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. 10



Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
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Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter 1: Locating the Brother

Chapter 2: Checking Up on Lilith

Chapter 3: Strategizing

Chapter 4: The Village Raids Meeting

Chapter 5: Suspicions

Chapter 6: The Mansion

Chapter 7: Aoyuki's Fury

Chapter 8: The Real Deadly Assassins?

Chapter 9: A Lie

Chapter 10: Assassination Alibi

Chapter 11: The Plan to Capture Gira

Chapter 12: Queen Lif VII's Trauma

Chapter 13: The Showdown

Chapter 14: Versus Gira

Chapter 15: The Avatar Golem

Epilogue

Extra Story 1: The Melancholy of Acting Abyss Dungeonmaster, Iceheat

Extra Story 2: Khaos and Orka Meet Tower City

Extra Story 3: Negotiating with the Border Villagers and the Aftermath

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus Short Story

About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue

A young male demon gleefully hummed a tune as he conducted one last check on the trap he was going to spring on his unsuspecting prey who had checked into an inn in the Human Kingdom's royal capital. The demon was tall—his height was well north of 190 centimeters—but the most noticeable thing about him was that he was dressed in a clown suit, complete with a red ball for a nose and hair that was dyed seven different colors. He was also wearing garish makeup, with a star-shaped patch covering his left eye, and a half-moon over his right. Yet despite his gaudy, outlandish appearance, it was obvious he was quite handsome, with chiseled features and a set of lean yet rock-hard muscles lurking underneath the fabric of his costume. His colorful locks that he prized most of all were well coiffed and hung down past his shoulders.

This demon clown went by the name of Mad Pierrot, and he was a member of the Bourreaux, the world's deadliest society of assassins. And if that weren't enough, Mad Pierrot counted himself among the Morte Spada, a designation given to the five top assassins within the cabal. The weirdly costumed assassin snickered and made his lengthy strands of hair sway to one side with purposely flamboyant flair.

"Once I make the hostage magically appear on this empty couch, my targets will be so preoccupied with the shocking reveal, they won't notice the invisible noose slowly tightening around their necks," Mad Pierrot mumbled to himself. "Dark and his merry companions won't know what hit them, for they will be no match for the great Mad Pierrot, the most beautiful assassin of the Morte Spada!"

As implied by his short speech, Mad Pierrot had been tasked with killing Dark, the leader of a party of A-rank human adventurers known as the Black Fools. The other two members of the party, Nemumu and Gold, hadn't been named as part of the hit job, but Mad Pierrot planned to take them out all the same. At present, the Black Fools were attending to business at the Human Kingdom palace, and in their absence, Mad Pierrot had infiltrated the upmarket inn they were staying at and

promptly rendered all the staff unconscious, as well as all the other guests. He had refrained from killing them because he needed them alive to use as hostages if events took a turn.

"I hear the Black Fools are the fastest party in history to reach A-rank, even though they're a bunch of humans," Mad Pierrot muttered to himself. "How unfortunate they must be to have invited the ire of one of our nobles, for now they will meet their ends so soon after making a name for themselves. Although it *is* what they deserve for being attention-seeking inferiors. If only that vermin race would just remember its place and stay well out of sight, we wouldn't have to slaughter so many of their kind."

Mad Pierrot shrugged mirthfully at the sheer ignorance the hopelessly primitive human race persisted in displaying. He already knew the Black Fools would be incredibly easy to take out. For one thing, Dark and his party had yet to notice the arrival of one of the world's top assassins to the Human Kingdom capital, which meant the demon was free to set up his trap in the inn while they were out.

Furthermore, Mad Pierrot had a sizable stock of hostages that could be used to force Dark to surrender. After all, Dark's party worked closely with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, who had proclaimed absolute autonomy for all humans, and someone who outwardly sympathized with that credo wouldn't let fellow humans die on their watch. Plus, as another trump card to tie Dark's hands, Mad Pierrot had placed a number of magic items around the capital that were set to emit a poisonous gas if activated. There was no way Dark would escape his doom.

This assignment was particularly mouthwatering for Mad Pierrot, because if he pulled it off, it would be his achievement alone. All five Morte Spada had been assigned to do away with Dark, but all five were completely bigoted toward humans, so none had even considered the possibility of cooperating with each other to wipe out a group of third-rate targets. All of the Morte Spada were obsessively ambitious, so the idea of killing Dark and his party solo and using that as leverage for attaining a higher position within the Bourreaux was an appealing one. In truth, the Morte Spada saw one another as their *real* foes, not the Black Fools.

Mad Pierrot noticed movement outside the window, prompting him to blow a contemptuous puff of air out of his nostrils. "So they're finally on their way back. And they still have

no clue I'm here. A-rank adventurers or not, inferiors will never stop being pitiful inferiors." The clown thought for a second, then changed his mind. "No, it is because I, Mad Pierrot, am utterly indomitable, thoroughly prepared, and last but not least, *exceedingly* beautiful."

From Mad Pierrot's perspective, the Black Fools didn't display even a hint of caution as they moseyed up to the inn without a care, opened the door, and waltzed into the first-floor lounge. It was there that the party finally came face-to-face with the clown, who treated them to a glare of pure disdain.

"I see you've finally decided to come back, Black Fools," he sneered at them.

Chapter 1: Locating the Brother

Diablo, a former member of the Concord of the Tribes, had been a part of the Demonkin Nation's elite delegation to the emergency summit at the Principality of the Nine, but prior to its commencement, he ran into a human boy named Dark who wore a mask and was serving as a bodyguard for Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom. Due to Dark's close resemblance to Light, Diablo ordered the boy to remove his mask, but the boy's face was so disfigured by burn scars, he was unable to positively identify him either way. Yet he believed in his heart of hearts that Dark was really Light in disguise, later learning that Dark's party had worked closely with the Wicked Witch during her war with the beastfolk, and had apparently won favor with her for their efforts.

"So if I attempt to attack Light and his Black Fools, the Wicked Witch may end up retaliating," Diablo had realized at the time. "And this is the same witch who toppled the Elven Queendom and massacred the Beastfolk Federation's entire army in battle."

At the same time, leaving Light to his own devices clearly wasn't an option. If his nation found out that the human boy he was supposed to have assassinated actually survived, Diablo would be stripped of the peerage he had been given as a reward for carrying out the task. Not only would Diablo find himself once again living life as a commoner, he would likely be at the mercy of his vengeful older brother, who had once been the head of the household and the fiefdom they oversaw before the Demonkin Nation rewarded Diablo by removing his brother and installing him as the new head of the family. His brother was subsequently forced to live with his in-laws, but if Diablo ever fell from grace, the older demon would likely seize back his old position, and order Diablo's execution so history wouldn't have an opportunity to repeat itself. In that scenario, Diablo would have absolutely no way of protecting himself, because in his nation, an aristocrat was perfectly free to kill a commoner.

As a result, Diablo found himself caught between a rock and a hard place. At least, until he remembered that he had one card left to play. Light's brother, Els, had been among a batch of

human slaves sent to his fiefdom a few years prior, but none of the documents Diablo had on hand at the principality mentioned his current whereabouts, meaning Diablo would have to go back to his fiefdom in the Demonkin Nation in order to search for the relevant records. This posed quite a dilemma for him, however, because doing so would entail skipping a key summit that had originally been convoked by his own nation. In fact, Diablo had accompanied Voros, the crown prince of the Demonkin Nation, to the principality as one of the elites with a bright future in leadership ahead of him, and withdrawing from the summit would put that particular career path in serious jeopardy. But after thinking long and hard about it, Diablo concluded the summit was worth sacrificing for the greater good.

"If I lose my peerage, it will be the death of me," Diablo reasoned. "I must not let anyone else know about Light. As for the summit, that blot on my record will no doubt have severe repercussions, but I can always rehabilitate myself once I'm rid of Light for good."

With his mind made up, Diablo had left for the Demonkin Nation on the morning of the summit. He was determined to locate Els and use him as a bargaining chip in the inevitable showdown of his life against Light.

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The moment Diablo arrived at his fiefdom's mansion, he made a beeline for his study to search for the documents he was looking for without even bothering to change his clothes after the long journey.

"He was part of a group of slaves sent to my domain about two or so years ago..." Diablo mumbled to himself. "Which means he should be listed in these papers— *Here*!"

Exactly as Diablo had remembered, Els's name, age, place of origin, and a rough estimate of his height and weight was written down in the copy of a register he'd filed away. As a feudal lord, Diablo needed to keep track of everyone residing in his territory, and that included keeping records of the enslaved, since they supplied the manpower that produced wealth for the fiefdom.

Now that he had confirmed that Els had indeed entered his territory, Diablo attempted to trace his present whereabouts by

looking through more recent records, until he ran into an unexpected dead end.

"He froze to death?" Diablo said, incredulously reading the notice in his hand aloud. "But not during the winter season?"

The Demonkin Nation was the northernmost nation on the mainland, and due to its cold climate, the inhabitants hardly grew any wheat there, instead preferring hardier crops like potatoes and such that could withstand the unforgiving conditions. Els had been part of a group of slaves who were primarily brought in to clear areas of land for farming, but he had frozen to death about a year ago. Or at least, that was what the records claimed.

"Light's brother and multiple other slaves froze to death, but not during wintertime..." Diablo mused. "On the face of it, that is simply impossible. For one thing, the slaves were all able-bodied males who were best suited to working in the fields and surviving the elements. It beggars belief that they could freeze to death during a warmer season. True, human slaves are fairly cheap, but they still cost money to purchase, and it takes time and resources to train them up to do the work properly. Who would be foolish enough to allow them to just freeze to death in the middle of—"

Something suddenly floated up from the depths of Diablo's memory, sending him rifling through some confidential documents until he found the note he was looking for, dated roughly a year ago.

"These are all the slaves I sent to that mad physician that one time..." Diablo gasped as he scanned the list. "And he was one of them!"

The "mad physician" Diablo was referring to was a Master who went by the name of Doc and who ran experiments in order to—in his words—"realize a new future for the human race." However, these experiments involved the excruciatingly painful vivisection of test subjects in order to splice monster cells together with living flesh for the ostensible purpose of artificially creating superhumans. In other words, Doc's "experiments" more closely resembled grotesque, fetishistic torture sessions than actual good-faith research.

Since Diablo was a feudal lord, he knew full well what Doc did with his test subjects, but he was nevertheless contractually obligated to send human slaves to the twisted physician at

regular intervals, and they had to be “healthy and lively” specimens. Doc had similar contracts with many other demon aristocrats, and in return, the supplier of the slaves was given access to curative magic that could remedy ailments and wounds that were far beyond the help of regular healing potions. This meant that although the human experiments Doc conducted were so ghastly, they made even the demon slave owners wince, the cultured elite still entered into these contracts, knowing that an agreement of that kind served as platinum-grade health insurance.

When Diablo had handed Els over to Doc, he had listed him as deceased for recordkeeping purposes, with hypothermia chosen at random for the cause of death.

“So I ordered my subordinates to send me a list of the healthiest, spriest slaves we had in order to send them to Doc,” Diablo recapped, the list shaking in his hands. “And they just happened to add Light’s brother to the list…”

On receiving the same list a year ago, he had merely scanned the document to make sure that the number of slaves matched what Doc had requested before approving the transfer. He had failed to notice that Els was on that roster until this very moment, when it was decidedly too late.

“If this happened a year ago, he must be long dead by now…” Diablo whimpered. If Els could have been retrieved alive, he would have served as a useful bargaining chip against Light, but there was basically no chance that Els would have survived a full year in Doc’s laboratory of death. Diablo grabbed his head in dismay, pained by his inadvertent mistake.

“I suppose I should contact the mad doctor to see if I can at least salvage the body,” Diablo mumbled, rationalizing that even a person’s remains might hold some value and could be used in a negotiation. However, he had already moved on to considering other backup plans.

“If worse comes to worst, I can put a hit out on Light,” Diablo reasoned. “I will no doubt have to spend a fortune hiring someone from *that* society to assassinate him, but it will certainly be worth it if it means I maintain my status.”

Diablo gnashed his back molars in frustration. “Humans are parasitic worms that spend their short, miserable lives crawling around in the dirt. That loathsome race lives like worms and dies like worms. I cannot allow one of those disease-ridden pests to

threaten my brilliant future as an elite! I must eliminate that bug, Light, no matter what it takes!”

The pupils of Diablo’s ink-black eyes shone with a crazed light, and all he wanted now was for Light to become a cadaver like his brother.

Chapter 2: Checking Up on Lilith

“So Diablo’s been busy doing all sorts of stuff, has he?” I said as I skimmed the report Mei had handed to me in my office on the lowest level of the Abyss. It had been a few weeks since we had returned from the fiasco that was the emergency summit in the Duchy, and Mei was providing me with an update on the present situation.

