excitement.

“Magnificent!” he yelled. “You really do live up to your reputation!” Before he could be stopped, Domas ran right into the Firewall and bathed in the flames.

“M-Mr. Domas?!” I called out in alarm.

“My goodness, it’s so hot! This is *scorchingly* hot!” Domas said, holding his arms aloft inside the hellfire like a madman. “This heat proves you really have created a Firewall!”

Apparently, Domas was willing to take damage from the fire to confirm that I had conjured up a real, tactical-class Firewall without chanting the spell.



Nemumu looked positively unnerved by Domas's actions, while Gold reacted with a belly laugh.

"Domas, old boy, you look like you're having quite a lark there, but be careful not to go overboard now, what?" Gold warned.

"My apologies, Gold," Domas said. "But I can't help getting excited over seeing a human perform an *actual* tactical-class spell without vocalizing the accompanying chant for it!"

They hadn't even known each other for an hour, yet here Gold and Domas were, speaking to each other in a manner that suggested they'd been friends for a decade or so. This lighthearted banter from someone who was standing in a literal bonfire freaked Nemumu out even more, so I decided to cancel the Firewall before Domas could do permanent damage to himself. But once the flames had died down, I saw that Domas didn't show any signs of being burnt, and not even a single thread on his outfit was singed. I thought he had jumped into the fire unprotected, but his appearance suggested he had put up some magical defenses first. It just went to show that he wasn't a School of Magic researcher for nothing.

Domas approached me looking extremely impressed, though it felt like a part of him was itching to spend more time roasting in the flames.

"A human being able to perform a chantless tactical-class spell is shocking enough," Domas said. "But the way you conduct yourself, Mr. Dark, in such a singularly calm and understated manner like a silent millpond, I would never have guessed that you were a powerful mage right up until the moment you cast your spells. You are the very model of a mage, and I must tip my hat to you."

"Thank you for the kind words, Mr. Domas," I said. "It's an honor to receive such praise from an instructor at this school." I hadn't actually performed any conventional spells, I'd just released a couple of gacha cards, so I didn't think it was all that big a deal. Domas noticed my indifference but mistook it for humility, making him even more impressed.

"Mr. Dark, your talents are so astonishingly brilliant for a human that I must ask if you would be interested in enrolling in our academy," he said. "You would have my full backing, and I am sure my colleagues would welcome you with open arms. And of course, we would offer you a full scholarship."

That "for a human" caveat didn't escape my notice, since it

smacked of antihuman bigotry, but at the same time, it *was* vanishingly rare for a human to exhibit such a high degree of magical aptitude, so I was pretty sure Domas wasn't being purposely malicious. If anything, he was just too used to seeing humans as low-level mages at best, though he seemed perfectly happy recognizing and commending a human who was a skilled spellcaster. However, I wasn't going to apply to become a student at this school anytime soon, since I already had too much on my plate with my vendetta. But there was no way I was going to tell him the real reason, so I turned him down with a few half-truths.

"I'm very flattered that you would extend such an offer to me, but I believe in my heart of hearts that the adventuring life is a better fit for me," I said. "I should also inform you that I'm here in my capacity as a royal bodyguard for the Human Kingdom, so I hope you'll understand if I tell you I cannot accept your offer at this time."

"Oh, such a pity," Domas lamented. "But then again, if you are not motivated by study, it would serve no one's interests to have you matriculate." I guess he assumed I would end up becoming too bored to hone my talents at the academy if I didn't even want to be there in the first place, and although he seemed to regret the fact that I had rejected his offer, he didn't press the issue any further. Or at least, not *too* much further.

"If you ever change your mind about joining our school, be sure to let me know," he said. "I and the rest of the academy would greatly welcome your presence."

"Thanks for your consideration," I replied.

"Oh, there is nothing to consider, for we would truly welcome you with outstretched arms if you decided to change your mind," Domas said. "To think both you and Saint Miya would rise to prominence at nearly the same time. Perhaps the realm of magic is entering a new era with the arrival of human mages like yourselves."

"Saint Miya?" I asked, surprised to hear my friend's name mentioned.

"One of my hobbies is collecting the latest information regarding accomplished mages, you see," Domas said in all earnestness. "Not only have I heard about you that way, Mr. Dark, but I have also been regaled with the exploits of a human mage named Saint Miya, who made a name for herself by healing people of all their wounds. I would count myself

honored if I got to meet her in person one day."

Domas closed his eyes and began to imagine the day where he would encounter Miya in the flesh. He must have really been a fan of magic and mages. *I can't believe Miya's gotten so famous this fast,* I thought. *Sure, we're talking about someone who hunts for info on mages as a hobby, but even so…*

But even so, this presented a great chance for Elio, Gimra, and Wordy's collective dream of sending Miya to the School of Magic to be realized, so I decided to do my part and talk her up.

"My party has met Miya on our adventures," I said. "Not only is she a skilled mage, she's a very kind and generous person to boot."

"My word! To think you would sing the praises of Saint Miya too…" Domas hummed in thought. "According to the information I have gathered, she lives in a village not far from here. Perhaps I should go and visit her at the next opportune time?"

"Yes, you should definitely go visit her," I agreed. "I guarantee you won't regret it."

I continued to laud Miya's accomplishments for Domas's benefit, completely burning up the time that I should have been using to tour the academy.

☆☆☆

"Achoo!"

At the same moment that Light was conversing with Domas about her, Miya was spending her free time helping her brother Elio on their farm, when all of a sudden, she sneezed.

"Caught a cold, Miya?" her brother asked.

"No, I don't think I'm sick…" Miya replied, rubbing her upper arms with both hands. "But now that you mention it, I think I did feel a chill shoot up my spine, like that feeling I get whenever Quornae's about to cause another well-meaning catastrophe."



Elio simply gave his sister a curious look, unsure of what to make of this cryptic response of hers, though even Miya herself wouldn't know just how right her instincts were until a little while later.

☆☆☆

*This is bad,* thought Diablo. *This is very bad. If I don't do something, I'm going to…*

While Light was busy touring the Principality of the Nine, Diablo was seated at a table, eating lunch with his four demon cohorts. It was rather a late lunch since the younger blue bloods had to wait for the more senior members of the delegation to eat first, and the young lords always ate together, since building relations over meals was seen as part of the job, as it were. But instead of mulling over how to relate to his peers-slash-rivals, Diablo was deep in thought, his ghost-white complexion remarkably a shade paler than usual.

He was on the verge of fainting from all the pent-up anxiety caused by Princess Lilith's young bodyguard, Dark, bearing a very close resemblance to Light, even if his face was too horribly scarred to tell for certain if they were one and the same. Yet despite this uncertainty, Diablo still felt Light miraculously escaping from the Abyss after burning his face in some kind of accident was a probable scenario. Though even if he could somehow have confirmed that Dark was indeed Light, there was nothing he could do about it. If Diablo attempted to kill Dark, the Wicked Witch of the Tower would no doubt retaliate, but equally, if he left Dark to his own devices, the Demonkin Nation would find out Light hadn't been assassinated after all and Diablo would be stripped of his peerage. Try as he might, he couldn't come up with a way out of his dilemma.

"What seems to be troubling you, Lord Diablo?" asked Freede, the unofficial leader of the young nobles. "If you're feeling unwell, I suggest taking the remainder of the day off to rest." Although Freede was a contender in the race to climb the status ladder, even he was capable of expressing some level of consideration for the health of one of his cohorts, though it was likely that the specter of Diablo collapsing during such a high-profile gathering like the summit was also factoring into his concern. In that event, Freede's fitness as a leader would be

called into question if it was found that he had overlooked the wellness of someone in his inner circle.

The question quickly roused Diablo from his introspection and he forced a manufactured smile onto his face. “I-I appreciate your concern, Lord Freede. I was merely recalling a nightmare I had the other night. I assure you, I am of sound health—”

“That’s all right, then,” Freede interrupted. “I wager your nightmare had something to do with the melted face of that inferior kid. That was genuinely one of the most gruesome sights imaginable, and I’m hardly exaggerating.” His brow crinkled in disgust as he took a sip of his wine.

“I couldn’t believe he would subject us to that horrific sight,” another of the young demon nobles remarked. “Inferiors are already foul-looking creatures due to their natural physiognomies, but that brat was an extreme case indeed.”

“I’m still curious why you ordered that boy to take off his mask, Lord Diablo,” another demon said. “Was there a good reason for engaging in that stunt?”

Silence was the only response Diablo could offer that last snide remark. He obviously couldn’t confide to his cohorts that he believed the bodyguard looked like the human boy he had supposedly killed years before. Eventually, the other demons grew bored of waiting for a rejoinder from Diablo, so the conversation shifted in a different direction.

“Speaking of those aesthetically repugnant inferiors, my brother often flays and kills them while complaining how loathsome they look,” one of the demons said. “Now while I can certainly sympathize with such outbursts, it would behoove him to remember his responsibilities as a slaveholder. If we keep killing our bondservants unnecessarily, who will be left to serve us for the duration of their short, beastly lives?”

“Indeed, that would be dreadfully unbecoming of a future leader of our nation,” Freede agreed. “No man of authority would willingly rob himself of a source of cheap labor, no matter how hideous the members of that degenerate race look to the eye.”

“Brilliant observation, Lord Freede!” the first demon said. “If only a fragment of your wisdom would rub off on my foolhardy brother, he might learn not to waste good property. Yet because he is the youngest of the family, we do tend to spoil him excessively.”

Freede guffawed. “We are all disposed to indulging our younger siblings, it’s true. Take my younger sister, for instance. I’m practically at her beck and call, if I am completely honest about it. The situation has gotten so out of control, father has had to give me a stern lecture about unduly coddling her.”

“But your sister is a darling young charmer who’s wise beyond her years,” another of the demons piped up. “If I were her older brother, nothing would stop me from indulging her every whim.”

Laughter erupted from the young aristocrats and echoed around the dining hall. It was a perfectly delightful discussion—if you ignored the utter barbarity of the topic—and everyone was absorbed in laughter. Everyone except for Diablo, whose eyes suddenly widened as he had an epiphany.

“Excuse me, my good fellows, but I must attend to a very important matter that has until this moment slipped my mind,” Diablo said abruptly as he shot up out of his seat.

“Lord Diablo?” Freede queried, but he was already halfway out of the dining hall, lost in his train of thought.

*Brother... Sister...* thought Diablo. *Older brother!*

All that talk about family members had reminded Diablo that he did still have one card he could play, and the realization that he had a trump card struck him like lightning out of the blue, energizing him out of his funk. He rushed to his private room as fast as standard decorum allowed so that he wouldn’t draw unwanted attention to himself, and once he got there, he dumped the entire contents of a satchel full of documents onto the table. The documents pertained to the fiefdom Diablo ruled over, and reviewing them was part of his job as the viscount. There were piles upon piles of documents that he was expected to sift through, but Diablo had long ago accepted that the workload was a necessary part of performing his duties as the ruling elite. Yet the sheer volume of documents to review was so extensive, Diablo had been forced to bring his work with him to the summit and chip away at it, because he couldn’t exactly have skipped the summit just to focus on finishing up all the documentation work he had to do. But all of these considerations fell by the wayside as Diablo picked up document after document and scanned them with bloodshot eyes.

“It’s not this one! Not this one either!” Diablo grumbled irritably. “Nor this one! Nor this!” He continued speed-reading the documents until he ran out of papers to read, then pored

over each piece of paper a second time to make sure. The second read through garnered the same result: the one record he wanted wasn't in the pile.

Diablo pressed his hand to his forehead. "Where is it? Where did I put it? I *know* I saw documentation containing the name of Light's brother..."

When one of Diablo's peers had said the words "older brother," it had triggered Diablo's encyclopedic memory and sent him back to the time he had spotted the name of Light's elder brother in one of the documents he was reviewing. The record had stated the brother was brought as a slave to Diablo's own fiefdom, though it hadn't said why.

Diablo was very sure it was the name of Light's brother, and that it wasn't a case of mistaken identity. The nation-state backers of the Concord of the Tribes had sponsored a background check into Light in order to assess if he had the makings of a Master, though it was ultimately determined that Light wasn't a Master, just your garden-variety human with a bizarre, trash-level Gift. However, the background check had also contained a profile on Light's family, and that information had been shared with the nonhuman members of the fake party.

Shortly after becoming a viscount, Diablo had received a notice of a fresh shipment of slaves, which was where he had seen the name "Els." The familiar name had triggered Diablo's astounding memory into recalling the relevant portions of Light's background check so that he could cross-reference them with the description of the human slave in question, and the data had matched up perfectly. Not only did this slave have the same name as Light's brother, he was the same approximate age, came from the same region, and there was barely any difference in terms of their height and weight.

"Why would Light's brother be brought to my realm?" Diablo had mused to himself on seeing the entry, but he had been too busy with his other work at the time to give the coincidental discovery any more thought. Or at least, he hadn't until now.

"When did I receive that notice? *When*?" Diablo griped, racking his brain. "If only I could locate Light's brother, I could use him as a bargaining chip!"

However, Diablo's impeccable memory was failing to recall the exact date and time he had read the record in question, and since it turned out that he hadn't brought this now-critical

document with him, it meant he would have to return to his fiefdom to retrieve it. The hitch was he needed to be present at this equally critical summit, because absenting himself would put an indelible mark on his record. All of this meant that Diablo was faced with a decision that would demand a near-unthinkable sacrifice on his part either way.

# Chapter 7: Moving the Pieces Into Place

The summit was still three days away from getting underway but it was time to get things in order. *I bet we'll turn the world upside down by deposing the king of the Human Kingdom and installing Lilith in his place,* I mused to myself as I activated an SR Telepathy card. To make sure this coup went off without a hitch, I needed to touch base with my allies and vassal states one last time so that all of my ducks were in a row. And the first person I contacted was Dagan, the king of the Dwarf Kingdom.

After setting up an appointment via Telepathy, Nemumu and I stole away into the night, and making use of Nemumu's covert skills, we were able to make it to Dagan's private suite in the Dwarf Kingdom's manor without being noticed. As soon as we stepped out of the shadows, Dagan toddled over and greeted us with a broad, open-mouthed smile.

"As I live and breathe!" Dagan exclaimed. "Lord Light! Miss Nemumu, aren't you a sight for sore eyes? How're you two holdin' up, health-wise? Aw, who am I kidding? We all know you two are too heckin' powerful to catch a cold!" He roared with laughter at his own joke.

"I'm glad to see you haven't lost any of your energy either," I said.

"Sure, I may be as fit as a flea, but mentally speaking, my mind's been itching like the dickens to do some research on those ancient ruins ever since we got back from that quest," Dagan admitted. "I wanna punch my old self in the throat for throwing 'paper' at that last confab! If only I'd gone for 'rock,' I'd be neck-deep in artifact research right now!"

Dagan was bald with a long red mane of a beard, and like most dwarves, he was short and stocky but burly at the same time. For those of you wondering what Dagan was going on about with all that "paper" and "rock" talk, the Dwarf Kingdom wasn't your typical monarchy with a hereditary line of succession to the throne, but a nation where who got to be king was decided by holding these so-called "confabs" between the leading craftsmen, who would inevitably foist the title onto someone who very often didn't want it. Dagan had been chosen

as king after losing a game of rock-paper-scissors with the other remaining candidate for the crown.

Dagan was part of a long line of craftsmen who had been researching and developing magic items since the founding of the Dwarf Kingdom, but all that was put on hold when he was forced to serve as the king until the next regular summit that was due to be held in a few years' time. Since the current summit was an emergency one, Dagan's retirement from the throne wasn't set to be on the agenda. His grouchiness surrounding his situation was because he would rather have abdicated from the throne and hurled himself straight into researching the spoils brought up from the ancient underground ruins the dwarves had been keeping secret for centuries but had never been able to access until just recently.

"Ah, forget about that last part," Dagan said. "All my deputies have started tuning me out whenever I mope and complain about it, so I guess I must've thought you wouldn't mind hearing my bellyaching. Anyhoo, I can guess why you've decided to pay me a visit, and I can guarantee that you have nothing to worry about when it comes to the matter of the Human Kingdom in three days. I'll never forget the way you helped me explore those ruins, and I'm not about to double-cross folk I consider my allies."

I could trust that Dagan was speaking from the heart, especially since he had seen me, Mei, Nazuna, Mera, Jack, and Suzu in action when we explored those ruins. He definitely wouldn't want to make enemies of us if he could help it. But I hadn't come to hear him renew his vows on a promise he had already made.

"Actually, I'm here to ask you for another favor," I explained.

"Another favor, you say?" Dagan grunted, wondering what it could be. "Well, I'm ready and raring to help you in any way I can, since I owe you that much. So shoot."

"Okay, here's what I need..." I proceeded to tell Dagan what I wanted him to do right after Lilith was voted in as the new queen of the Human Kingdom. After hearing my request, he stroked his beard, a frown on his face.

"Okay, I get the picture, and I sure as fun want to help you out in that regard, but..." Dagan hemmed in a low, gravelly voice. "That's a doozy of a request, considering where my kingdom sits in the pecking order."

“I’ll admit that my side cannot support you openly, but we can arrange a soft landing for you behind the scenes,” I said. “We’ll extend financial and other assistance to you, and we promise that you will be far from the only party assuming the risk.”

“In that case, I’ll just have to take your word for it,” Dagan said. “You can count me in, Lord Light. Though I’m afraid I may need some time to convince my inner circle to back me up on this one. Hopefully that won’t be an issue?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “In fact, I also brought you a thank-you gift.” I opened my Item Box and took out a phantasma-class magic necklace. It was completely useless for the purposes of combat, but I figured it still held plenty of value as a research specimen and as a potential prized possession. And just as I had thought, Dagan’s eyes twinkled along with the gleaming necklace.

“Let me be clear that this is merely a *small* token of my appreciation,” I said, handing him the necklace. “This is absolutely not intended to be a bribe.”

“I hear you loud and clear, Lord Light,” Dagan replied. “But good friends know how to stay friends, and this gift shows how much you value our relationship. Gestures like these are much appreciated, especially from a young lad like yourself.” Dagan carefully stowed the token of my appreciation—which I admit was a bit of a sweetener—then turned back to me to finish off our conversation. “Don’t you worry ’bout a thing! I’ll make sure you get what you want or my name isn’t King Dagan! I’ll make all of my deputies fall into line!”

“Thanks a lot, Your Highness,” I said. “I’ll be counting on you.” Dagan and I smiled at each other and shared a firm handshake, then Nemumu helped me sneak out of the dwarf king’s suite and off toward our next destination. And it was likely to be our last destination for the night if I played my cards right.

*I think it’s better for Ellie to engage with the elves, the dark elves, and the beastfolk on this matter,* I thought. *Unlike me, she knows those leaders on a more ‘face-to-face’ basis as the Wicked Witch.*

As we sneaked around in the night, Nemumu started to grow sulky and complain. “I don’t think you need to go to all this trouble just for Lilith, Lord Dark. It shouldn’t really matter what happens in the aftermath.”

“Lilith’s putting everything on the line with this scheme, remember. I’m not going to throw her to the wolves while she’s

still vulnerable," I said. "And it's not just for Lilith's sake, anyway. It's so I can sleep easy at night. Besides, I don't consider doing this to be that much trouble at all."

Nemumu didn't say another word after that. But it was true that I was doing all of this more for my own peace of mind than as a favor to Lilith, so I wasn't going to turn around and ask her to thank me for it later. At the same time, I appreciated Nemumu looking out for my own best interests, even if she did jump to conclusions.

"Thanks for getting angry on my behalf, though," I said.

"Oh, uh, not at all! You don't need to thank me!" Nemumu said quickly. "I apologize for not realizing what was really on your mind." She might have sounded modest, but in truth, she was blushing so hard, I could tell despite how dark it was. I smirked silently as we slipped past some more guards and sneaked our way inside our next destination: the Onifolk Archipelago's manor. We quietly infiltrated Yotsuha's suite, and there waiting for us was the Holy Princess of the onis, beaming as brightly as a bouquet of flowers.

"I'm so glad you could make it, my destiny," Yotsuha said.

"Sorry we had to meet this late," I replied. "But we have something very important to discuss, so I appreciate you giving up your time, Your Holiness."

Yotsuha was currently the undisputed supreme ruler of the Onifolk Archipelago, despite still being in her teens. She was previously only the ceremonial head of state, with a clan called the House of Kamijo in de facto control over the government and military. Another clan, the House of Shimobashira, had served as direct vassals to Yotsuha, helping to maintain her lifestyle and assisting her with religious ceremonies. However the two houses had conspired together to resurrect a world-destroying ogre god and use it as a living weapon, and in so doing, they had sacrificed generations of Holy Princesses to the monster.

These sacrifices had included Yotsuha's own mother, and they had been planning to make Yotsuha and her little sister the final sacrifices that would at last bring the ogre fully under their control. But when Yotsuha found out about this plot, she swore vengeance on them and switched allegiance over to our side so that she could overthrow the Houses of Kamijo and Shimobashira. I took it upon myself to slay the ogre, while also getting my own revenge on Oboro, one of my eight sworn

enemies from the Concord of the Tribes.

Once the dust had settled after the coup, Yotsuha became the ruler of her nation in both name and practice. Also, for some reason, Yotsuha kept referring to me as her “destiny” after I’d agreed to help her avenge her mother’s death. If I were to guess why this was, I’d say she was just being extra deferential to me. However, I couldn’t help noticing that Nemumu was looking peeved, like a pet dog whose master was busy playing with the cat. Maybe she didn’t like how Yotsuha—who wasn’t a member of the Abyss—was being all casual and chummy with me. I decided to ignore Nemumu’s attitude and continued my conversation with Yotsuha.

“So the truth is, I need to ask you a huge favor,” I said. “I know we could’ve discussed this over Telepathy, but I wanted to make an effort to talk about this matter with you in person in good faith.” I was taking this step because I was speaking to Yotsuha as the leader of her nation, not simply as someone I knew personally. As for Yotsuha herself, she looked positively ecstatic that I needed her help with something.

“You’re my destiny who saved me and my nation, so I’m forever in your debt,” Yotsuha said. “I shall gladly do whatever it is you request of me. Even if you were to ask for my hand in marriage, my nation would welcome you with an officially sanctioned ceremony.”

That last line offended Nemumu so much, I could feel the murderous vibes hitting me from behind. It was obvious Yotsuha was teasing me to lighten the mood, but it appeared Nemumu wasn’t finding it very funny.

I adopted a disarming smile and hurriedly put up a hand to signal Nemumu to stand down. “I wouldn’t kid around like that or people might get a wrong idea,” I said to the Holy Princess. “Anyway, I came here to ask you if you could…”

After outlining my big favor, Yotsuha accepted without a second thought, since she still felt like she owed me a lot for helping her to get her revenge on her enemies. And with that settled, all I had to do was wait for the other pieces to fall into place before the main event at the summit.

# Chapter 8: The Forgotten

Three male humans sat around a table at a nondescript location in the Principality of the Nine, looking at the map of the enclave that was spread out before them. The map showed gathering places, the manors in the summit compound and which nation held which, plus other details, such as the placement of the attackers around town, and the targets of the assaults. The map was the product of meticulous planning, and the men traded smiles as they gazed upon their opus.

"Tomorrow night, we will finally launch our mission, Captain Aldo!" one young man said. Their leader, Aldo, was bald, of below average height, and although he looked to be in his fifties, he was obviously hiding a muscular physique under his simple clothing. He had the look of a man who would probably get mistaken for a dwarf if he grew out his beard a bit. Aldo and the other two were wearing pendants bearing the symbol of the Church of the Goddess—the same pendant that Light and his party had seen on him when they had encountered Aldo at the church's headquarters a few days prior.

Aldo grinned broadly and nodded deeply. "We must never forget that we the Forgotten are ghosts completely disregarded by our holy church. But that doesn't matter, so long as we make the entire world submit to the glory of the Church of the Goddess! As long as we accomplish our life's mission, it doesn't matter if we are absent from the written records or erased from the collective memories of the people!"

As the name implied, the Forgotten were adherents whose extremist ideology had placed them at odds with the Church of the Goddess, to the point where the group and the church had officially parted ways decades previously. But instead of treating the church as an adversary, the Forgotten embraced the split, because the status allowed them to operate freely, without the church being linked to their actions. This separation served to maintain the church's reputation in the eyes of the public while the Forgotten took on dirtier tasks for the sake of their religion. If you were looking for an apt comparison, the Forgotten were not unlike the Dark Elf Islands' covert group, the Shadow Unit.

The members of the Forgotten were willing to do anything they could in order to boost the prestige of the Church of the Goddess and expand the faithful. They were even willing to accept punishment from the Goddess herself after their deaths if it was deemed that the mortal sins they had committed in life warranted divine judgment.

Only those demonstrating the most fervent faith and devotion to the Church of the Goddess were allowed into the Forgotten, and vetting, recruiting, and training up new members fell to the group itself. Funding for the group came mostly from tithes granted by members who led double lives in respectable society, or by pilfering money from nonbelievers that they assaulted and killed, because after all, these religious extremists believed that ridding the world of apostates and seizing their assets was just and holy.

Aldo's euphoric expression suddenly turned grim. "Three years ago, our enemies in the Dragonute Empire raided our village and massacred our brethren, our fresh recruits, and even our children! My soul will forever ache in memory of them."

"Mine too, captain," one of his underlings piped up.

"Me too," the other agreed. "Every time I think about what they did to our fallen brethren…" The young man's eyes started filling with tears, as did his associate's. Without further context, many would think the dragonutes had been entirely in the wrong for what they did, but the larger picture was a little more complicated than that.

The "village" Aldo had referred to had actually been a top secret compound for training armed militants. New recruits would be taken there to train, and those arrivals often included children of all races. For some of the kids, the Forgotten took custody of them through legitimate means, though a number of others, *especially* those who demonstrated a knack for combat—however raw it might still be—at a very young age, would get forcefully kidnapped with the group even going as far as killing parents by poisoning them or by using other more violent methods. The newly created orphans would then be brainwashed into becoming loyal disciples of the Church of the Goddess, before spending their days training to be warriors and assassins.

The Forgotten believed such strong-armed tactics were perfectly justified if used against nonbelievers. Furthermore, any

children whose skills failed to live up to expectations after strenuous training were put to death by lynching, which was carried out by the other indoctrinated children in their age group in order to desensitize them to murder.

Fully trained members of the Forgotten were given assignments to assassinate anyone who spat on the name of the Church of the Goddess, including authority figures who stood in the way of proselytizers. As for other targets, the Forgotten would often threaten them by abducting family members and torturing them to death, before dumping their mutilated corpses back to the target's doorstep. This was all done in ostensible support of the Church of the Goddess, but this campaign of terror they were waging had caused the Dragonute Empire to take action against the Forgotten.

The empire had sent an assault team to destroy the Forgotten's secret compound and kill everybody inside, for the dragonute top brass reasoned it would be next to impossible to reeducate and reintegrate these adults and children who had been thoroughly indoctrinated into being deadly radicals into society. And if there did happen to be inhabitants who weren't brainwashed, there was no way to distinguish them from the ones who had been. When they got to the compound, the assault team flattened every building in it to make sure it could never be usable again.

The dragonutes had made sure to search the premises for documents and other materials before razing the compound entirely, but they had found no evidence that proved the Church of the Goddess had been providing material support for the Forgotten. As such, the church's reputation remained unblemished, but in the aftermath of the operation, the dragonute leaders viewed the Church of the Goddess with a greater level of contempt, although this was not expressed publicly.

Only a handful of members of the Forgotten had survived the massacre. Aldo, the current leader of the group, had been at the Principality of the Nine at the time of the catastrophe, working undercover as a clerk at a theater. The few other remaining members also happened to have been outside the compound when the raid took place. Their numbers had been reduced so drastically, the Forgotten was all but a defunct organization. Yet luckily for them, all was not lost.

“Glory be to the Goddess that the dragonutes were content with simply slaughtering our brethren and destroying our compound,” Aldo said. “Those murderers failed to discover our secret weapon: the Poor Man’s Plague. This blessed fortune must have been bestowed upon us by the Goddess herself!”

The two other men also raised their voices in veneration. The “Poor Man’s Plague” was the name of a curse that caused a fatal illness that could spread from person to person. The curse was first developed as a low-cost weapon during the advanced ancient civilization era, but the nations put a stop to the research at the time because they feared the curse would trigger a highly contagious and lethal pandemic that would kill enemies and allies alike. In other words, the curse could be used as a cheap but effective weapon of mass destruction by cash-strapped terrorists, and it was precisely because of this aspect that the curse had come to be labeled the “Poor Man’s Plague.” The ancient civilization had banned its manufacture, development, and usage with an international treaty, and records showed that violators of it were hit with severe penalties.

Many years ago within the current age, members of the Forgotten had been exploring some ancient ruins when they happened upon a book containing the way to make the Poor Man’s Plague. The group had then conducted research and development on the curse in a refurbished cave in a separate, undisclosed location known only to a select number of members. This meant that even though the dragonutes had destroyed the training compound, the group’s plans to develop this deadly weapon had entirely escaped their notice.