“Indeed. Both the demonkin merchants as well as our own operatives who infiltrated their nation in advance have confirmed it,” Mei stated, her long ponytail swaying side to side as she spoke. “Our contacts have also reported a surge of activity among the Demonkin Nation’s senior officials.”

At this moment in time, we were getting intel reports from merchants summoned from my Unlimited Gacha cards who we had stationed in the Demonkin Nation, as well as receiving info from demon merchants who often traveled in and out of their homeland. I had also intended to relocate the Mohawk adventurers to the Demonkin Nation so that they could gather more intel for us there, but they had been barred from entering at the border. During the curtailed summit, Lilith had called for and won a surprise vote to crown herself queen of the Human Kingdom, which had angered Prince Voros of the Demonkin Nation to the point that he had sworn to punish Lilith and her nation on the diplomatic front. As a result, the Demonkin Nation had started to impose tougher entry restrictions on humans, and the Mohawks found themselves unable to get past the stricter border measures.

The Mohawks were really bummed out after being denied entry to the Demonkin Nation, I recalled. *I told them not to worry about it, but I wonder if they really are feeling any better.* Just like all of my summons, the Mohawks felt a great deal of responsibility to carry out my orders to the letter, so I could only hope that this setback wasn’t keeping them up at night. But as much as I was worried about them, I did have other matters to attend to, so I refocused my attention on Mei’s verbal report.

“Not only did the Demonkin Nation lose face at the summit, it is firmly opposed to the Human Kingdom gaining complete

independence, so we can assume the demonkin will engage in some variety of strongly vindictive measures to disrupt Queen Lilith's rule," Mei continued. "The increased level of activity among the demonkin leadership suggests they are preparing to launch a high-profile retaliatory response against the Human Kingdom, but unfortunately, the intelligence we have is too limited to be able to determine the exact nature of this reprisal."

"And Diablo's supposed to be a viscount, right?" I said. "That could mean he's positioning himself in such a way that he can prove his loyalty to his nation." This was only a guess, though, since we didn't have enough intelligence to come to any firm conclusions either way.

"If we want to absolutely crush Diablo's reputation and spirit, we need to know an awful lot more about what's going on there," I concluded. "Mei, I want you to tell all of our intelligence ops to gather more info on what Diablo is up to, as well as the rest of the demonkin higher-ups."

"Certainly, Master Light," Mei replied before bending into a textbook-perfect bow, her ponytail once again swaying to and fro. The waving of her hair made me recall something that had slipped my mind.

"Oh yeah. Speaking of the demonkin, did we get any new info from the Human Kingdom? Specifically from Lilith?" I asked.

Lilith had crowned herself queen with the backing of the Beastfolk Federation, the Elven Queendom, the Dwarf Kingdom, the Dark Elf Islands, and the Onifolk Archipelago. The Dragonute Empire had abstained, which meant the only races that had fully opposed Lilith's ascension to the throne were the centaurs and the demonkin, and out of these two detractors, it was the Demonkin Nation that had proven to be the most hardline in their opposition to the change of leader. The demons were a prideful race that looked down on humans as "inferiors," so I felt it was a good bet they weren't just going to sit on the sidelines, twiddling their thumbs. I naturally assumed the Human Kingdom must have gathered some kind of intel on the Demonkin Nation in order to protect themselves from their potential nefarious machinations, but after thinking about it for a few seconds, Mei shook her head.

"I am afraid no intelligence has been received from the Human Kingdom on the subject. Aoyuki's covert agents can confirm this," she said. "Queen Lilith is currently busy

formulating a response to the words of former Prince Clowe, who has outwardly expressed opposition to his sister's reign. The queen is also preoccupied with taking care of her father, the former king, as well as with other matters that concern the consolidation of her power base. I genuinely believe it would be physically impossible for her to spare even part of her limited resources to engage with the Demonkin Nation."

"Yeah..." I said resignedly. "You may be right."

Lilith had banished all of the spies working for the Dragonute Empire and the Demonkin Nation from her realm, along with their immediate families and even their distant relatives. The purge included a lot of senior and lower-level civil and military officials, who we ended up having to replace with Normal humans summoned using my Unlimited Gacha cards. But even with this great replacement, Lilith was still short on manpower, so we could safely assume that she didn't have the time to be thinking about gathering intelligence from other nations.

"We should touch base with the Human Kingdom," I eventually said. "I'd like to pay Lilith a visit to see how she's holding up." Since she and I were far from being strangers, I was naturally worried about how she was handling the huge workload of running the kingdom. But instead of contacting Lilith directly, I used one of my SR Telepathy cards to contact Yume's clone, who served as Lilith's personal maid.

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"Welcome to my palace, Lord Dark," Lilith said anemically. "Please forgive me for not preparing a more lavish reception for you."

"Oh, right. Don't worry about it," I said.

I had contacted the fake Yume to schedule a visit with Lilith for when she was least busy, and had arrived in the Human Kingdom capital some days later disguised as the adventurer known as Dark, with Nemumu and Gold in tow. On reaching the royal palace—which was more the size of a slightly oversized mansion than a building that could be described as "palatial"—Yume led me to Lilith's executive office. The new queen looked a wreck, with big black bags under her bloodshot eyes, and a noticeable if slight slurring of her words. She didn't even seem to have the energy to get up from behind her desk, which was

stacked high with piles and piles of paperwork that I assumed she had to get through that day.

"You know, Queen Lilith…" I started in a tender voice. "Forgive me if this might sound rude, but you aren't looking too well. Are you *sure* you're getting enough rest?"

"Rest? The rest of what?" Lilith said sleepily. "Oh, you mean am I getting enough sleep? I think I stopped counting how much sleep I was getting after my third day of staying up all night. But I'm fine, thank you. Any sleepiness goes away once you've been awake for a certain length of time, and I can even do paperwork without needing any sleep, so long as I keep drinking high-grade potion."

Lilith flashed me a smile that was so weak, she looked as though she would topple over dead if I so much as tapped her on the shoulder. Sure, I got that she had a lot of work to do to consolidate her power after deposing her father; detaining her brother, the former heir apparent; and banishing droves of spies from her kingdom, but she was literally killing herself to get everything done, and under my SSR Fool's Mask, I was freaking out.

I reached into my cloak pocket and fished out a gacha card. *In any case, I'll need to give her this if I want to have any kind of real conversation with her,* I thought. I released the card, and a bottle of pills appeared in my hand. Since it was just me, my party, the fake Yume, and Lilith in her office, I was free to activate a gacha card if I pleased.

"Lord Dark, what are those?" Lilith asked, staring at the pill bottle.

"Antisleeping pills," I said. "Take one of these and you won't need to sleep for the whole day. They're also completely harmless, so you should have no worries taking them."

More specifically, I was offering her some SSSR Sleep-B-Gone Tablets. The card stated that one pill could keep you awake and alert for an entire twenty-four-hour period and there were no harmful side effects from taking it. I figured Lilith needed this drug more than anything at present.

"You should go ahead and try one," I said, shaking one pill out of the bottle. "Yume, here."

"Allow me," the fake Yume said, taking the pill from me and handing it to Lilith.

"You don't need to fuss over me, Lord Dark…" Lilith insisted.

“People don’t need to sleep in order to do paperwork, and I’m proving that right now. Yes, on occasion, I *might* see a pink goblin dancing with a mulberry-colored orc out of the corner of my eye, but I also feel a bit lighter on my feet than how I usually feel… Kind of like I’m about to take flight and soar up to meet the Goddess at any time…”

“That’s all well and good, but how about we take this medicine that Lord Dark has kindly given us?” Yume urged, dutifully ignoring Lilith’s borderline gibberish.

I should’ve checked in on Lilith sooner, I thought to myself. If I had, the new queen likely wouldn’t have gotten to the stage where she was grinding away sleeplessly to the point of hallucinating about monsters dancing with each other. *And why would a pink goblin be dancing with a mulberry-colored orc, anyway?* I wondered, utterly perplexed.

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“I’m so sorry, Lord Dark,” Lilith said, with much more clarity this time. “I shouldn’t have let you see me like that.” She was sitting on a sofa with her head bowed, having completely perked up after taking my antisleeping pill. Prior to this, she had been at her desk, totally exhausted after not getting a wink of sleep for three straight days—at the very least—and I was in no doubt that she would have collapsed if she had tried to get up to greet me. It seemed the medicine had worked like a charm, since she clearly remembered what had just transpired between us.

I was sitting on the sofa opposite, a coffee table separating us. “You’re fine. Don’t worry about it,” I said, waving my hand to emphasize that it was no big deal. “I know how stupidly busy you are, and I only wish I could have given you that medicine sooner, so you didn’t have to go through all of that needless stress.”

“Oh, no, I don’t think the trouble I’m going through is needless at all!” Lilith said quickly in a panicky voice. “I’m grateful for all that you’ve done for me, and I must apologize again for giving you that impression!”

The fake Yume placed cups of tea in front of me and Lilith, and I used the momentary distraction to broach the subject of the real purpose of my visit.

“So I was wondering if you’d heard about anything that’s been going on in the Demonkin Nation,” I asked. “My team has picked

up some chatter about a lot of activity taking place among their leadership, but we have next to no clue about the next steps they're likely to take."

"I'm afraid we can't help you there," Lilith said apologetically. "I haven't heard anything of note from the Demonkin Nation, likely because I've been so busy establishing my own authority after deposing my father and brother..."

Lilith started complaining about the issues she had been forced to deal with due to the two men in her family. Clowe was presently under house arrest at the royal family's secondary residence because he had staunchly refused to fade quietly into the background.

"I will take back the throne, just you watch!" he would scream repeatedly. What made things more complicated was that a faction loyal to Clowe wasn't entirely extinguished, and they seemed dead set on rescuing Clowe and restoring him to power as the "rightful ruler."



Despite the fact that Lilith had followed all of the proper procedures at the summit to gain her present position, Clowe's loyalists could still stoke a potential rebellion against his sister.

As for the former king, he had chosen not to stay in the royal capital, opting instead to live out the rest of his days in another city in the Human Kingdom. He had decided to do this in order to physically remove himself from the country's center of power, and to fully demonstrate that he would never be involved in state affairs again. After witnessing this voluntary relocation, most loyalists of the former king decided to give up on any ideas of restoring him to the throne, instead deciding whether they should back Lilith or Clowe. But unfortunately, this didn't mean *everything* was tied up in a neat little bow.

"I'm very thankful that my father has decided to retire to a life of privacy far away from me, but..." Lilith said hesitantly, her expression gloomy. "Now that he's been freed from all of the responsibilities of being king, he's squandering a ridiculous amount of money on food, drink, and all *sorts* of decadent pleasures."

When the crown was still atop his head, the former king barely ate, and was often left so beleaguered by his job as monarch, he didn't have time to indulge in stuff like alcohol or entertainment. But as soon as Lilith replaced him, the former king found himself with all the time in the world to eat, drink, and be merry, and had transformed from a gaunt skeleton into a slightly chubby social butterfly. However, that wasn't the only way in which he had changed.

"Nowadays, my father is a frequent client of a certain high-class courtesan," Lilith admitted. "Not only does he spend a pretty penny for her services, he also purchases extravagant gifts for her, and he's even attempting to get her out of the profession so she can become his new wife. He's been making me approve all of these expenses to satisfy his more, um, *prurient* appetites, even when I was close to collapsing from a lack of sleep. That is *not* the type of work a father should be making his teenage daughter perform for any reason. I don't care how much of an effort he went to in order to restrain himself previously. This is simply going too far."

I could sense a darker aura emanating from Lilith. "I'll admit that it's better than having my father in open rebellion against me like my brother is, and I'm extremely happy that my father is

living his life for himself for a change. But who in his right mind makes his own flesh-and-blood daughter cover the costs of not only remodeling his estate, but also buying jewelry and having clothing tailored for a courtesan he wants to have all to himself?" Toward the end of her little rant, it almost sounded like Lilith was mumbling a curse. The issue with her dad was obviously way out of my area of expertise and I couldn't give her any advice on the matter, so I quickly changed the subject.

"S-So your brother's still openly rebelling against you *and* he has a faction supporting him?" I queried. "If you want, I could get my people to nip that in the bud."

Lilith raised her head and looked me straight in the eye, regarding me now more as a queen than a teenage girl complaining about her dad's midlife crisis. "I appreciate the thought, Lord Dark, but I must ask you not to interfere on that front. It is an internal matter to be resolved within the Human Kingdom itself, and I cannot accept your assistance concerning it."

Lilith clenched her fists that were already resting on her lap. "You've already done so much in granting asylum to Nono and the other spies, and I really don't think it's right to keep depending on your help to sort out what are internal matters..."

Lilith was right that I had arranged for the spies she had banished from her kingdom to be relocated to the Great Tower city, and I had also pulled a few strings to open up paths for former spies to seek asylum in the Beastfolk Federation, the Elven Queendom, the Dwarf Kingdom, the Onifolk Archipelago, and the Dark Elf Islands. However, more than a few spies had taken their own lives after being sentenced to exile, and their deaths weighed heavily on Lilith. From the way she was looking at me, it seemed the new queen was trying to convey that she would rather carry out the reforms in her kingdom independently because she didn't want any of those suicides to be in vain, so I took the hint and didn't suggest anything more.

At that moment, we heard a knock at the office door, and Yume answered. If you were wondering why I had come to the palace dressed as Dark and why Lilith had been calling me "Lord Dark" all this time, it was precisely for this eventuality. The person at the door turned out to be a civil official, and Yume led him over to the sofas. The official bent down and started whispering something into Lilith's ear before she stopped him.

“You’re free to state your business openly,” Lilith said. “My guests also have a right to know.” This must have been her way of showing that she had nothing to hide from me and my allies, and I appreciated the gesture of good faith. The official cast furtive glances at me and my party, but he couldn’t ignore a direct order from his queen, so he delivered his report out loud.

The first reforms that Lilith had put in place were to raise a number of tariffs, ban the sale of human slaves to other nations, outlaw all forms of human slavery, and prohibit racial discrimination against humans. These measures were modeled after the Wicked Witch’s “absolute autonomy for humans” decree, and every nation had received official notices outlining these reforms. The five nations who had backed Lilith’s succession were naturally already receptive to these changes, and the dragonutes and the centaurs were yet to respond. But according to the official, a formal reply had just been received from the Demonkin Nation.

“‘We shall not honor the notice from the Human Kingdom for any reason, and we will never recognize Lilith as the kingdom’s legitimate ruler,’” the official said, reciting the demonkin’s message in brief. “‘Consequently, we will be imposing the following economic sanctions on the Human Kingdom: embargos on all exports of salt, magic gems, dungeon items, monster-harvested materials, and similar goods. These sanctions will remain in effect indefinitely.’”

The Demonkin Nation had the third most dungeons in the world, behind only the Dwarf Kingdom and the Dark Elf Islands. Magic items and gems were some of the most prized exports to come out of the Demonkin Nation, as were the monster materials retrieved from their dungeons. Another factor in these sanctions was that the Demonkin Nation depended on the wheat they imported from the Human Kingdom. Since the Demonkin Nation was the nation that was farthest north on the continent, it was unable to grow much of its own wheat.

“‘The repeal of these sanctions is conditional on the resumption of uninterrupted shipments of wheat, slaves, and other goods to our satisfaction,’” the official continued aloud. “‘And if you refuse, we will be compelled to resort to more forceful measures.’”

It appeared the Demonkin Nation preferred to be vague with their wording, but anyone with half a brain could see that “more

forceful measures" meant demons would maraud into Human Kingdom territory and pillage villages for wheat and slaves before burning them to the ground. It could even turn into wholesale slaughter, just to teach Lilith a lesson.

The official nervously handed the new queen the message so that she could read it herself. He had obviously summarized the lengthy letter, so it would have been understandable if Lilith had thought he was exaggerating, but as she scanned the message line by line, the dubious look on her face transformed into wide-eyed fury.

"What the hell is this?!" Lilith screeched, springing up from the sofa. "How can the Demonkin Nation treat us with this much *contempt*?! Do they think we're a vassal state? We are neither their slaves nor their cattle!"

"Your Majesty, not in front of our guests," the fake Yume pleaded. She had officially been made head maid, answering only to Lilith, so unlike the official, who clammed up in fright at the outburst, Yume could get away with chastising the queen. At the mention of "guests," Lilith quickly remembered that my party and I were still in the room, and in her embarrassment, she sank back down to her sofa.

"P-Please forgive me," she said. "I shouldn't have acted so inappropriately."

"No need to apologize," I reassured her. "I know exactly how you feel, believe me."

And I wasn't saying it to be polite, because in truth, I was just as ready to blow my lid as Lilith at the contents of that note. I didn't really care if the Demonkin Nation recognized Lilith as the Human Kingdom's ruler or not, and if economic sanctions were imposed, we could easily live with them. In both cases, the demonkin were—just about—within their rights to do these things as a sovereign state, and denying them would amount to meddling in a nation's internal affairs. Plus, that was largely immaterial anyway, because these kinds of spats often didn't matter in the long run—either politically or economically—if the other nations did recognize the disputed head of state. It would also just lead to more problems if Lilith intervened in matters where she had no right to do so.

No, all of that was part and parcel of the delicate balancing act known as cross-border diplomacy. The bit that riled me was the Demonkin Nation all but announcing that they were

prepared to go far beyond the limits of acceptability. They had made a thinly veiled threat that they would invade the Human Kingdom to pillage the crops and round up people to force into slavery, then burn down villages and carry out wholesale slaughter. They wouldn't even extend the Human Kingdom the courtesy of formally declaring war. They would simply unilaterally violate the Human Kingdom's sovereignty out of sheer contempt for its inhabitants. Of course, none of this was actually spelled out in the letter, but it was easy to read between the lines.

Would any nation-state really stoop so low? The demonkin were acting more like a predatory mafia than a proud nation. Did they really think it was right to commit the kinds of atrocities that were being suggested against another nation just because they viewed it as less powerful than itself? Even the suggestion of it shouldn't have been allowed!

Lilith dismissed the official, leaving just the five of us in her office again. Her brow furrowed as if she had a sudden headache. "On the bright side, the economic sanctions won't present too much of a problem," Lilith said, sounding resigned. "They will undoubtedly be painful, but we already factored them in when we drew up my list of reforms."

The Human Kingdom was the only nation in the world that was completely landlocked, and since it was filled with plains and located in the central breadbasket region, the kingdom produced plenty of wheat. But because there were no coastlines where sea salt could be made, nor any salt mines, the nation was entirely dependent on importing salt, an essential part of the human diet. If Lilith were to launch her reforms without the backing of any of the other nations, the Human Kingdom would inevitably be cut off from all salt supplies, and a devastating salt famine would cause great suffering to her people.

Luckily for the new queen, she already had five nations on her side, ready to supply her with salt, versus one Demonkin Nation that was threatening to cut her off. *And if worse comes to worst, I could always send my N Salt cards her way,* I thought. I had an army of Double Shadow clones of myself in the Abyss pulling Unlimited Gacha cards around the clock, meaning we already had a surplus of salt cards we could give to the Human Kingdom if the need ever arose. However, that wasn't the biggest issue facing Lilith.

“We can easily import salt from five of the nations, so even if the demonkin, the dragonutes, and the centaurs stop supplying us, it won’t be the end of the world. The same goes for resources from dungeons,” Lilith noted. “So thanks to the connections we’ve made with our allies, any sanctions by the demonkins will not leave us wasting away. But if I outright reject the Demonkin Nation’s demands, they could very well engage in vicious brigandage that is quite unbecoming of a respectable nation.”

At present, Lilith was still busy dealing with the fallout from her seizing the throne, and she hadn’t completely consolidated her grip on power yet, which basically meant she had no spare resources with which to protect the border regions from demonkin attacks. Plus, if she were to send human soldiers out to confront these marauders, they surely wouldn’t last long. Not against demonkin. The Human Kingdom’s army would practically be embarking on a suicide mission if they tried to repel any assaults ordered by the Demonkin Nation. So the only question that remained was whether Lilith would sit idly by and leave her subjects in these border villages at the mercy of the demons?

There was an extremely serious glint in Lilith’s eyes as they locked with mine, but at the same time, her gaze trembled slightly, fearing she might not get the answer she wanted. She gulped feebly before speaking her mind.

“Lord Dark, I know there isn’t much we can offer that will match what you deserve,” Lilith began. “But I cannot allow the innocent lives of my people to be sacrificed in the name of change! So I must ask you here and now: will you lend me your strength to fight back against the senseless violence the demonkin undoubtedly plan to unleash on us? I of course intend to repay you however I can, and for however long it takes.” She was bowing so low, her head was nearly touching the floor. “I beg you, Lord Dark.”

In truth, she didn’t even need to ask. “Of course I’ll help you out,” I replied. “In fact, I *insist* on helping you.”

Lilith breathed a huge sigh of relief, not caring one bit how it would look. I could sense Nemumu starting to get angry at Lilith from her position stationed behind my sofa, but I wasn’t about to embarrass both of us by turning around and telling her to cool it. Instead, I flashed Lilith the biggest, most reassuring smile I could from under my mask.

“I don’t like what the demonkin are suggesting either,” I said.

“No nation has the right to needlessly harm or take the lives of humans, so I will do everything in my power to support you.”

“Thank you so much, Lord Dark!” Lilith said, bowing her head over and over again. “Thank you so very, very much!” She was speaking as her nation’s head of state as well as from her heart as a private individual. After mumbling a “You’re welcome,” and waiting a few moments for Lilith to stop bowing, I asked her for permission for my people to roam freely around the Human Kingdom, as well as asking her to take care of the paperwork that would need to be filled out to mount our response. She already had piles of paperwork on her plate, but she gladly accepted the extra workload for the sake of securing the safety of her people.

Once all bases had been covered, my party and I said our goodbyes and exited the palace office. Instead of teleporting straight from the office, the fake Yume escorted us out to the front gate, since a bunch of people had seen us while we were in the palace, such as guards, maids, and the official who had come in with the note. Once we were outside the gate and in the clear, we would find a random alleyway to walk down or a wall that would shield us from prying eyes in order to teleport back to the Abyss without raising suspicion. It was while we were searching for a suitable place to teleport from that Nemumu decided to pipe up and air her grievances.

“Lord Dark, are you really fine with what happened back there?” Nemumu asked. “That girl refused your help when it came to getting rid of her brother, yet as soon as it’s a problem she can’t handle, she runs to you begging and pleading!”

I could almost see her lips purse under her muffler as her brow furrowed. “I realize her soldiers aren’t strong enough to take on demonkin, meaning she has no choice but to come to us,” Nemumu continued. “But as your servant, I cannot abide her flippant attitude. Just give the word, and I’ll turn around and issue her with a stern warning.”

“You know bally well that her attitude was anything *but* flippant, m’girl,” Gold interjected. “I sympathize with you in some respects, but milord and milady Lilith have made their decision, and it’s our sworn duty to abide by it.”

“It’s *also* our duty as Lord Dark’s servants to call out a situation for what it is,” Nemumu shot back. “Or are you perfectly fine with someone just walking all over him?”

“As I say, Nemumu, I’m perfectly sympathetic about your underlying concerns,” Gold reiterated. “But in this instance, I daresay you’re being rather hyperbolic—”

“Okay, that’s enough, you two,” I said, instantly ending the argument while it was still in its infancy. I turned to face my teammates in an attempt to keep things upbeat. “I really appreciate you keeping me in check, Nemumu. I still have a lot to learn, so if you ever see me slipping up on something, feel free to tell me.”

“Thank you, Lord Dark,” Nemumu said with a respectful bow.

With that taken care of, we resumed our hunt for a suitable spot to teleport from. As we ambled along, I took the opportunity to add my two cents. “But you know, there’s always the possibility Lilith was putting on an elaborate show for us to make the pill easier for me to swallow, so to speak.”

“Huh? You think she might have been putting on an act?” Nemumu said, genuinely surprised that such a ploy could have slipped her notice.

I nodded and explained my thinking. “It’s *possible*, though I can’t say for sure. But if we were to assume that it *was* an act, that would mean the Demonkin Nation sent Lilith that notice a while ago, and she’s been wondering what to do with it ever since. On the one hand, Lilith and her forces are too weak to take on the demonkin alone, so it would be in her best interests to have me handle the job, especially knowing that I want revenge on Diablo anyway.”

I took a breath. “On the other hand, if she’d approach me with that request straightaway, without even trying to sugarcoat it, you and everyone else would have thought she was acting insanely entitled.”

“So milady Lilith has been waiting for you to visit this whole time, milord, then got one of her own to playact the delivery of the notice so her request would appear to be of the utmost urgency, and as such, seem more palatable to us, eh?” Gold mused, stroking the part of his helmet covering his chin. I quickly reminded him that it was all supposition, nothing more.

“If the demonkin intend to attack border villages and do all sorts of things that will interfere with Lilith’s nation-building efforts, that gives us an opening for making Diablo’s life more miserable,” I added. “It would save Lilith the need to deploy troops, and besides, I still owe her for helping me to unmask

Miki as a spy in Tower City. Driving back the demons would make us even, and we would both get something out of it."