“Thanks to the Goddess’s grace, we will finally bring the hammer down on the nonbelievers who traffic in sacrilege against our church!” Aldo fulminated. “This shall be the final mission of the Forgotten! But by the will of the Goddess, this operation will unite all the races of the world in worshipping in the pews of her church! The Poor Man’s Plague will *guarantee* that future!”

Even after the dragonutes had destroyed the compound, research into the curse had continued at the laboratory in the cave. In fact, the Forgotten had sped up their research so that they could get their revenge on the dragonutes much sooner. As far as experimental subjects were concerned, they used a range of slaves and abductees from various races: humans, beastfolk,

elves, dark elves, dwarves, dragonutes, and centaurs. For the nonhuman races, the Forgotten favored using children as test subjects since they were less able to resist compared to adults, and these experiments helped the researchers to successfully develop the Poor Man's Plague into a curse that could infect and kill all races. And not only that but the scientists also managed to develop an effective cure for the disease.

Aldo stared off into space as he spoke, as if he were delivering a divine prophecy. "We will infect ourselves with the Poor Man's Plague, go to our appointed positions at the summit venue and around the city, then detonate the explosives we'll be wearing to spread the disease. In the moments before we die, we will falsely declare ourselves to be agents of the Wicked Witch of the Tower."

Aldo's gaze hardened. "The Poor Man's Plague will infect world leaders, their deputies, and their citizens. A few may have access to top-level mages that may be able to cure them of the Poor Man's Plague, but the vast majority will not. The Church of the Goddess, however, will have the 'holy water' that will cure the faithful, and once everybody has witnessed that miracle, the church is sure to be elevated to its rightful place as this world's savior!"

Or in other words, the Forgotten were going to engineer a worldwide epidemic and ensure that one of the only cures of the plague—this so-called holy water—was in the hands of the Church of the Goddess. World leaders who chose to be healed immediately by the holy water at the Duchy would express their gratitude by raising the Holy See to a higher status. Other leaders refusing the church's help would return to their own nations and spread the disease throughout their populations. However, the Forgotten had given the holy water to affiliate churches in all nations in advance so that they could still cure the sick. The hope was that the citizens of the more prideful nonhuman races would ignore the objections put forth by their rulers and prioritize the lives of their families instead. In that scenario, the Church of the Goddess would no longer be relegated to second-class status among the general populations of those species.

The Forgotten would claim to be sent by the Wicked Witch of the Tower, so that all the backlash for the pandemic would be directed at her instead of the church. The summit had been convened to discuss ways to deal with the witch, which made

their collective cover story believable enough to dispel any potential suspicion that might be leveled at the church. The Forgotten had given churches around the world certain quantities of the cure—as well as the recipe for making more—describing it as medicine to treat common ailments, though they were instructed to distribute it as “holy water” in the event of an unspecified crisis. The Forgotten didn’t go into any further details than that, and nothing was written down, so any investigation after the fact would fail to turn up a connection to the extremists that had spread the disease.

“The dragonutes have decimated us to the point of no return, and much as I regret to say it, upon my demise, the Forgotten will cease to exist,” Aldo said, a determined expression on his face. The organization could theoretically have started again from scratch by recruiting new members and orphans and building a whole new training compound, but with the dragonutes on high alert and watching for religious extremists, that option seemed to be off the table. If the dragonutes were to find the now-fledgling group during the rebuilding process, the empire would make sure there was no one left to cause a threat. For all intents and purposes, the Forgotten were as good as obliterated.

“But with this one final mission, we will pay honor to the Goddess for creating this world by ushering in a new era of glory for her church!” Aldo yelled. “Come, my brethren. Join me as we make our final journey to the Goddess so that she may bestow her blessed judgment upon our immortal souls!”

“How glorifying!” said one of his associates.

“I shall follow you to our day of judgment, my captain!” said the other. The two young senior officers wept with emotion, and Aldo nodded with approval, touched by their reaction. A truly rapturous atmosphere filled that tiny room, and there, witnessing it all, was a small animal that was lurking in a corner. Of course, neither Aldo nor his two deputies even noticed they were being watched.

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“...and that is the full extent of our assessment of this Aldo,” Aoyuki said, concluding her briefing on the intelligence report she had just handed to me.

“Thanks. Excellent work as always,” I said.

“Mrrrow,” she purred in response. Aoyuki, Ellie, and Mei were all standing in front of my desk in my executive office on the bottom tier of the Abyss. I had asked Aoyuki to use her spy familiars to gather intelligence on the middle-aged man who had approached my party during our visit to the holy seat of the Church of the Goddess in the Duchy, because while he had acted like a friendly (if a little pushy) churchgoer, Nemumu had seen through this disguise and identified him as an assassin. The idea of an assassin running around the place just before a major summit didn’t sit right with me, so I’d called Aoyuki to check him out.

According to her report, the old guy was the leader of a radical faction of the Church of the Goddess known as the Forgotten, and they were planning to commit terrorist acts by blowing themselves up at various locations on the eve of the summit and blaming the Wicked Witch for it. And that wasn’t even the half of it.

I flipped through the report in my hand and sighed. “It’d be one thing if they were simply planning to kill all the world leaders, but who would’ve believed they’d be plotting to unleash a worldwide pandemic? But seriously, could these guys *really* have created a curse that infects people with a deadly, contagious disease, as well as a cure for it?”

“They could in theory, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said. “After hearing about Aoyuki’s investigation, I reviewed some of our historical texts concerning the ancient civilization, and I did indeed find records about this ‘Poor Man’s Plague.’ That would give credence to their claim that they possess a way to unleash such a curse, plus the formula that will lift it.”

I scowled, knowing that Ellie was always right about these things. “Why would they go and make something so dangerous just to make their church look good?”

“How will you respond to this, Master Light?” Mei asked, though she already knew what I was going to do.

“Ethically speaking, I can’t just stand around and let these creeps unleash a plague on innocent people,” I said. “Plus, if their terror attacks cause the summit to be canceled, all our efforts to install Lilith on the throne will go down the drain. Of course, it’s in everybody’s best interests to put a stop to this plot, but above all else, I can’t let them thwart this golden opportunity

I have to ruin Diablo's life."

I wanted to embarrass Diablo in public by getting the Wicked Witch to humiliate him at the summit, thereby leaving an indelible mark against his career ambitions. I wasn't going to let these terrorists rob me of the opportunity.

"In any case, my party was hired by Lilith to run security for her," I said. "No bodyguard worth their salt would just stand by and let a terror attack happen if they had the power to stop it."

In preparation to mobilize, I rose from my chair and started giving out orders. "We have to earn our keep, after all," I added.

## Chapter 9: Aldo’s Past

Aldo was the surviving captain of the Forgotten, but that wasn’t his real name. When he first joined the group, he renounced his birth name and adopted a nom de guerre, and since his true identity has been lost to time, for the purposes of telling his tale, Aldo will henceforth be referred to as “Unnamed.”

Unnamed was the third son of a hunter who lived in a small village, and although he was a better huntsman than both of his older brothers, Unnamed had no claim to his father’s house or assets. So at the age of fifteen, Unnamed left home and formed an adventuring party with two other young males with similarly woeful inheritance prospects: one was a third son just like himself, while the other was a second son.

Unnamed served as the party’s scout, with the other two acting as frontline warriors. It should be noted that the title of “warrior” was typically given to young, inexperienced adventurers who were fresh off the farm with no scholarship or skills to speak of. Due to Unnamed already being a practiced hunter, he had more talent as an adventurer than his two cohorts. In fact, not only was Unnamed a whiz with a bow and arrow, he could also spot beasts and monsters at a distance, track creatures, and mask his scent to surprise his prey.

Thanks to Unnamed, the party was able to quickly locate monsters, and when the trio engaged them, he would be the first to loose his arrows at his target before the other two came in to club the creatures to death. Unnamed was also a dab hand at setting traps that immobilized monsters for an easy kill, which meant that even though their party was made up of novices, thanks to Unnamed, their careers as questers got off to quite an auspicious start.

It was around this time that Unnamed was staying in a town that just happened to have a Church of the Goddess—which was a rare sight in this particular realm—where he saw a young apprentice nun toiling away at selling talismans to raise funds for the church. But back then, Unnamed didn’t think much of the religion.

*Why the hell would I worship some goddess who has made us*

*humans so low-level, we get trampled on by all the other races?* Unnamed thought as he gazed at the novitiate. *Anyone who believes in all that goddess crap is as dumb as dirt.*

But the apprentice nun was just his type in the looks department, so he approached her with the intention of purchasing one of the talismans, which basically looked like small wooden planks branded with the symbol of the church. Unnamed used the exchange to invite the nun out on a date, but a random solicitation was hardly going to work on a girl like her, and his offer was promptly declined. He walked away from the young nun and stuffed the newly purchased talisman into his satchel, where it would remain completely forgotten about until much later.

Despite his failure to pick up a girl, Unnamed and his partymates were still riding high as adventurers. Their hubris eventually swelled to the point that they decided to explore a dungeon in the Dwarf Kingdom, where they had heard they could quickly gain fame and fortune.

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*Please protect me, Great Goddess!* Unnamed begged desperately. *Please don't let me die!*

A few months later, Unnamed found himself hiding in a tangle of roots under a tree and praying fervently for his life to be spared as he tightly clutched the talisman the nun had sold him. So how had he gotten himself into such a predicament?

Unnamed and his party had arrived at the town in the Dwarf Kingdom near to the dungeon they had decided to explore and found an inn that would serve as their base while they were there, then immediately struck out for the world-class dungeon. On the first tier, they found and slew a Bush Wolf, and this confidence booster had sent them trekking deeper into the woods in search of more monsters to battle. Their wish was unfortunately granted when they encountered a pack of Bush Wolves, led by a higher-level Great Bush Wolf. The pack instantly set upon the two frontline warriors in the party and ripped them to shreds before devouring their entrails. Unnamed used the momentary distraction to escape, but the Great Bush Wolf and some of the Bush Wolves gave pursuit, and he could feel the creatures gaining on him. *I can't shake them!* he wailed in his

mind. *I'm gonna get eaten alive, just like my buddies back there! I don't wanna go out like that!*

Unnamed's nerves eventually got the better of him and he stumbled over some unnoticed obstacle in his path, causing the contents of his satchel to spill out across the ground. Lying there in front of his eyes was the very talisman he had bought from the nun he'd thought was cute, and it had just so happened to land in front of a tree with a big enough opening in its roots to serve as a hiding place for him. He excitedly sized up the tree roots, then grabbed the talisman and made a beeline for this temporary sanctuary. The space was barely large enough for his frame to fit into, but once he had covered the opening with leafy branches, he was satisfied that he was out of sight. Unnamed lay in wait in his cramped hiding place and held his breath, clinging tightly to the wooden talisman. The low, primordial growl of the Great Bush Wolf suddenly filled his ears, and it took all of Unnamed's fortitude not to gasp in fear. He squeezed the talisman tighter and offered up another prayer. *Great Goddess, spare my life!*

The Great Bush Wolf and the Bush Wolves soon came loping through the forest, but they failed to spot Unnamed's hiding place, and he managed to survive the ordeal, though not because of some divine intervention by the Goddess. He had merely lucked out by getting covered in mud when he'd stumbled to the ground, which had helped to disguise his scent from the predators chasing him. Plus, the smell given off by the plant life surrounding his hiding place had also fooled the monsters. But Unnamed remained completely unaware of these deciding factors as he lay trembling cocooned by the tree roots for a few more hours. Only once he felt he was totally out of danger did he crawl out of his foxhole, his face a mess of tears and snot. His mind, however, had hardened around a newfound conviction.

"The Great Goddess truly exists, and she's watching over us…" Unnamed breathed. The freshly minted convert eventually managed to make it out of the dungeon by himself, whereupon he dropped to his knees and mourned the loss of his comrades, as well as expressed regret for the life he had led up to that point.

"My friends died because they spurned the Goddess and her mercy," he concluded. "I lived because I happened to be in

possession of one of her holy amulets."

Unnamed collected his friends' belongings from the inn and disposed of them before journeying back to the town he lived in before. There, he joined his local Church of the Goddess and became one of the devout. Unnamed continued to make ends meet by going on quests, but he never missed prayers at church. In fact, he was such a fervent believer, all of his attention was fixated on the Goddess, meaning he had no time for women, not even the apprentice nun he had once tried to court. Even the priest of the church was impressed by Unnamed's strict piousness.

About a year after that fateful day in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, Unnamed was strolling home from church after daily prayers when an elderly man accosted him.

"Excuse me, young man, but do you have a moment?" the senior citizen said. Unnamed immediately recognized the man as a fellow worshipper at the church whose religious piety rivaled his own.

"I've witnessed how devoted you are to our faith," the old man began. "And in consideration of that, I have a proposition for you that I think might be right up your alley."

The conversation smelled fishy to Unnamed, and if the man speaking to him hadn't been a fellow parishioner, he would have refused to even listen to his proposal. *But this man prays at the church just as much as I do, if not more,* he thought. *I guess it's worth hearing what he has to say.*

As soon as Unnamed assented to hear him out, the old man's face brightened, and the two went to a tavern the elderly man frequented, where they were shown to a private room. After chatting over a light meal and beer, the old man finally broached the subject he had brought the younger man here to discuss.

"Would you be willing to join the Forgotten?" the old man asked. "I believe you would be a fine addition to our ranks."

"The Forgotten?" Unnamed queried, prompting the elderly man to launch into telling him about the background of the group. The Forgotten was a religious faction that had been disavowed by the Church of the Goddess, but this actually suited both sides because it meant the ultradevout members of the Forgotten were free to operate in the shadows to spread their faith throughout the land without scandalizing the church due to its often messy methods of doing so. The old man was the

former captain of the Forgotten, and he was looking to recruit Unnamed for his group. The tavern they were in was actually managed by the Forgotten, so the two of them were free to discuss these sensitive matters there.

Unnamed was moved to tears after hearing the elderly man's pitch. *I finally know why the Goddess spared my life,* Unnamed thought. In other words, he believed he had miraculously made it out of that monster attack alive so that he could go on to serve as a disciple of the Forgotten.

"Please take me!" Unnamed yelled in response. "I will dedicate the rest of my life to the Goddess!"

"I knew I was right about you," the elderly man said, smiling happily as if he were talking to a cherished grandchild.

A few days later, Unnamed died while out questing in the forest. At least that was what the sole witness to his death had reported to the guild when handing over his adventurer tag that had been recovered from his body as proof of his demise. After hearing the testimony of the eyewitness—who by some curious coincidence just happened to be an active member of the Church of the Goddess—the guild listed Unnamed as deceased.

Now that he was officially "dead," Unnamed moved to the Forgotten's secret training village, renouncing his birth name to instead go by the number he was given: 113. He was tonsured and given standard-issue clothing to wear, and he set about honing his skills in the compound. Assassination techniques made up the majority of his training program, but 113 also learned how to make camp, how to survive in the wild with no tools or extra clothes, how to succeed in the art of conversation, and how to pick locks. These and a number of other skills that had been perfected by the Forgotten over the years were beaten into 113 without mercy. Despite enduring many blood-soaked days of training to become a full member, 113 and all of the trainees in his peer group didn't complain once, since they were all fanatics of their religion.

However, 113 stood head and shoulders above his cohorts, since the skills and experience he had as a hunter easily translated to the assassin training. And so, after several years of grooming, 113 was accepted as a full member of the Forgotten and given the name "Aldo." He quickly got to work, assassinating feudal lords that had previously slighted the Church of the Goddess, as well as making money for the Forgotten by killing

the unfaithful and stealing their possessions, before disguising the attacks as robberies carried out by petty bandits.

Aldo was very good at his job, but he never let that go to his head. “This is all for the Goddess and all for her church,” he would frequently remind those around him. Yet he soon marked himself out as the greatest assassin in the history of the organization, and everyone unanimously pushed for him to become the next captain. After being promoted to the role, Aldo moved his own base of operations to the Principality of the Nine, where the headquarters of the Church of the Goddess was located, and by day, he worked as a clerk at a theater, while at night, he led the Forgotten’s operations as their leader.

# Chapter 10: The Poor Man’s Plague

The theater near the summit conference hall was an entertainment venue that staged operas, musicals, and other performances for the enjoyment of the citizens of the Principality of the Nine. Sometimes, national leaders would be in attendance to delight in symphonies or operatic shows from private boxes, though these occasions were often merely excuses for leaders to hold top secret discussions in exclusive spaces.

On this particular night, the storied theater had been entirely reserved, but surreptitiously this time, since the theater was supposed to be shut for the duration of the world summit to make sure the performances wouldn’t clash with the high-profile gathering. But the space was presently being used by very atypical guests in the form of what was left of the Forgotten. Including Aldo, the gathering numbered less than thirty, these men and women representing all that remained of the extremist group. Because Aldo worked in the back offices of the theater, he was able to organize a secret gathering at the playhouse fairly easily, and the theater turned out to be the perfect spot for one, since nobody was likely to peek into a venue that was supposedly closed, and the building was right next to the summit conference hall. It was also strategically placed in the center of the Duchy, which meant all parts of the urban enclave were easily accessible to the group for their planned terror attacks on the night before the summit.

The members of the Forgotten stood on the stage facing Aldo, all wearing dark clothing under equally dark cloaks—which was the standard outfit for carrying out attacks under the cover of darkness—and pendants embedded with bloodred magical gems.

Aldo scanned the fighters in front of him and started his speech to them in a soft, somber tone. “Very soon, every single one of us gathered here tonight will depart from this world in a blaze of glory. As long as the Dragonute Empire remains standing, our organization will never regain its previous might. However, the Goddess has not forsaken us!” He all but bellowed this last part, and maintained the same thunderous pitch

throughout the rest of the address.

"Thanks to the grace of the Goddess, we found the Poor Man's Plague, and we managed to safeguard its secrets from the dragonutes' cowardly assault on our compound!" Aldo was really hamming it up, as if he were the lead in a play. "We also perfected the curse that will punish the heretics and lead more believers to the holy flock! All of us in the Forgotten are ready to sacrifice our lives for this glorious cause! All of us in the Forgotten will restore our holy church and the Goddess to their rightful place on the mainland! Our deaths shall not be in vain!"

From his front pocket, Aldo fished out a small bottle containing an elixir: the Poor Man's Plague. He flicked out the stopper, emptied the contents into his mouth, then hurled the bottle down at the stage beneath his feet, smashing it into a million pieces to signal his ironclad and irreversible commitment to the cause. Through this act, Aldo had infected himself with the plague, and if he didn't take the antidote, he would soon develop a fever, grow nauseous, have trouble breathing, then finally perish.

He faced his troops once more. "We in the Forgotten will never be mentioned in the history books, and we shall be forever abandoned from memory. Even so, we sacrifice everything for the sake of our one holy church, and for the sake of our great Goddess! I die for a truly righteous cause, the same as all of you, my courageous brethren!"

"Captain!" Tears streamed down the faces of the other Forgotten members at Aldo's brave words and his display of dedication by being the first to infect himself with the Poor Man's Plague. Nobody in the theater that night had the curative elixir in their possession, and if any of them were contemplating taking it, they would need to go all the way to the Church of the Goddess headquarters for it. But the thought of curing himself never crossed Aldo's mind, since the next thing on his to-do list was to infiltrate the manor housing the Dragonute Empire's dignitaries and blow himself up.

Because Aldo was delivering his speech in a theater designed for maximum acoustics, his voice from the stage was amplified all the way to the upper balcony. Once they had taken a moment to weep, the other members of the Forgotten copied their leader by opening their own bottles, drinking the liquid inside, then smashing the receptacles at their feet. There was no turning

back for anyone.

Aldo also began to weep at this display of fortitude by his followers. “My brethren, you are all holy warriors of the Church of the Goddess! In my eyes, you all shine brightly with honor! Now march, faithful soldiers! Sacrifice your lives to the one church and the one holy Goddess!”

“All for the Goddess! All for her church!” the other extremists roared back at him. Everyone including Aldo gripped the pendants dangling around their necks as a final affirmation that they were armed and ready to go. Their collective assignment was to take up positions at the central manors and other locations around the city, grab their pendants, and pour mana into the ruby gems until it triggered an explosion. The blast would reduce their bodies to a fine, bloody mist that would infect anyone in the vicinity. This particular type of pendant had been chosen as a safety precaution since it wouldn’t explode unless the user purposely squeezed it tightly and energized it with mana.

The members of the Forgotten nodded silently to one another, then headed for the exits to go to their assigned locations, but a young boy’s voice halted them in their tracks.

“I thought you guys might end up thinking twice about doing something this stupid. If you had, I would’ve let the constables handle this. But if you’re really this committed to carrying out this dumb plot of yours, then I guess I have no choice but to do my job as a bodyguard.”

The members of the Forgotten muttered among themselves in surprise and turned as one to the upper balcony, where the voice was coming from. As they did so, a human woman with gorgeous auburn skin, platinum-blonde hair, and a muffler around her neck emerged from the shadows. She was so stunningly beautiful, she looked like a fairy princess out of a fable, but her gaze was icy enough to freeze the blood in your veins. At that particular moment, she was looking down at the fanatics like someone about to stomp on a bunch of insects. However, the voice the fanatics had heard had clearly belonged to a young kid, so she couldn’t have been the one who had addressed them. All of a sudden, a boy with dark hair wearing a fool’s mask and carrying a staff like a mage appeared from behind the woman.

“Sorry to ruin your little party, but if you’re planning to

sabotage the summit, I'm gonna have to stop you guys," the boy said, sounding very sure that he would have no problems carrying out his proclamation.

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"Sorry to ruin your little party," I said. "But if you're planning to sabotage the summit, I'm gonna have to stop you guys."

Nemumu and I had hidden ourselves in the balcony seats in order to keep an eye on the Forgotten, but we decided to show ourselves once the fanatics started heading for the exits to carry out their planned terror attacks. *I figured they'd end up getting cold feet at the eleventh hour,* I thought. *But I guess I was wrong.* If the Forgotten had called off the attacks, we would have just contacted the authorities and let them deal with it, but if they really were dead set on blowing themselves up to start an epidemic, then we had no choice but to take them out ourselves.

"So your brilliant plan is to indiscriminately make people sick with your curse, then have them cured at the Church of the Goddess in order to elevate the religion?" I said, taunting them. "If you're gonna manufacture a pandemic just for your own petty interests, then I see it as my duty to put a stop to it. And not just because I'm a bodyguard, but because I'm an upstanding, law-abiding citizen."

"I know you people!" Aldo cried out. "You're the ones who stopped by the holy seat! What in blazes are you doing *here*? No, never mind that. If you've overheard everything, we can't let you leave here alive!"

Aldo was right to think that we'd heard the whole shebang up to this point. In fact, even up in the balcony seats, we hadn't even needed to strain our ears to hear him ranting and raving to his fellow fanatics. Since Aldo worked at the theater, he knew people could hear everything happening on the stage just fine from the balcony, and if I were in his position, I wouldn't want to leave any witnesses either. Aldo instructed his followers to come up to the balcony to grab us, but I already had a card out ready.

"SSR Area Paralysis—release!" I intoned, drawing a brief shriek from everyone below us before they all flopped to the ground, unable to move. As the name suggested, the Area Paralysis card was able to paralyze numerous targets without killing them.

"Amazing work, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said from behind me.

“You vanquished them all in one fell swoop! Gold will be furious that he didn’t get to see you in action!”

“Thanks, Nemumu,” I replied. “I’m glad I was able to stun everyone without hurting them, since nobody here is over Level 100.”

Since we were dealing with humans, we couldn’t take the risk of using physical force to stun them individually in case we accidentally ended up killing some due to our elevated power levels. Luckily, the Area Paralysis card helped us avoid that particular deadly scenario. For extra insurance, we had also used a hack to make sure nobody would be able to leave the theater, no matter how much they tried. And as Nemumu mentioned, Gold wasn’t with us. I’d gotten him to stay with Lilith to provide her with protection, since that *was* supposed to be the job we were in the Duchy to do. Nemumu appeared to be feeling a sense of superiority that she had gotten to come with me on this mission and Gold hadn’t. I grinned at the very thought of it as we made moves to wrap up the mission.

“Anyway, now that they’re all out of commission, let’s tie ’em up, destroy the Poor Man’s Plague, and hand these chumps over to the sentries,” I said. “No, actually, we should wait until *after* the summit to alert the authorities to what they were doing, since we don’t want to cause a disturbance prematurely.”

“As you command, Lord Dark,” Nemumu said, readying herself to jump down to the first floor. “Allow me to restrain them —”

“You dirty apostates!” Aldo interrupted from below. Our eyes turned to the leader, who was slowly but surely lifting himself up from where he had fallen on the stage. This was quite surprising since after being hit with the Area Paralysis card, he shouldn’t have been able to lift a finger, much less speak.

*His power level isn’t supposed to be all that high,* I thought. *Which suggests he must be such a huge religious fanatic that he’s managing to move and speak purely through sheer force of will.* I was honestly impressed at the strength of his beliefs, so it was a shame that he had decided to focus that passion on a cause that was so heinous. Aldo’s hood slipped off his bald head and revealed a glare that was filled with unmitigated hatred.

“Why do you stand in our way?!” Aldo barked at us. “The Goddess created this world! She is the one who gave us life! Why would you stymie this blessed opportunity to propagate her

faith?!”

“We’re not here to challenge your beliefs or your larger goals,” I replied. “But you’re going about it completely the wrong way. Who the hell do you think you are to try to orchestrate a calamity just so that your church can gain more prominence? Do you *really* think the Goddess herself would want you to do this in her name?”

“Do not deign to speak for the Goddess, heretic!” Aldo spat. “People like you only besmirch her name!”

“You maggot!” Nemumu shouted down at him, palming one of her knives and placing her foot on the balcony ledge, ready to dive down and skin Aldo alive.

“Nemumu, it’s fine,” I said, stopping her. “His words don’t bother me in the slightest.” I turned back to Aldo. “If you’ve got something to say, save it for the authorities. In any case, we don’t want you guys interrupting the summit. Nemumu, you and I will go tie ’em up—” But before I could finish my sentence, I noticed Aldo digging something out of his pocket.

“Never thought I’d have to use my Fragment of the Goddess before attacking the dragonute’s manor,” Aldo muttered.

“Hey, that looks just like the—” I began. In the brief glimpse Aldo had given me, I’d recognized the object as being remarkably similar to the Fragment of the Undergod that Ellie had retrieved from the ogre I’d killed back on the Onifolk Archipelago. That other Fragment had looked like the tip of a fang from the mouth of a large monster, but Mei had been unable to glean any stats from the object even after running a boosted Appraisal on it, which I’d put down to it probably being too old and fossilized to have any stats left. My team back in the Abyss was presently busy poring over documents from the Onifolk Archipelago to see if they could find any records relating to the Fragment of the Undergod, but I’d never imagined that Aldo would be holding something that looked exactly like it.

While I stood there looking stunned, Aldo placed this so-called “Fragment of the Goddess” in his mouth and swallowed it. The next thing we knew, he was screaming in agony as his body contorted this way and that until two huge wings sprouted from his back, ripping through his cloak. Not only were the wings majestic, they were also as white as driven snow and without a single speck of dust on them. When Aldo flapped his new wings, they created strong gusts of wind and lifted him up into the air.

“Thank the Goddess that we in the Forgotten kept this weapon of last resort in our possession! Not only do I now have wings but I am also over my numbness and can feel the power coursing through me! This is truly a miracle of miracles!”

What I was seeing right at that moment was a burly, late middle-aged man being propelled upward into the air by the wings growing out of his back, his face a picture of rapturous joy. But instead of being some kind of mystical sight, the whole thing just creeped me out, as if I were looking at a hybrid that had been stitched together from different creatures.

*I should run an Appraisal on him while he’s busy running his mouth,* I told myself, activating an SR Appraisal card. His stats read as follows: “Level 1000, Human, Male, Gift: Pseudo-Evolve, Aldo.”

*What the heck is a “Pseudo-Evolve”?* I asked myself. *Wait a minute. Is his power level getting higher?* While I was performing my appraisal on Aldo, his level continued to rise until it reached 1200. In the meantime, Aldo was basically dancing around in the air over the mutations that were morphing his body. He flew up near the ceiling so that he could look down on Nemumu and me with sadistic glee.

“I will punish you fools for ruining our plans!” he proclaimed. “Prepared to be killed by a disciple who has been blessed by a miracle from the Goddess herself, even though such a death is too good for apostates like yourselves! Suffer divine wrath!”

Aldo flapped his wings toward us, creating gusts of winds far stronger than his initial takeoff, and if that wasn’t enough, feathers as sharp as blades came barreling toward us at high speed. The wind and the knife-feathers instantly ripped the balcony we were standing on to shreds, the debris crashing down to the first floor, though luckily, none of it hit the other fanatics I had paralyzed since they were near the stage area, and the balcony was above the rear seats. As for me, I was fine since I’d easily been able to dodge the attack, landing on a seat on the floor below. Nemumu, on the other hand, had gone for an entirely different solution.

“Just because you have wings, that doesn’t make you special!” Nemumu declared.

“What the devil are you doing on my back— Graaah!” Before Aldo could finish his sentence, Nemumu sliced off both of his wings, then kicked him in midair toward the stage so that he

wouldn’t land on any of the other members of the Forgotten and injure them.

From the outcome, it was obvious that Nemumu had waited until the very last second before launching herself from the balcony just before it was destroyed, and thanks to her powerful legs and her advanced agility, she practically flew through the air and landed perfectly on Aldo’s back. After she had punted him away, Nemumu landed gracefully and without a sound on the backrest of a seat on the first floor. Normally, that would have spelled the end of it, but Aldo managed to stand up again, looking clearly undefeated.

“Not only have you sliced off the wings the Goddess herself had blessed me with, but you have also blasphemed by kicking one of her chosen apostles! However…” Aldo instantly regenerated the wings, replacing the stumps on his back. “Your unholy onslaught isn’t enough to defeat this servant of the Goddess!”

Nemumu clicked her tongue. “So you’re not only disgusting, but you can regenerate too? Why must you make this harder for us?”

Aldo ignored Nemumu’s insults and started flapping his wings, a demonically triumphant look on his face. But instead of heading up toward the ceiling, he leaped from the stage and swooped low toward us.

Nemumu stood on the seat she had landed on, knife at the ready. “This time, I’ll infuse my blade with anti-regeneration poison!”

“Insufferable fools,” Aldo spat. “Don’t belittle the depths of our faith!” He dove down and deftly lifted one of the paralyzed extremists up into the air before delivering a thunderous kick to their torso. Since Aldo was above Level 1200 by this point, the kick caused an explosion of blood and guts to rain down in our direction. Of course, both Nemumu and I could have dodged this simple projectile attack in our sleep, but the act was so unbelievably shocking and gruesome, we almost forgot to evade it.

“Are you *insane*?!” I cried out as I leaped out of the way. “How could you *do* that to your own comrade?!”

“I’m completely sane, child!” Aldo yelled down, throwing his head back in laughter. “I believe I just told you *not* to belittle the depths of our faith. Now you will taste the fruits of our long

years of research!”

Blood and entrails lay scattered all around the theater, but it was only in that moment that I noticed the human viscera was starting to give off dark smoke that was clumping together into a miasma. Aldo hadn’t kicked those body parts at us to hurt us *physically*. No, that attack was designed to activate the Poor Man’s Plague inside the adherent’s body so that the curse would infect the two of us.

“Okay, *now* I see what you’re trying to do,” I said. “But you still make me sick.”

Aldo cackled again. “Of *course* I’m making you sick! That’s the whole idea!”

“No, I mean the whole way you operate makes me sick!” I shot back. “Your so-called ‘Poor Man’s Plague’ is never going to infect us, no matter what you try. In fact, you just reminded me that I should’ve neutralized that ‘weapon’ of yours before it ever crossed your mind to pull a stupid stunt like that.” I pulled out a gacha card. “SSSR High Exorcism—release!”

This card was powerful enough to purify my arm after it had held on to a quarter-unsealed God Requiem Gungnir, so cleansing this little crowd of devotees and the surrounding area of the curse would be a walk in the park compared to that. It only took a second or so for the High Exorcism card to do its job, and once it had finished, I turned to face Aldo, who was still hovering in midair.

“I have exorcised the Poor Man’s Plague from this theater and from every one of you zealots,” I declared. “The only thing left for us to do now is take you down.”

“Th-That’s impossible…” Aldo uttered. “We spent so many years and sacrificed so much to develop that curse, yet you’ve just effortlessly erased it?”

Aldo trembled from the tips of his wings to the tips of his toes, then spun around and flew up toward the ceiling, presumably intending to punch a hole through the roof and flee.

“I refuse to deal with you horrors for one second longer!” Aldo yelled over his shoulder. “I alone shall escape and fulfill my divine mission!”

Nemumu and I watched his frantic getaway attempt with bored indifference. “Give it up, Aldo,” I called up to him. “There’s no way you’re getting out of here.” And as if to prove it, Aldo slammed his head into the ceiling without so much as chipping

the material it was made from, causing him to bellow his pain and confusion as he clutched his face to stop it from throbbing so much. For those who might be wondering what had just happened, Mei had covered the ceiling—plus the doors and walls of the entire theater—with a web of near-invisible Magistrings that would be all but impossible for someone of Aldo's power level to break through.

"Th-There's some sort of fine mesh covering the ceiling!" Aldo exclaimed. "I couldn't see it till I was close up, but it was still strong enough to stop me?!"

"Like I said, you can forget making a run for it," I told him. "Your only choice is to surrender and tell us all about that Fragment of the Goddess you swallowed."

"Well, if I can't break out through the ceiling, I'll just have to kill you both and leave the hard way!" Aldo swooped down from the ceiling and headed straight for me to make good on his threat.

"Mei, get his paralyzed accomplices somewhere safe!" I commanded. I leaped toward Aldo and whacked one of his beefy arms away with my staff. He reacted by circling up and out of reach, then repeated his eagle dive toward me, though this time around, he had company.

"Don't you dare touch Lord Dark with your dirty hands, you maggot!" Nemumu warned. She had also leaped up into the air and landed on Aldo's back. She raised her knife that she had infused with anti-regeneration poison and slashed at his wings, but the knife didn't even make a scratch.

"Flesh blessed by the Goddess is never vulnerable to the same attack twice!" Aldo declared, attempting to strike Nemumu with the back of his hand to get her off his back. Although the Assassin's Blade was understandably taken aback that her attack had failed, she still managed to protect her face with her forearms in the nick of time to soften the blow, and she landed on the floor on her feet.

"Bow down and witness the endless miracles of the Goddess!" Aldo roared, sprouting two more wings to give him a set of four. The extra wings did up his speed, but he was still way too slow to be a match for us. I used our difference in level to my advantage, aiming my staff at his head and bringing it down on the top of his skull. But instead of it knocking him out cold like I was intending, Aldo remained airborne.

*I didn't hit him with all my might, sure, but it was pretty darn close,* I thought. *So how is he still conscious? Did he get a stamina boost?*

"You miserable pests!" Aldo yelled. "In that case…" He mutated again, sprouting extra wings, arms, and eyes this time. When his body eventually settled down into its new shape, Aldo had four arms, eyes in the back, top, and both sides of his head, and his fingers had elongated and fused together to resemble swords.

"Behold yet another blessed miracle by the Goddess!" Aldo yelled. "Now die like the immoral dogs you are, apostates!"

"If *that's* supposed to be a miracle, I'd rather be cursed!" I retorted.

Aldo responded to my jibe by hurtling down toward me at superfast speed, with all four of his knife-arms pointing at me. All of a sudden, his arms detached at the elbows and shot out like tentacles, moving in such a way that even if the target dodged the initial slashes, the blades remained in pursuit and took more swings without respite.

That attack might have worked against any normal opponent, but I could have knocked those knife-arms aside with my staff all day long if I'd wanted to. But I had more important things to do, so I decided it was time to put an end to this stupid battle.

"Nemumu!" I called over to her. "Stop this guy in his tracks! It only has to be for a second!"

"Understood, Lord Dark!" Nemumu replied. Trusting my partner to give me an opening, I whipped out a card as she charged at Aldo.

"So you want to die first, do you?" Aldo taunted her. "I'll send you to the feet of the Goddess to receive your punishment, you heretic!"

"Your arms are way too slow to hit me," Nemumu coolly pointed out. "Poison Manifest!" She used her unique skill to imbue her knife with poison, then speedily closed the gap to Aldo while nimbly dodging all of his sword-arm attacks. She leaped into the air and zoomed right past Aldo, but not before gouging one of his eyes out with her knife. The mutated fanatic screeched at length like a wounded wildebeest, before blindly crashing into the seats on the first floor.

Once he'd come to a halt, I activated the card I was holding. "SSSR Ice World—release!" The spell instantly froze Aldo solid.

"Excellent work, Lord Dark!" Nemumu exclaimed ecstatically

as she ran up to me.

"No, thank *you* for recognizing that you had to poison him in the softest part of his body," I said, recalling how Aldo had been invulnerable to Nemumu's knife attack before. "Thanks to your quick thinking, we were able to stop him for long enough to freeze him." I paused and looked down at Aldo's icy body. "Normally, this would be the end of the story, but it looks like he has other ideas."

As I feared, the tinkling sound of cracking ice filled the theater. Upon closer inspection, I could see that Aldo's body was gradually mutating within his icy prison, no doubt believing that increasing his mass was the solution to breaking free. Shortly after I had finished speaking to Nemumu, the ice shattered completely and revealed a newly transformed Aldo, whose beastlike guttural roar echoed around the theater. It was such an earsplitting sound, no doubt every sentry in the Duchy and beyond would have heard it if not for the fact that we had enclosed the theater in an R Silent bubble beforehand.

At any rate, this version of Aldo was the furthest thing you could imagine from the human man we had met outside the church a few days before. This monstrosity was more than triple the size of the original Aldo, had muscles bulging everywhere you looked, had six arms sprouting out of his sides, and had eyes on every part of his body. Yet he was *still* acting like he was a gift from heaven.

"Behold! The ultimate blessing of the Goddess!" Aldo proclaimed in a spectral, preternatural voice. "The strength of my faith is unbeatable! Nobody in this mortal realm can defeat me!"

"Unbeatable, my foot," I said reflexively. "There's nothing in this world that's totally invincible. I have an unlimited number of gacha cards that can prove that."

"Cease your prattle, apostate!" Aldo snapped. "You will now die knowing the inestimable power of my faith in the Goddess!" He rushed toward me at a speed that belied his now-lumbering frame.

"Lord Dark!" Nemumu called out as she went to jump in front of me to shield me from his attack, but I put up my hand to stop her.

"It's fine," I said. "I'm ending this circus act right now." I produced another gacha card and activated it. "SSR See Through —release!"

As the rarity suggested, the See Through card wasn't all that powerful, since all it really did was let me see through things, but for the purposes of defeating Aldo, it was one of the best options I had in my arsenal. After releasing the card, I charged forward to meet Aldo head-on, dodging the multiple knife-arms he kept swinging in my direction. Just like Nemumu had done earlier, I ramped up my speed and zoomed past Aldo, though this time, I purposely left him standing.

"You did well to avoid my strikes!" Aldo admitted as he turned to face me again. "But how long do you think your luck will last?"

"You needn't drag this out any longer. You've already lost," I said with my back to Aldo still. I turned around, then extended my closed right fist and uncurled my fingers to reveal what I was holding in it.

"What? The Fragment of the Goddess?" Aldo cried out in disbelief. "Where did you get that?!"

"I located it using my enhanced vision that lets me see through flesh, then simply scooped it out of your body when I zipped past you," I explained. "This thing was letting you heal and do all sorts of tricks, wasn't it? So all I had to do was take it away from you."

"G-Give it back!" Aldo screamed frantically. "Give me back the Fragment!" Since all I had done to Aldo was make a hand-sized hole in him, he was still healthy enough to fight, and he launched himself toward me at the same high velocity he had demonstrated before.

"SSSR Ice World—release!" I said, activating the triple-super rare gacha card and again encasing him in an icy coffin, but this time, he no longer had the power to transform himself into a larger monstrosity to escape. Because I had used the SSSR Ice World twice in such an enclosed space, the ambient temperature had grown cold enough to turn the moisture in the air into snowflakes, and I stood in the middle of a mini blizzard for a moment, looking up at the huge ice sculpture that was Aldo in his mutated form, before placing the Fragment of the Goddess in my Item Box.



# Chapter 11: The Summit, Part 1

The day of the summit in the Principality of the Nine had arrived, and the leaders and representatives of all nine nations were moments away from entering the central conference hall and taking their seats at the round table. My party and a handful of knights from the Human Kingdom had been placed on standby at the entrance reserved for humans, ready to open the doors for the royal delegation.

With a few minutes to go until the summit officially got underway, I waited next to the doors, visibly frowning under my mask. Nemumu seemed worried about my grumpiness, while Gold decided it was best to leave me alone, since he felt there was little he could do to cheer me up. Putting my teammates on the spot like this wasn't intentional on my part, and considering the summit was proceeding without a hitch, I should really have been in better spirits. After all, we had managed to thwart an extremist group called the Forgotten from executing a series of terror attacks that could potentially have led to the summit being called off, captured all of its members, then purified them of a curse known as the "Poor Man's Plague," which would have caused an epidemic if we had allowed it to spread unchecked. Their leader, Aldo, had given us a bit of trouble by mutating himself into a monster using the Fragment of the Goddess, an item which looked awfully similar to the so-called "Fragment of the Undergod" we had recovered from the dead ogre I'd fought in the Onifolk Archipelago. But I was able to scoop out this "Fragment" from Aldo's mutated body before finally capturing him too.

Sure, I would have much *preferred* not having to take on this extra chore of dealing with the Forgotten, but I'd considered it within the scope of providing security for Lilith. Plus, we were able to retrieve a similar item to the Fragment of the Undergod that *wasn't* completely drained of all of its power, so whatever way you looked at it, I *should* have been satisfied with the way things had turned out. So why was I so crabby? I had Diablo to thank for that.

*I can't believe Diablo just dropped everything and headed back to*

*the Demonkin Nation at the last possible minute,* I thought. Yes, my sworn enemy had packed his bags that very morning and hightailed it back to his homeland. When I found out, I was in complete shock. I asked Nemumu to probe deeper into his mysterious departure, and from what she could gather at such short notice, Diablo had excused himself from proceedings to go take care of a situation that had arisen in his fiefdom and he was apparently the only one in the entire nation who could take care of it, forcing him to skip out on this very important summit. Of course, since his departure, everyone in his clique of demonkin snobs had been sniggering nonstop at how Diablo had fallen a few rungs—if not more—down the ladder.

*Originally, Ellie was supposed to appear at the summit as the Wicked Witch and make sure he was left twisting in the wind,* I thought. *I guess his absence* is *still a stain on his record, but I wanted to be the one to bring him crashing down. I could've made it much,* much *worse for him.* It didn't matter that Diablo had effectively tripped himself up; *I* was supposed to be the one who ruined his life, and the fact I wasn't directly responsible for him face-planting into the dirt pissed me off to no end. Sure, call me childish, but if you look at it from my perspective, that self-important bastard *needed* a thoroughly humiliating experience after what he'd put me through three years earlier.

However, it was slowly dawning on me that I couldn't continue to stew over this lost opportunity, because Lilith, fake Yume, and the human soldiers were all eyeing me warily. I guess I must have been radiating a little *too* much dark aura while reflecting on the situation. And this was still an important summit, so I had to get my act together fast. *Yes, it sucks that Diablo's not here, but I need to start thinking positively,* I thought. *The summit's about to get underway, and things are generally moving in the right direction, all things considered. Besides, I can always deal with that rat, Diablo, later.*

I took a few shallow breaths to clear my mind, and it seemed to do the trick. Even Nemumu looked relieved that the worst had passed, while Gold nodded approvingly at me. Lilith, Yume, and the soldiers started to act a bit more normally again, though that was probably because it was almost time for the doors to be opened for the presummit gathering.

"It's time," the king prompted, finally authorizing his soldiers to open our set of doors at the exact same time as the other

eight. All the delegations then entered the chamber at the same time, with the main representative from each nation walking toward the round table in the center of the conference hall in lockstep with their counterparts while their retinues followed a few paces behind.

The representative from the Demonkin Nation—the nation that had called the emergency summit in the first place—was a male demon with long fangs, who was over 175 centimeters tall, and although he was wearing a flamboyantly lavish outfit that partially exposed his chest, he walked with the kind of steady, purposeful gait that made it very clear he was trained in combat.

According to Lilith, this was Voros, the crown prince of the Demonkin Nation, here in his father's stead, because the king was bedridden due to illness. A successor to the throne was yet to be officially named, but everyone knew it was going to be Voros, and the prince was certainly conducting himself as if he had already secured the position of being the next king. If I were to guess, I would say he was seeking to use this summit to burnish his authority. The group following Voros consisted of bodyguards, diplomats, and of course, the four young aristocrats in Diablo's clique that *hadn't* skedaddled out of the Duchy.

The Beastfolk Federation's representative was a bearman named Ozo, who was a good two meters tall, and whose girth could be best described as broad. Ozo had been smoking a long pipe prior to entering the chamber, but for the sake of propriety, he had quickly handed the pipe to a subordinate behind him before marching into the hall. Although Ozo was physically imposing, that was simply because he was heavyset. He didn't give off even a whiff of brutality.

The five chieftains that ruled the Beastfolk Federation traditionally sent one of their number to represent the nation at summits after discussing the matter among themselves, but as a result of the Beastfolk Massacre—otherwise known as the "Human Deliverance War" by members of my own race—where my side killed three of their chieftains, the beastfolk that had been hurriedly fast-tracked into the vacant tribe leader roles were young and lacked experience. As such, since Ozo was one of the few remaining senior chieftains left, he was quickly picked to represent his nation at the summit. I also couldn't help noticing that most of Ozo's subordinates and bodyguards were

from his own Bear Tribe, which really highlighted how much we had devastated the other tribes.

The Dwarf Kingdom was being represented by none other than Dagan, who I'd spoken to three nights earlier, and when he spotted me, his world-weary expression softened into a brief smile before quickly banishing it again, since he knew this was neither the time nor the place to acknowledge my presence. As it was, some of the more observant attendees from the other races *did* notice this silent exchange, but my party feigned total ignorance so we wouldn't draw further suspicion.

Yotsuha—who I'd also talked to three nights earlier—similarly flashed me a smile, but unlike Dagan, she continued to beam at me as if she were genuinely thrilled to see me again. In fact, her reaction was so noticeable, even Lilith stole a glance at me, wondering if she should be concerned, though I had naturally already briefed Lilith on Yotsuha, so the princess knew she was on our side. True to form, Nemumu's reaction to Yotsuha smiling at me was to huffily readjust her muffler so that it fully covered her mouth, making me chuckle awkwardly.

The centaurs were represented by a leader who looked elderly, but whose physique was still large and powerful. He had a beard, was wearing a traditional outfit festooned with accessories, and was leading an entourage that reserved scornful looks for the human and beastfolk delegations. We humans were, of course, "inferior," but it seemed as though the centaurs wore their rivalry with the beastfolk on their sleeves. I didn't let the centaurs' dismissive treatment of my race bother me, but I did take a closer glance at their leader.

*So that's Santor's grandfather, is it?* I mused. *They do share the same general physique, looks, and overall demeanor.* In all my travels with the Concord of the Tribes, not once did our partymate, Santor, mention that he was related to the head of state of his nation, but my intelligence operatives discovered this connection very soon after we had broken free from the Abyss. In all honesty, his family ties didn't totally surprise me when I first learned of Santor's background. *I knew there was a reason he was obsessively competitive with Garou,* I thought, referring to the wolfman in our former party. *It was because he's the grandson of the leader of his nation.*

Sure, the centaurs viewed the beastfolk as rivals, but that didn't necessarily apply to every single member of the centaur

race. However, since Santor was related to the head of the nation and in the running to be his successor, it made sense that he expressed more hostility toward a beastman. *I should bear that in mind when I exact my revenge on Santor,* I thought.

The dragonutes and the dark elves had sent diplomats to represent them at the summit rather than their leaders. The official line from the dragonutes was that no member of the imperial family could make it due to scheduling conflicts arising from the abrupt nature of the summit, but it was obvious that the *real* reason was the dragonute leaders were too prideful to dignify this meeting with their presence, since it had been called by a race they considered beneath them. Of course, what dispatching a lower-level surrogate insinuated wasn't lost on the demonkin, and they didn't seem to take too kindly to the slight.

The dark elves were an entirely different matter, though. Disguised as the Wicked Witch, Ellie had removed the dark elf clan leaders from power after thwarting their attempt to assassinate her. In their place, she had installed puppets who were fully on her side, but unfortunately, these replacements didn't have nearly as tight a grip over the clans as their predecessors. As such, the new leadership had to spend every waking moment making sure the nation didn't devolve into chaos, forcing them to send a proxy to the emergency summit. The demonkin were slightly disappointed at this outcome as well, but they appeared to be more accepting of the dark elf leaders' no-show, due to these extenuating circumstances. Since the Dragonute Empire didn't have that excuse, the demonkin found their snub even more intolerable.

Finally, there were the elves, led in by Queen Lif VII, who had all the cheer of a condemned criminal being led to the gallows. Her world-renowned beauty was nowhere to be seen and she had the gaunt, sunken cheeks of someone who was on a lengthy crash diet. The group that entered the hall behind her consisted of three people wearing hoods followed by a number of elven knights, and this delegation was by far the most funereal of the nine.

Voros glanced across at the elves skeptically as he launched into the presummit introductions. "Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for answering our call to attend this summit. I look forward to a full and fruitful discussion on our proposed response to the Wicked Witch and the chaos she has caused!"

Despite the somber mood of the occasion, Voros wore a buoyant smile while delivering this opening statement, as if he were the lead role in a play warming up the audience before the raising of the curtain. He seemed visibly excited about being the big cheese at this gathering, though everyone else in the hall appeared thoroughly weirded out by it.

"Princess Lilith, you have blossomed into a splendid young woman," Voros continued, ignoring the disconcerted reaction he was getting. "The last time we met, you were still a tender young girl, but now even the young gentlemen in my circle cannot help but notice how lovely you have become. For a human, that is."

Lilith paused momentarily at this casual bigotry. "I thank you for your kind words, Prince Voros. As for yourself, I see you are as strikingly resplendent in your appearance as I remember from when I was still young."

Voros laughed vociferously. "You flatter me, my dear! It was worth calling this summit just to hear you say that!"

Thankfully, Lilith had been able to talk her way out of what could have quite easily been an awkward exchange. It should also be noted that Voros was absolutely stunned when he first caught a glimpse of Nemumu, but since he was royalty and she was not, he didn't try to hit on her like one of the demon blue bloods had done a few days before. And for the sake of clarity, summits were conducted in private with just the nine representatives in the hall while everyone else stayed outside. The reason for these larger presummit gatherings was to give nations the opportunity to present their heirs apparent and rotating leaders to the others, so that if another representative took a seat at the round table during the next summit, the meeting could proceed smoothly without any surprises. This explained why Voros had struck up an informal conversation with Lilith. In due time, everyone apart from the nine representatives would leave the chamber so that the real business of the summit could begin.

*This is the part of the summit where we were going to embarrass Diablo in public, since he would've been one of the aristocrats standing behind Voros,* I reflected, glancing across at the Demonkin Nation delegation and sighing.

As the moderator of the summit, Voros continued the conversation by complimenting Lif on her appearance and Dagan on the superior goods his kingdom made. Lif, who looked

like a hospital patient, expressed her thanks rather curtly, likely because she saw through the empty praise, while Dagan responded with something generic and made it fairly obvious that he wanted to get on with the summit.

Voros turned to Ozo. “I wish to extend my deepest sympathies for the devastating losses your great nation has suffered at the hands of the Wicked Witch of the Tower. Here at the summit, you will have the opportunity to discuss what you think is the best recourse for dealing with that menace.”

“Actually, we have no quarrels with what the Great Witch of the Tower did to us,” Ozo said. “We were at fault with the whole war business. But at least it’s over now, so we can pick up the pieces and move on from it.”

Voros hesitated, since this was clearly not the answer he had been fishing for. “Well, that’s *very* forward-thinking of you, Chief Ozo.” His words dripped with sarcasm and displeasure, but Ozo wasn’t paying attention because he was too preoccupied with the presence of the hooded trio standing behind Lif, the bearman’s timid eyes frequently darting in their direction. This seemed to escape Voros’s notice entirely, though, since he swiftly moved on to expressing words of welcome to the representatives from the onifolk, the dark elves, the centaurs, and lastly, the dragonutes.

“I *sincerely* appreciate you gracing us with your presence,” Voros said to the dragonute diplomat with barely concealed derisiveness. “Unlike the dark elves who have had their leadership destabilized by the Wicked Witch, the emperor of the Dragonute Empire is apparently too *busy* to join us for this emergency summit. When you return to your proud nation, please give my regards to His Imperial Majesty. Let him know I regret that we were unable to meet in person, and that he should take care not to overwork himself.”

“Thank you, Prince Voros,” the dragonute proxy replied. “We shall relay your message to our honorable leader. Knowing that your father is in poor health himself, we are sure our leader will be glad to hear that you also worry about him, *Prince* Voros.”

Of course, it was easy to see that Voros was belittling the dragonute emperor for not even bothering to show up to the summit, even speculating in a backhanded way that he might be sick due to overexertion, but the dragonute envoy had deftly countered by reminding Voros that it was his own father who

was the real no-show by being in his sickbed, and furthermore, the demon king had yet to officially name his firstborn son as his successor. You could almost hear the dragonute snickering by the end of his response.

The demons saw the dragonutes as their bitter rivals, which led to the two races always trading sarcastic barbs at these summits, or so I had been told. This time around, however, we had a surprise in store that would make the demonkin and the dragonutes in attendance forget all about how much they hated one another.

"Now that we are done with the pleasantries, let us begin this emergency summit," Voros announced. "I will ask everyone apart from the nine representatives to please depart from the hall so that we may—"

"Your Highness, might I say something before I leave?" Lilith asked, raising her hand. Her father, the king of the Human Kingdom, morosely shut his eyes. The fake Yume, Nemumu, Gold, and myself didn't show any kind of reaction, but the rest of the human contingent was shocked, wondering what the princess was about to say. Even though Lilith was human, she was still royalty, so Voros couldn't ignore her request.

"Yes, you may speak, Princess Lilith," Voros said, a businesslike smile on his face. "Was there something that slipped your mind that you wished to tell us? If you intend to invite me to dinner this evening, I would be honored to entertain the request, but be forewarned that I may be forced to cancel if the outcome of this summit demands it."

The rest of the demon delegation giggled at Voros's snide joke, because everyone knew the demon prince would never lower himself to dine with an inferior human, royalty or not. *Seriously, is sarcasm the only language these demons know?*

Lilith took a step forward, confident that what she was about to say was far from frivolous, like Voros was suggesting. Once she had made sure that she had the attention of everyone in the chamber, Lilith began in a raised pitch. "I am here to declare that my nation, the Human Kingdom, intends to depose the incumbent king, and that I, Lilith, shall take his place as queen regnant. I ask for the opportunity to have the dignitaries gathered here ratify this decision!"

Lilith's shocking declaration had the same effect on the crowd as an ultimate-class attack spell, and the previous sarcastic

discourse was instantly banished from everyone's minds. Voros's expression froze, all trace of his pretentious attitude erased. Aside from the Human Kingdom's king, everyone in the chamber who was not already in the know looked upon Lilith aghast.

Voros was the first to recover from the shock of the princess's sudden declaration and sighed. "I never would have imagined that you would suggest something so nonsensical, Princess Lilith. I will remind you that this summit is a forum to decide critical world matters, and as such, it is no place for practical jokes. This conduct is highly unbecoming of you and your nation."

Voros glared icily at Lilith while admonishing her like she was a child, but the princess stood her ground and continued her piece.

"Your Highness, why would you assume that it is a joke?" Lilith asked. "If memory serves, I believe it is customary for my nation to inform the summit when there is to be a transition of power to a new monarch so that the other eight nations can formally welcome the successor. Alternatively, the eight nonhuman nations can decide who the next ruler of the Human Kingdom will be by a simple majority vote. Am I correct?"

At this juncture, it should be repeated that the Human Kingdom didn't even have the right to pick its own rulers, and the other eight nations made sure the kingdom was ruled by people who wouldn't upset the status quo. The other nations "welcomed" a successor they approved of by holding a supposedly ceremonial confirmatory vote, which also served as a way to block anyone they saw as a potential risk if the majority objected to the candidate put forward.

At that moment, Voros was staring at Lilith with pure contempt that went beyond the usual antihuman bigotry. His eyes made it clear that he thought Lilith was completely brainless and downright insane for believing her coronation would pass the eight-nation vote. To his mind, not one nonhuman race would agree to support Lilith's ascension to the throne. Visibly irritated, Voros sought to end what he saw as a farce so that he could get the summit back on track.

"Yes, you are right that you will immediately take the throne as queen regnant *if* the majority of the other eight nations support your nomination," Voros conceded. "However, nobody here has raised any objections to the current king's rule, so there

really is no reason to depose him. In any case, we convened this emergency summit to address the threat posed by the Wicked Witch. This hall is not your playground, and we do not have time to engage in this childish game, Princess Lilith."

But this dressing down by Voros didn't even make Lilith flinch, and she was quick to push back. "So I assume that means the Demonkin Nation is opposed to my declaration, then? Might we hear your thoughts on the matter, Queen Lif VII of the Elven Queendom?"

"W-We of the E-Elven Queendom would welcome the abdication of the incumbent king of the Human Kingdom and for P-Princess Lilith to replace him as queen," Lif said haltingly.

"*What*?!" Voros's jaw practically dropped to the floor, so blindsided was he by Lif's declaration of support. It was such a bombshell, in fact, that it made Voros blind to how much Lif was nervously fidgeting, her mind clearly preoccupied with the hooded figures standing behind her.

"The Dwarf Kingdom would welcome the coronation of Princess Lilith too!" Dagan piped up with a hint of amusement.

"We of the Beastfolk Federation support the proposition as well," Ozo added.

"The Dark Elf Islands also approve of Princess Lilith's coronation," said the dark elf envoy.

Yotsuha flashed me a winning smile before casting the deciding vote. "We of the Onifolk Archipelago approve of Princess Lilith's installation as queen."