"So not only did she consider our mutual interests, she actually went out of her way to make it look like she wasn't ordering you into rendering a service for her," Gold marveled. "I once thought milady was just a normal lass, but it's like they say: victory turns the meek little rabbit into a mighty lion, what what?"

"Hmm, that could very well be true, Lord Dark," Nemumu said, seeming truly awed by what was being suggested. "Who would have believed that she would be such a skilled actor that she would even fool me? She's amazing."

"Like I said, it's only a theory," I repeated. "In any case, we should seize the opportunity that's been presented to us. If she did put on an act for our sake, it means she really does have the makings of a magnificent queen. Since she went out of her way to consider appearances, let's return the favor by sending those demonkin raiders packing, while we put the screws on Diablo for good measure."

The newfound respect that Gold and Nemumu felt for Lilith lifted my mood, and we continued our search for a suitable spot to teleport back to the Abyss.

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After the Double Shadow Yume had escorted Light's party to the palace gate, she returned to Lilith's executive office to find her hunched over on the sofa, holding her head, though the second the newly installed queen noticed the door opening, she rose from her seat and anxiously approached her new head maid.

"D-Did Lord Dark seem, um, *angry* by any chance? Was he annoyed at all?" She paused. "I can't believe I asked him to help me with the demonkin right after I refused his offer to eliminate my brother."

"No, on the contrary, I didn't observe any change in Master Dark's mood," Yume said. "He didn't seem irritated at all, and I felt his attitude was what we'd usually expect."

"B-But he wears that mask, so we don't know for *sure* what his mood was..." Lilith sighed. "If Lord Dark spurns us now, the human race will have no future whatsoever. But at the same

time, I can't go having my brother killed, because that would only cause more problems."

Lilith had not, in fact, been expecting the harshly worded notice from the Demonkin Nation to arrive at the same moment she was hosting Light, and finding herself in a bind, she had felt her only choice was to ask for yet another favor from him. To make matters worse, this unanticipated plea for help had come hot on the heels of her curtly rejecting his offer to execute Clowe, and if *that* weren't enough, Lilith had little to offer Light in return for his military assistance. Given all of these factors, Light would have had every right to give her a thorough tongue-lashing on the spot, and she wouldn't have been able to defend her actions at all.

"Master Dark is an extraordinarily generous gentleman," Yume said gently. "He could never become angry with you over something so minor, so there's no need to distress yourself, Your Majesty."

Lilith groaned softly. "Let's hope you're right. All we can do is pray to the Goddess."

She could feel an ache developing on one side of her stomach, but she had no time to rest since she had a huge pile of paperwork waiting for her, and the young queen dragged her stress-filled body over to her desk in order to finish the day's workload.

Chapter 3: Strategizing

As soon as I was back in my office on the bottom tier of the Abyss, I summoned Mei and Ellie so that we could discuss all that had gone down during my visit to Lilith's palace. The three of us stood over a map I had unfurled on my desk, the brows of my two deputies furrowed in displeasure.

"Given everything that I know about the oppression of humans up on the surface world, this treatment only serves to underscore how cruel the situation is," Mei stated.

"How absolutely atrocious," Ellie agreed. "If you'll grant me permission, Blessed Lord, I will eliminate every single demon soldier that crosses the border seeking to do harm to humans, just like we did with all those awful beastmen."

"It's a very tempting offer, Ellie, but to accomplish what I have in mind, I don't want to kill *every* demon that crosses into the Human Kingdom," I said. "No, this is our chance to use the demons as pawns to put the squeeze on Diablo and ruin his life."

I told Mei and Ellie about the scheme I had concocted in my head on my way back from the palace, because I really needed their input on it, since they were better positioned to tell whether or not my plan was feasible. But after hearing my idea, Mei and Ellie weren't short on praise.

"It is highly impressive that you were able to formulate such an excellent plan of attack in such a short space of time, Master Light," Mei said. "To think that we could not only drive back the demon troops and teach them a lesson but also use the incursions to severely damage Diablo's reputation..."

"I absolutely concur!" Ellie chirped. "Only my Blessed Lord Light could have come up with such a clever scheme. I feel like I have been brought face-to-face with your vast intellect, and can see that it is more unfathomable than the oceans while soaring higher than the highest of heavens. I cannot describe how *thrilling* this experience is!"

I laughed, a genuinely bright smile on my face. "Thanks, you two. I'm flattered. But I'm pretty sure you both could have come up with this same plan, with or without my help."

I pulled the map toward me and traced the border between

the Human Kingdom and the Demonkin Nation with my eye. “Okay, if we’re going with my idea, we’ll need to temporarily relocate the people living in these border villages to the Great Tower. Will we be able to house all of them?”

“Of course, Your Blessedness!” Ellie replied cheerily. “We’re very experienced at taking in refugees, thanks to the war with the beastfolk, and more recently, the outcasts from the Human Kingdom. And not only are we experienced, we also have a surplus of food, clothing, shelter, and nonessential items at our disposal, so we can easily accommodate these new evacuees!”

She stood in a boastful pose, her sizable chest puffed out. The Forbidden Witch was the ruler of the Great Tower and the city that had been built at its foot, so she’d definitely know if we could absorb more people or not.

Since she had completely convinced me on that point, I turned to Mei next. “I’m moving the villagers out of the danger zones so that they don’t get hurt, but that won’t stop the demons from destroying buildings, crops, wells, and other bits of infrastructure,” I said. “If that happens, can we make those places whole again with what we have in the Abyss?”

“Yes, we will have no issues on that particular front,” Mei replied. “As you know, your UR Double Shadow clones continue to press the Unlimited Gacha buttons at all hours of the day, so I would estimate that we have enough resources to restore one, possibly two hundred villages if they happen to be completely destroyed. I firmly believe that you will be able to carry out your plan of attack, Master Light.”

Mei was in charge of the day-to-day administration of the Abyss, so she was fully aware of whether or not we had the materials and manpower to rebuild entire villages. Her stamp of approval was all the confidence I needed to execute my scheme against the demonkin army, and by extension, Diablo.

“Well, with that all settled, I think Mera will be the best person for this particular operation,” I said before turning to the fairy maid that had been assigned to my office for the day. “Can you find her and bring her here?”

“Master Light,” Mei piped up, stopping the fairy maid in her tracks. “May I have a word before we continue?”

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“According to Aoyuki, the Mohawks are still in low spirits after failing to enter the Demonkin Nation,” Mei said. “Perhaps we

should allow them to contribute to the operation in some way to restore their morale."

"I told them not to sweat it, since it really wasn't their fault," I muttered. "It was just bad timing after everything that happened."

Like all of my allies in the Abyss, the Mohawks took their devotion to me very seriously. In the back of my mind, I'd been worried they would take the setback too hard, and it looked like I had been right to be concerned.

"Sure, we should bring them on board too," I said. "We're gonna need a bunch of people for this operation, and they're still near the Demonkin Nation border, so why not? They have absolutely nothing to atone for, but I'll gladly welcome their help. Of course, I'll have to run it by Mera, since she'll be taking the lead on this one."

"It is very much appreciated, Master Light," Mei said, bowing her head deeply. "I am sure the Mohawks will be elated."

I repeated my order to the fairy maid to fetch Mera, and not long later, she showed up with her trademark cackle preceding her.

"Keh heh heh heh!" Mera cackled. "Forgive me for making you wait, master."

"There's nothing to forgive. You're right on time," I said. "I'm the one who should be sorry for calling you here on such short notice."

Mera chuckled again. "There's no need to apologize to me for that. After all, there's no one in the Abyss who wouldn't be thrilled to be called to your office by you."



Mei, Ellie, and the fairy maid who had brought Mera to my office all nodded excitedly in agreement with this statement. It just went to show how much my summons liked getting attention from me, though I wasn't sure if I should be tickled by their devotion or calling them out for being too over the top. I cleared my throat and told Mera about the assignment I wanted her to undertake before asking if she was up for it. I knew she was perfectly capable of handling the tasks I was asking her to carry out—the combat prowess she had displayed in every battle I had put her in proved that—but I still thought I should ask, just to make sure she was fine with the plan. And as it turned out, she was. For the most part.

"Oh, I can certainly take care of those demons in just the way you want me to, master," Mera said, letting out a murderous laugh. "But I'd rethink how the Mohawks are mobilized, if I were you. If the demons toss any high-level opponents our way, I can't promise I'll be able to get all the Mohawks out of there in one piece."

The demonkin still had several Masters on their side, according to Miki, and there was a nonzero chance of them deploying one or more of these Masters in their cross-border raids, so Mera raised a good point.

"All right. Draw up a list of magic items we will need to keep the Mohawks safe," I said to Mera. "In fact, since you're in charge of this operation, I'm authorizing you to make use of *any* material, magic item, or personnel you deem necessary to carry out your mission. I wish you luck out there."

Mera chortled. "Thank you very much, master!" She proudly dropped to one knee. "I promise to do everything in my power to make this operation a success!"

I nodded my approval at Mera's enthusiasm. And with that, my plan to drive back the demons and completely disgrace Diablo in the process was officially underway.

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Moments after leaving Light's office, where she had been assigned a new mission, Mera happened to run into Iceheat, who was surreptitiously lurking around the corner of a connecting hallway.

The chimera cackled. "Whoa, you scared me! Don't go

snooping on me in stealth mode, babe."

Iceheat had indeed been concealing her presence by using her elevated power level to watch Mera from the shadows, and the chimera almost hadn't noticed. After this admonishment, though, Iceheat started shuffling and lurching toward her friend like a zombie.

Okay, now she really is *creeping me out,* Mera thought, chuckling nervously like she would if she'd run into a *real* ghost. When she was close enough, Iceheat lifted her head to reveal a deathly pale countenance framing a pair of eyes that seemed to ooze malice.

"Master Light called you into his office to assign you to some new operation, didn't he?" Iceheat said.

Mera giggled to soften the blow. "Yes, hun."

"Mera! You have to give *me* that assignment!" Iceheat yelled at her friend. "Or at least let me help you!"

"Look, I know how desperate you are, but it's a no on both counts, dollface," Mera said.

"But why not?" Iceheat whined. She already knew no summon in their right mind would give up an assignment bestowed upon them by Light himself so easily, for it would be the height of sacrilege to pass up the opportunity to serve the most revered dungeon lord, but the grappler maid had hoped there might be some wiggle room for her to at least contribute to the operation in some way before her friend flatly refused her.

Mera shrugged sympathetically and explained her reasoning. "Look, it's not like I'm saying that to be mean to you. I'd love to bring you along if I could," she said. "However, this is a *covert* mission, and you'd stand out like a sore thumb. So sorry, babe, but you need to sit this one out."

"How can you say that?" Iceheat moaned. "What sort of mission are we talking about, anyway?"

"Uh…" Mera hesitated. "Okay, I'll tell you. They didn't say it was hush-hush." She gave Iceheat a quick rundown, and once she had finished, the grappler maid's shoulders slumped resignedly.

"You're right," Iceheat admitted glumly. "I indeed would be very out of place on a mission like that."

Mera cackled with approval. "Thanks for seeing it my way. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to prepare for my date with those demons." She sashayed away down the hallway, her long sleeves swaying loosely as she moved.

Iceheat stood where she was and grumpily mumbled to herself. “Am I really cursed with bad luck?” she muttered. “Do I need to gather more good luck charms to beat the curse? I myself have heard that the shed skin of a snake symbolizes good fortune. I wonder if there are any snake monsters in the Abyss.”

Iceheat staggered away in a trance, desperately trying to remember if there were any snakelike creatures left in the dungeon that might have left behind their old skin.

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“Hells yeah!” the Mohawk leader screeched. “Lady Luck has finally thrown us a bone, boys!”

The Mohawks were presently whooping it up in a room they had rented at an inn in the Human Kingdom town that was nearest to the Demonkin Nation border. The party had recently been refused entry into the home nation of the demonkin, finding themselves unable to complete an intelligence-gathering assignment that had been handed down to them by Light. And what had made the whole thing worse was that it had come hot on the heels of their failure to dig up any intelligence regarding a person of interest while in the Dragonute Empire. Light had told the Mohawks that he did not fault them for these setbacks, but hearing those kind words from their master only made the Mohawks feel all the more miserable about their inadequacies.

But that had all changed now that they had received orders to assist Mera in carrying out an operation that Light had personally formulated himself. The fact that he had called on them specifically to take part in his pet project was the surest sign they had received yet that the young dungeon master hadn’t abandoned the Mohawks for failing twice in their missions. Up until a few moments ago, the Mohawks had been hunched over and despairing, but now they were bouncing with new energy, as if someone had inserted iron rods in their spines.