*"See? I kept my promise, my destiny. Tell me that I don't deserve your praise,"* Yotsuha's eyes seemed to be saying as she looked at me intently. It appeared that all that mattered to her was repaying her favor to me, and she didn't actually care if Lilith became queen or not.

*Well, I'm glad she feels so indebted to me for carrying out her revenge and killing that ogre for her, but she's seriously looking at me way too much right now,* I thought to myself. But I was supposed to be a simple, not-particularly-noteworthy bodyguard at this summit, so I could hardly tell her to cut it out. I tried to just ignore Yotsuha, but Nemumu was complicating matters by getting pissed at how she was looking at me. For his part, Gold simply shrugged his shoulders in sympathy. Thankfully, however, the impact of Lilith winning the vote to become queen had been so overwhelming, no one else had even noticed Yotsuha's silent

antics. Voros in particular was so stunned by this turn of events that he was struggling to string two words together, so Lilith decided to speak for him.

"So the Elven Queendom, the Dwarf Kingdom, the Beastfolk Federation, the Dark Elf Islands, and the Onifolk Archipelago are all in favor of my proposal," Lilith reeled off. "May we hear the centaurs' thoughts on it?"

"Do you really think I'd let an inferior filly like you be any sort of *queen*?!" the bearded centaur leader boomed. Normally, everybody avoided calling a human an "inferior" for the duration of a summit since it lacked grace and the speaker would be thought of as a country bumpkin who didn't know how to read a room, but due to the chaotic nature of the present situation, the uttering of the slur was barely noticed.

"And how does the Dragonute Empire vote?" Lilith said, completely ignoring the bigoted remark.

"We shall abstain," the dragonute envoy replied. The diplomat was completely authorized to vote whichever way he wished, but he instead chose to take a neutral stance for now and closely observe the situation. It seemed the diplomat wasn't very pleased at how the dragonutes had been outmaneuvered, but decided his top priority was to report on the matter to his superiors back home as soon as possible.

With a majority vote secured in her favor, Lilith smiled broadly and announced her victory. "Only the demonkin and the centaurs oppose my motion. The elves, the dwarves, the beastfolk, the dark elves, and the onis are all in favor. The Dragonute Empire abstained. That makes the count five in favor, two opposed, one abstention. Therefore, by majority decision, the current king of the Human Kingdom is hereby deposed, and I, Lilith, will immediately take over as queen regnant."

While Lilith had sounded more like a calm and confident teenage girl before, there was a regal quality to her voice all of a sudden. Or rather, her voice now seemed to be filled with a weighty resolve to perform her new role to the best of her abilities. *Everything's going according to plan,* I thought. *All that groundwork paid off.* Just hearing Lilith's resounding voice made me and my allies feel like we were witnessing a historical event unfold before us. Lilith—or rather, *Queen* Lilith, as she was now—had completely taken over as the leading player at this summit, leaving Voros sputtering until he was finally able to form words

again.

“This is an outrage!” he screeched. “What in blazes would cause you people to side with this woman—” He stopped mid-sentence for he had suddenly realized what was going on. His murderous glare swept across the faces of the representatives of the five races that voted for Lilith. “You traitors! That evil witch put you up to this, didn’t she?”

A portion of the delegates stared curiously at Voros, not understanding what he was implying, but the four young demon nobles definitely knew what he meant.



Voros continued to stare daggers at the representatives of the five nations, venom accompanying every word out of his mouth. “We know that infernal witch conquered the elves, the dark elves, and the beastfolk! She must have been behind that coup on the Onifolk Archipelago too! And the dwarves? She must’ve bought off your ilk with magic items or some other technological bribe she cooked up using her black magic!”

“How rude of you to suggest that I would stoop to bribing or bullying people to take my side,” retorted the mellifluous voice of a young woman that rang out in the conference hall before giggling at the very idea of it. “All I did was make efforts in good faith to present my side of the story to these five nations, and they readily agreed to cooperate with me. You know very well that such a declaration would never have been broached without making due preparations beforehand. In fact, everything was already set in stone the moment Queen Lilith opened her mouth. You must be rather soft in the head if it took you that long to realize how the vote would play out.”

The voice rang out from behind Queen Lif VII, but she continued to face forward, trembling like a child stuck in a haunted house. Voros glowered at the elf queen, his pride thoroughly wounded, but she was unable to move a muscle or say anything, so it fell to one of the hooded individuals behind her to fill in the blanks.

“I hope you will forgive me for not introducing myself sooner,” the hooded figure began. “I am the one and only Wicked Witch of the Tower, the very issue that this summit was convened to address. It is the greatest of pleasures to make all of your acquaintances.”

It was at that moment that everyone realized the hooded woman was in fact wearing an outfit resembling a sorceress’s. After the young woman had identified herself as the Wicked Witch, a good few seconds passed where everyone stood motionless before the guards serving the dragonutes, demonkin, and centaurs moved into position to protect the delegates. The two other hooded figures behind the witch also moved in front of her, serving as bodyguards, and they both lowered their hoods to reveal their true identities: UR Level 8888, Menace of Mayhem, Khaos, and UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka.

Khaos produced his Chaos Scythe from his Item Box, and the

weapon was so large, it drew plenty of stares from those present. Of course, he had made such a showy move on purpose to demonstrate that he served the Wicked Witch as her guardian-slash-deputy.

Once all of the security guards had taken up their positions, Voros yelled at the queen of the elves. “Was this your doing, Queen Lif? Why did you bring the Wicked Witch to a summit that was convened to address the problems *she’s* causing? Were you really that intent on betraying us?!”

“No! I wasn’t! I wasn’t…” Lif pressed her hands to the sides of her head, shaking like a leaf. “I wasn’t. I really wasn’t…” The elf queen once again seemed too incapacitated by fear to do anything, so Ellie, basking in her role as the Wicked Witch, took another step forward and spoke on her behalf.

“Once I became aware that you fine fellows had organized an emergency summit concerning myself, I insisted on accompanying the Elven Queendom to the gathering as their guest,” Ellie said. “And thanks to them, I was able to enter this chamber without facing any restrictions whatsoever. Their assistance was very much appreciated.”

Ellie turned to Lif and addressed her in a gentle voice. “You no longer have to worry about me punishing you by ‘mushing up your brain,’ so to speak. There’s no need to keep being so frightened.”

“Oh, thank you so much!” Lif said as relief washed over her, not caring that all of the top dignitaries of the world were watching on. “Thank you so, so very much! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

For those who might have forgotten, “mushing up your brain” was in reference to the first time Ellie showed up in the Elven Queendom capital in her guise as the Wicked Witch, when she captured Lif with her strategic-class spell Dorn Fesseln and probed the queen’s memory using her magic. The memory probe could be a very painful process, to the point that it could render a person permanently mentally incapacitated if Ellie so wished, and while she hadn’t gone quite that far with Lif, the elf queen was still finding it hard to recover from the excruciating experience, if how emaciated she looked was anything to go by. It was because Lif was so afraid of going through the memory probe again that she had readily agreed to help smuggle Ellie into the conference chamber, and the queen had remained

fearful all through this presummit meeting until Ellie told her she was in the clear.

Obviously, Voros and the other dignitaries had no way of knowing what "mushing up your brain" referred to, though they were able to guess that it wouldn't be all fun and games, to say the least.

The Wicked Witch turned to the delegates before her once more, and addressed them in a vaguely teasing manner. "Please don't worry about little old me, my good fellows. You can go ahead with your little summit. I shall remain here for the rest of the proceedings and answer any questions you might have for me to the best of my abilities."

*This was supposed to be the exact moment where the Wicked Witch was going to embarrass Diablo and discredit him in front of everyone,* I thought mournfully. *Oh well. Guess that'll have to wait till next time.* Since it was no use crying over spilled milk, I refocused my attention on what was going on in the conference chamber. The Wicked Witch was busy urging the delegates to carry on with the summit with her present, but as one would probably expect, everyone was balking at the idea of discussing what response they should take against the witch when said witch was in the very same room. Voros—who had been expecting to play the lead role in this summit—went red with anger over how the witch had thrown mud in his face and all over the reputation of the Demonkin Nation.

"We're not going to hold a meeting with the *enemy* listening in!" Voros yelled. "Be reasonable, woman!"

"My word. You're turning down my invitation to freely discuss matters? I thought you fine fellows might use this extraordinary opportunity to extract some valuable information from me. I would never have imagined that you would all be this faint of heart."

"Damnable witch…" Voros cursed. "Guards, seize her!" The demon guards started moving toward the Wicked Witch, but before they got anywhere near her, the elf guards joined Khaos and Orka and formed a wall of bodies in front of her.

"Queen Lif!" Voros squawked in wide-eyed rage. "What possesses you to stand in our way?!"

"Sh-She is here as a g-guest of the Elven Queendom," Lif stammered. "It is my d-duty as head of state to safeguard the people I invite."

“Your so-called ‘guest’ is the source of turmoil across our lands!” Voros screeched. “Did that little detail escape your empty mind?!”

“Sorry, Prince Voros, but if you’re plannin’ on arresting the Wicked Witch, you’re gonna have to go through the Dwarf Kingdom too,” Dagan said mirthfully. “We owe her at least that much.”

“We of the Beastfolk Federation will also assist the Elven Queendom,” Ozo said after a slight pause.

“The Dark Elf Islands will provide protection as well,” the country’s envoy added.

All attention in the chamber turned to Yotsuha, the only remaining ally of the Wicked Witch who hadn’t said anything yet. Despite everything that had happened up to this point, the Holy Princess hadn’t taken her eyes off me once, but as soon as she noticed she was the center of attention, she snapped out of it, scanned the room to get up to speed on the situation, then said her piece.

“The Onifolk Archipelago stands behind the Elven Queendom,” Yotsuha declared. “Or rather, we stand in support of the Wicked Witch of the Tower. We mean no disrespect to anyone else, but we are greatly indebted to her.”

“You weasels!” Voros yelled, but he knew the odds of successfully detaining the Wicked Witch were against him with five nations standing in his way.

The dragonute envoy chose that moment to jump in. “Prince Voros, this summit is a venue for discussing issues using words. It is not the place for us to draw swords. Call me excessively cautious if you wish, but I believe it would be for the best to end this summit here.”

“I’m with the Dragonute Empire on this,” the centaur leader added. “The current conditions are too dysfunctional for a proper meeting.”

The dragonutes were basically saying they would neither oppose nor ally with Voros, and the centaurs, seeing the tide turning against them, had taken refuge in the dragonute envoy’s suggestion. This time, Voros was truly alone with no allies he could count on, and if he were to insist on having his own way, he would only end up injuring his own prestige and that of his nation further. Although it meant following the suggestion made by his dragonute rivals, Voros had no choice but to stand down

and retreat.

Just as I had been expecting, Voros raised his hand to signal to his guards to fall back. “The Demonkin Nation will never forget how six nations fell in with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, but we acknowledge that these unforeseen circumstances do not permit this summit to proceed as planned, therefore the Demonkin Nation will withdraw for now.”

“I would like to say something, Prince Voros,” Lilith piped up just as the demon prince was about to vacate his seat. Voros glowered at the new queen, wondering what she could possibly want from him in this final moment of the aborted summit.

“I do find it highly regrettable that we are canceling the summit,” Lilith said, not even flinching under the nakedly hostile glare Voros was treating her to. “However, I hope that the demonkin, the dragonutes, and the centaurs will not forget that I have been lawfully appointed as the queen of the Human Kingdom following the rules of this summit. That is all.”

Voros had completely forgotten about Lilith’s coronation amid all the chaos that had been created by the Wicked Witch’s appearance. After being reminded of it by the new queen herself, Voros nearly clucked his tongue in anger, but he managed to maintain his manners and addressed Lilith directly.

“All you did was abuse our rules to selfishly usurp the throne like some common thief,” he said pointedly. “You will surely come to regret this decision.”

“I assure you that day will never come, Your Highness,” Lilith replied without missing a beat while still maintaining her dignity as the new queen.

“We shall see how long your show of defiance will last,” Voros scowled. “For the moment, our nation will recognize your enthronement, but we shall also reassess our dealings with your nation on every front, not least diplomatically.”

“Your Majesty, Queen Lilith,” the dragonute envoy said, approaching the issue somewhat more tactfully. “My nation will also need to reconsider the nature of our relationship with your kingdom immediately upon my return. This is a necessary measure, since I suspect your own nation will not be as acquiescent of our demands as in the past.”

“We centaurs need to discuss our relationship with *every* nation, aside from the Demonkin Nation and the Dragonute Empire, of course,” the centaur leader added. “The fact that we

were not able to complete the summit as planned is highly disappointing to us.”

So to sum up, the summit ended prematurely with the Demonkin Nation expressing open enmity against the Human Kingdom, while the dragonutes and the centaurs decided they would take their time to rethink their respective relationships with the humans. I suspected all three nations weren’t particularly happy with the outcome, *especially* after they had been freely exploiting the Human Kingdom for centuries, but because they had decided to back off—for the time being, at least—Lilith had become the new ruler of her nation like she had always dreamed of, and this moment represented the beginning of a new chapter in the history of humanity. The representatives of the three unfriendly nations left first, but it wasn’t long before the delegates from the other six nations also eventually returned to their manors, since there was nothing left to talk about.

# Chapter 12: The Summit, Part 2

After the summit had ended prematurely, the Human Kingdom delegation returned to the manor that was assigned to us, and once there, Lilith gathered everyone in the reception hall to make an address. Flanking the new queen were the fake Yume, myself, Nemumu, Gold, Ellie (in her guise as the Wicked Witch), Khaos, and Orka. This had all been planned beforehand, and we made sure that those in the audience for the address included those who hadn't been at the presummit to witness history being made.

Once Lilith had done a quick scan of the attentive rows in front of her, she began her speech. "During the emergency summit, five nations voted to depose the king and appoint me as the sovereign queen of the Human Kingdom."

Shocked murmurs rippled around the knights and maids in attendance. Many studied the reactions of the other people who had been at the summit, and once they had confirmed this wasn't some big practical joke, a new wave of gasps filled the room. Lilith waited for the buzz of conversation to simmer down into a fretful silence before continuing.

"My father, the former king, will retire and live out the remainder of his days away from the palace," Lilith announced. "He will have absolutely no involvement in the governance of the kingdom. As soon as I return home, I will also instruct my brother to step down from his post. Like my father, he will have no further involvement in state affairs and will spend the rest of his years pursuing private interests. These decisions are final, and I will not entertain any objections to them."

The knights, the maids, and the servants were all at a total loss of words, but the now-former king stood perfectly still and listened to every word without a hint of sorrow for his own fate. If anything, it looked like a part of him had known this was going to happen.

"Furthermore, I am now using my authority as queen to hereby dismiss everyone in this room from their positions, apart from those who accompanied me to the summit," Lilith continued. "And if you wish to know the reason for this, it's

because you all serve as spies for other nations."

The reception hall descended into near pandemonium at Lilith's latest declaration. The knights who had provided the princess with security at the summit gazed at the newly fired crowd in shock and disbelief. *Or to be more precise, everyone here who has just been fired are the spies working for the demonkin or the dragonutes,* I thought, sighing to myself. There were more spies in the kingdom working for the dwarves, the elves, the dark elves, the beastfolk, and the onis, but if we were to get rid of all of those ones too, there'd be nobody left to actually run the kingdom. So as a gesture of goodwill toward the five nations that had cooperated with us on this historic day, we decided not to purge their spies. Their agents didn't present any problems in the short term anyway, since we could always plug any intelligence leaks through some backdoor maneuvering. In the long run, we planned to replace all of these other spies with new people, but that process was going to take years.

*We could replace the spies with people summoned from my N cards, but it'd still take time and money to train up a skilled workforce,* I thought, slowly coming to the painful realization of just how much work I'd managed to put on my plate.

"Your Highness! You must take back these irresponsible accusations this instant!" Nono called out sharply from the crowd. "Espionage is a very serious crime that shouldn't be spoken of lightly, not even as a joke!"

It was fair to say that Lilith was probably closer to her head maid on a personal level than she was to her own father. After all, Nono had looked after her ever since she was a little girl, so Lilith had come to view her head maid as an elder sister, or even as a mother figure. But in this moment, Lilith's eyes bore holes into the maid, her glare totally devoid of warmth.

"Yes, indeed," the new queen said finally. "I only wish I was joking."

"Y-You're free to doubt the loyalty of everyone else in this room, but I have served you faithfully ever since you were a little girl, Your Highness," Nono protested. "How could you suspect *me* of being a spy after all that I've done for you?"

Nono was plainly shaken by the cold look she was on the receiving end of from Lilith, and I was willing to bet it was a look she had never seen from her charge before, yet she was still pleading her innocence and attempting to appeal to Lilith's

emotions. But the new queen was totally unmoved, since she had been preparing for this very moment for months.

"In that case, are you able to *faithfully* explain why you wrote all of those letters in cipher, why you contacted the Demonkin Nation through your family, why you have a code name, and why you're under orders to assassinate me if I ever become too much of a nuisance and dress the murder up as a suicide?"

Nono's eyes widened in shock and she took a step back. Lilith had deftly exposed all of the secrets Nono had been hiding, leaving her unable to even think up a halfway convincing rebuttal, and all she could do was blanch like a cornered criminal.

"Nono, if you are so devoted to me, tell me that I'm wrong to accuse you of these things," Lilith reiterated.

"Y-Your Highness..." Nono breathed.

"I've gathered up plenty of evidence that points to the directives you've been given and how your family has served the Demonkin Nation," Lilith said matter-of-factly. "If you're able to refute this evidence, say your piece now."

Knowing that Lilith had demonstrable proof of her espionage, Nono couldn't utter a word to defend herself. As a pregnant silence descended on the hall, Lilith finally broke down, unable to keep her authority figure facade up any longer.

"Traitor..." she seethed. "You traitor, you traitor, you *traitor*!" Hot tears streamed down Lilith's cheeks as she shrieked the word like a wounded animal. "Why did you stab me in the back, Nono?" she wailed. "We promised each other we'd work for a brighter future for the human race, so why? *Why*?! Was everything you said a lie? Did you think it was funny that I trusted you? Were you stringing me along all this time just so you could laugh at me? Nono!"

"Y-Your Highness—" Nono started but she was cut off almost instantly by Lilith's desperate pleas.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Nono! Please tell me it's all a horrible mistake!" Lilith yelled, her wavy blonde hair getting more tousled with each word that came out of her mouth. "Tell me every bit of the evidence that damns you is a lie—that it's all lies—and that you're still the best friend I have! Please, just say something! Tell me you'd never, ever betray me! Say you'll always be here for me! I don't want to lose you!" Lilith paused as she wept bitter tears. "Please, Nono, don't abandon me. Tell me I'm wrong..."

Lilith was no longer a queen, but a scared little girl speaking straight from the heart. Her sobs were devastating not just to Nono, but to all the other spies in the reception hall. But Nono couldn't deny the accusations. She couldn't even go up and hug Lilith to comfort her. All the maid could do was stand silently in place, knowing that everything Lilith was saying was true. It was left up to the fake Yume to give Lilith a handkerchief so she could wipe away her tears, which allowed the teenage queen to collect herself and regain her former regal composure.

"Everyone in this room who has spied for a foreign nation is guilty of treason," Lilith stated once she had calmed down again. "You are all dismissed from the palace and your families will be dispossessed of their properties. Normally, those found to have committed the crime of treason would be executed, as would their relatives, but in recognition of your long years of service to the royal family, I will spare your lives and merely banish you, your relatives, and whoever you are associated with from the kingdom. I shall permit you to take whatever possessions you can carry, but any property you leave behind will be seized by the state. That is all."

Lilith had opted for a bloodless purge, since executing all of the spies plus their relatives would have taken way too much time given the numbers we were talking about. On top of that, not only would it waste valuable manpower carrying out what would basically amount to a massacre, the shock of the wholesale slaughter would be too much for the citizens of the Human Kingdom—or for the other nations, for that matter—to tolerate. So Lilith had decided to go with the more workable option of simply expelling all the spies.

As soon as Nono heard what was to become of her, she slumped to her knees, her head drooping in a daze. Lilith, now Level 100, clenched her fist so tight, she drew enough blood to stain her glove, but she resisted the urge to give into her emotions again.

Lilith turned to Ellie. "Great Witch, may you please return us to the Human Kingdom? I would also like to request your assistance in rebuilding my nation."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Ellie said spiritedly. "The Wicked Witch of the Tower will spare no effort in aiding you to accomplish your goals."

Ellie had once regarded Lilith as an enemy of sorts, but after

watching Lilith unflinchingly take the throne in front of all of those world leaders, before coming back to the manor to ruthlessly disown a maid who had been her best friend for most of her life, Ellie had a newfound respect for her. Looking at the bigger picture, however, the Wicked Witch had just readily consented to Queen Lilith's request, meaning the Human Kingdom was now formally in an alliance with the Great Tower. I was willing to bet that the soon-to-be outcast spies would broadcast this particular bit of news to whichever adoptive nations they ended up in.

"Lilith..." a tired, morose voice spoke up.

"Yes, dear father?" Lilith said. "How may I help you?" I couldn't help noticing that Lilith had already started referring to the former king as "father" instead of "Your Majesty." That was definitely one way of showing who was in charge. But instead of scolding her for being disrespectful, the former king gave her a piece of advice in a voice that conveyed the kind of weight he had been carrying on his shoulders for decades.

"Lilith..." the ex-monarch repeated. "What's done is done. There is no going back. No matter the struggles you may encounter, as a member of this royal family, you are not allowed to abandon the throne you have chosen to ascend to. Are you prepared to accept that obligation?"

"Yes, dear father. I'm ready to face whatever consequences may come," Lilith replied immediately. "If I must give up my life to secure a better future for the Human Kingdom and the whole of our race, so be it."

The teenage girl that had broken down and started bawling after feeling abandoned by Nono was nowhere to be seen. In her place stood a clear but hardened gemstone that would glimmer beautifully until the end of time. Basking in her glow, Lilith's father seemed unable to utter another word, so Lilith turned back to the Wicked Witch.

"Great Witch, if you please," Lilith prompted.

"Right away, Your Majesty," Ellie replied. My deputy activated an SSR Teleportation card, and a flash of light transported her and Lilith to the Human Kingdom, with the fake Yume, myself, Nemumu, Gold, Khaos, and Orka all in tow. Just before Lilith phased away, Nono took one last look at her former charge through tear-filled eyes, knowing there was nothing the spy-maid could do apart from watch on as the curtain fell on her

relationship with Lilith. All that awaited Nono now was banishment from her homeland, and a lifelong separation from a queen who would usher in a new era.

## Chapter 13: Confronting Clowe

Clowe, the crown prince of the Human Kingdom, was busy working through documents in his father's executive office, which took up a large section of the undersized palace. Although the task seemed tedious, to Clowe, it served as a dress rehearsal for when he would eventually take over as the king. All of a sudden, the noise of many feet shuffling hurriedly down the hallway outside distracted him from his reading, causing him to click his tongue in annoyance.

"Are we harboring children in this palace?" Clowe muttered to himself. "What's all that noise about?" He turned to one of the attendants who was helping him with the documents. "Go out there and tell them all to be quiet."

"Certainly, Your Highness," said the aide, who was equally annoyed at being disrupted from his work, and he strode purposefully over to the door, ready to give the rabble-rousers outside a severe tongue-lashing. But before he could reach it, the door burst open and a cohort of heavily armed knights filed brusquely into the room. The attendant yelped as he was roughly shoved aside and knocked to the ground. Clowe looked up, about to yell at the intruders for harming his assistant, but as soldier after soldier filed into the office, the prince clammed up nervously, wondering what in the world was going on.

*Is there some emergency?* Clowe wondered. *Are they here to warn me that another race has invaded our kingdom? Or has an assassin infiltrated the palace? Or maybe—*

Clowe quickly found that all of his guesses were off the mark when the sea of soldiers parted to allow Lilith to stroll into the office.

"Lilith?" Clowe gasped, the gears in his head momentarily freezing up. He hadn't expected to see his sister again for quite a while, since the summit wasn't supposed to end until much later on, and she only added to his confusion with the words she dispassionately uttered next.

"From now on, you will address me as 'Queen Lilith,'" she said. "You will put down your pen and obey my orders."

"Queen?" Clowe said quizzically. "If this is some kind of prank,

I have to say I don't find it very humorous. Our father, His Majesty, is of sound health, and for you to assume his authority is the height of insolence. Don't think you can get away with this chicanery just because you're his daughter."

"It is certainly no laughing matter, dear brother," Lilith replied. "During the summit, five out of eight of the nonhuman nations voted to depose our father and install me as the reigning monarch of this kingdom."

Knowing that the other nations held veto powers over who ruled the Human Kingdom, Clowe had devoted himself to being the diligent, obedient heir apparent, yet here he was, being told that the majority of the other races had picked Lilith—a known opponent of the status quo, no less—to wear the crown atop her head instead. Furthermore, his younger sister was acting like she was now in charge of the palace, to the point where she had even brought in a multitude of knights who all seemed loyal to her. A feeling of confusion and apprehension crawled up Clowe's spine as it became increasingly apparent that Lilith wasn't bluffing.

Clowe shot up out of his chair. "*Five* nations voted for you? That's clearly not possible, and I will not allow you to utter such provable lies. Our father has done nothing to deserve being deposed, and you have no accomplishments to speak of that would entitle you to take the throne. It simply doesn't make sense! I have no idea what you hope to achieve by playing these sorts of games, but you'd better cease all this empty posturing before I lose my temper!"

"Dear brother, it is time to face reality," Lilith said simply. "Why else would I be here when I'm supposed to be confined in the principality?"

Clowe tried to make sense of what was happening. "You came back here by yourself just before the summit was supposed to begin?"

For one thing, there was no way she would have made it home on the day of the summit itself, even if she had come by riverboat. But like Lilith said, she wasn't supposed to be allowed to return to the Human Kingdom while the summit was underway. The other nations had ordered the king to bring along a member of the royal family as an "assistant," though in reality, the purpose of their presence was to serve as a glorified hostage to keep the monarch in line. There would have been a

huge kerfuffle if Lilith had absconded from the principality without giving notice. But if she had been allowed to return home without incident at this time, that would suggest that Lilith had indeed become queen and won the right to leave the Duchy early. Or perhaps she had attended the summit, then left for the palace immediately after using some speedy form of transport—with help, of course. As it dawned on him that some very special circumstances must have led to Lilith standing in his office at that moment, Clowe grew more frantic.

"Th-This is inconceivable!" he sputtered. "The other nations *couldn't* have agreed to this! Our father has never done anything to anger them, and you're the *last* person they would ever pick to rule this kingdom! Did our father pass away in the principality? But if that had happened, they would have held another meeting to pick *me* to be his successor. It *should've* been me! What in the world happened at that summit? *I'm* supposed to be next in line for the throne…"

As he neared the end of his tirade, Clowe's voice reduced to a whimper, as if probing inwardly for answers, but before he could come to any kind of plausible interpretation, the melodious voice of a young woman interrupted his train of thought.

"Your Majesty, isn't it better to simply detain this man if he will not cooperate?" the woman suggested. "Your coronation is already a settled matter, so it's a waste of time engaging in this debate."

"*What*?!" Clowe spluttered. "What is the Wicked Witch of the Tower doing here?!"

The hooded sorceress stepped forward from behind Lilith, closely followed by her two deputies, Khaos and Orka. The Black Fools—who were still serving as Lilith's bodyguards—also showed themselves. Since Clowe was in no way clueless, it didn't take him long at all to piece it all together.

"You brainless twit!" Clowe roared at Lilith. "You've sold our kingdom out to the Wicked Witch, haven't you?!"

"Dear brother, I would never betray our nation in that way," Lilith replied calmly. "If anything, *you're* the one who has been selling our countrymen, and often to the lowest bidder. All *I* am doing is borrowing the strength of the Great Witch to set things back on the right path."

"So you conspired with this witch behind our backs just so you could claim some kind of vindication for your juvenile, self-

righteous moralizing!" Clowe yelled. "*I* was supposed to be king! But thanks to your high treason, all the work we've done over the years has been wasted!" He paused to catch his breath, then continued. "You're right that we sell civilians into slavery every time the other nations order us to do so, and we have to accept whatever pittance they offer us for them, no questions asked. Not only that but we constantly have to capitulate to whatever price they set for our exports. But all of that has been to safeguard a future for the human race! Those other nations told me I *had* to sell my own people if I wanted their backing to become the next king, so why would they go with *you* instead? Was all of that sacrifice for nothing?! I feel like I'm about to lose my mind!"

"You did lose your mind, dear brother. A long time ago," Lilith told him. "You call it your own personal sacrifice to sell our people as slaves and allow other nations to purchase the fruits of our labor for next to nothing? All you've done is sacrifice other people to satisfy your own ambition to become king. You say you want to secure a future for our race, but what kind of future do you envision that involves selling out your fellow human beings? Have you no shame?"

"And what the hell is *wrong* with doing whatever you can to become king?!" Clowe retorted. "You think I haven't known what kind of nation we are ever since I was born?! Yes, we *are* a chattel nation beholden to the others, but there is nothing we can do to change that! I was just like you when I was younger, rebelling against the natural order, but nobody gave a damn! I tried to negotiate better conditions for our people, but the other races wouldn't budge an inch because we're so utterly powerless! So if nothing's going to change, I might as well be the other nations' lapdog if that's what it takes to be king!"

Clowe glowered at his sister, then continued. "Lilith, you're perfectly free to prattle on about your ideals like a snot-nosed little brat, but don't you ever forget that you're just as powerless as me and every other human! Go ahead and play-act as queen if you wish, but all you're doing is hastening our demise, because the moment you slip up, the other races will be sure to bury you along with the whole of our kingdom! And when that happens, you'll have no one to blame but yourself!"

"On the contrary, our kingdom will make it through unscathed," Lilith shot back. "In fact, I *needed* to take action so

that our nation could realize a brighter tomorrow, so please refrain from making such baseless accusations about me, dear brother."

The two siblings were engaged in yet another war of words with no hope of their differences being bridged, but this time around, Lilith was in a position of power, and she didn't need to endure any further second-guessing from her brother.

"Well, if I'm going to prove I'm right, I will need you to step down and remove yourself," Lilith said, her gaze fixed and needlelike. "I now exercise full control over all of our soldiers, so there is no one who will side with you in resisting me. Please do the right thing and obey my order."

"Lilith..." Clowe growled, his tone dripping with venom. "I swear to the Goddess that I will take back the throne. Maintaining the status quo is the only way for our kingdom to remain intact! I will most assuredly reclaim the crown for the sake of the survival of the human race and to restore my honor. And I don't care if *you're* the one standing in my way!"

Lilith remained placid as she signaled to some of the knights to restrain Clowe and usher him out of the room. His attendants were also forcibly led away.

"Do you think we should do away with the prince so that he won't cause any trouble in the future?" the Wicked Witch suggested as she watched Clowe being escorted out of the door. Dark—who was standing beside the witch and Queen Lilith—grimaced to show that even asking such a question was going too far, but because he was still wearing his mask, nobody noticed.

Lilith considered the Wicked Witch's advice for a couple of seconds. "No, I can't see how executing my brother would work in my favor. People might label me a bloodthirsty tyrant who is willing to spill the blood of her own in order to wear the crown. I won't be able to cultivate support from the people if I have that kind of reputation. No, if we are forced to kill him, it must be as a last resort."

At present, Clowe enjoyed a respectable level of popular support with the people, and Lilith had quite literally usurped the king and the heir apparent. At this particular stage, it would be rather unwise to purposely engage in acts that could potentially hurt her credibility. Since the Wicked Witch didn't really care either way, she simply shrugged at Lilith's response and didn't

press the issue.

Lilith turned to the remaining knights in the room and issued some more orders. “We have accomplished our first objective of capturing my brother without letting him escape, but our tasks are many, and they include gathering up important documents, and safeguarding all of our national treasures and critical facilities. We cannot allow anything to fall through the cracks.”

The soldiers signaled their understanding and compliance loudly and in unison before dispersing to attend to the assignments they had been given beforehand. The historic upheaval of the Human Kingdom was only just beginning.

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After making her triumphant return to the Human Kingdom as its new queen, and capturing and removing Clowe from his position, Lilith moved to solidify her control over the military, while various other governing bodies and bureaus were swiftly staffed with more people generously granted by Light in order to take care of the colossal workload that came with reforming an entire nation. Even though Lilith was still fully committed to elevating the status of the human race, she first needed to establish her footing as queen before she would be able to get anywhere. Her initial responsibilities included grappling with piles upon piles of documents, exiling all of the spies lurking around her kingdom, and filling the resulting vacancies with trusted individuals.

And yet, that was still only a small portion of Lilith’s emerging obligations. About a month later, the Demonkin Nation imposed economic sanctions on the Human Kingdom, placing an extra burden on Lilith. Despite this setback, the new queen faced the problem with a positive attitude, since she was also busy reversing all of the injustices that had been foisted on the kingdom. Among a number of other rectifications, she had banned the sale of human slaves, instituted new tariffs, and scrapped previously signed agreements that saw people selling goods at unfairly devalued prices. However, the mistreatment humans had suffered for centuries was like a sickness with no easy cure. Even with the reforms in place, neither the attitudes of the humans nor the other races were going to change *that* quickly. But all the same, Lilith was able to take the first steps

toward her lifelong dream of raising the station of humans—a dream she was dead set on realizing even if it meant driving her personal maid and best friend, Nono, out of her life.

As for Nono, she and a large group of around a hundred members of her extended family arrived at the Dwarf Kingdom after a long trek. The clothes they all wore were plain, but not particularly shabby, if you ignored the odd stain here and there, and they looked haggard, partly due to the grueling journey and partly due to the psychological damage they had suffered after being shunned as traitors by their own countrymen.

"I see you folks finally made it 'cross our border," said the dwarf sentry they encountered on reaching the Dwarf Kingdom. "Since you were all supposedly working as spies for the demonkin, we're gonna hafta put you folks under watch for a spell. But it'll be over once we're sure you're nothing to worry about, so it's best to just bear with it."

"We accept your terms," Nono said, speaking for the group. "We greatly appreciate you taking us in."

"So I can assume this rabble behind you are the ones who are seeking asylum, right, miss?" the dwarf continued.

"Yes, it's everyone you see here," Nono replied.

"Okay, perfect," the dwarf sentry said cheerily. "If you'll pardon us, we'll record your names, genders, and make an exact count of all the people we got here. C'mon, men." The dwarf beckoned the other sentries holding notepads to start taking down information about the outcasts. The young children among the arrivals were scared of the armed dwarf soldiers and hid behind their parents, causing the lead sentry to sigh and attempt to reassure the rest of the group.

"You don't need to worry about gettin' hurt," the dwarf said. "All we're gonna do is put you under surveillance and limit your freedom to move around for a bit. Y'know, 'cause you folks were found to be spies."

"We thank you for being so considerate," said Nono.

"Oh, don't thank me. Thank the higher-ups for handing down the order," the dwarf replied. "We're just doing our jobs, that's all."

It took quite a while to jot down all the names and other relevant info from the group, and as she watched on, Nono reflected on how she had ended up in this situation. Lilith, the young princess she had cared for like a little sister, had called her

a “traitor” to her face, ordered her exile from the Human Kingdom, then teleported back to the palace, leaving the former king and the rest of the delegation behind in the Principality of the Nine. When the remnants of the delegation made the long trek home from the summit, the traveling party included those who had been credibly accused of being spies, and for a while, the servants and soldiers closest to the ex-king eyed Nono and the rest of the spies with open disdain, feeling it necessary to stay extra vigilant in case any ad hoc scheme arose to take Lilith’s father hostage and use him as a bargaining chip. The mistrust persisted until the former monarch intervened, chiding his underlings for engaging in these kinds of disputes.

“Lilith has already handed down their punishment,” the king emeritus said. “To shame them any further would only disgrace our new queen.”

Tears rushed to the eyes of the unmasked spies at the former king’s declaration, and the rest of the entourage refrained from vilifying them for the rest of the trip. When the spies got back to the Human Kingdom, they found their homes had already been seized by soldiers, though they were still allowed to take whatever possessions they could carry from them in preparation for their time in exile. In an unexpected twist, however, the outcasts were told they were free to seek asylum in any of the six following places: the Great Tower, the rest of the Elven Queendom, the Dark Elf Islands, the Dwarf Kingdom, the Beastfolk Federation, and the Onifolk Archipelago.

What the spies didn’t know was that Lilith had initially been inclined to simply banish them from the kingdom without offering any help beyond that, since she didn’t want to appear soft on traitors as the new leader of her nation. It was Light who had later convinced Lilith that they should arrange for some of the other nations to take in the newly displaced as an act of mercy toward fellow humans.

Light’s first thought was to house all of the former spies in the Great Tower city, but ultimately pulled the plug on that idea since there were likely to be individuals who would refuse to be accommodated at the tower, due to their resentment toward the Wicked Witch for their new circumstances. So Light had worked with the five nations within his sphere of influence to open up routes for the former spies to claim asylum at one of them instead. In the case of the Dwarf Kingdom, Light had personally

given Dagan another magic item under the table as a gift so he would cooperate.

Lilith had been moved to tears when she'd heard Light's generous alternative and readily agreed to it, bowing her head to him in gratitude, not as a queen, but as a fellow human being. As queen, Lilith considered the spies no longer deserving of citizenship and the protections that status afforded, but when the expatriates were viewed in isolation, separate from the espionage they had committed, Lilith couldn't help wishing there was a better life awaiting them elsewhere.

"Well, that's it. We're all done writing everyone up," the head dwarf sentry announced. "You folks can follow us to your new residences. Might as well tell us now if you've got anyone among you who's too sick or injured to walk, so we can get 'em carriages."

Nono scanned the group briefly to double-check before answering. "I believe we'll be fine without carriages, thank you."

"Then, let's get a move on," the head dwarf said. "Make sure you all keep up so that there's no chance of you getting lost." The outcasts weren't allowed through the main gate due to their questionable status, so the sentries instead led the group through a gate to the rear, where there were much fewer people. Everyone in the traveling group followed where the dwarves led them—all except for Nono, who stood facing the direction of the Human Kingdom's capital as people walked past her without paying her any attention.

"Your Highness..." Nono whispered forlornly to the air around her.

The young princess Nono had once known had grown up and was to fight her own battles as queen, but the former maid still found herself wondering if Lilith was eating healthily in her absence. Lilith also had a habit of clutching her blanket in her sleep like a body pillow. Was there someone to check on her and readjust the blanket so she didn't get cold during the night? Were people making sure Lilith wasn't doing any reading in the dark in a way that would harm her vision? Was she sitting up straight at the table, not hunched over like some washerwoman? Did she have someone she could trust, with whom she could share her anxieties and complaints without reservation?

*It's absurd for a spy like me to be worrying about Her Highness now of all times,* Nono thought. Was this an act of self-

deprecation on her part? Or was the ostracized maid finally accepting the reality of her situation? Or was she perhaps—

“Miss, it’s time to go,” the dwarf sentry said. “If you’re hurt at all, we can grab you some potion if you’d like.”

“No, I’m perfectly fine,” Nono said, though the rivulets of tears streaming down her face suggested otherwise. “Forgive my manners.”

Nono turned her back on the Human Kingdom and set off for her new home with the rest of the expatriates. Would Lilith and Nono ever cross paths again? Nobody knew what lay in their futures at that time.

# Epilogue

I was sitting in my office on the bottom level of the Abyss and scanning the report that Ellie had handed me only minutes before. She and Mei had come to brief me on what they had been able to find out about the so-called “Fragment of the Goddess” Aldo had used to mutate himself. We found out that the item was indeed another “Fragment of the Undergod” as we’d expected, but unfortunately, while we had been hoping that Ellie’s probe of Aldo’s memory would fill in some of the other blanks we had, we hadn’t had a whole lot of luck on that front.

“So the Fragment ended up mutating Aldo’s body so much, even the memories contained in his brain turned to unreadable mush,” I groaned, placing the report down on my desk. “The other members of the Forgotten were only aware that the ‘Fragment’ had been passed down through successive generations of captains of the organization, but had no clue how they got the thing in the first place.”

The Forgotten had plotted to trigger an epidemic by infecting themselves with a curse known as the “Poor Man’s Plague” before blowing themselves up all around the Principality of the Nine on the eve of the summit. They had secretly given the Church of the Goddess an antidote to the plague that they referred to as “holy water,” and the scheme was supposed to create new converts to the religion and elevate the status of the church. Luckily, my party accidentally bumped into their leader before their plan had been set in motion, and he raised our suspicions enough for us to look into him, which eventually led to us uncovering their plot and putting a stop to it.

But just when we were about to hand this cabal of extremists over to the authorities, Aldo fished out this so-called “Fragment of the Goddess,” swallowed it, and transformed into a winged monster that was resistant to most of Nemumu’s conventional attacks as well as mine. I finally defeated him by using a gacha card that allowed me to see into his body and locate the Fragment, before swiftly gouging out the item from his guts with my bare hand. Since this meant he was no longer able to mutate further, I used another gacha card to turn him into a block of ice,

and we were finally free to take Aldo and his buddies down to the Abyss to probe them.

I had originally wanted to hand the Forgotten over to the Duchy's constables, but the revelation of the existence of another Fragment of the Undergod had forced me to change my plans. But as it turned out, Aldo's memory had been totally scrambled and the other terrorists didn't have a clue who had first obtained the Fragment, nor how they had come by it. Although, we did find out about all of the *other* grisly stuff the organization had been getting up to. Every single one of them had committed heinous acts like killing lords, dressing up as bandits to rob and kill innocent people to get more funds, and kidnapping people to brainwash them into becoming soldiers or else using them as live test subjects. In short, the things they had done were so evil and repulsive, I decided I would punish those criminals myself once we had finished extracting all of the info we needed from them. I was also going to make sure that the penalty administered to them fit their crimes.

*I thought I was gonna have to punish the actual Church of the Goddess too,* I reflected. *But according to Ellie's findings, everything the Forgotten did was truly done without the church's knowledge.* Needless to say, it would have been very wrong to retaliate against the church just because the Forgotten had committed criminal acts in its name, which just went to show how dangerously problematic these fanatics really were. And what was even *more* problematic was how Aldo had unknowingly sabotaged our chances of finding out more about the Fragment of the Undergod.

"I'm terribly sorry, Blessed Lord," Ellie mumbled, responding to my earlier grumblings. "Oh, if only I were a better sorceress…"

"Oh, no, it's not your fault, Ellie," I said quickly. "Nobody could've predicted that the Fragment would mutate people's memories too. In any case, are you *sure* there's no way we can restore Aldo's body using magic?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's quite impossible, Your Blessedness," Ellie sighed. "In order to fight you, Blessed Lord, Mr. Aldo transformed his body into something that went far beyond being human, and since he technically did not injure himself or come down with an illness, healing magic will not work on him. It would be like trying to turn a human-turned-monster back into a human again. No wizardry exists in this world that can restore a body to

its previous form after its entire makeup has changed in that way."

"I guess you're right," I conceded, accepting Ellie's explanation.

We considered trying to get Nazuna to use her Prometheus sword to revert Aldo back into a human, but I ultimately decided against it. It was true that the mythical-class weapon had the power to bend reality itself and make the impossible possible, and from that description, you'd probably be wondering what in the world was stopping me from making use of such a powerful, all-purpose weapon, but there were plenty of reasons to not do it.

First off, the Prometheus was at its most effective and powerful when used on Nazuna herself, but it took a much higher amount of strain to bend the reality of other people. The process for the latter would undoubtedly cause a whole lot of damage to the wielder, and Nazuna would be risking killing herself in the attempt. Not only was Aldo not remotely worth that kind of risk, we didn't even know if the Prometheus would be able to restore him back to his original body, and I wasn't about to needlessly gamble with Nazuna's life to find out. So I gave up on the idea of extracting info from Aldo and switched my attention to the new Fragment of the Undergod in the small box in front of me.

"It's too bad we weren't able to gain any intel from Aldo, but at least we managed to recover a Fragment that isn't totally depleted of power," I said. "And thanks to you and your boosted Appraisal, Mei, we were able to get some very interesting info from it."

"I thank you for the compliment, Master Light," Mei said, bowing.

According to Mei's findings, the Fragment of the Undergod really was a part of the legendary wicked god's body that had somehow got chipped off. Anyone using the Fragment would gain a Gift called Pseudo-Evolve, which transformed the body and mind of the user until it was eventually an entity approaching god level, evolving far beyond being a member of one of the nine races.

"So this actually came from the Undergod, huh?" I remarked in awe. "And not only that but this thing can actually confer a Gift on a human. That's really amazing in itself, even if the Gift is fake

and temporary. But just to be clear, I'd never want to use such a thing on myself."

"I must concur, Blessed Lord," Ellie said. "The very thought of 'evolving' myself into some sort of godlike figure sounds like the height of riskiness to me."

"I also agree," Mei said. "And given the descriptions I have heard about the evolved Aldo, it sounds as though he transformed into a being that more closely resembled a monster than a god."

"Maybe this Fragment is an item that transforms people into the minions of the Undergod?" I mused.

This whole thing had me recalling the creation myth of our world. In the beginning, everything was a syrupy black vortex of nothingness until the Goddess shone her light upon the darkness, creating the mainland, the islands, and the nine races who lived on them. But the leftover dregs of the darkness molded themselves into the Undergod of Evil, who went to live deep underground. The Undergod made monsters out of his own flesh and sent them up to the surface world through dark holes that dotted the land (These "holes" were widely believed to be metaphors for dungeons), so that the monsters would pile up on top of each other for him to climb up and reach the Goddess he longed to abduct. The nine races created by the Goddess took up arms against the monsters to protect their deity, and the monsters in turn attempted to eliminate the races standing in their way.

The ancient battle had continued right up to the present day, according to the myth of creation, but it now looked as if the Undergod wasn't satisfied with simply creating monsters out of his own body, to the extent that he might have been laying down trap items that would turn people from the nine races into his powerful minions.

"Well, anyway, at least we have this Fragment of the Undergod in our possession," I said. "I'll need you guys to find out exactly where this was found and whether the Undergod really exists. If this Undergod is real, we need to find out where it is lurking and whether it presents any threat or any kind of obstacle to us."

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei said, bowing again. "I shall send a message to all of our agents operating up on the surface world."

“And I will offer my assistance on this investigation as the Wicked Witch of the Tower, Your Blessedness,” Ellie said with a curtsy. I nodded approvingly, certain that my two deputies would be able to find the answers I needed soon enough.

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The Dragonute Empire’s envoy returned to his nation to relay the shocking news of what had taken place at the emergency summit. Not only had Princess Lilith executed a scandalous coup to seize the throne of the Human Kingdom with the support of five other nations, the Wicked Witch herself had unexpectedly shown up to the event, and proceedings collapsed due to the irreconcilable discord her presence provoked.

Of course, the events of the summit soon reached the ears of Hiro, the leader of the Masters affiliated with the dragonutes, and he summoned his three usual associates to an undisclosed location in the Dragonute Empire to relate the news to them and discuss their options.

“Who could have expected such events to unfold in the Principality of the Nine?” Hiro mused. “At the very least, I never would have foreseen this development, given what we know.”

Seated beside Hiro on the sofa, Hisomi furrowed his brow and crossed his arms as he listened to the report. “It was certainly a bold move by the Wicked Witch of the Tower to organize a majority of nations to back the princess and make her the new queen. Perhaps her plan is to control the Human Kingdom from the shadows?”

Hiro hummed in contemplation. “Would it really make sense for her to take such a tortuous approach simply so she could exercise indirect rule over the Human Kingdom of all places? The witch brought five other nations to heel without investing as much time and effort. What do you think, Kaizer?”

“Who cares what we think?” snapped Kaizer, who was sitting by himself on the opposite couch. “When it comes to real intel, we’ve got squat, so debating it now is about as useful as throwing darts with a blindfold on! I don’t have the time or energy for that crap.”

Hiro and Hisomi snickered wryly at Kaizer’s successful attempt to shut down any further discussion on the subject. Standing behind Kaizer’s sofa, Hei simply observed the scene in silence.

“I suppose you’re correct, Kaizer. Though you don’t need to be so blunt about it,” Hiro teased.

“I am well aware of the need to collect intel on the Wicked Witch so that we can more accurately judge what her next move might be,” Hisomi said. “But as you know, the city at the foot of the Great Tower has tightened up security to the point that we can’t make a move without revealing ourselves.”

Ellie—the Wicked Witch they were talking about—had taken it upon herself to beef up security at Tower City after two Masters affiliated with the Demonkin Nation, Miki and Daigo, attacked Light and his allies after Miki had infiltrated the settlement. As a result, there were no holes for a spy to exploit, meaning Hisomi was basically left empty-handed when it came to intel on the Wicked Witch herself.

“But at least the demonkin have taken a belligerent stance toward the Human Kingdom as a consequence of what happened at the summit,” Hiro noted, attempting to cheer Hisomi up. “Voros is immensely prideful, so it’s guaranteed he will retaliate against the Human Kingdom for making a mockery of the summit he personally called. Queen Lilith will be unable to repel the Demonkin Nation on her own, meaning she will beseech the Wicked Witch to provide her with assistance. The Wicked Witch entering the conflict will force the demonkin to call upon their Masters for support, leading to the Wicked Witch being pitted against said Masters, which will provide us with an excellent opportunity to gather some useful intelligence.”

Hisomi chuckled dryly and shrugged. “It would no doubt help us more if their Masters prevailed, rubbing out the Wicked Witch in the process.”

Kaizer leaned back on his sofa with a supremely exasperated look on his face. “The only thing I give that delusional death cult credit for is their destructive capability. Especially that leader of theirs, Goh. You don’t wanna mess with him.”

“Never thought I’d hear you praise someone in that way, Kaizer,” Hiro remarked.

“I make a point of being honest,” Kaizer said, glaring pointedly at Hiro.

Hisomi attempted to de-escalate the conversation by interjecting in a jokey tone. “Anyway, I believe I should start preparing to gather intel ahead of this inevitable clash between the Wicked Witch and the Demonkin Nation’s Masters,” he said.

“But sadly, I still lack the manpower to do things adequately. I hope no one will be *too* upset if I come back empty-handed.”

“I can assist you, Hisomi,” Hiro offered. “But it would be best to temper your expectations of me too.”

Hisomi and Hiro chuckled at their running joke as they both rose from their seats and went off to prepare for their intelligence-gathering operation. Kaizer watched the two young men intently as they left the room, as if keeping tabs on two spies.

“No matter what happens, I will always protect you, Kaizer,” Hei said, finally breaking his silence. Hei had known Kaizer ever since they were young, so he could easily sense when his fellow Master was unsettled.

“Shut the hell up, you unbending weirdo,” Kaizer spat. He too got up from his sofa and walked out of the room with the intention of resuming work on his project. Hei naturally followed closely behind, completely ignoring Kaizer’s spiteful remark toward him.

# Extra Story 1: The Mohawks Get Their Orders

“Aw, shit. We weren’t able to get any good info!” the Mohawk leader griped.

“You said it, big boss. Dude’s like a ghost,” one of his Mohawk associates agreed sympathetically. “But remember, we’re talking about a madman who triggered a war with the Great Tower.”

“Yo, watch yer mouth, will ya?” the leader warned. “Ya never know who might be listenin’ in.”

“Sorry, boss. Force of habit,” the offending Mohawk replied.

The Mohawks were currently in the room they had rented at an inn in the Dragonute Empire’s capital. Light had sent them there to dig up some dirt on Fayh, the squinty-eyed merchant who looked like an exact copy of Cavaur, the flesh-eating zombie Light had fought in the Dwarf Kingdom months before.

Cavaur had turned out to be an undercover agent working for a Master, and he had inspired a dwarf named Naano—one of Light’s sworn enemies from his old party—to craft a cursed sword in order to lure Light into a trap. But Light had turned the tables on Cavaur by capturing him and condemning the zombie to death. Shortly after this, however, the Beastfolk Federation declared war on the Great Tower.

While traveling to the Dragonute Empire to collect intel, the Mohawks happened to become acquainted with Miya and her brother, Elio, and later on, her newfound mage friend, Quornae. But when Miya and Quornae went missing, the Mohawks helped Elio to search for the two girls. It didn’t take Light’s team long to find out what had happened to Miya and Quornae, along with thousands of other humans who had been forced into captivity and military slavery.

Light had ordered Ellie—in her guise as the Wicked Witch of the Tower—to completely obliterate the beastfolk army so that there was no soldier left alive to tell the tale, and she and her team had succeeded in that objective, unexpectedly aided by a pair of bloodsucking slimes that the beastmen chiefs unwittingly unleashed. All of the nonhuman races had come to refer to the

war as the “Beastfolk Massacre,” though the slave soldiers and hostages rescued by Ellie favored the name: the “Human Deliverance War.”

The Mohawks had contributed to the rescue of the human victims, and once the war was over, they set off for the Dragonute Empire again, this time on a mission to find out more about Fayh. When Ellie probed the memories of Gamm, the Wolf Tribe’s chieftain, she found out that a human resembling Cavaur had contacted him and presented him with a seemingly foolproof plan to defeat the Great Tower. Gamm’s memories of Fayh showed him as a small-time merchant who traveled by sea between the Dragonute Empire and the Beastfolk Federation. Light’s team had sent agents to the beastfolk nation to find out more, but they drew a total blank.

The Mohawks had no luck picking up any leads on Fayh in the Dragonute Empire either. In fact, it was as if Fayh the merchant had never actually existed. When the Mohawks were asking around, strangely no one had ever seen him. Other merchants serving as undercover agents for Light also came to the Dragonute Empire to look for clues, but they too were unable to dig up any info on Fayh. This frustrating state of affairs had led to the present situation, where all of the Mohawks were slumped on their knees in their room at the inn.

“Well, I guess our only option is to hit the bricks again,” the leader said. “It ain’t glamorous, but askin’ questions is all we can really do right now.”

“Damn straight, brother,” another Mohawk concurred. “‘Least it’s better than sittin’ ’ere mopin’ all day.”

“An’ we did pick up on the news that they’re holdin’ an emergency summit at the Duchy real soon,” a third Mohawk pointed out. “They say it’s to deal with the Beastfolk Massacre or the Deliverance War or whatever it’s called. That prob’ly means the big guy’s on his way to the Duchy.”

As one, the Mohawks gulped. They knew all about Light’s scheme to install Lilith as the new queen of the Human Kingdom so that she could improve the lot of the human race, and the summit at the Principality of the Nine was the venue for that transfer of authority to take place, which meant unless something extraordinary happened, Light would be showing up at the Duchy disguised as the adventurer Dark. The principality was under the control of the Dragonute Empire, so there was

every possibility that Light would also use the trip as an opportunity to summon the Mohawks to give him an update on their intelligence-gathering activities. If the Mohawks were to show up without one iota of intel on Fayh, Light would surely be disappointed. Even though the Mohawks were low-level summons, their loyalty to the young dungeon master was second to none, so the thought of Light feeling so dejected—even if only momentarily—made the Mohawks' chests ache with unforgivable sorrow.

The red-haired leader tried to rouse his party. "Okay, lissen up, ya goons! Ya better get out there and rustle up any intel you can find on Fayh! I don't care how puny or ticky-tacky it is, ya hear me?"

"Hell yeah!" the others hollered enthusiastically. "Ain't nothin' gonna stop us!"

"Pipe down, you humans!" the innkeeper yelled up at them. "If you don't cut out all that noise, I'll throw you bums out!"

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When all was said and done, the Mohawks made no measurable progress in tracking down any info on Fayh, and all they had to show for their efforts was a big, fat goose egg. But luckily for them, the situation changed dramatically with the coronation of Lilith at the emergency summit, the news of the shocking event spreading like wildfire through the Principality of the Nine and the Dragonute Empire's capital. Amid the furor, the Mohawk leader received new orders from Light via one of Aoyuki's tamed familiars, and he relayed these instructions to his gang with tears in his eyes, though they were ones of joy rather than anguish this time.

"Lord Light says he wants us to end our fact-finding mission here and relocate to the Demonkin Nation instead to find out what's going on over there," the Mohawk boss told his boys. "Apparently, there's a bunch of smoke coming out of that place after everything that's gone down at the summit. But Lord Light also said we shouldn't push our luck gathering intel. We should prioritize our lives over all else."

"Lord Light..." breathed one of the other Mohawks before tearing up himself.

"Why's he so good to us?" another said, lifting his sunglasses

and wiping away tears. “And after we couldn’t find anything on Fayh too…”

The Mohawk leader roused his troops once more. “You boys see how much our lord cares about us? We hafta pay him back double by gathering all the intel we can in the Demonkin Nation!”

“I hear that, bossman!” a Mohawk roared in response.

“We’re gonna be absolute workhorses, just you watch!” another cried out.



“I *thought* I told you human bozos to cut out that racket!” the innkeeper yelled up at them.

It took the Mohawks a whole month to get to the Demonkin Nation, but when they finally made it there, they ran into an unforeseen problem at the border.

“Whaddaya *mean* you’re not lettin’ us in?!” the red-haired leader screeched. “On what grounds, asshole?”

“That should be plainly obvious,” the demon sentry said matter-of-factly without so much as flinching. “No nation in their right mind would allow entry to suspicious-looking characters like yourselves.”

“And how in shit’s name are *we* suspicious?” the Mohawk leader protested. “Besides, all of our papers are in order, and we even paid the friggin’ border tax!”

“Yeah! What gives?” piped up another Mohawk. “We’re professional adventurers for cryin’ out loud. All the proof’s right there in front of your nose! You do this to every mug who looks funny to ya?”

“Yes, I acknowledge that you have handed over all of the required documentation,” the demon sentry said, sounding officious. “However, I still reserve the right to bar entry to anyone who appears suspect. The higher-ups are already on edge thanks to the fiasco at the summit, so we’re in no position to just wave through a bunch of roosterheads like you. So if you want to come in here, do something about your hairdos and those outfits. Until you look at least halfway presentable, I can’t allow you passage, even if I wanted to.”

“Are ya crazy, dude?” one Mohawk bellowed. “How are our dos ‘suspect’ in any way?”