The four other Mohawks echoed the sentiments of their red-haired leader.

“This is our big chance to score!” one said.

“Damn straight, brother!” yelled another. “We better make this one count!”

“And apparently, Ms. Mera’s gonna be on it too,” a third Mohawk piped up. “You just know this mission’s gonna be *huge*!”

“It don’t matter how big it is, man, we just gotta do it!” said the fourth and last Mohawk. “And we’d better do it right or else!”

The party leader nodded sagely at the notion. “We’ve bungled our missions not once but *twice* now, and the main man’s still counting on us, so we *need* to make him proud! To that end, I may even hafta order you to lay down your lives for the sake of this mission. If that time comes, I’m gonna go down fighting with the rest of you hogs.”

The other Mohawks nodded solemnly, knowing their leader wasn’t joking around nor saying that lightly. If it did indeed come to it, they were all willing to die to ensure Light’s mission was a success. Once the leader was convinced his men were willing to pay the ultimate price, he relayed the details of the operation to them.

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“Hey, did ya hear?” a demon soldier said to his cohorts. “Apparently, they’re gonna send commandos across the border to punish the Human Kingdom.”

The soldiers stationed in one of the border cities in the Demonkin Nation were shooting the breeze over lunch. The topic immediately captured the interest of everyone else at the table.

“You caught wind of that too?” one of the other soldiers asked. “Seems like the prince had mud thrown in his face during the summit. The princess of the Human Kingdom seized the throne by somehow wheedling her way into getting most of the other nations beside ours into siding with her. Now they’re gonna send us to attack a few villages in her kingdom to teach that stuck-up inferior a lesson.”

“Don’t care what reason they give us, just so long as we’re free to go ballistic on those rodents. *Especially* their women,” another soldier said. “I’ll be the first to sign myself up so I can beat and violate those wenches.”

A young soldier sipped his soup, and a lascivious grin spread across his face. “Nothing gets me going more than going to town on inferior tramps. I can’t explain it, but ruining chicks who can’t fight back is a huge turn-on.”

“Ah, who needs those messy broads?” another soldier piped up. “I’m just hoping these villages have a buncha money and trinkets I can make off with. It’s not like you can make much cash

rounding up inferiors and sellin' 'em as slaves anyhow."

"Yeah, looting those animals *would* put a lot more money in the bank..." the other soldier agreed before pondering something for a second. "Never figured I'd have to choose between wenching or pillaging."

The demon soldiers that had been assigned to keep the border secure were engaged in a spirited debate over the various kinds of horrors they were going to inflict on the human villages on the other side of the border, the gravity of their discussion as facetious and mundane as a conversation about pest control. Little did they know, however, that actors on both sides of the borders were already maneuvering in preparation for what was about to come next.

Chapter 4: The Village Raids Meeting

The Demonkin Nation lay north of both the Dwarf Kingdom and the Human Kingdom, though an impassable mountain range separated the Dwarf Kingdom and the Demonkin Nation, forcing bilateral trade between the two nations to be conducted mainly on ships shuttling between ports.

Located right next to the Dwarf Kingdom, the Human Kingdom shared a long border with the Demonkin Nation, half of which lay in impenetrable forest, while the other half ran across flatlands and was dotted with crossings and checkpoints that were maintained by both nations. The concentrated presence of these checkpoints made it next to impossible to launch covert, cross-border raids with legions of heavily armed personnel, yet the demonkin felt they could not allow the humiliation they had suffered at the summit in the Principality of the Nine pass without harsh retaliation. For one thing, Princess Lilith had basically tricked Voros, the prince regent of the Demonkin Nation, into allowing her to exploit the summit his nation had convened in order to seize the throne of the Human Kingdom. For another, the Wicked Witch of the Tower—the threat the summit had primarily been called to address—had shown up at the conference hall, causing the gathering to irretrievably descend into dysfunction and chaos.

And so, the order came down from on high to make incursions into the Human Kingdom to raid some of the border villages, pillaging their wheat, rounding up people to be taken as slaves, burning down buildings, and leaving piles of brutalized corpses in their wake as a show of force to Queen Lilith. However, the carnage was supposed to be carried out in a way that couldn’t be traced back to the Demonkin Nation—at least, not officially. To square that circle, demonkin military officials had decided to stage the raids from the mountains straddling the border between the Dwarf Kingdom and the Human Kingdom, with their soldiers not wearing their usual uniforms that had the Demonkin Nation emblem stitched on. The demonkin army had selected soldiers who would serve as elite commandos to carry out the raids, and one such company

numbering a hundred strong had gathered in a room in a city near the Demonkin Nation border. The captain of the company, who sported a pair of devil horns and had equally devilish features, had just given his troops documents containing instructions.

“We will shortly commence our operations in the Human Kingdom’s border villages,” the leader said. “Attacks on inferiors will be disguised as the work of bandits. For that purpose, we will not be carrying any effects that display our nation’s emblem, nor any other items that might incriminate us.”

One of the soldiers raised his hand. “Captain! According to these instructions, these raids are designed to punish the inferiors, but how will they get the message if we dress up as bandits instead of wearing our uniforms?”

The leader had expected someone to ask about this apparent contradiction in their orders, and he had come prepared with an answer. “That won’t be a problem. Even the inferiors will know we’re not regular bandits when they see us in action.” In other words, the demonkin expected any survivors to report to the Human Kingdom’s leaders that the assailants seemed too well trained and well armed to simply be a part of some common criminal gang.

“In that case, we can’t go overboard and wipe out whole villages,” a different soldier said, a hint of remorse in his voice.

His captain barked a laugh at him. “Don’t be daft. You really think bandits are stupid enough to leave witnesses behind? You can kill all the inferiors you want without holding back, ’cause they’re just like roaches. The only thing they’re good at is hiding. There’s always gonna be one or two of their kind we will just happen to overlook who’ll end up spreading the word of our attacks.”

The soldiers cheered and clapped their captain for allowing them free rein to completely massacre helpless villagers, which basically served as a form of entertainment for them.

“Captain, you’re the greatest!” one soldier called out.

“Give it up for our awesome nation!” cried another.

“Slaughtering those savages will be great stress relief!” yelled a third.

The captain waved his hand to quieten his troops. “However, you’re not allowed to bring back any slaves on this operation. You can have your way with female inferiors, but make sure you

kill them once you're done with them. You're free to take whatever money and other valuables you find, as well as any weapons they might have, but that's it. Anyone who fails to follow these orders will face discipline."

His troops casually agreed to these terms like school kids being read the dos and don'ts of a field trip. After going through the other matters highlighted in the document one at a time, the captain decided it was time to wrap up the meeting.

"Hiking through those mountains won't be easy, but I know you grunts will be able to handle it," the captain stated. "So none of you had better go soft on me during the trek, you hear? Dismissed!"

The soldiers all got up to leave for their barracks so they could start preparing for the operation, and as they filed out of the meeting room, they excitedly gossiped about the mission as if it were some glorified school trip.

"So what's the best way of murdering those dumb apes?" one soldier piped up.

Another demon giggled. "Well, there ain't nothing quite like porking a mother blind in front of her kids, that's for sure."

"Nuh-uh, the way I go about it, I pound a chick and make her boyfriend watch," his bunkmate said. "Or if she don't got a man around, her brother or sister will do."

"I gotta kill as many inferiors as I can and steal all their loot if I wanna afford a nice wedding for my gal," another soldier mused. It was clear that nobody felt an ounce of guilt for the horrors they were talking about inflicting on the humans across the border.

On the first day of the operation, the whole company showed up to the departure point packed and looking the part, dressed as bandits. From there, they began their march through the mountains that intersected the dwarf, demonkin, and human nations, navigating the normally impassable terrain with a map that was so outdated, its accuracy couldn't be assured. The demonkin were a highly diverse race when it came to their physiques, their mana levels, and their abilities, but the soldiers that had been chosen for this particular mission were peak specimens able to traverse the mountainous region without a word of complaint. If anything, their conversations on the trail continued where they had left off in the meeting room, which largely consisted of how they were going to slaughter the

inferiors.

It took the demon soldiers only a few days to hike over the mountains and cross the border into the Human Kingdom. As an added bonus, the journey had added several layers of muck and grime to their clothing, and the soldiers had been given no opportunities to shave, so they had ended up more closely resembling unkempt criminal bandits.

The captain scanned another map that had been copied from material sent by spies lurking in the Human Kingdom. “We’ll set up camp in these forests for the night. Once we’ve rested up, we’ll hit that first village full of inferiors.”

The other soldiers murmured back in the affirmative, each pair of eyes glinting like those of a hungry wolf at the thought of engaging in their slaughter they had all been waiting for. Little did they know, however, that Mera and her team were awaiting their arrival.

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The demon commandos awoke and began preparations to mobilize so early the next day, the morning sunshine cresting the mountain peaks had barely penetrated the retreating darkness.

“If you’re all ready, let’s move out!” barked their commander.

“Sir, yes, sir!” the soldiers yelled back, and they began their march toward the first human village that they’d marked on the map. The unit had been chatty while hiking through the mountains on the previous days, but for this early morning raid, they made sure they were completely silent, to the point where they stopped even the swords, bows, and arrow quivers they were carrying from making a sound.

The pack of covert soldiers were cloaked in fog thicker than steamed milk, meaning it would be impossible for their victims to see or hear them approach, especially as the troops displayed a level of discipline not seen in a typical bandit gang. Even if a bandit leader did warn, yell, and threaten his underlings to stay quiet before setting out on a raid, the element of surprise would still inevitably be partly lost due to the idle chatter of the brigands who wouldn’t even think about keeping their clinking weapons silent. Yet in this case, the demon soldiers were careful to make sure that each step they took didn’t rattle the swords

hanging from their hips.

The scout at the head of the vanguard suddenly halted, prompting the rest of the unit to stop too. He checked the map three times before whispering to the commander. “Captain, according to the map, the village is right up ahead. But I’m unable to get visual confirmation due to all this fog.”

“No, no, no. You’re *supposed* to call me ‘boss’ around these parts,” the captain hissed back.

The scout tittered. “I almost forgot you were leading a bunch of bandits, *boss*.”

The captain turned to the rest of his troops. “I’m told we’re close to the village now, so keep as low a profile as you can.” The soldiers dutifully obeyed and the next ten minutes was spent plodding in complete silence until the sound of an object splashing in water drew their attention. The morning sun was higher in the sky by this point and it had burned the fog away so that it was no more than wisps, allowing the soldiers to make out what lay ahead of them if they strained their eyes.

Three human girls between the ages of ten and twelve were out fetching water from a well, seemingly as a chore for the rest of their kin. The demon captain quietly signaled to his archers to take aim at the girls, though since the village was only demarcated by a simple wooden fence with open fields surrounding it, there was nothing obstructing the demons from view. Yet the girls continued to draw water from the well without noticing they were being watched.

The archers nocked their arrows and drew back their bowstrings, making sure to minimize the amount of sound made by their weapons, while the other soldiers waited with cruel, depraved smiles on their faces. As soon as the captain gave the signal, the archers loosed their arrows without any hesitation at the helpless girls, hitting the one closest in the head, shoulders, and legs. The second girl was also struck in the leg, but the third came out unscathed. The rest of the demon troops in their bandit outfits took this first strike as the signal for them to also attack.

“I’m gonna kill these brats to show those other mutts what’s in store for ’em!” one soldier yelled.

“Kill every villager you see!” called out another.

“Hey, don’t kill the chicks!” his buddy objected. “Just cut off their limbs so we can have our way with ’em. We’ll have our fun,

then slice open their bellies and rip out their organs!”

“Kill! Rape! Kill!” yelled the last demon to offer their thoughts before the attack properly got underway.

The soldiers dashed across the open field, then bounded over the wooden fence, excited to their cores about the carnage they were about to unleash. Their first thought was to charge toward the well where the injured girls were, and the first demon who arrived on the scene went up to the girl who was struck in the head by an arrow and ran her through with his sword.

The girl who had an arrow in her leg tried to flee, but her injury meant she could only shuffle away, allowing another demon to saunter up and guffaw at her as he impaled her with his spear. “You shoulda ran when ya had the chance, waif!” he bawled at her lifeless body.

The girl who had escaped the initial attack uninjured tried to run away as fast as her legs could carry her, but she was no match for high-level demons in a footrace. One quickly caught up to her and forced her to the ground.

“Hey, ain’t you gonna slit her throat?” his fellow soldier asked him.

“Nah, I’m gonna fool around with the kid first,” replied the demon straddling the girl. “She’s actually pretty cute for a filthy inferior.”

“You get turned on by underage inferiors?” another demon said. “What kind of sick puppy are you?”