“Frickin’-A right!” another Mohawk agreed. “Do you even *know* how much we struggle to keep these mohawks sharp and lookin’ good?”

“Does it *look* like I care?” the sentry retorted. “If you want in, get yourselves a new look. That’s my final word on the matter.”

Faced with this arbitrary order and no other recourse, the Mohawks could only gnash their teeth bitterly at their misfortune.

## Extra Story 2: Just in Case

“Thank you for inviting me here today, Lord Light,” Lilith said to me.

“Oh, no, thank *you* for finding time in your busy schedule to come here,” I replied.

“Well, it’s only natural that I would come. My very safety is on the line, after all,” Lilith noted. “I’m extremely appreciative that you would do this for me.”

At that particular moment, the two of us were in the training area on the lowest underground floor of the Great Tower, and we had been joined by Nemumu and Gold. Despite appearances, Lilith hadn’t come here to do some sightseeing—no, I’d called her here to do some training on emergency evasion tactics should the worst come to pass at the summit in the Principality of the Nine. Instead of being decked out in appropriate battle gear, Lilith was wearing the kind of dress she would usually have on in the palace, though this wasn’t because the princess had come unprepared or was goofing off or anything. No, I had specifically told her to wear a gown for today’s training session. My party—the Black Fools—would be providing security for Lilith at the summit, but there was no guarantee we would always be near her to provide that protection, so I figured it would be best for Lilith to do some training on how to protect herself in case she ever got separated from us. She would be using gacha cards as her means of protection, and to ensure that this simulation would closely mirror reality, I had asked her to wear the type of royal gown she would presumably be wearing to the summit—one that would no doubt impede her mobility.

I cleared my throat. “All right, let’s get started. First, take out the cards I gave you.”

“Yes, of course,” Lilith said, producing five cards from her Item Box. Three of the cards were “user hack” cards, giving her the power of telepathy, teleportation, and healing respectively, while the other two were “summoning” cards, one producing a force field and the second, a golem. And just in case you were wondering, her Item Box had been supplied by one of my gacha cards. I had already told Lilith how to activate the cards, but I

went through the process again, just to be sure.

"So when you want to use a card, hold it up and say the word 'release,'" I instructed. "That will unlock the powers that are contained within the card. I hope everything's clear so far?"

"Yes, I understand completely," Lilith replied.

"As you know, the Telepathy card works by picturing the person you wish to contact in your mind, then thinking your message as clearly as possible," I continued. "The Teleportation card works by picturing the location you want to go to next, the Healing card closes up a wound and restores the skin to normal, and the Force Field card creates a transparent, domed barrier around you which will protect you from enemy attacks. The last card—the golem card—produces a guardian that will protect you."

If Lilith did get attacked after finding herself separated from us, the Teleportation card would whisk her away to somewhere safe. If something was jamming teleportation magic, then she could activate a force field and release a golem to distract her would-be assailants, while using the Telepathy card to contact us for help. And we had already given Lilith magic items that would protect her from all sorts of poisons and instant death spells, so she would be fine on that front. These were all the tools Lilith had at her disposal to protect herself just in case we happened not to be around and she found herself under attack. We would use this day to train her on how to use the cards she wasn't so familiar with. I figured it'd be better for her to come here to the tower and do some dry runs with them, instead of just explaining how the cards work.

"I don't think you need to practice using the Telepathy card, since you've already used that one several times before, right?" I queried.

"Yes, I remember using one of those cards to tell you about the emergency summit," Lilith said. Since she was already fairly familiar with the Telepathy card, I decided to skip straight to trying out the Teleportation card.

"Gold, could you move over to the far end of the arena for us?" I said.

"Certainly, milord," Gold replied cheerily, then moved a good hundred meters away from where the rest of us were standing.

I turned to Lilith. "So just like with the Telepathy card, hold up the Teleportation card, think about Gold and where he's at, then

say ‘release.’ That should magically warp you over to him.”

“O-Okay, I’ll give it a shot,” Lilith said with a hint of nervousness. Gold waved over to her to make sure she knew where he was. She held up the Teleportation card, then closed her eyes so she could concentrate on thinking about Gold. “Teleportation card—release!”

Immediately after voicing this command, Lilith disappeared, and instantly appeared by Gold’s side. When she saw the golden knight right in front of her, she breathed a huge sigh of relief. As she walked back to us with Gold in tow, I greeted her with a broad smile.

“Good job, Princess Lilith,” I said. “Now you can teleport yourself to a safe place if you ever get into trouble and we’re not around to help you. However, if you do use this card, you’ll need to teleport to this training area beneath the Great Tower, not to wherever my party is at the time.”

Lilith looked startled by this. “Why can’t I just teleport directly to you, Lord Light? I honestly feel at my most secure whenever I’m with you.”

This admission made Nemumu nod, her haughty expression basically saying, *“See? Even* you *know there’s no safer place to be in this world than by Lord Light’s side.”* I noticed Nemumu’s antics out of the corner of my eye, but I maintained my smile and told Lilith the reason behind this piece of advice.

“Remember, you’ll be in a situation where an enemy has somehow separated you from my party,” I noted. “If you simply teleport back to our location, there’s a good chance we’d get separated again. So instead of wasting a Teleportation card, I think it’s better if you just warp to this training ground where your safety can be guaranteed until we reunite.”

“That does make sense,” Lilith conceded. “It’s better to make sure I’m *actually* safe rather than potentially placing myself in danger again. However, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to visualize this training area without some kind of marker to guide me. This place looks too much like all the other training grounds I’ve seen, and I’m afraid I might make a mistake.”

“I can help with that,” I said. “I have something that would make for the perfect marker.” I took out a card and released the item I was thinking of: the N Totem Pole. It was a large wooden post with a bunch of faces and animals carved into it, and it had been painted in all primary colors. It wasn’t actually a magic item

at all, but for the use we had for it, it would serve as a very memorable point of reference for someone wanting to teleport into this room. As proof, Lilith nodded several times in approval.

“Yes, this thing definitely has a very interesting design that I shall not soon forget,” Lilith agreed. “This will be the perfect guidepost for teleporting.”

“The next part of our training is going to get a little bit more intense,” I warned. This time, I was going to get Lilith to simulate activating a force field and releasing a golem just in case she couldn’t use either the Telepathy or Teleportation cards for whatever reason.

“For these next two cards, I will get Nemumu to play the part of an assailant,” I said. “In this scenario, Nemumu has already cast a spell that renders both the Telepathy and Teleportation cards useless. When she approaches you, you must first release the golem, then protect yourself by using the other card to activate a force field.”

“O-Okay, understood,” Lilith replied.

To be more specific, she would be releasing an SSSR Level 3000, Decoy Golem. Not only was the golem an absolute tank with exceptionally high durability stats, it also specialized in forcibly drawing all of the enemy’s attention and malice toward it. Then, with the assailant suitably distracted by the golem, Lilith would activate the force field that would theoretically protect her until me and my party showed up to handle the situation. I figured this was quite a handy backup plan in case the Teleportation or Telepathy cards didn’t work.

“All right, Nemumu. She’s all yours,” I said, signaling the beginning of the test.

“As you command, Lord Light,” Nemumu replied. She bowed to me, then escorted Lilith to the center of the training area. I had chosen Nemumu to act as the assailant in this instance since there was a chance, however slight, that whoever was playing the attacker might find themselves with their arms wrapped around Lilith or touching her in some other way, so I figured having another woman engaging her would make it less problematic.

Nemumu took up a position a good distance away from Lilith. “All right, Your Highness. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Well, here goes nothing,” Lilith said, her voice trembling slightly as she held up the Decoy Golem card. “R-Relea— Ah!”

The card vanished from Lilith's hand just as she was about to voice her command. Nemumu was also nowhere to be seen. Before Lilith could figure out what had happened, Nemumu pressed two fingers against the princess's neck as if they were a dagger.

"If my fingers were a real blade, you would be dead by now, Your Highness," Nemumu informed Lilith from behind her, gently stroking the princess's neck with her outstretched fingers to prove her point. Indeed, if Nemumu had gone in for the kill with one of her knives unsheathed, Lilith's carotid artery would have been sliced open and a fountain of blood would be spraying from her throat. The princess was so jarred by what had transpired, she couldn't even let out a frightened squeal even though she wanted to.

Nemumu returned the gacha card she had yoinked out of the princess's hand and retook her starting position once more. "If you're facing a high-level opponent, they'll be able to snatch that card away from you before you can even release it," Nemumu announced, a smug look on her face. "So if you plan on using that card, I suggest you make it quick, Your Highness."

"On the contrary, m'girl," Gold piped up. "Her Highness won't receive any proper training if you keep nicking her cards, what?"

Plainly vexed by this intervention, Nemumu defended her actions. "You know as well as I do that high-level opponents can do much, *much* worse to her than that. I did it for her own good!"

"Of course I know that, m'girl," Gold replied. "What I'm saying for both of your benefits is you should allow her to use the cards first, *then* demonstrate those kinds of extraordinary situations."

I clapped my hands before the exchange could turn into a full-blown argument. "It's fine, you guys. You're both right. But Nemumu, maybe this time you could approach Princess Lilith at a more *normal* speed and allow her to use the cards without any disruptions." Hopefully saying this would prevent a repeat of what had just happened.

"Understood, Lord Light," Nemumu said without any hint of an objection. Gold also stood back and held his tongue.

"This time, Your Highness, I'll release some of my bloodlust when I charge at you," Nemumu informed the princess. "That way, I'll be mimicking a real hostile. Is that okay with you?"

"O-Of course, please do," Lilith said, clearly afraid of what was coming next.

Just as Nemumu had warned, she started exuding a limited amount of murderous aura before scurrying toward Lilith at a much slower speed. Although the dark energy was pretty weak to me and Gold, Lilith was still only Level 100, so Nemumu's aura totally unnerved her into making a very serious mistake.

"R-R-Release!" Lilith yelled while holding both the golem card *and* the force field card. This activated both cards at the same time, causing the Decoy Golem to materialize inside the force field that had formed around Lilith. The giant golem hit its head on the top of the force field and started toppling backward, where Lilith was standing. Given its weight, she would be crushed if it landed on her.

"Nemumu! Gold!" I yelled urgently.

My two teammates and I sped toward the force field as fast as our respective power levels could carry us, and when we reached it, Nemumu shattered it with her knives, Gold knocked the golem aside with his shield, and I scooped up Lilith and carried her a safe distance away.

"L-Lord Light…" Lilith began. "I-I'm so sorry!" A red color crept into Lilith's cheeks as I stood there with her still in my arms, holding her like a newlywed bride. I gently placed Lilith back on her feet and resolved to give her a pep talk, because judging by how red she had gone, she was obviously super embarrassed about how badly she had just messed up.



“No, I’m sorry for carrying you like that, emergency or no,” I said. “I never envisioned such an accident happening, though. That’s our fault for putting you in that spot in the first place, so don’t blame yourself for what just happened.”

Lilith placed her hands on her chest and took several deep breaths to regain her composure and to rein in her blushing.

“Thank you, Lord Light,” she said finally. “I-I feel much better hearing that.”

Nemumu was staring at Lilith enviously, prompting a completely confused look from myself at why she would be acting like that. Gold jumped in to clear the air.

“I never would have foreseen such an accident either, milord,” he said. “On a positive note, at least we were here to rescue her from harm. Though this does highlight that there is a risk of her releasing two cards at once and getting herself into a jolly old pickle.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, then turned to Lilith. “So it looks like you probably shouldn’t use the Decoy Golem since it comes with too many dangers attached. We need to go away and think of a better card to use in its place, so will you be available for more training?”

“I most certainly will, Lord Light,” Lilith replied with a calm smile. “I will always trust you and your friends to come up with what’s best for my safety.”

I bowed to Lilith and officially brought an end to the training session. *Now what should the replacement card be?* I wondered. *I ought to go talk to Annelia and Alth about it.*

I ordered Nemumu to escort Lilith back to her palace using a Teleportation card, then I used my own Teleportation card to take myself and Gold to the bottom of the Abyss, and from there, I headed to the Card Repository.

A few days later, we hit upon the solution of replacing the Decoy Golem card with the SSR Small Hatebirds card. This card manifested multiple small birds made of mana that forcibly drew an assailant’s hate and malice toward them. In other words, the Small Hatebirds would serve as decoys in just the same way as the Level 3000 golem, but unlike the golem, the birds had no combat abilities and all they did was fly around, distracting the assailant. But this served our purpose fine, since the birds wouldn’t hurt Lilith at all if they accidentally came into contact with her, so in a repeat scenario of a summon becoming trapped

inside a force field with Lilith, she would be perfectly fine. Once we had settled on using the Small Hatebirds as the replacement decoys, I called Lilith using Telepathy to schedule another training session.

## Extra Story 3: Miya and the School of Magic

“Magic power, frozen might! Manifest to blade of ice! Ice Sword!”

Miya, the adventurer-turned-trainee-apothecary, formed a single Ice Sword that hovered in the air above her. She had just finished up her afternoon apothecary lessons and had decided to spend her free time training in a wooded area outside the village. Miya would usually fire her ultimate combat-class spell into random trees, but on this particular day, she had decided to add a new element to her training regimen.

“Let’s see now…” Miya mumbled to herself. “I remember him standing on one of those swords like it was a plank, so I should turn this one on its side…” Miya brought the Ice Sword closer to her feet and manipulated the magic weapon so the blade lay flat. She made this sword wider than usual for the exact purpose of stepping onto it, which was what she now tried to do, but surfing on an Ice Sword was much easier said than done, and even though Miya was quite agile for a girl her age, she couldn’t maintain her balance on a moving Ice Sword. As soon as she ordered the frozen blade to inch forward, she found herself lurching backward awkwardly, arms flailing, before falling to the ground and landing hard on her backside.

“Ow!” Miya yelped, her eyes welling up due to the pain. But she resisted the urge to use Lowheal on herself, since her mana pool was limited and she needed to conserve what she had for that day’s training.

Still teary-eyed, Miya rose to her feet and tried to rub the pain away. “That elf made standing on a moving sword look so easy,” she grumbled. “He was absolutely frightening and horrible in *every* way imaginable, but I have to give him credit for his skills.”

The elf Miya was referring to was Kyto, a rogue knight from the Elven Queendom who had slain half her party before brutally assaulting her on that fateful night in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon. At the time, Kyto had been wielding the Grandius, a phantasma-class legendary sword that was able to produce

multiple floating clones of itself, and not only could Kyto attack multiple targets using the clones, he could also hop on one and use it to glide through the air.

That little trick had inspired Miya to attempt the same stunt with her Ice Sword, but the plain truth of the matter was Ice Swords weren't so well adapted to this kind of secondary use. For starters, Miya would be unable to use the Ice Sword she was riding on to attack anyone, and furthermore, just moving the Ice Sword consumed a drastically large amount of mana. An Ice Sword was not meant to be ridden in the first place, so it was naturally quite tough to maintain your balance on one, and anyone who tried would be in for a very rough flight.

But despite this, Miya was completely enthralled with the tactical advantages that would come with moving through the air atop an Ice Sword, to the point where she was more than willing to put up with the painful process of trial and error to achieve it. Miya figured that if she had learned how to take off on an Ice Sword sooner, she and Quornae could have easily escaped from the wolfmen that had ended up kidnapping them, and her good friend wouldn't have had to go through the harrowing experience of being locked up in a filthy warehouse with all of the other human hostages. However, that would have relied heavily on Miya actually mastering the trick in the first place. Though in addition to the getaway Ice Sword, she was experimenting with another magical technique.

"Magic power, frozen might! Manifest to blade of ice! Ice Sword!" Once Miya had finished the chant, a new Ice Sword seemingly the same as the previous one appeared before her. "Attack!" Miya ordered, directing the blade at a tree on the edge of the woods. The sword duly obeyed and buried itself into the trunk.

The young mage approached the tree and inspected something underneath the wedged Ice Sword. What she saw made her smile. "Good! It sliced through better than I was expecting!"

What Miya was looking at was a second sword made of thinner ice that had penetrated the trunk below the regular Ice Sword. She had in fact manifested a compound weapon, with one sword made of thin ice layered on top of the normal Ice Sword. The idea was that a foe would be so focused on the regular Ice Sword, they wouldn't even realize that there was

another barely visible sword close beside it. This meant that even if the enemy were to intercept the regular Ice Sword, the other sword would still hit them and cause damage.

But because the second sword was made of thinner ice, it was a much weaker projectile than the real Ice Sword. When Miya had first tried out this trick, the second sword had been so brittle, it shattered against the tree without leaving so much as a scratch. This time around, she had been able to figure out how to make the second sword durable enough to penetrate wood while still maximizing the thinness of the ice.

On seeing the result of this experiment, Miya was satisfied that this thinner, stealthier ice blade would be an effective addition to her arsenal. She spent the rest of her free time practicing spells from her bag of tricks until her mana reserves were eventually exhausted.

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After her little solo training session, Miya returned to the village and found that Yoerm the traveling merchant had parked his covered wagon up in the main square while she was away. There were already plenty of villagers milling around the wagon, since the arrival of a merchant served as a form of entertainment in this otherwise sleepy little hamlet. Miya cast her mind back a few months to the time Yoerm had rolled into town with a party of Mohawks providing security for him. Everyone had hesitated to even approach the wagon due to how menacing the Mohawks looked.

*Those Mohawks did seem pretty scary at first, but they were actually really nice,* Miya recalled. *I wonder what they're up to now. I hope they're doing well.* Miya had initially joined her fellow villagers in prejudging the Mohawks based on their appearances, but she soon became fast friends with them once she found out they also knew the boy adventurer named Dark.

As soon as Yoerm spotted Miya, he excused himself from the customer who was talking to him and waved to the maiden. "I'm glad I caught you, Miya. I actually have a letter addressed to you."

"A letter to me?" Miya repeated.

"That's right," Yoerm confirmed. "And get this: it's from the School of Magic in the Duchy!"

The School of Magic in the Principality of the Nine was the world's top academy for researching spellcraft. Others in the vicinity of Yoerm's booming voice turned to look at Miya in awe. The young mage was every bit as surprised as the gawkers around her, but all the same, she took the letter, thanked the merchant for delivering it, then hurried off home to open it. A bunch of thoughts floated through her mind as she slit open the envelope. *Why would the School of Magic be sending* me *a letter?* she asked herself. *Have they sent it by mistake? I wonder what it says.*

It turned out that the letter had come from someone by the name of Domas, who was a researcher on combat magic and an instructor at the School of Magic. To sum up the contents of the letter, Domas said that he had heard much about a human healer named Saint Miya, and he was wondering if she would be interested in taking the entrance exam to enroll in his institution. Domas pledged to cover the testing fee, as well as pay for all the traveling and lodging expenses she would incur. He was also quite sure she would also be granted a full scholarship as long as she scored well on the entrance exam.

"Why is he calling me a 'saint'?" Miya said aloud. "Has he somehow heard about how Quornae made up this whole new religion called Towerism and made me a saint of it for some reason? Is that why he sent this letter inviting me to enroll in the School of Magic?"

Like Miya said, "Towerism" was a religion her friend Quornae had invented out of whole cloth, and it deified the Wicked Witch as its principal god, designated the fairy maids as angels, and canonized Miya as a saint. The young mage had been placed in the holy pantheon because she had healed and provided comfort to Quornae and the other captives who were detained in the warehouse, and her friend's dramaturgical excesses had aggrandized these charitable contributions as miracles performed by a living saint. But Miya wasn't expecting the bombshell that was in store for her as she read on.

*I happened to meet a human mage by the name of Dark while he was visiting the principality, and it turned out to be an extraordinarily valuable encounter,* Domas wrote. *Your name came up during our conversation, and he mentioned that you were a mage with skills that even surpassed his own. He also testified to your remarkably angelic personality and recommended that I extend*

*an invitation to you to join our institution forthwith. He guaranteed that I would not regret offering such an extraordinary talent this opportunity, so I have followed his advice and reached out to you with this letter.*

Miya half retched in the back of her throat as if she were about to spew blood, a sound that was about as unladylike as was possible to imagine.

"Why, Dark? *Why*?!" Miya groaned, grabbing both sides of her head in consternation. "You *know* my powers pale in comparison to yours, so why did you tell him I'm *better* than you?!"

Miya's stomach ached at the thought that Dark—the young mage she revered unequivocally—had recommended her to the School of Magic under false pretenses. But eventually, the notion that he thought so highly of her overshadowed any of her other concerns, and a sloppy grin appeared on Miya's face, soon followed by a gleeful yet equally slovenly chuckle. As before, this reaction was totally unbecoming of an innocent teenage girl like Miya.

With the letter lying on the table in front of her, Miya continued to alternate between cradling her head in total vexation, rereading the letter, and grinning from ear to ear until her brother, Elio, came home.

## Extra Story 4: The Ideal Wife?

In her free time, Level 7777 summon Suzu liked to make dolls, big and small, with her collection passing the hundred mark long ago. The UR Double Gunner had also kept a notebook titled, “Things I Want To Do With Lord Light,” which she used to update constantly before her talking musket, Lock, voiced his unqualified revulsion at this “delusional” hobby, leading a devastated Suzu to earnestly pursue another interest instead: cooking.

Suzu would visit the cafeteria kitchens well after lunchtime, when there was barely anyone around, and on this particular day, she started her cooking session by kneading dough to make bread, while wearing a cute apron she had stitched herself. She then moved on to preparing stewed Hamburg steak from scratch, cutting what she needed off a bigger slab of beef with a butcher’s knife, then mincing the meat herself.

The chefs in the kitchens—who were also summons from Light’s gacha cards—were normally disinclined to let anyone else intrude on their space, which they considered all but sacred, but when Suzu first approached them with her head bowed and told them her reasons for wanting to start cooking meals, they could hardly say no. In fact, the chefs even cheered her on, designating a small area of their kitchens that Suzu could have all to herself.

At this point, one might wonder what started Suzu on this journey of cooking her own meals. It was nothing to do with not liking the food prepared by the cooks, nor did she find the act of cooking particularly enjoyable. No, her overarching reason for wanting to cook was the same as all her other hobbies: she was doing it with Light in mind.

Once Suzu had finished cooking, she conveyed her thanks to the chefs for letting her use their space with a bow, then walked out of the kitchens carrying the freshly made meal on a dinner tray. On reentering her private room, she was greeted by Lock, whom she had left there while she was cooking.

“Welcome back, partner,” Lock said, sounding unusually curt. Suzu nodded in response and headed over to the table. The chefs were willing to allow Suzu to join them in their hallowed

kitchens, but that same courtesy did not extend to her intelligent weapon. It didn't matter if Suzu cleaned and maintained Lock every day, a kitchen was simply no place for a gun as far as the chefs were concerned, so Suzu was forced to leave Lock in their room, which clearly made the musket pout.

Suzu placed the tray down on the table, then grabbed a notebook and pen and put them beside it. Next, she took out a knife and fork, cut off a piece of the Hamburg steak, and placed it in her mouth. She then took a bite out of her freshly baked bread and started chewing with her eyes closed, concentrating on how the food interacted with her taste buds like a trained sommelier. After that, she jotted down areas of concern, such as the richness of the food or its lack of flavor, her expression every bit as solemn and no-nonsense as if she were fighting a deadly foe. Unable to stay silent in the face of Suzu's overblown earnestness a moment longer, Lock spoke up.

"Honestly, who would have believed you'd be *this* dedicated?" he said. "And all in preparation for one day getting to cook a meal for Lord Light whenever he happens to give you the chance."

As Lock noted, this cooking hobby was unlike any of the other pastimes Suzu had dabbled in. In short, she was practicing so that she would be ready to wow Light with her culinary talents if the opportunity ever arose. Or to put it another way, her hobby was more like an intensive training course in becoming the ideal wife.

"You don't have to wait for your chance to come along, you know," Lock sighed in exasperation. "Just go up to Lord Light and offer him some of your cooking."

Suzu furiously shook her head, leaving Lock to interpret what she meant. "What? You think it'd be rude to impose on him? And you'd be too ashamed to go through that? Then, what's the point of practicing?"

Suzu awkwardly averted her gaze and mumbled an excuse under her breath.

"Oh, you think your food isn't delicious enough yet for Lord Light to taste? Well, I'm no expert on these things since I don't eat, but I know how much effort you put into your cooking, and the food looks decent enough to me, so I'd say you're good to go. I think Lord Light would be really excited to try one of your meals."

Lock was right in assuming that Suzu's Hamburg steak would pass with flying colors as a home-cooked meal, even if the dish wasn't quite up to the same standard as what the gourmet chefs who worked in the kitchens of the Abyss could produce. But to give an idea of how much Suzu's cooking had improved, Nemumu tended to spit out any food prepared by a top chef on the surface world, yet she could enjoy one of Suzu's meals with absolutely no complaints. However, since Suzu planned to cook for Light—the dungeon lord she revered and crushed on with her whole heart—the food needed to be impeccable, and she simply didn't believe she had reached that standard yet.

Lock sighed once more at Suzu's timidity. "How can someone who's so dominant on the battlefield be so cowardly when it comes to Lord Light? At the very least, the size of your manhood should give you a lot more confidence."

Suzu instantly shot Lock a murderous look, but the musket didn't flinch and continued lecturing his partner. "If you keep dragging your feet without making your move, the first person to eat your cooking might end up being that sicko for all we know."

The dirty look on Suzu's face quickly morphed into a mask of fright, and she had to wrap her arms around herself to settle her uncontrollable trembling. The "sicko" Lock was referring to was Miki, a Master who had once been affiliated with the Demonkin Nation before defecting to Light's side. Miki was presently detained in a cell in the lowest depths of the Abyss, but she was fine with that, as long as it meant she was near Suzu, the gorgeous love of her life who was intersex. Miki would constantly harass Suzu for sexual favors in exchange for intelligence, with the transfer of freshly worn tights from her object of lust being among the least explicit of Miki's demands. Suzu reflexively shuddered when recalling Miki's uniquely gooey and predatory gaze, for it was a gaze that struck more fear into a person's heart than any a ruthless, blood-soaked killer could muster up.

"You wish we could just finish off that creep and be done with it?" Lock queried, interpreting Suzu's body language. "You know we can't do that. Not if she still has a bunch of intel we need. And besides, I don't think killing that sicko's a good idea, even if she has no more info to give us. I'm actually planning to warn Lord Light not to off her when I get the chance."

Suzu shot Lock a quizzical look, but the musket seemed deadly serious about advising Light against executing Miki. A significant majority of Light's allies were in favor of killing the captive, even if it meant destroying a valuable source of information, largely because there was a chance her indecent conduct might corrupt Light, or even his little sister, Yume. Given the prevailing mood, it was highly unusual that Lock would be against doing away with Miki, but the musket proceeded to lay out an unintuitively convincing reason for his opposition.

"You know how that creep is infinitely obsessed with you?" Lock said. "Well, if we kill her, that obsessiveness might end up growing stronger and revive her as some kind of undead super zombie. You'd definitely be a lot worse off if that happened."

This hypothetical scenario stunned Suzu more than receiving a blow to the back of the head. She'd heard of cases where someone with a deep-seated bitterness had come back from the dead after being killed, the spiritual energy from their raging spite transforming them into something resembling a powerful zombie in order to keep pursuing its target with upgraded fanaticism. It went without saying that Miki's attachment to Suzu went beyond mere obsession, and it was hard to imagine what would happen if that fervor grew even stronger after death. The mere notion of it made Suzu quiver in fear more than she had ever quivered before.

"The last thing we want is a zombie Miki wreaking havoc in the Abyss," Lock continued. "Keeping her on a leash by negotiating with her is the best place we can be right now in my opinion."

Suzu had gone quieter than usual after hearing Lock's argument, prompting the musket to seal the deal. "That sicko might end up demanding a home-cooked meal from you as payment for coughing up info, so I suggest you hurry up and get Lord Light to try your cooking before that can happen."

Suzu knew Lock was right, but her shoulders still silently slumped, betraying her dejection. The rifle was quick to translate this visible response into words.

"You're still not confident Lord Light will like your food? Then, just get someone else to taste-test it for— Huh? Why must Lord Light be the first to taste your food, and no one else? You're killing me here!"

Suzu had grown weepy at the thought of someone else taking

the first bite out of her home-cooked meal, causing Lock to respond with supreme indignation. This back-and-forth continued for a little while, but the pair ultimately failed to reach a compromise, and the stewed Hamburg steak grew too cold to enjoy properly. And so, whether Suzu would ever get the opportunity to prepare a meal for Light remained totally up in the air.

# Extra Story 5: Outcasts at the Great Tower

As soon as she was named queen, Lilith ordered the expulsion and exile of a multitude of spies and their families from the Human Kingdom. They were allowed to take as many possessions as they could carry with them, but the rest of their property would be transferred to the state as part of their punishment for committing high treason. The outcasts were allowed to seek asylum at a number of places, but as it turned out, most chose to go to the Great Tower, despite the fact that the Wicked Witch had played a major part in uprooting their lives.