The assailant laughed off the remark. “It’s actually pretty sweet once you get going. I get a huge kick outta these little girls crying their heads off. You should try doing one of these runts sometime. I guarantee you’ll never go back.”

The girl who was pressed to the ground suddenly exploded into ominous, rasping laughter that seemed to echo all around. “I’d *never* do the dirty with you, even as part of an undercover mission,” the girl finally said in a distinctly sassy voice. “You’re sleazy, you’re gross, and your breath stinks!”

“What the…” The demon soldier didn’t know how to react, since the girl sounded so much older than she looked, and before he could make sense of this inconsistency, the girl’s head split wide open. But instead of revealing brain matter and other soft tissues like one would expect to find in there, the inside of the girl’s head was filled with teeth that would have looked more at home on a predatory beast and a long bloodred tongue that

slithered between them. Of course, no human could pull off a transformation like this, and the astonishingly horrific sight stopped all of the other nearby demon soldiers in their tracks. But even if the demons had kept running at full speed, it wouldn't have made any difference, since their fates had already been sealed.

The girl's head—now bisected and gaping open like a Venus flytrap—lunged forward, her neck extending from her shoulders like an anaconda, and chomped the forearm of her assailant. The raider screamed as an extreme amount of pain raced up what remained of his right arm and coursed through his entire body.

"Lemme go! Lemme— Arrrrgh!" the soldier cried out.

The girl's head continued munching and crunching her attacker's arm, easily shredding its way through skin, flesh, blood, and bone alike and devouring it all. The demon tried to use his intact left arm to push the girl away, but he was completely helpless against the limitless strength the shape-shifting maiden was exhibiting.

"Y-You monster!" bawled another soldier as he drew his sword and swung it at the girl's neck. But when the blade made contact, it was repelled with a metallic clang, as if it had struck a boulder. Thoroughly surprised by this, the demon attempted to behead the mutated girl again and again, but it was all to no avail, and the young girl found herself free to finish gobbling down her victim's arm before sinking her teeth into his shoulder.

Meanwhile, the girl's would-be abuser continued to scream and sob. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry—graaah! Mommy!" Before he could say another word, the girl's head detached itself from his shoulder and plunged into the demon's belly instead, devouring entrails and making him vomit up blood.

The demon who had been trying to behead the girl was so horrified by the sight, he paused and backed away, completely ashen-faced. The other soldiers who were still charging excitedly toward the village heard the screams from one of their own and stopped to regard the nightmare situation that was taking place right in front of them—namely, a human girl wolfing down a high-level demon soldier, her head split open like an alligator's jaws.

Unfortunately for the commandos, that wasn't the end of the nightmare. The two other girls they had shot down with arrows

then stabbed to death revived in front of their very eyes and started chowing down on the demons nearest to them in a similar fashion. One of these unlucky demons screeched in excruciating pain, unable to even form words.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" the other unfortunate demon wailed. "Don't do this to me! Don't— Graah!"

The ferrous stench of blood filled the immediate area, and one of the demon soldiers lucky enough to still be unscathed shrank back, utterly unnerved by the situation. "Wh-What is this?" the commando stammered. "Wasn't this village supposed to be full of inferiors? Where the *hell* did these monsters come from?!"

He and his fellow survivors decided to flee the deadly scene without even trying to rescue their preyed-upon colleagues. But as had been highlighted before, their fates were already sealed.

The doors to every single house in the village swung open to reveal countless misshapen creatures who could barely be called humanoid. Some were completely headless, their snout-shaped necks filled with jagged teeth, while others had arms boasting vortices of flesh-eating fangs. Another set of creatures had gaping, carnivorous-looking jaws yawning in the middle of their torsos.

Just one look at these creatures was enough to cause all of the blood to drain from the faces of the raiders. The demon commandos had come up against all sorts of monsters in the past, but they had never once seen abominations like these creatures. The petrified soldiers watched on as the monstrosities began stampeding toward them, but the voice of their leader helped to steel their resolve once more.

"Stand your ground, men!" the commander barked. "Anyone who can use combat magic, start chanting and destroy these freaks! Save your brothers and leave no one behind!"

The soldiers with mage abilities wasted no time in carrying out the commander's orders, and chanted words from various spells overlapped one another in the air.

"Magic power, frozen might! Manifest to blade of ice! Ice Sword!"

"Magic power, blazing higher! Flow through me and form my fire! Flame Lance!"

"Magic power, hard as clay! Strike my quarry where they lay. Earth Arrow!"

The magical attacks with multiple properties rained down on the army of oddities, shredding the monsters into bloody pieces. The combat-class spells had succeeded where regular blades had failed, and the surviving soldiers cheered the outcome.

“Hell yeah! Our spells wiped out those damn freaks!” one of the raiders cheered.

“Looks like they’re weak against magic,” another concluded.

“Let’s eliminate the rest of this freak show and rescue our buddies!” a third soldier suggested.

The morale of the raiders had been completely restored, but unfortunately for them, it was only Mera putting on a show, and a few short moments later, the monsters that had been ripped apart got to their feet and resumed their charge.

“What the…” the demons breathed collectively.

Not only had the monsters completely regenerated themselves but all of their body parts that had been lopped off had revived independently and were skittering toward the demons with a will of their own. The tinier chunks of flesh wriggled and squirmed across the ground like worms, attempting to rejoin the misshapen body nearest to them. Since Mera was a Level 7777 chimera, combat-class spells were never going to leave so much as a scratch on her or her spawns, and the spectacle of the monsters getting torn apart by the magical projectiles had simply been a ruse to give the demons a false sense of security before figuratively drop-kicking them into an even deeper pit of despair. The smaller chunks of creature were actually much faster than the fully intact ones, and a miniature minion swiftly latched itself onto the nearest raider, who screamed out in fright.

“It’s got my leg!” he wailed. “The damn thing’s eating my leg!” The soldier fell onto his backside, making him an even easier target for the larger, flesh-eating ones to mass around him like a pack of hyenas.

“Help!” the soldier yelled. “Somebody save me! Please! My brothers—”

One of the predators, its entire body lined with jagged teeth, smothered the soldier’s face so he couldn’t say another word out, then started feasting on his skull. The soldier still had his arm outstretched, begging for help, but none of his fellow soldiers were willing to lend him a hand. The arm eventually detached itself from the rest of the soldier’s body, and that

bloody stump was also quickly gobbled up by the monsters.

The rest of the soldiers felt their morale dropping to new lows as the grisly display played out before them. Knowing there was now no hope of carrying out their mission, the captain at last barked a belated evacuation order.

"All units retreat!" the captain roared. "Every man for himself! Run for your lives!" The soldiers immediately did what they were told and turned their backs on their doomed brothers-in-arms, some of whom were still desperately pleading for help. But before they could take more than a few steps, the first monster girl relinquished the hold she had on the victim she was eating and cackled fiendishly.

"Hey, where do you think *you're* going, big boys?" she said, still speaking in an eerily grown-up voice. "You come barging in here, then decide to leave just when the party's getting started? Where *are* your manners, sweeties? Wait, did you think you could just waltz right on in here and rape and kill all the villagers? And now things have gone sideways, all you wanna do is save your hides? Well, bad news, boys. I'm afraid I'm gonna need you to stick around and spend some quality time with us."

As soon as the girl finished speaking, a bunch of monsters spawned from her body left and right, taking the shape of wolves, tigers, and horses, and each creature that split off from the girl's 140-centimeter frame like an oversized amoeba was accompanied by the sickening sound of flesh being ripped from bones. The newly formed beasts dashed to get in front of the raiders and block their escape routes like a pack of sheepdogs, before slowly drawing closer to the demons while cackling as strangely as the girl who had produced them—though by this point, the girl in question had transformed into a two-meter-tall bombshell of a woman. From behind her, five human soldiers in armor bearing the emblem of the Human Kingdom appeared.

"Wahoo!" one of the humans cheered. "Y'better give up and surrender now, ya evil bastards!"

"Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, dudes!" another man in armor called out. "Just toss your weapons to the ground and put those hands up where we can see 'em."

Mera cackled. "You guys tie up anyone who's actually smart enough to drop their weapons. Don't worry about the ones still trying to resist. My spawns will eat them for lunch."

The men in armor did as Mera said and started restraining the

demons who had their hands in the air. Some of the other demons continued to fight back, despite being surrounded by monsters, but they soon learned that their only choice was to give themselves up.

"I surrender!" one of the holdouts yelled. "Please! I give up—"

"It's too late for you, peabrains!" Mera stated. "All you need to do now is stick around and scream your heads off, 'cause this is gonna hurt like hell!"

More inhuman monsters dashed out from under Mera's skirt and swarmed the recalcitrant demons, but this time, instead of eating them alive like before, they only bit chunks out of their arms, thighs, bellies, and other parts of the body in a way that was decidedly nonlethal but left them screeching in pain.

"Please just kill me!" yelled one of the luckless demons. "Don't make me suffer like this!"

"Why is this *happening*?!" another cried. "I thought we were just gonna have our way with a bunch of chicks and steal all of their money!"

Mera laughed long and loud as her monsters tortured the demons at length. All of the other commandos who had tried to flee heard the screams, and the blood-chilling noise was enough to dampen their spirits and make them throw up their hands in surrender. When all was said and done, only half of the hundred-strong demon raiding party had managed to survive the confrontation.

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After devouring half of the raiders that had been sent from the Demonkin Nation, Mera addressed the survivors that she had gotten her assistants to tie up.

"Dealing with you dopes took up more time than I was willing to spare," Mera said, letting out a sinister chuckle. "Your buddies just *had* to put up a needless fight, didn't they?"

One of the detained demons eyed Mera and her army of misshapen abominations up and down. *Wh-What kind of creatures are these freaks? I thought this was supposed to be an easy mission doing some looting and a bit of killing to send a warning to the Human Kingdom.*

Mera sneered back at the captured soldiers and cackled like a raven. "Anyway, it's time I got a move on with you cretins. Oh,

and for the record, we already know that each and every one of you is a professional soldier in the Demonkin Nation army."

"No! Y-You got it all wrong," the captain said quickly, swallowing down his fear. "We're demonkin, sure, but we have nothing to do with the army."

"It's no use trying to fool me, buttercup," Mera taunted. "We have it on good authority that you aren't a criminal gang. Besides, there aren't many petty bandits as well disciplined and organized as you fakers."

The surviving soldiers stiffened when they heard that Mera knew their real identities, which pretty much proved that her assertion was correct. Some even started to wonder if one or two in their ranks had tipped off the other side so they could deploy this monster lady in time to set a trap for them. Of course, the truth of the matter was that the "good authority" Mera spoke about was none other than Aoyuki's network of animal familiars, who had been tracking the movements of the demon raiders from the beginning. Aoyuki had then passed the info on to Mera about which village the soldiers were likely to strike. But since the chimera didn't really see any need to reveal all of the tricks at her disposal, she moved on to the main purpose of this postconflict debriefing without enlightening her captives on how their plan had come undone.

"Well, now that we've got your true identities out of the way, would you army boys mind telling me how many of you personally know Lord Diablo?" Mera said.

None of the detainees had expected that particular name to be mentioned, so it took more than a few moments for them to make any sort of sense out of what they had just heard. Mera laughed and helpfully explained what she meant.

"I think most of you will have heard of Lord Diablo, the blue blood who drove out his brother—the baron—took over the household, and got himself promoted to viscount?" Mera stated. "If any of you are tied to him in any way, you'd better tell me now. I don't care how trifling the connection is."

This "clarification" only served to further bewilder the prisoners of war, but Mera stood and waited patiently for anyone to speak up. It soon became increasingly clear that Mera was getting vaguely disappointed that no one was claiming any kind of relationship to Diablo, so a few soldiers decided to hesitantly step forward.

“Um, I think I have a cousin who married a man living in Lord Diablo’s fiefdom,” one captive offered.

“M-My granddad has a friend who’s a public servant in Lord Diablo’s realm. Or so I heard,” another demon added.

“My sister-in-law’s family lives under Lord Diablo’s rule,” a third soldier admitted reluctantly.

Out of roughly fifty prisoners of war, only three volunteered even the merest of distant associations with Diablo. But despite the slim pickings, Mera was nonetheless strangely jovial.

“That’s fantastic!” Mera beamed with a chuckle. “Sorry about that, boys. We didn’t have time to identify which of you—if any—were connected to Diablo, so that helps a lot.” She turned to the human soldiers. “You can untie those three.”

“Roger, ma’am!” the humans replied. They quickly cut the captives in question loose, leaving the other prisoners completely dumbfounded over how the trio’s luck had seemingly turned around so fast. Mera ignored their reactions, instead activating her Item Box to retrieve three satchels from it. The armed humans escorted the former captives over to Mera, who handed the satchels to the demons.

“Each bag contains food, water, a change of clothes, and a standard-grade healing potion,” Mera said. “Oh, and one more thing…” She produced three sacks stuffed with gold coins. “This is my way of saying sorry for scaring you back there. That’s all yours to keep, my dears.”

The three freed captives—as well as the rest of the prisoners—were even more puzzled by this sudden inexplicable turn of events. Mera cackled again before passing down her final instruction to the liberated demons.

“Last but not least, you must deliver these letters to Diablo,” Mera said, handing each of the three demons an envelope. “They all say the same thing, but since there’s always a chance of letters getting lost, we’re playing it safe and sending the message in triplicate. You three be sure to hand those letters directly to Diablo, you hear? Oh, and also tell him, ‘Remember me on the day you succeed,’ once you get to him.”

Not only had the three freed demon soldiers been given supplies and sacks of gold coins, they had also been enlisted to act as couriers to take a letter to Diablo. And this “request” was being made after witnessing half of their division get eaten alive by monsters. The whole series of events had the former captives

completely bewildered.

"Did you gents need anything else?" Mera asked with a friendly chuckle. "I want to make sure all of you make it to Diablo safe and sound, so if there's anything else I can do for you, just name it."

Before the three liberated demons could say anything, the remaining detainees started talking over them. After witnessing the prior exchange, the other demons had finally figured out that they would also be freed and sent back home if they just claimed some sort of connection to Diablo.

"I know Lord Diablo *really* well!" one of the soldiers said. "So can you please untie me so I can go home?"

"Me too! I know him!" a second voice piped up.

"I've spoken *directly* to Lord Diablo!" pleaded another demon who was sitting on the ground, tied up. "So untie me, please!"

Mera cackled at length at the sudden ruckus before going chillingly silent. "Shut up, you dumb crooks."

The remaining demons that had been scrambling to make their cases heard, like carps at a feeding frenzy, all suddenly clammed up in the face of Mera's threatening aura. What they weren't to know was that the die had already been cast when they'd failed to speak up the first time Mera had asked about their ties to Diablo. The chimera strode between two of the freed demons and took up a position a little closer to the rest of the captives, a bloodthirsty grin spread across her face. All of a sudden, a bunch of tentacles wormed their way out from beneath Mera's full-length skirt, and the sight of them alone was enough to disturb the minds of her soon-to-be victims.

Mera mercilessly roared with laughter. "You should've thought of telling me about your connections to Diablo the first time I asked. Now I know that you're all just lying through your teeth! You creeps are no more than marauders who tried to attack a defenseless village, so now you must all meet your maker to serve as a warning to others!"

"Y-You're planning to *kill* prisoners of war?!" the demon captain sputtered. "Y-You can't do that! The Demonkin Nation will never stand for it! Humans breed like flies, anyway, so it doesn't matter if some died during our operations! The demonkin will make you pay for this act of barbarity!"

"Oh, you think *I'm* being barbaric?" Mera giggled darkly. "I'm not gonna take that from a bunch of vandals like you. If I hadn't

been here, you would've massacred this entire village by now. And I'm willing to bet this isn't the first time you've slaughtered a bunch of humans, is it, cupcakes? So you know what they say: turnabout is fair play. It's time to make your peace with it. And before you die, I'm gonna make sure you louts suffer so much that you'll regret *everything* you've done with your miserable little lives!"

Her tentacles shot out and wrapped themselves around the hapless captives, who couldn't struggle much because they were still tied up. Some of the tentacles melted the flesh of the demons they touched, while others relentlessly gouged out gaping wounds. Yet more sucked the blood out of their victims, while a number of others injected poison. In short, the captives suffered agony on a level that even surpassed the pain that had been inflicted on their colleagues by Mera's misshapen spawns in the earlier battle.

The three freed demons watched on in horror as the rest of their squad were eviscerated in ways that were previously unimaginable, the ghoulish, eldritch butchery causing the trio to slump to the ground. These three high-level demon warriors had witnessed all sorts of violence and bloodshed throughout their army careers, yet they couldn't stop themselves from trembling like toddlers as the gruesome mass execution unfolded in front of them.

After what felt like an eternity, Mera finally turned to the freed demons. "Oh, I'm sorry you had to see this, sweeties. I was so caught up in disposing of this trash heap here, I completely forgot you were still here. But don't worry, my darlings. Your buddies *will* suffer, but I'll make sure I ingest every last bit of them so that there's no risk of you seeing them later."

Although Mera's smile was stretched an inch wider than what would be considered conventionally pleasing to the eye, she still looked ravishing and statuesque, even against the backdrop of wholesale slaughter that was taking place behind her. Thanks to her awe-inspiring beauty, the scene would have looked like a stunning work of art if it wasn't for all the gurgling screams and the sound of bones being crushed.

Although the three freed captives left physically unharmed, what they had seen happen to their friends had seared scars into their minds, and the scene would replay itself in their nightmares for the rest of their lives. Though of course, Mera

had carried out the massacre in full view of the discharged soldiers with that in mind.

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Mera watched the three surviving demon soldiers go until she could no longer see their figures on the horizon, then allowed herself a rather impolite belch. She had gorged greedily on roughly a hundred demons and left large swathes of blood and entrails behind on the fields.

Mera snickered at the spectacle in front of her. “I had to eat those bozos alive in order to show how ruthless I am, but honest to goodness, those demons tasted *horrible* and didn’t go down well at all. I’d better go chug some high-grade potion or my stomach will be killing me for the rest of the day.”

The part about the potion was, of course, meant to be a joke for the sake of the human soldiers, who removed their helmets to reveal themselves to be the five Mohawks.

“Glad that’s all dealt with,” one of the Mohawks said. “Not that I mind puttin’ on all this armor. I just wish we didn’t have to wear these dumb helmets. Messes with the do.”

“Damn right, chief,” another Mohawk agreed. “Think we did all right and then some on this mission. The helmets were the only downside.”

“They say we gotta wear these things for our own good, but seriously, man. Like, come on…” a third Mohawk added.

Mera guffawed at their complaints. “Who gives a fig if your hair gets all mussed up by the helmets? You guys take your hairdos way too seriously.”

The Mohawks paused in the middle of a bit of emergency hair rearrangement to protest.

“Yo! What’re you talkin’ about, Miss Mera?” the Mohawk leader said gruffly.

“We’re *proud* of these mohawks!” another explained. “Even Lord Light says we look good with ’em!”

“No one’s allowed to talk smack about the dos, not even you, Miss Mera!” a third Mohawk warned.

Mera was Level 7777 while the Mohawks were only between Levels 20 and 25, and such a yawning gap in levels meant the Mohawks had no chance of beating Mera in a fight—a reality that was underlined by the fact that the chimera had just made

total mincemeat out of a whole company of demon soldiers. Yet here the Mohawks were, forcefully standing up for the hairstyles they took pride in, and that struck a chord with Mera. The fact that Light himself had complimented the Mohican-style hairdos was the real clincher that ended the argument, though.

"My apologies, babes," Mera said, sounding genuinely contrite. "I shouldn't have made fun of your hairdos. I hope you can forgive me." Her response immediately placated the Mohawks, so they moved on to another issue that had been gnawing away at them.

"By the way, you sure it's cool to let those three dudes off like that, Miss Mera?" the Mohawk leader asked. "Like, not only did they see what you actually look like, you also gave 'em enough money and supplies to help 'em get back home."

Before the demons had even crossed the border into the Human Kingdom, Light and his deputies identified the villages that might be targeted by raids, and with Queen Lilith's permission, temporarily relocated the villagers to the safety of the Great Tower. Then, Mera and the Mohawks disguised as Human Kingdom soldiers had lain in wait in an empty village that was all but certain to be one of the first targeted by the demon raiders. The girls the demons had seen fetching water from the well, plus all the oddly shaped monsters, had all been spawned by Mera.

The Mohawks had been under the impression that their mission was solely to massacre every demon soldier that attacked the village, so they were surprised when they received the order to set a few of the assailants free and let them skip away scot-free with a generous amount of money and supplies. The subsequent order they received was to execute the rest of the prisoners to punish them for their deeds, while making sure that the aforementioned lucky few survivors witnessed the massacre in full. The Mohawks still had no clue why they'd had to go through all of that trouble, so the leader felt the need to ask Mera about it. Mera cackled in response and gave an explanation that quickly put their concerns to rest.

"Sorry, hun. Can't say I know why either," Mera admitted. "All I know is master wanted us to give those messages to a handful of survivors. We may never know why we had to set free some of those demon trash bags who tried to raze a village for no good reason. At the end of the day, our only job is to do what our

master tells us, and do it right!"

The Mohawks expressed their awe at Mera's spiel before their red-haired leader raised his voice to speak. "We had no luck on our intel missions in the Dragonute Empire, and it was the same again in the Demonkin Nation. By the end of it, we were too ashamed to show our faces to Lord Light. So what you've just said really hits home, Miss Mera. All we gotta think about is making sure this whole operation goes off without a hitch!"

"Yup, solid advice there, Miss Mera!" another Mohawk agreed.

"Right on, man!" a third piped up. "We're seein' to it that nothin' goes wrong with this operation!" The Mohawks' morale had reached fever pitch by the time Mera saw fit to chuck a bucket of cold water over their excitement.

"Well, I'm glad you're all happy, but I wouldn't go mentioning 'luck' in front of Iceheat," Mera warned. "That gal has been down in the dumps about her string of bad luck, and that kind of talk tends to push her over the edge."

"Say what?" one of the Mohawks replied. "Why the heck would she be feelin' unlucky? She has the same power level as you!" To the Mohawks, the Level 7777 summons were like gods compared to them. And as far as they were concerned, Iceheat in particular occupied a special class of own, since she served as Light's bodyguard whenever he was down in the Abyss. Because the Mohawks had been so busy gathering intelligence up on the surface world, they had yet to hear about Iceheat's most recent setbacks with Miki and on the Onifolk Archipelago.

Mera sighed. "I'm afraid a lot has happened recently. A *lot*." Since Mera was a close friend of hers, she wasn't about to embarrass Iceheat by elaborating on her various mishaps, but the Mohawks got the hint anyway, and after exchanging a few glances, they came back to Mera with a suggestion.

"We heard humans hang fish heads in their doorway to bring good luck and get rid of the bad," the leader told her. "Not sure where they got that idea from, but it's what they do up here on the surface."

"Fish heads?" Mera chuckled. "You guys have gotta be kidding, right?"

"We're not joking, honest," another Mohawk piped up. "We genuinely saw people hanging up fish heads in a village we stayed in."

"We thought they must've been yanking our chains at first

too," a third Mohawk explained. "But them villagers were dead serious about the custom when we asked 'em about it."

"The elders insisted the fish heads could drive out evil spirits and other bad stuff," another of the Mohawks added.

"No freaking way," Mera cackled. "Y'know, that sounds so crazy, it might actually work. Those surface folk can really blow your mind sometimes…"

Mera's fascination with this superstition suddenly turned to dread as she considered the implications if Iceheat were ever to find out about it. Mera could easily spawn fish heads using her powers, but that would only give Iceheat an excuse to go overboard and completely cover the door to her room with a load of creepy, highly perishable lucky charms.

I don't even want to imagine *what that would look like,* Mera mused. *If Yume or Nazuna were to ever catch sight of something like that, they'd be bowled over backward and bawling their eyes out.*

From then on, and for the rest of the time that Mera was conducting the operation at the border, she found herself wrestling between her obligation to her friend to tell her about the superstition or keeping that particular factoid to herself for the sake of everyone else.

Chapter 5: Suspicions

“You conniving *traitor*!” Prince Voros roared in Diablo’s face, making the former member of the Concord of the Tribes shrink where he stood. The two demons were presently in Voros’s executive office in the Demonkin Nation’s palace, where Diablo had been summoned to have an “urgent dialogue” with the prince. Diablo had already known what the “urgent dialogue” would pertain to, to the point where he had already been making preparations to go to the royal capital to explain himself to the prince before receiving the official summons. Voros had been busy with paperwork at his desk before Diablo walked into his office, but as soon as the prince saw the viscount, he went red in the face and started screaming at him.

Voros brusquely leaped from his chair, grabbed a handful of letters from his desk, and strode toward Diablo. “You’re in league with the Wicked Witch, aren’t you? Turncoat! How dare you show your face in front of me!”

“You are quite mistaken, Your Highness!” Diablo squeaked. “I have done absolutely nothing to betray you or our nation!”

“In that case, how do you explain these letters?!” Voros barked, thrusting the papers in his hand close to Diablo’s face. He already knew what was written on them, however, because he had received similar letters himself from soldiers who had survived the botched cross-border raids into the Human Kingdom. Mera had allowed a few commandos to live and return to their homeland to deliver these letters while massacring everyone else.