The reason for this unexpected development was actually quite simple: the exiled included a large number of distant relatives who'd had no idea that members of their extended families had been engaging in espionage. While the households that actually served as spies mostly chose to seek refuge in the nations where they already had connections, their innocent distant relatives were too furious at the perpetrators to resettle with them, and the fact that the Great Tower had embraced absolute autonomy for humans made it a prime destination for relocation. The asylum seekers had to undergo extra-rigorous rounds of screening that had been instituted as a result of the Miki incident, but for the most part, the displaced were taken in and resettled without any issues.

The Great Tower settlement was also very eager to welcome this influx of pariahs, since the previous waves of arrivals had mostly consisted of former slaves or peasants who struggled to even write their own names. This was especially true of the surge of evacuees that were taken in as a result of the Beastfolk Massacre, also known as the Human Deliverance War. The tower settlement had the infrastructure to house all of the new immigrants that had continued to stream in ever since the war, but it was quickly becoming apparent that there was a crippling lack of people skilled in trades.

The exiles from the Human Kingdom were different, however. Since they were all related to households that had been hired to serve as spies for other nations, even these extended families

were high enough up the social ladder to have been taught to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic. They had also been trained in the type of common etiquette and cultural refinement expected of the professional class, and most importantly, many of this cohort had job-specific skills that were needed to run the settlement smoothly. While Tower City was mostly managed by the fairy maids, a school with a built-in orphanage had been opened to train the next generation of administrators. But with the arrival of these skilled professionals, the fairy maids could fill the vacancies they had without needing to wait for the children to finish up their schooling.

Of course, some of the more established residents were resentful that the newcomers were suddenly being placed in higher positions than them, but even that minor friction ended up resolving itself in time and with only a few interventions where they were needed. The fairy maids only had a finite amount of time and energy to dedicate to overseeing Tower City, so they naturally chose to bring the outcasts on board to reduce their workloads. And the fairy maids weren't the only ones who viewed these new arrivals as a godsend.

"H-How do you do?" the girl stuttered nervously. "I look forward to working with you, Miss Silica!"

Silica laughed warmly. "There's no need to be so formal. You can just call me 'Silica.'"

"O-Okay, Silica!" the new hire replied.

Silica was an orphan whose traveling merchant parents had been killed by a monster. Sometime after that harrowing experience, she was sold into slavery but was saved by a group of human adventurers who had funny-looking Mohican-style haircuts. On gaining her freedom, she relocated to the Great Tower settlement, where she was eventually placed in charge of her own shop, even though she would have rather been in school. But since Silica's parents had taught her the basics of commerce while they were still alive, and there was no one else with Silica's set of skills readily available, it was what it was.

On a sidenote, the most popular item in Silica's store was the so-called "fairy maid soap" which came in bar form. Light's Unlimited Gacha produced N Soap cards in such huge amounts, they couldn't be consumed fast enough in the Abyss, so instead of them taking up space in the dungeon, the fairy maids sold any surplus soap to the shops around Tower City wholesale, in order

to promote hygiene among the fast-growing population. And thanks to the supernaturally gorgeous fairy maids constantly using the same soap themselves, even the men who were otherwise comfortable with a little bit of grime started picking up the habit of washing their hands with soap. As such, the introduction of N Soap to the city successfully improved public health.

"I was hoping I'd find someone to help me out in the shop, because running this place by myself is hard," Silica said. "And I'm glad it's another girl who's around my age and able to calculate numbers. It's been almost impossible to find someone like you."

This wasn't Silica engaging in empty flattery either, because apart from a very brief period, Silica had been running the store all by herself. This meant she had to receive the fresh supplies of goods, stock the shelves, clean the store, get the place ready for opening each morning, deal with the customers, do the bookkeeping, write the reports, and draft the orders for more inventory.

But the fresh batch of refugees to the Great Tower were from the educated class, and among them was a girl who, like Silica, had no other family to take care of her. Despite her circumstances, the girl was literate, knew how to do math, and was trained in proper etiquette. Knowing her profile, the fairy maids immediately assigned this girl to Silica's shop to lighten her workload. As for the new girl, she was not only thankful to have been placed in a workplace that she could also call home, she was relieved she would be living with another girl close to her age, so the transition went smoothly.

"I-I'm also glad you are the person I'm working for," the new girl said in response. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not all that comfortable being around guys."

"Oh, sure, I can relate," Silica said. "Guys generally scare me too, *especially* if they're full-grown men." She momentarily recalled the Mohawks who had rescued her and added, "I'll admit that some of them are nice, though."

On that note, Silica decided it was time to get down to work. "All right, you can help me get this shop ready for opening. Since this is your first day, I'll walk you through what I usually do, and then next time, we'll divvy up the work."

"Of course! I'll be sure to pull my weight!" the girl said cheerily.

☆☆☆

The first workday with the new employee passed without incident, and once they had closed up shop, the two girls made stew together and had a pleasant conversation over supper.

"You're such a good teacher, Silica," the hireling said. "Everything you told me was easy to understand, and I was able to get the hang of it all straightaway."

Silica stopped eating to giggle bashfully. "Was I *really* that good at teaching you?"

"Have you taught anyone before?" the new girl asked innocently. "You seem experienced in that sort of thing."

Silica paused briefly. "Nope, this is my first time training someone. It's all new to me."

Luckily for Silica, the new hire didn't notice the slight hesitation before she answered the question. As far as both girls were concerned, this was Silica's first time training an employee.

*Me and Miki had this same stew the last night we were here together,* Silica recalled sadly. *And we made it together too...*

The last time Silica saw Miki had been the very next morning. The two girls had taken part in an evacuation drill that had seen the entire neighborhood temporarily relocate to the Great Tower, which would provide them with shelter in case of monster attacks or other disasters. To thank them for their participation in the drill, the residents were all provided with a free breakfast inside the tower, but a fairy maid had accidentally spilled soup over Miki's clothes. Another fairy maid had then led Miki up to the second floor of the tower to get her a change of clothes, but she never came back down.

Later that same day, large tremors rocked Tower City, transforming the evacuation drill into a real emergency, but once the danger had passed, Silica was cleared to return home. Naturally, Silica couldn't just leave without Miki, but when she asked a nearby fairy maid about her friend, she received a spine-chilling reply.

"Miki? I have no idea who that is."

Silica didn't waste another second and ran back to her shop. When she got there, she bounded up the stairs to Miki's second-floor bedroom, only to discover that the room had been completely emptied out. In fact, none of Miki's possessions could be found in the shop, not even any of the cups she had used. It

was like Miki had never existed.

There was one other precedent of someone disappearing in a similar fashion to that: a man who had attempted to sexually assault a fairy maid. But Silica didn't think that was a likely explanation for her coworker's disappearance, because in her eyes, Miki had been a teenage girl who would never have done anything inappropriate with a fairy maid. The only other plausible explanation she could come up with was that maybe Miki had been a spy working for another nation. If that had been the case, it was understandable that the Great Witch had decided to remove the infiltrator and treat her as a nonperson.

Silica herself abided by the unspoken rule never to mention Miki again, nor openly acknowledge her existence. She had no choice in the matter. *Maybe I'm wrong about what happened to Miki. I have no way of knowing for sure,* thought Silica. *But if she is still alive out there, I hope she's living a happy life.* Even if it had been just for a brief spell, Silica still considered Miki a friend who had shared the same meals and slept under the same roof as her. Silica couldn't help but wish the best for her onetime companion.

"Silica, is something wrong?" the new girl asked. "You seem kind of down."

"Oh, sorry. It's not what you think," Silica said with a hurried smile. "I was just thinking about the orders I need to send out in a couple of days." She then seamlessly changed the subject. "Since the shop's closed tomorrow, how about I take you on a tour of Tower City? I'll show you a bunch of restaurants and shops I think you'll like."

"Oh, wow, you're so thoughtful!" the new hire gushed. "I heard this place was more thriving than the entirety of the Human Kingdom, so I've always wanted to check it out."

Silica kept the smile on her face constant as her new employee expressed her excitement in a manner befitting of the young girl she was, but in her heart of hearts, Silica still prayed that Miki was safe and well.

☆☆☆

True to Silica's wishes, Miki was presently wallowing in happiness as she huffed deeply on Suzu's used tights inside her cell at the bottom of the Abyss.

“*Ahhh*! I can still smell my sweet Suzu’s scent at the very tips of the toes!” Miki exulted between whiffs. “I can still *feel* her warmth in these tights! Oh, my Suzu! Miki’s sweet, *sweet* Suzu!”

Miki went back to inhaling every inch of the black tights she had received weeks before as her first concession, the SSSR Curse Collar around her neck bobbing up and down with each breath she took. The faces of the fairy maids assigned to guard her cell twisted in unmitigated revulsion, and they had to cover their ears to block out the noises she was making. But there could be no doubt that Miki was as contented and fulfilled as any girl could ever hope to be.

# Extra Story 6: Lucky Charms

“Damn it!” Iceheat yelled. “Why won’t Miss Mei grant me authorization?”

“Well, of *course* she’s not gonna let you go up to the surface for that reason, even on your day off,” Mera said, chuckling. “Who in their right mind makes that sort of trip just to collect rabbits’ feet?”

On this particular night, the two women were sitting at a table in Iceheat’s private apartment in the Abyss and chatting over some tea. Normally, Iceheat would be holding one of these self-pity sessions in an empty cafeteria, but on this occasion, she had made an exception. Aside from the tea, the table contained various high-calorie snacks that had been bought at the dungeon shop, ranging from chocolate candy and butter cookies loaded with extra butter to deep-fried french fries.

“Yes, I’m well aware of how silly it sounds, but I myself have to collect rabbits’ feet if I am ever going to turn my present situation around,” Iceheat protested. “Rabbits’ feet are known charms that bring good luck, and I submitted a written request with my objectives thoroughly documented, so why was I turned down?”

“I’m sorry, babes, but even *I* would turn you down if I saw that,” Mera said, rubbing her forehead wearily. “It’s simply not a good enough reason for a Level 7777 like you to go up to the surface.”

She suddenly cackled as she recalled another recent episode with Iceheat that had followed a similar script. “I heard you even asked Gold for advice on how to improve your luck, which resulted in you trying to paint this whole room gold. Actually, it wasn’t even a paint job. You were gonna cover everything with gold foil like it was wallpaper. Luckily, Gold found out about it just in time to stop you. Even that laid-back gadfly gave you a stern warning about going through with that madness. I almost didn’t believe my ears when I first caught wind of it.”

“He told me gold was a lucky color, so I myself came to the conclusion that covering my room in *real* gold would definitely improve my fortunes,” Iceheat explained. “And I thought having

a bunch of rabbits' feet in the room would only help to guarantee I had better luck…"

Mera immediately started imagining what it would look like if the walls around her were covered in gaudy gold foil and festooned with rabbits' feet. Not only would the combination look incredibly tacky, it would also be a ghastly display of animal cruelty that would cause both Yume and Nazuna to break down in tears if they ever saw it. The mere thought of that happening doubled the size of Mera's headache.

But why was Iceheat so willing to go to such extremes to attain more luck, I hear you ask? Well, it can all be traced back to Miki. Light had assigned Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, and Jack to fight the female Master in the Great Tower, but Iceheat had pleaded with the other Level 7777 warriors to let her fight Miki alone. Her reasoning was she hadn't taken part in any of the surface-world missions since battling the White Knights in the same tower, and she wanted to prove her fealty to Light. But before Iceheat could engage Miki in combat, the blonde Master fell in love with Suzu at first sight and defected to the Great Tower. Although Light's side had successfully captured Miki and thrown her in a cell, this unexpected turn had been a major letdown for Iceheat.

During the subsequent mission to the Onifolk Archipelago, Iceheat had been assigned the task of capturing the head of a daimyo, Utamaro, who was the de facto leader of the nation. However, Khaos had accidentally incapacitated Utamaro while engaging with his security detail, meaning that Iceheat had once again been denied her chance to shine. Because of this series of events, Iceheat was starting to believe she might be jinxed, and as a result, she became obsessed with superstitions—particularly the kind that might help her to reverse her fortunes.

Mera sighed and attempted to cheer Iceheat up. "Hun, I get what you're going through, I really do, but you shouldn't let stuff that happened in the past consume you like this. You're just suffering from a string of bad luck, that's all. We all do at some point. All you can do is shrug it off and move on."

"You have a point, but…" Iceheat said glumly, tracing the rim of her teacup with her finger. "But my mind won't *let* me move on from it."

It was often the case that something that might seem trivial to one person was a cause of great anxiety to someone else, and no amount of advice from others was going to lift that person

out of their funk.

Iceheat looked up from her teacup and fixed Mera with a deadly serious look. “I hear cats can bring you luck,” she said. “So I plan on asking Miss Aoyuki to come live with me here for a while. What do you think?”

Mera laughed until she was hoarse before saying in an equally serious tone of voice, “Please don’t.”

*Iceheat and Miss Aoyuki are both stubborn to a fault,* Mera reasoned. *If things get* really *messy, I could quite easily see those two ending up getting into a brawl which wouldn’t end well.*

Aoyuki was a Level 9999 SUR warrior, though she usually sent monsters she had tamed to do her fighting for her. But even without the aid of her creatures, Aoyuki was an overwhelmingly strong fighter in her own right. As for Iceheat, she could hold her own against one or multiple powerful opponents, thanks to her fire and ice attacks, which meant if the two of them ended up in an all-out slugfest, the damage that would be wrought to the Abyss would no doubt be unimaginable. Of course, both Iceheat and Aoyuki were two of Light’s most loyal allies, so they were highly unlikely to engage in this type of destructive behavior that would anger their lord, but nothing in life was guaranteed. *I have to do everything I can to intervene before the worst happens,* Mera thought, chuckling anxiously to herself.

“Yes, I know Miss Aoyuki is the closest we have to a feline down here,” Mera said to a sour-looking Iceheat. “But wouldn’t getting a *real* cat be the obvious solution here?”

“I considered that, but taking care of a helpless animal is far more complicated than it sounds,” Iceheat said. “I would possibly consider keeping a pet for the emotional enrichment of Miss Yume, but I would rather not own a pet solely for myself. The time I would spend caring for a cat would be better spent serving Master Light.”

Mera completely sympathized with this logic, since she would also much rather spend all of her free time being useful to Light. However, keeping Aoyuki around as a pet still wasn’t an option.

“Okay, how about this?” Mera started. “You could always keep a bunch of cats that don’t need any looking after at all.”

Iceheat didn’t follow. “Are you talking about zombie cats?”

Mera burst out laughing. “Now you’re freaking *me* out!” She cleared her throat and proceeded to explain to her hopelessly narrow-minded friend what she had *actually* meant.

☆☆☆

“The one sitting up straight is absolutely adorable, but I just love the one curled up in its sleep,” Iceheat squeed.

“Mrreeew!” Aoyuki purred in agreement.

The pair were in the lounge area of Suzu’s private chambers, gushing over the realistic cat dolls the gunner had made as part of her doll-making hobby. The replica felines were all sitting on the table for Iceheat and Aoyuki to enjoy, while Mera stood off to one side, watching the scene unfold, and Suzu was smiling away due to all the praise she was receiving.

“Thanks again for letting her have some of your cat dolls, hun,” Mera said with a chuckle.

“Don’t feel like you have to owe us anything, Ms. Mera,” Lock said, replying in Suzu’s stead from between her fingers. “My partner’s always glad to give her dolls to people who will take good care of them. You can see for yourself how pleased she is with all the compliments.”



Mera had suggested to Iceheat that she should try keeping inanimate cats in her room instead of a real, live feline. Since both Mera and Iceheat were aware of Suzu's hobby, they had asked her if she had any cat dolls she would be willing to part with. Suzu readily agreed, since she had made more handmade Light dolls than her living quarters could reasonably cope with, and she would need the extra space if she wanted to house all of the extra Light dolls she was inevitably going to make. Aoyuki's hobby was collecting cat goods to a similarly excessive degree, and the SUR monster tamer had happened to pick up on Mera and Iceheat's chatter about the cat dolls through her own devices. Highly intrigued by them, Aoyuki had decided to accompany the two Level 7777s to Suzu's apartment.

"This cat has such a cute pattern on its fur!" Iceheat exclaimed.

"Mrrow!" Aoyuki agreed.

Mera watched the unlikely threesome fawning over the cat dolls like they were best friends, and breathed a sigh of relief that things had all worked out in the end.

"You did great, Ms. Mera," Lock said sympathetically.

Mera guffawed. "When it boils down to it, it's all for master's benefit."

Since Lock often served as Suzu's much-beleaguered interlocutor and adviser, the musket was able to empathize with the headaches Mera must have had trying to deal with Iceheat's problem, and unbeknownst to the three maidens gazing at the cat dolls, another duo who were vastly different in nearly every other respect were forming an unlikely bond.

## Extra Story 7: Lap Pillow

“Please enjoy, Master Light,” Mei said, placing a cup of tea in front of me on my desk.

“Thanks, Mei,” I said, flashing her a smile. At this particular moment in time, the two of us were by ourselves in my executive office on the bottom level of the Abyss while I leafed through some documents. It seemed like an eternity since we’d had each other to ourselves like this, but I was too preoccupied with a totally separate issue to fully appreciate the moment. And what was this problem that had me racking my brain to find a solution, you might ask? The question bouncing around inside my head was how I was going to punish Ellie.

For those who might be wondering why Ellie of all people would ever need to be disciplined, it was because that was what she wanted. A little while back, the city at the base of the Great Tower was infiltrated by a Master named Miki, which led to intel being leaked to another Master named Daigo, who came to the tower intending to wreak havoc. Daigo injured some of my allies with his twin Elemental Blades—even fatally wounding one—but we managed to limit the damage to the area surrounding the tower to a barely noticeable level.

But since Ellie was in charge of the Great Tower and the adjoining city, she felt responsible for that whole episode, so she had practically begged me to punish her in some way. At first, I’d told her I didn’t blame her at all, but she insisted that punishing bad work was “essential” for the running of any organization. Mei also pleaded for me to punish Ellie on her behalf, so I ended up relenting.

*I know I promised I’d punish her…* I thought. *But what’s the right punishment for this situation?* In truth, I still blamed myself for the incident, since I was the one who made all the final decisions, and some of those decisions had opened up security holes that Miki had exploited. As such, I didn’t think Ellie was at fault at all, but I knew I was never going to be able to convince her of that. On the other hand, I knew I *had* to punish Ellie in some way so she’d stop guilt-tripping herself over it.

*But a simple slap on the wrist won’t cut it,* I reasoned. *Still, if I*

*crucify her like she wants me to, that would just end up undermining her authority here in the Abyss and at the Great Tower.* And that was the conundrum I was wrestling with: how to find a suitable middle ground between letting Ellie off lightly and coming down too hard on her.

*No jury in the world would lay the blame at Ellie's door for Miki's spying,* I thought. *Hm, since Miki is the source of the problem, should I just execute her and sweep it all under the rug? Suzu would no longer be made to feel targeted and terrified, and I wouldn't have to worry so much about her influencing Yume and Nazuna…*

At present, Miki was detained in a cell in the Abyss, her power level lowered thanks to the SSSR Curse Collar we had placed around her neck. The item had also reduced her mana pool, limited her physical abilities, and put a lid on her Gift. In short, the Curse Collar had weakened Miki in so many ways, slaying her would be a cinch. But I still shook my head and batted away this idea. *She's a valuable source of information, so she's—just barely—worth the trouble,* I rationalized. *And I'm now painfully aware of how critical it is to have as much information as you can get.*

Back when I was a member of the Concord of the Tribes, I was too ignorant about the value of knowledge until it was too late. But thanks to Mei and my other allies, I had become a complete convert to the idea of building up a massive knowledge base. While Suzu might not like my judgment call on this one, I just couldn't get rid of a source of intelligence like Miki—at least, not yet. *I guess I have no choice but to punish Ellie in a way that's not too harsh, but also not too soft,* I concluded. I sighed audibly as my train of thought brought me right back to square one.

"Master Light, you seem exhausted," Mei noted. It seemed as though my sighing had been too loud to pass unnoticed.

I massaged my temples with the fingers of both hands. "Not physically, but my mental fatigue is another story."

"Overthinking matters is never good for one's health," Mei stated. "Perhaps I can interest you in taking a short break." Mei sat down on the sofa next to me and patted her lap twice. Knowing exactly what she was implying, I felt my cheeks flush.

It also took me back to everything that had happened three years earlier. *The Concord of the Tribes betrayed me and left me for dead at the bottom of the Abyss, before Mei showed up to rescue me,* I recalled. *I was so tired from my ordeal that I pretty much passed out soon after meeting her, so she let me sleep with my head on her*

*lap that night.* I remember drifting in and out of consciousness, but sensing that my head was being caressed by something incredibly soft, while a pleasant scent filled my nostrils. When I eventually woke up, I immediately broke down and started crying at how my former party had cruelly and violently kicked me to the curb, and it had taken Mei's gentle embrace to calm me down again. Looking back, I really was an emotional wreck at the time. In the end, what had allowed me to lift myself up from that low point was my vow to get revenge on those who had wronged me, and the fact that Mei was there for me.

It had just been the two of us when we started to build a new life for ourselves at the bottom of the Abyss, and we had worked closely to develop the dungeon into the stronghold it was three years later. Those first years down here were filled with some of the best memories of my life, to the point where I wouldn't have minded if I had to relive them.

"Sure, I could take a little break," I said, doing my best to mask my inhibitions.

"Of course," Mei said. "You can rest here for as long as you like, Master Light." Instead of speaking in her usual slightly wooden, officious tone, Mei's voice was extra warm and contented. Even I couldn't help smiling bashfully as I lay my head down on Mei's lap. The scent that filled my nostrils was every bit as pleasant as I remembered, and her thighs were as soft and as cozily warm as anything. Mei started stroking my head like I was still a little kid, but I didn't mind at all. In fact, I could sense the love and tenderness she had for me through her gentle, soothing caresses.

While resting on Mei's lap, I realized I was blessed with partners I could trust, who would stick with me through thick and thin, unlike those fakes in the Concord of the Tribes. I didn't need to stress myself out so much over solving any conundrum by myself, because I could always go to my partners with whatever problems I had, and I knew they would come up with better solutions than I could by myself. I felt a weight lifting off me as I came to this realization, and this newfound peace of mind made me want to doze off.

"Mei..." I mumbled. "Can you wake me up again in a little bit?"



“Why, certainly, Master Light,” Mei said lovingly, the last syllable hovering in my ear as I drifted off to sleep fully at peace and without a care in the world. Like a baby being tucked in by its mother, I surrendered my consciousness to the enveloping darkness completely unguarded.

## Extra Story 8: Khaos vs Orka

“May I join you, my Mohawk friends?”

The UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka approached the sunglasses-wearing group while they were in the middle of a late lunch in the Abyss cafeteria. Because it was past noon already, the cafeteria wasn’t particularly crowded and there were plenty of empty seats, yet despite this, Orka approached the Mohawks anyway.

For their part, the Mohawks had just returned to the dungeon after another round of questing and intelligence-gathering, but here they were being confronted by what might as well have been a direct order to allow Orka to join them, because while the fiddler had been summoned much later than the Mohawks, Orka’s power level was overwhelmingly higher than theirs, leaving the Mohawks in no position to refuse. But instead of grudgingly acquiescing to the request, the Mohawk leader excitedly accommodated the fiddler.

“Here’s a seat with your name on, Mr. Orka!” the red-haired leader declared. “Take a load off and chow down with us!”

“Your kindness is very much appreciated,” Orka replied, placing his tray of food on the table and taking a seat next to the Mohawks. But before he touched his meal, Orka activated his Item Box and took out a ream of papers. “Here’s the revised sheet music for the composition you performed for me the other day.”

“What? Ya rewrote it *already*?” the Mohawk leader said, taking the sheet music from him. “Whoa! We owe ya big time, man!”

The Mohawks were low-level summons with no unique skills to speak of and completely incapable of raising their power levels, like the rest of Light’s other summons, but instead of lamenting their lot in life, the Mohawks were committed to acquiring more skills through sheer effort alone in order to be more useful to their dungeon lord. This meant that whenever they had spare time, the Mohawks would train themselves in practical skills, such as laying traps, tracking targets, and administering first aid. They also engaged in other pursuits that didn’t seem particularly relevant at first glance, such as cooking,

brewing fine tea, and etiquette. Writing and performing music was another of these pursuits, and after the Mohawk leader had taken the rewritten sheet music from Orka, the other Mohawks all scrambled to take a peek at how the expert musician had rearranged their composition.

"To be honest with you, my friends, I am not entirely sure if my revisions fully reflect the sheer *force* and vigor with which you deliver the melody," a slightly flustered Orka admitted. "That is my main concern with the score, because I thoroughly enjoyed that aspect of your music."

"Oh, you got nothin' to worry about here, chief!" the Mohawk leader said. "That song was a total work in progress by a bunch of complete amateurs, so we're stoked that a real music guy like you has had a look at our tune."

"No lies here, Mr. Orka!" another Mohawk concurred.

"I could tell at a glance that ya really polished up our music," a third Mohawk added.

"Can't wait to bust out this new ditty!" said a fourth.

"I am afraid all this praise is making me blush," Orka said bashfully. He scratched his cheek with his finger as his face turned a ruddy hue.

The Mohawks sat back down in their seats and everyone at the cafeteria table discussed Orka's sheet music as lunch resumed. When the topic eventually ran its course, one of the Mohawks brought up something that had been on his mind for a good few minutes.

"Mr. Orka, are ya sure that'll be enough to fill ya up?" the Mohawk asked. All Orka had on his tray was one ball of sticky rice topped with dried tuna and wrapped in seaweed, some pickled vegetables, a slice of rolled omelet, and a small bowl of salmon stew with rice. By contrast, the Mohawks had loaded their trays with all sorts of meats, fruit, and vegetables. Since they mostly operated up on the surface, they generally had to put up with food that wasn't as tasty as the stuff they could get down here in the Abyss, so they tended to make the most of their rare visits to the dungeon's cafeteria. But while Orka had a slim build—compared to the Mohawks, at least—he wasn't slim enough to justify the scantness of his meal. The fiddler smiled and explained his reason.

"The lunch I have before me is actually an extravagant collection of my favorite foods," Orka stated. "I love the rice ball,

the stew with rice, and the omelet equally. As for the volume, I would argue that the rice will sufficiently fill my stomach."

The Mohawks could relate in a way, since they liked all of those listed food items too. The stew with rice was particularly delectable after having some of the booze that was stocked in the Abyss. However, it still seemed strange to them that a grown man could sustain himself on so little. There was also another reason why the meager lunch seemed so odd to the Mohawks.

"Uh, okay. We just asked since you look like the princely type, Mr. Orka," the Mohawk observed.

"Ya got that right," another Mohawk agreed. "I can imagine him eatin' a full-course meal with a knife and fork like *actual* royalty!"

"Whoa, you read my mind, brother!" said a third.

Orka could only chuckle bashfully in agreement of their assessment. He had long hair that was dark one side, white the other, and tied into a ponytail that stretched down his back. He was tall and good-looking, and he looked particularly majestic when playing the fiddle. If Alth of the Card Repository could be considered a conventionally handsome prince with a sunny disposition, then Orka was the cool, mysterious prince who played the violin—or perhaps a piano—under the moonlight. Yet here was this princely figure, eating a meal that was barely enough to even satisfy commoners.

"It's true. The meals I eat don't usually match the image most have of me," Orka agreed as he picked up the rice ball. "And although I do not often partake in the kind of lavish meals you are talking about, I do enjoy them from time to time. Personally, however, I'm more enamored with how the white of the rice and the black of the seaweed match my own colors. Do you see?"

"Yeah, that rice ball really does go well with your colors, boss," the Mohawk leader replied.

"Yup, now that ya mention it, it does," another Mohawk remarked. "But you look good next to anything, Mr. Orka."

Orka smiled pleasantly at this, then took a bite out of the rice ball. Despite their vastly differing power levels, everyone conversed like good buddies as they enjoyed meals—or at least, they did until Orka received a call via Telepathy.

"Hello, Orka?" Ellie said when the extrasensory channel had been established. "Is now a good time?"

"Ms. Ellie?" Orka responded. "Yes, I'm available for whatever

you need.” The Mohawks took this opening exchange as their cue to stop talking. Of course, Ellie wouldn’t be able to hear the Mohawks over the Telepathy line, no matter how loudly they spoke, but they were considerate enough not to inadvertently distract Orka while he was on his call.

“I’d like to speak to you and Khaos personally when the two of you are free,” Ellie stated. “We will be discussing your roles as the Wicked Witch’s deputies. I want to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Understood, Ms. Ellie,” Orka replied. “Once I’ve finished my lunch, I’ll go find Khaos and arrange a time for the three of us to meet.”

“If you could, that’d be great,” Ellie said before ending the Telepathy call. Since it wasn’t an emergency, Orka returned to his conversation with the Mohawks until they had all finished eating.

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“And that’s how we’re going to reveal ourselves to the world,” Ellie told Orka and Khaos in a meeting room in the Abyss later that same afternoon. “Our main purpose for being there is to shatter Mr. Diablo’s reputation, but our appearance will also serve as an opportunity to introduce the two of you as my deputies. So I will need you both to adhere closely to the script I have just laid out to you.”

The plan—as Ellie outlined it to Orka and Khaos—was that they would compel the Elf Queendom’s monarch to invite the Wicked Witch and her two lieutenants to the summit as her special guests, where the three of them would reveal their true identities moments after the summit was officially opened. Their task was to essentially bully Diablo and make him look bad in front of the world’s dignitaries, though they wouldn’t go as far as hurting him physically. Instead, they were to make comments that implied Diablo was in cahoots with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, the threat the summit had been convened to address. This would cause Diablo to find himself under pressure to explain himself to his own nation as well as others, and the negative effect to his reputation would wear heavily on his psyche.

In addition to that, the summit represented a rare opportunity for the Wicked Witch to make a splash on the world

stage. The Great Tower and the character of the Wicked Witch had originally been concocted in part to draw attention away from Light's underground stronghold in the Abyss, which meant the more extravagantly Ellie played the part of the tower witch, the better it would be for Light's interests. She had also mentioned that it would be much more convincing if the Wicked Witch had attendants serving as her bodyguards, which was why both Khaos and Orka had been summoned. Plus, since Khaos was the same height and build as Light, he could function as his master's body double if necessary.

Since both Khaos and Orka had been told what their roles would be when the pair were summoned, they immediately agreed to Ellie's plans for the summit. However, Orka accidentally proceeded to jab at a certain sore spot for Khaos.

"At long last, you'll be able to call me 'elder brother' before a world audience," Orka said to Khaos, smiling gently. "Such an honor would be most humbling."

Khaos clicked his tongue, still annoyed at the fact that he had to refer to Orka as his older brother whenever they were up on the surface world, despite not being related in any way whatsoever. Khaos had only begrudgingly gone along with the charade since it helped him in his role as a stand-in for "Dark"—Light's alter ego on the surface—should his services ever be called on. Since Dark had lost his entire family in a fire, according to his made-up backstory, no one would ever suspect Khaos of playing the masked mage.

"Khaos, please make sure you follow my plan to the letter," Ellie stressed, just to be on the safe side.

"I will," Khaos replied. "I am not so foolish that I would break a promise."

Khaos was a rebellious sort, who had refused to immediately serve under Light when first summoned, and was initially resistant to referring to Orka as his elder brother. But after Light defeated Khaos in a duel, Khaos yielded to performing both of these obligations since he abided by his so-called "laws of nature," where the weak must obey the strong. But while Khaos had lost to Light, Orka was less proficient in combat than him, and therefore less deserving of deference, which meant Orka's playful banter came off as extra grating to Khaos, although he had too much pride to simply outright ignore his promises to Light and Ellie.

Looking to change the subject and chase away the sour mood hanging in the air, Ellie activated her Item Box and pulled out an envelope. “Oh, that reminds me, Khaos. Miss Ayame sent this letter to you.”

“Another one?” Khaos sighed. “Thanks. I’ll take it.”

Ayame was the younger sister of Yotsuha, the Holy Princess of the Onifolk Archipelago, and she was dedicated to her swordsmanship training so that she could one day realize her dream of becoming a full-fledged warrior and her older sister’s protector. When the two sisters took refuge in the Great Tower, Ayame had wanted to test her strength against Ellie in her guise as the Great Witch, who politely demurred from a duel with the young girl, noting that a sorceress who specialized in ranged attacks would be a mismatch for a close-combat practitioner like Ayame.

As an alternative solution, Khaos was chosen to be Ayame’s sparring partner, but due to the large gulf in their power levels, the young oni was unable to even score a hit on Khaos with her wooden sword. But in an act of condescending pity for someone who was far weaker than him, Khaos offered Ayame a few pointers on how to fight with a sword. This marked the beginning of Ayame’s training sessions with Khaos at the Great Tower, and the young oni girl came to admire him as her “master.”

Even after Ayame had returned to her homeland with Yotsuha, she kept in contact with Khaos by writing him letters. Since Khaos wasn’t the type to disregard someone who looked up to him, he dutifully wrote back to Ayame whenever he had the time to spare, and as a result, the two had pretty much become pen pals.

In the meeting room, Orka realized he shouldn’t have poked fun at Khaos before, so he attempted to clear the air by complimenting his partner on the heartwarming relationship he had struck up with Ayame. “I’m proud of you, Khaos,” he remarked. “Despite your prickly exterior, you are still kind to your admirers and treat them gently.”

“Orka, do you wish to fight me?” Khaos snapped coldly. “If you do, then just come out and say it directly, instead of prodding me in this backhanded, roundabout fashion.” Of course, Orka wasn’t trying to be malicious at all, but that didn’t matter to Khaos, who was still fuming about the fiddler’s previous remark about him

being the “younger brother” of the pair.

“No spite was intended on my part,” Orka said quickly as he withered under Khaos’s pitiless gaze. “I was simply praising you for being friendly with Ayame. If what I said sounded scornful to your ears, I apologize.”

A brief moment of silence passed before Khaos opened his mouth. “I suppose I let my emotions run away with me.”

“Then, can we agree to call it even?” Orka suggested.

“Sure,” Khaos said. But even though the pair had seemingly put aside their differences for the time being, an uneasy air still lingered over them. Ellie knew that if these tensions persisted, it would hamper whatever plans she had for introducing these two “brothers” to the outside world.

“It seems to me that you two aren’t really as close as you ought to be,” Ellie said, a touch of exasperation in her voice. “I’ll concede that there hasn’t been much time for you to get to know each other since you were both summoned, but could you at least *try* to be a bit more open with each other? As a matter of fact, I think a duel might solve most of the issues between you two.”

“Why would you think *that*?” Khaos asked, staring at Ellie as if she had lost her mind. Orka didn’t say a word, but grinned in befuddlement at the superwitch. Ellie ignored the reactions of the pair and explained the logic behind her proposal.

“I truly believe that a full-on fight is a very effective method when it comes to male bonding,” Ellie said, striking an authoritative-looking pose with her well-developed chest thrust forward. “For proof, you need look no further than the way Khaos reformed himself after battling the Blessed Lord Light.”

Khaos was at a total loss of words in response to this remark. The only thing wrong with Ellie’s observation was that he hadn’t actually fought with Light in order to bond. No, Khaos’s intent had been to get Light to prove that he was worthy of being his master, and if it had turned out that Light was the weaker of the two, Khaos would have taken charge and carried out Light’s vendetta for him. Khaos had challenged Light because he firmly believed that the strong ruled the weak—or to view this aphorism in a different light, that the strong must protect the weak.

After defeat in the mock battle, Khaos had dutifully acknowledged that Light was the rightful leader, but curiously

enough, the fight had resulted in the two boys becoming closer. On being reminded of this outcome, Khaos found Ellie's proposition convincing enough that he couldn't form a counterargument to it. But Orka was understandably hesitant about the idea.

"What you propose makes perfect sense in principle, Ms. Ellie, but I am afraid I would be no match for Khaos," Orka pointed out. "My specialties are purely limited to rearguard support, whereas Khaos is a highly versatile frontline fighter who has mastered a wide range of attacks. I cannot see myself prevailing in such a matchup."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Ellie said cheerily. "All we need to do is place a handicap on Khaos. Or more precisely..." What had started out purely as an explanatory meeting for what was going to happen at the summit had turned into a planning session for a regulation fight between Orka and Khaos, with Ellie laying out all of the ground rules.

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"We are now ready to begin the mock battle!"

Ellie's voice rang out around the roughly hewn training grounds at the bottom of the Abyss as the two contestants faced each other in the center of one, standing fairly close to each other. It was worth noting, though, that Khaos was an expert at ranged combat magic as well as in close combat, and while Orka shared the same power level, his combat abilities were mostly limited to buffing and debuffing targets.

Because a no-holds-barred fight would have given Khaos an overwhelming advantage, the warrior mage had agreed to be saddled with several handicaps. One of these was that he was required to wear a Curse Collar that would nerf his physical abilities, while a second limitation enforced on him was that he was only allowed to use one spell or skill in his arsenal for the entirety of the battle. For example, if Khaos were to start off by casting a single attack spell, he would have used up his entire authorized ammunition immediately, and any subsequent attempts to use another spell or skill would result in disqualification. Furthermore, Khaos wasn't allowed to use any of the powers made available to him by his Chaos Scythe. He was also not allowed to attack Orka for a whole thirty seconds once

the fight had started. During that time, Orka was allowed to use whatever buffs or debuffs he wanted on himself or Khaos, though the fiddler was equally not permitted to attack Khaos directly within those initial thirty seconds.

"Could you please confirm once again that you have no issues with these handicaps?" Ellie said.

"I don't have any problems with them," Khaos replied.

"I have no objections either," Orka said.

"Very good," Ellie said. "As you know, this entire arena is infused with mana linked directly to me, meaning any injuries will be healed at the cost of my mana. In other words, as long as I still have mana available to channel, neither of you shall perish, so you are free to engage each other in an all-out battle."

Much to Ellie's satisfaction, both Khaos and Orka nodded grimly at this. The superwitch raised her hand to signal the start of the fight. "Let the contest begin!"

"Illusion Sonata: Phantom Bisque Doll!" Orka yelled, immediately placing his bow on his fiddle and creating five copies of himself. He had clearly decided to add more targets to confuse his opponent before unleashing any buffs or debuffs. Khaos reacted with shock, but before he could say anything about it, Orka switched to another song.

"Strength Enhancement Ballad: Lionheart!" This time, Orka concentrated on buffing his stats and those of his five clones, and he did this for what remained of his thirty-second head start.

"You call *that* pure rearguard support?!" Chaos Scythe in hand, Khaos rushed toward the six Orkas with the intent of slicing through every copy until he found the genuine article. Of course, he could have easily ended the fight by duplicating his scythe and cutting down the sextuplets all at once, but as per the rules of the bout, he was prohibited from using any of the weapon's powers.

"I only summon us as a last resort," the Orkas said in unison. "Weakening Elegy: Leg-Pulling Arms!"

The Orkas debuffed Khaos' physical abilities even further, focusing on evading the warrior mage's attacks, and these tactics appeared to be working, since his opponent was unable to catch up to him.

Khaos grunted. "It feels like my legs are being held back by dozens of arms. I can't believe a stupid buff caster is this difficult

to fight!”

“Oh, stop. You’re making me blush,” the Orkas said.

“It wasn’t a compliment!” Khaos roared. Since he couldn’t match the Orkas for speed, Khaos switched to anticipating his duplicate opponents’ next moves and extinguishing them one by one with well-placed hits. Through this change in tactics, Khaos managed to eliminate one, then a second, then a third Orka clone, gradually closing in on the real fiddler.

“Illusion Sonata: Phantom Bisque Doll!” the remaining Orkas yelled. The tune they subsequently played replaced the clones Khaos had destroyed, making the warrior mage wince in frustration.

*I wonder if I might have handicapped Khaos a little* too *much,* Ellie reflected as she watched what was quite clearly a one-sided fight. The way it was going, Khaos would never manage to subdue the real Orka, while the fiddler would be free to debuff Khaos until he was fully incapacitated. If the battle reached that point, Orka would simply be able to physically overpower Khaos in hand-to-hand combat, regardless of the fact that he was a pure rearguard support specialist. Or alternatively, if he were so inclined, he could play a tune that put his opponent to sleep, which would count as a knockout without Orka even needing to touch Khaos. Of course, Khaos wasn’t about to allow himself to lose in such a pathetic matter.

“Chaos Territory!” Khaos exercised his right to use a single skill, and that skill just happened to be the one that instantly slowed the Orkas’ movements while making himself more agile. Khaos immediately used the opportunity to start eliminating the Orka clones.

“I-Illusion Sonata: Phantom Bisque Doll!” the Orkas yelled frantically before playing their spellcasting tune again, but instead of more clones appearing, the melody simply filled the air harmlessly. The real Orka was consuming mana with his instrument, yet he had nothing to show for it.

“What’s happening?!” Orka wailed.

“And that’s the last of them!” Khaos said as he extinguished the final clone. He then turned to face Orka and walked toward him with the blade of his Chaos Scythe pointed at him.

“Do we continue?” Khaos asked.

“No, I accept that I am defeated,” Orka said. He lifted the bow off the strings of his fiddle and raised both arms into the air in

surrender before flashing Khaos a friendly smile. Khaos put away his weapon too, although a bitter look remained on his face, as if he had been the one who had lost.

“By the way, what are the exact powers of that skill you used?” Orka queried. “I wasn’t able to make copies of myself even though I was playing my fiddle. It was such a curious marvel that I feel the need to ask.”

Khaos clicked his tongue loudly, but he gave him a rundown anyway. “Chaos Territory reverses the powers of any attack that’s within its range.” In other words, the skill turned a buff into a debuff and vice versa. In addition to this, the properties of any magic weapon wielded by the opponent was forcefully inverted. Chaos Territory was another powerful trump card in Khaos’s arsenal, but he had chosen not to use it in his duel with Light, since the young dungeon lord had engaged him in a direct, blow-for-blow fistfight. But against Orka, Khaos faced an opponent who was intent on winning by using evasive maneuvers, which had ultimately forced Khaos’s hand.

“I see. So that’s why my Illusion Sonata was unable to make more copies,” Orka said. “If the properties of my fiddle were reversed, it’s obvious why it failed. But controlling someone’s weapon like that is an unbelievably powerful skill. You really do amaze me, Khaos.”

“Your praise means nothing to me,” Khaos replied. “In fact, I feel like I lost the fight. I never imagined I would need to use the Chaos Territory, since it was my last card to play…”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Khaos,” Orka joked.

“That wasn’t a compliment either!” Khaos retorted.

The awkward mood that had existed between the Level 8888s had completely vanished by this point, and the two were exchanging words like they were longtime friends or possibly even like real brothers. As she watched the pair joshing with each other, Ellie crossed her arms triumphantly in the knowledge that her idea had worked splendidly, and with Khaos and Orka back on good terms, nothing could get in the way of their performance at the summit.

# Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here to once again give my sincerest thanks to you for reading and/or purchasing this ninth 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!*

Since this volume covers the summit at the Principality of the Nine, it served as an opportunity for several characters from past volumes to make a reappearance as world leaders attending the event. For example, we have Dagan, the king of the Dwarf Kingdom, who also happened to come seventh in a popularity poll conducted by the Magazine Pocket manga app; Yotsuha, the Holy Princess of the Onifolk Archipelago, who once acted like a brat before turning over a new leaf and becoming a devotee of Light; and Queen Lif of the Elven Queendom, who was forced to follow the orders of the Wicked Witch of the Tower so that a certain scheme they had in mind could unfold without a hitch. In a way, the reappearance of all these characters was a real blast from the past.

This volume also features the Church of the Goddess, foreshadowing upcoming events in the series, as well as a hodgepodge of other developments. For those of you reading this afterword first, I certainly hope you will enjoy this volume's main story, and I also added a smorgasbord of extra scenes not found in the web novel, along with some new side stories. I worked hard on this extra content so that fans who have already read the web novel can enjoy this volume of the light novel too, and nothing would make me happier than knowing the subscribers to the web novel also found this book an interesting read.

And with all that said, on to the acknowledgments!

First, I wish to thank tef for providing yet more wonderful illustrations that show both the old and new characters in all their cute and captivating glory! I once again commend tef for having such superior artistic and design skills that make every illustration adorable and awesome to look at. I'm always grateful

for the marvelous work you put into this series.

Next to thank is my supervising editor, plus the editorial team at HJ Novels! I thank you once again for all of your support, especially with the way you patiently answer all of my off-the-wall questions. Please accept my apologies for being such a nuisance!

I also wish to thank Takafumi Oomae, who draws the manga version of *Unlimited Gacha*, new chapters of which come out on the Magazine Pocket app every Tuesday! I receive the early drafts as well as the final proofs of the manga chapters to review before they are published, and the material shows me just how much fun Oomae is having working on this project, which pleases me greatly. Your drafts are wonderful to look at every time I receive them, and by the way, I hope you stay healthy and keep plugging away!

I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Magazine Pocket's editorial team for their work in bringing such a wonderful manga to publication. I can assure you that this subscriber never misses a new chapter!

And last but most certainly not least, I would like to thank all of my readers for keeping up with *Unlimited Gacha*! It's thanks to your dedication and support that I'm able to keep writing books for this series. On a related note, I have started adding new entries to the web novel version of *Unlimited Gacha*, so I hope you will check them out! I'll continue writing *Unlimited Gacha* to the best of my abilities, so I look forward to your continued support right through to the very end!

**PS:** 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 that has a date of or around March 18th or 19th, 2024, and you will be directed to my personal web page, 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 web page. Once there, search for the entry that corresponds to the dates above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read all the past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **ririsu**. [Please note: As of this

English-language publication, this password has expired.]


Diablo was still the tall, lanky young demon I remembered, complete with ghostly pale skinand two devil-like horns sticking out of his head.
Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon:
My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an
UNLIMITED GACHA
I Got
LVL 9999
Friends and Am Out For Revenge
on My Former Party Members
and the World
VOL. 9
“…”
But I stared at Diablo in silence, my teeth gritted to conceal the murderous rage I felt toward him.


"How will you respond to this, Master Light?"
"Why would they go and make something so dangerous just to make their church look good?"


"I am the one and only Wicked Witch of the Tower. It is the greatest of pleasures to make all of your acquaintances."
The mellifluous voice of a young woman rang out in the conference hall.

# Bonus Short Story

## Light and Ellie Go on a Date (?!)

Since we had time before the summit, my party and I decided to take a look around the Principality of the Nine, and one of the stops on our itinerary was the School of Magic, where Gold somehow managed to wrangle a tour of the campus by one of the instructors at the academy, Domas. He became quite friendly with my party over the course of our visit, even inviting us for tea at the academy's cafeteria, since it was already past noon by that point. Apparently, it was fine for outsiders like us to be in the dining hall as long as we were escorted by a faculty member like Domas.

Since I didn't want to miss out on this rare opportunity to drink some tea in the school's cafeteria, I took him up on his offer right away. After finding a table and getting ourselves nice and comfortable, we started talking at length on various topics, and at some point, I mentioned the magic item shops I had seen at the market earlier that day.

"You want to know why some of the shops around here sell junk items?" Domas said.

"Yes," I confirmed. "I haven't seen that anywhere else." I figured Domas might know, since he lived in the Duchy.

The scholar took a sip of his tea to moisten his lips before answering. "Speaking from my perspective as a local, I find these shops perfectly normal, but it appears a visitor like yourself views them as something of an oddity. However, these 'junk' stores, as you call them, aren't *so* peculiar if you consider the types of customers they cater to. For example, purchasing a broken item that you can restore yourself is seen as a cheaper option than buying brand-new. Or take a magic item that has been discarded because it didn't work as intended; it might still attract another buyer who is interested in its unique properties."

"That's just what you'd expect from a store in the mage capital of the world, what?" Gold said, seeming thoroughly convinced by this explanation. Nemumu could only look on in wonder as Domas expertly illustrated why certain magic shops in the Duchy

were so unique.

*Now I get it,* I mused. *If I were a real mage, I'd definitely be interested in the kinds of items those shops are selling. Maybe Ellie would like to know about these stores too?*

Living up to her title of "Forbidden Witch," Ellie loved to research all things magical and medicinal, so she would no doubt leap at the chance to browse one of those junk shops. Ellie had already arrived in the Duchy as a guest of the Elven Queendom delegation, but she was presently keeping a low profile at the queendom's manor near the conference hall. After all, we didn't want her cover to be blown before the main event. But it was still many days before the summit was to be convened, and she would probably get bored if she had nothing else to do until then. I concluded that a visit to a merchant wouldn't hurt as long as Ellie made sure to disguise herself well.

After we had finished our tea with Domas and exited the School of Magic, I told Nemumu and Gold about my plan to contact Ellie to suggest going on a field trip to a magical junk shop.

"What a lovely idea, Lord Dark," Nemumu said. "I'm sure Miss Ellie will be thrilled by the idea. I will of course also come along to provide you with security."

"Steady on, m'girl," Gold interjected. "I'm bally well sure milord and Miss Ellie won't be needing you to protect them. Perhaps we should let them go and have a little bit of fun on their own."

It went without saying that Nemumu didn't take too kindly to Gold's attempts to keep her away from me. "What's your problem, Gold?" Nemumu snapped. "I only want to make sure Lord Dark and Miss Ellie stay safe! What's wrong with that?"

"It would be highly uncouth of you to get in the way of Miss Ellie's golden opportunity to have milord all to herself," Gold explained. "You have had private moments with milord on countless occasions, so you should be big enough to allow others to enjoy that same privilege, what?"

Once again, Gold had managed to completely shut down Nemumu in an argument, and all she could do was groan irritably in response. Like everyone in the Abyss, Ellie was deeply devoted to me, so spending some one-on-one time with me would please her to no end. *This could also serve as a reward to Ellie for everything she's done for me lately,* I thought. *If Gold says having me all to herself will make her happy, maybe that's how I*

*should plan it.* Personally, I thought the idea of framing spending quality time with me as some sort of prize was embarrassingly narcissistic, but I digress.

"I think Gold's right," I said. "Maybe it should just be me and Ellie visiting that shop. There's a chance she could say no because she's too busy, of course, but I think it's worth telling her about those shops, anyway. All right, I'm gonna contact her now." I activated an SR Telepathy card and told Ellie about my idea.

☆☆☆

"Blessed Lord Light?" Ellie said as the Telepathy link was established with her master. "Yes, I'm free to converse. I was just doing some paperwork."

At present, she was sharing a private room with Khaos and Orka in the Elven Queendom's manor, the three of them biding their time until the day of the summit, where they would appear before all the nations' leaders and tear Diablo's reputation to shreds. But since they were still days away from the big reveal, Ellie had been killing time by working on some documents she had brought with her from the Abyss and the Great Tower. She had been alternating between doing paperwork and taking sips of tea that she had brewed herself, when out of the blue, she received an SR Telepathy call from Light. What she heard floored her.

"You want to show me a magic shop I might be interested in?" Ellie sputtered, gasping. "J-Just the two of us? *Alone*? Oh, don't worry about my paperwork! I can finish that up in the next couple of days! Yes! Yes, Blessed Lord! So where should we meet? Yes, I know where that is! Of course! I'll meet you there as soon as I've changed!"

The moment the Telepathy link closed, Ellie shot out of her seat, already on cloud nine.

"I'm going to the market with Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie exclaimed. "Is this a date? Yes, it *must* be! A date with His Blessedness! Who would have imagined that this lucky day would come to me? I'm so happy, my heart might stop at any second!"

Khaos and Orka—who were sharing the room with Ellie since there was limited space in the manor—both found themselves

distracted from what they were doing by Ellie's sheer giddiness. On one of the sofas, Khaos looked up from the book he was reading, while Orka abruptly stopped humming the tune transcribed on the sheet music he was holding.

*Why would anyone make so much commotion over the mere prospect of socializing with someone?* Khaos thought as he gawked at Ellie.

Orka flashed a warning smile at him. *You know very well why she's so ecstatic. Let's not spoil the moment for her,* he said with his eyes.

Naturally, Ellie ignored the reactions of her two retainers, but her consummate glee suddenly morphed into panic.

"This is no time to dance around like a silly goose!" Ellie fretted. "I need to find a change of clothes and go meet His Blessedness right away! Ah, but what am I supposed to *wear*? No, first I need to take a bath and get myself properly groomed for this date!"

Ellie had agreed to meet Light at the gate leading to the open-air market in an hour, meaning the superwitch only had a very limited amount of time to make herself presentable. Making the dungeon master she revered as a god wait was not an option, so she was forced to take extraordinary measures.

"I have *very* important business to attend to!" Ellie told Khaos and Orka. "So if anyone from the queendom comes looking for me, make up some excuse and shoo them away. You can tell them I'll deal with their problems later!"

Orka stood up and bowed. "Understood, Ms. Ellie. We shall make sure to turn away all visitors in your absence." Khaos huffily returned to his reading, clearly unable to care any less about the whole situation.

"I'll be back in due course," Ellie said before promptly teleporting herself to her own private chambers at the bottom of the Abyss to wash, primp, and change into her best outfit.

☆☆☆

I arrived at the market gate exactly one hour after my telepathic conversation with Ellie, and we spotted each other at practically the same moment.

"Lord Dark, did I keep you waiting?" she asked.

"Nope. I just got here," I replied.

Ellie wasn't wearing the SSR Faceveil Hood she would usually don when playing the role of the Wicked Witch of the Tower, meaning her true face was on display for all to see, but she *was* wearing a bracelet on her upper arm that stopped people from remembering her facial features and other details about her appearance. In other words, the bracelet was a magic item that largely did the same job as the Faceveil Hood. As for the rest of Ellie's outfit, she was wearing the type of stylish dress you'd often see young women wearing while walking around town, instead of her usual witch's garb, which was her outfit of choice in the Abyss. I could only imagine she genuinely wanted to look the part.

"Well, now that we're here, let's take a look at this junk magic shop I had in mind," I said. "I'm wondering what kind of stuff they sell to people."

"Me too!" Ellie exclaimed excitedly. "Lead the way!"

I escorted Ellie all the way to where I remembered the junk shop was. Okay, it admittedly wasn't much of a trip, since the shop was easy to find and it only took us a few minutes to get there. Once at the store, we found a few other customers who looked like mages and joined them in perusing what was on display. Each item was tagged with the price and a brief description of why the item was junk and how it worked. I tried reading the tags of the items I was interested in, but the only part I could understand was how much they cost, because everything else was written in near-unintelligible technobabble.

*I have zero clue what any of these tags are saying,* I thought to myself. *In fact, I don't even know why most of these things are classed as junk items...* I glanced at the other customers, but unlike me, they seemed able to grasp what the tags were trying to convey, since they all looked fully absorbed in whatever was written on them. One of these enthralled customers who was standing right next to me—Ellie, as it turned out—chose that moment to say what was on her mind.

"What an intriguing specimen," she said, peering at one particular item. "So this thing produces light in all the colors of the rainbow, instead of just the one color, like it was supposed to? Perhaps the maker made a mistake when drawing the runes. But I'm still curious about how this thing managed to go from one color to seven. Oh! This water-generating item produces fire instead? How in the world can such a thing happen? That goes

wildly beyond simply being defective. This is all so fascinating!”

Near the end of her one-way dialogue, Ellie caught me gazing at her, and she was immediately apologetic. “F-Forgive me, Lord Dark. I should have realized that I would be the only one enjoying myself in here. I should’ve practiced more restraint.”

For those of you who picked up on it, she was indeed calling me “Lord Dark” up here on the surface world instead of “Blessed Lord Light,” because I was currently disguised as my alter ego.

“No, you’re perfectly fine,” I said. “This is a very unusual shop, so I’m having fun just looking around at everything. And I’m glad you’re having a good time, Ellie, since I wanted to give you the chance to unwind from all of the duties I’ve been putting you in charge of.”

After all, not only was Ellie kept extremely busy overseeing the Great Tower as the Wicked Witch, she had come to the Duchy as her alter ego at my request specifically to humiliate Diablo in front of a global audience. On top of that, Ellie had a load of other stuff on her plate as one of the managers of the Abyss, so I really hoped she was finding this trip to this junk magic shop a pleasant distraction from her work.

Ellie grew misty-eyed when she heard my reassurances, even feeling the need to press a hand to her mouth. “We only live to serve you, Lord Dark, yet you have gone out of your way to do this for me! I’m so very touched!”

“Ahem!” The store owner loudly cleared his throat as a warning to Ellie and myself to keep our voices down, since we’d been speaking loudly enough to draw stares from the other customers. We bit our tongues as we turned to face each other at the same moment, which made us both giggle over how silly our reactions were. After we had finished snickering to ourselves, we checked out what else the shop had to offer, but with Ellie whispering the particulars of each junk item to me this time, so that I could enjoy the experience just as much as she was. I was glad it was Ellie filling me in on this stuff, since she made sure the concepts were easy to understand.

After leaving the shop, we checked out a few other stores in the market that looked interesting, and the hours flew by so fast, it started getting dark before we realized what time it was. We ended the day by going to a random restaurant that caught our attention, chatting some more over dinner. *It looks like Ellie’s in a really good mood,* I thought as I ate. *I’m glad she gets to have this*

*much fun in her time off, instead of working all the time.*

☆☆☆

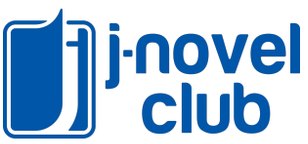
The day after Ellie went on her date with Light, Queen Lif came to the Wicked Witch's room to inform the sorceress that the world leaders had finalized the schedule for the summit. Throughout the exchange, however, the witch couldn't stop giggling like a schoolgirl.

"Have you ever noticed what a wonderful world we live in?" the Wicked Witch finally said, totally out of the blue. "Ever wondered why we live in such a beautiful world?"

"Oh, uh, yes! I-I absolutely agree!" Lif replied, sitting up to attention. The Wicked Witch was so beside herself with glee, it almost looked like she was about to rise into the air from the sofa she was sitting on and float away without the use of magic.

*Why is she so happy?* Lif wondered, frankly alarmed. *H-Has she come up with some completely horrific idea on how to punish the entire elf race in one go? Or maybe she's thought up a way of brutally persecuting all of the hostile nations at the summit?*

The elf queen trembled uncontrollably as she continued to speculate on the horrors Ellie was supposedly delighting in.



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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 Volume 9
by Meikyou Shisui

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