The only common thread that seemed to connect the survivors was that they all had some sort of link to Diablo. The ties were often rather tenuous—for example, having a distant relative or in-law living in Diablo’s domain, or knowing a petty official who worked for him—yet those links were clearly no coincidence, and furthermore, these survivors were completely unharmed, had plenty of supplies for the journey back to the Demonkin Nation, and had been given generous sums of money to boot.

All of the returning soldiers had been entrusted with letters to

give to Diablo, while also delivering the exact same verbal message, said to be from the Wicked Witch of the Tower: “Remember me on the day you succeed.” As for the survivors themselves, they reported witnessing scenes of indescribable gore perpetrated by a tall, gorgeous woman who was able to literally birth all kinds of nightmare-inducing monsters. Those who died in battle had suffered bitterly before being eaten alive, while the survivors subjected to those scenes of carnage continued to be afflicted by the emotional trauma of what they saw. Not one of them dared to stray from their collective duty of recrossing the mountains to deliver the letters.

Because the survivors had connections to Diablo that were so tenuous that they barely even counted, not all of the letters made it to Diablo directly. Most of the returning soldiers had resorted to giving the letters to their higher-ups, who had in turn relayed the notes to Diablo. The letters contained plenty of damning statements, which the prince read when they fell into his lap.

Remember what you promised me back when we last met, one passage read. *You joined hands with the Wicked Witch of the Tower in order to become king of the Demonkin Nation, and when the day of your coronation arrives, you will release a statement recognizing my tower as its own nation-state.*

You will fully accept and comply with the Absolute Autonomy of All Humans, another section read.

Is our agreement to a confidential alliance still in effect? the witch inquired in one of the notes.

It obviously went without saying that Diablo had never met the Wicked Witch in his life, let alone discussed plans for him to take over the throne of the Demonkin Nation with her. But it was made to look like Diablo was following a similar path to the one Lilith had taken when she deposed her father to become queen of the Human Kingdom.

Prior to that fateful summit, Voros would have snorted derisively at the idea of a human witch helping someone to take over his nation, but after being present at the abortive summit that had set something of a new historic precedent, he couldn’t help feeling alarmed when he read the letters. Diablo was also feeling panicked, because he knew he was on the verge of losing his status and his fiefdom, and being punished as a treasonous insurrectionist.

“I have no clue why I’m receiving these letters, Your Highness!” Diablo pleaded. “It must be an evil plot by that witch to frame me and sow division within our ranks! I will always be loyal to the Demonkin Nation!”

“Loyal, you say?” Voros sneered at him. “You already have one strike against you for departing from the principality on the day of the summit. Did you do that because you knew that damnable witch was going to show up and ruin things? Did you make up some excuse to flee the summit so she wouldn’t reveal that the two of you have been colluding?”

“A-Absolutely not!” Diablo protested. “I swear on my honor that I have never met the witch nor spoken to her! I *implore* you to believe me!”

“Oh, so now you *swear* you’ve never even met that blasted witch?” Voros ranted, clearly not convinced. “In that case, how come every *single* one of our operations to pillage Human Kingdom villages has ended disastrously? You *must* have secretly passed along information about the raids to that foul witch for a price!”

Voros paused, allowing an intimidating moment of silence to loom over them. “I believe your domain sits close to the mountains that need to be crossed in order to secretly infiltrate the Human Kingdom. Am I supposed to believe that’s a coincidence as well?!”

In truth, Mera had sent her spawns up the mountains after the first raid in order to keep tabs on any additional raiding parties that might be creeping around the terrain, so there was no need for Diablo or any other demon to be squeezed for intel. Of course, Diablo had no way of knowing that, and pumping him for answers was like asking a demon to prove the Devil himself didn’t exist.

If Light had been in the room, he would no doubt have been doubled over with laughter watching Diablo squirm in distress while trying to plead his innocence. It had been Light’s idea to only allow those with connections to Diablo—any connection whatsoever—to survive and be given generous provisions along with instructions to deliver the incriminating letters, because he wanted the Demonkin Nation royal family to suspect Diablo of foul play.

Naturally, this was only the opening salvo in Light’s campaign of harassment against his sworn enemy, but to Diablo, this one

ploy alone was overwhelmingly terrifying in its own right, since he faced the very real threat of being stripped of his peerage. Just as Light had been counting on, Voros had hauled Diablo in to go ballistic at him, and while Diablo was presently doing his best to defend himself against the accusations, the prince persisted in calling him everything from traitor to two-faced turncoat to scumbag who had sold out his fatherland to the enemy.

Once Voros had finished calling Diablo every name under the sun, he ordered the demon aristocrat to confine himself somewhere in the royal capital for an indefinite period until the authorities could clear him of the allegations that he was conspiring with the tower witch. Diablo had no choice but to obey his prince's command, and he left Voros's office looking haggard and decidedly green around the gills.

☆☆☆

"Why is all this happening to me?" Diablo wailed. "I've never even *spoken* to the Wicked Witch, much less colluded with her."

He was sitting in his study in a manor he owned in the royal capital. All demon aristocrats owned estates in the capital, whether they resided in the city itself or out in the provinces, because it was simply unthinkable for the upper crust to have to stay at inns and mingle with the great unwashed on their visits to the capital.

"I've never met that witch, but Prince Voros refuses to believe a word I say to him," Diablo bemoaned, cradling his head in his hands. "Not only are letters addressed to me supposedly written in the witch's hand arriving thick and fast, the soldiers delivering them are also relaying cryptic verbal messages intended to further implicate me," Diablo griped. "And all of these soldiers are linked to me in some way and appear to have been generously compensated for their work. It's simply too much."

Even though in reality, Diablo had nothing to do with the Wicked Witch in any way, shape, or form, the evidence mounting up against him was starting to prove too overwhelming to refute, to the point where if Diablo were in Voros's shoes, he would be every bit as doubtful of his innocence. So the question remained: Why was it he specifically who was being framed?

"Did the witch notice my absence from the summit? And now

she's using me as a sacrificial pawn to sow division in our ranks?" Diablo mused. "But it didn't have to be me. It could have been *any* of my peers…"

A sickening thought floated up in the back of Diablo's mind. "That masked boy. Light! Could he have become friendly enough with the witch to rope her into joining a scheme of his to cause my fall from grace?"

If that were the case, it would mean Diablo was in a very precarious position that would only get progressively more so. If Light and the Wicked Witch were indeed in cahoots, it would stand to reason that he would have told her about how the Concord of the Tribes had attempted to assassinate him in the Abyss, which consequently meant that even if Diablo were to succeed in getting rid of Light for good, he would also need to silence the Wicked Witch somehow. Any attempt to do so would inevitably trigger a conflict that would pit Diablo against the witch and the multiple nations under her thumb. If the Demonkin Nation were to find itself in danger of becoming entangled in an undesirable war with the Great Tower, Diablo's homeland would likely execute him as a peace offering. And since he was a member of the elite, he would be made the scapegoat shouldering the responsibility, with his fellow aristocrats accepting such a punishment for him. The soldiers and commoners would also find his execution appropriate under the circumstances. Diablo envisioned himself being dragged to the gallows, with everyone ignoring his desperate pleas for mercy. The image caused him to start trembling and grinding his teeth.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it *all*!" Diablo erupted. "Why does Light have to be alive still? Why couldn't he have just died in that dungeon and left me to live out my brilliant future in peace? That vile inferior! Damn him and the rest of his species! That vermin is a plague on everything I've built! Inferiors like him are lower than mealworms, and my race would be better off if they all just hanged themselves!"

All alone in the office, Diablo clawed at his impeccably groomed hair and screamed blue murder, repeatedly wishing death upon Light. Once he had finally yelled himself hoarse, he peered out the window and realized it was pitch-black outside. "I will have to warn everyone else in that old party of mine that he is still alive," he said to himself weakly. "But first, I must prepare

for my errand.”

Diablo made a mental note to send out subordinates to inform the other members on the Concord of the Tribes of Light’s return, though he wasn’t going out of his way because he was concerned for their well-being. He simply needed others to take the blame if it came to it.

In any case, Diablo hadn’t come to the royal capital solely to receive a tongue-lashing from Voros. At the appointed time, dressed in a dark hooded cloak that completely covered his head, he stole out of his manor by the rear entrance without informing any of his servants. He skulked through the nighttime streets, making sure few people saw him by blending into the darkness, until he reached the gate that separated the aristocratic quarter of the capital from the rest of the metropolis. The separation barrier was manned by sentries at all hours of the day, and no one was allowed through without showing their face, presenting identification, and recording their name in a registry. However, there were always exceptions to the rules—for the right price.

Clad in his hooded cloak, Diablo approached the gates silently, prompting the sentries to tighten their grips on their spears in preparation for engaging this dubious character who was neither traveling by carriage nor bringing a servant with him. Diablo knew he was being eyed up and down suspiciously, but he continued drawing closer to the sentries all the same, before suddenly stopping and motioning to the sentries for one of them to meet him in the shadows away from the barrier itself. The sentries all relaxed and their leader moved to where Diablo had indicated, a spot that was dark enough to conceal whatever exchange was about to take place. As soon as the two demons were standing face-to-face, Diablo reached into his cloak and dropped some gold coins into the lead sentry’s hand.

“Why, thank you, my liege,” the guard said before handing Diablo an object in return. “Just return this tag to us on your way back through.”

Diablo pocketed the wooden tag and passed through the gate into the commoner quarter without stopping to show his face or have his name recorded. The wooden tag wasn’t an official pass to enter the ungated part of the city as such, but simply proof that he had paid off the sentries so that he could gain access to the aristocratic quarter again if he were to come back this way.

So while Diablo was *technically* breaking the rules, this backdoor service had been made available to nobles who liked to frequent the low-class precincts for more disreputable purposes. For obvious reasons, these nobles didn't want to go through the clearance process every time they went through the gate, and the sentries were keen to save time and avoid any trouble or possible injuries that might arise from inconveniencing a shady authority figure, so at some point, the sentries had come up with an informal system where access through the gates could be purchased without any names being recorded. The shady aristocrats could certainly afford the bribes, and it gave the sentries a way of getting out of unwanted trouble while earning a bit of extra income on the side. It was a win-win for both sides, so the unwritten loophole was allowed to remain.

Diablo slunk into the commoner quarter, which was usually bustling during the day, but at night, there wasn't a soul to be seen, aside from two notable exceptions: the taverns and the pleasure district. Since this was the royal capital, those bits of the city were expansive melting pots of flesh and appetite—even more so than during the day.

Diablo didn't stop at any of the establishments serving drinks or women, instead making a beeline for the slums, which were even further removed from his own gated community. It was almost unheard of for a member of the aristocracy to go to that part of town; if they had business there, a servant would be sent to take care of it. If a noble's itinerary brought them anywhere near the slums, they would immediately surround themselves with bodyguards.

But since Diablo was a former adventurer—and a high-rank one at that—he was a skilled fighter who could easily handle himself in skirmishes. Diablo strolled past some vagrants sitting on their haunches, as well as a few petty hoodlums peering out of dark alleyways, sizing him up to see if he'd be easy to rob or not. Diablo ignored these sketchy characters and continued on his way to his destination with purpose, having memorized the route beforehand. Thanks to this fearless attitude, the criminals decided he wasn't someone they should mess with.

Diablo finally neared the address that was marked on the map in his mind, which turned out to be a run-down pub, but before entering, he took a moment to wipe the cold sweat from his brow. The former adventurer—who had been so unafraid of

muggers that he'd paid them no notice—was anxious about entering this establishment.

So this is where I make my request to the world's deadliest society of assassins, is it? Diablo asked himself. *Why would they situate themselves somewhere that is so unacceptably shabby?*

Diablo wasn't exaggerating on either front there. It really did appear that the world's greatest assassins were working out of what could only be described as a dive slap-bang in the middle of the slums. The door was brittle with age and stained with blood and other grime, prompting Diablo to open it with care and enter. Once inside, he silently scanned his surroundings, his eyes flitting left and right beneath his hood. He noticed two gruff-looking demons drinking beer up at the bar, scars all over their faces and fingers missing from their hands, which were telltale signs that they didn't lead honest lives. Both demons flashed Diablo hard looks when he entered, but they soon returned to their drinks again. As for the bartender, he was sipping on a drink with a bored look on his face, the idea of extending a welcome to Diablo clearly not crossing his mind.

A proper establishment would at least acknowledge a customer when one walks in, Diablo thought peevishly as he made his way up to the bar. When he got there, he fished a lapel pin out of his pocket and showed it to the bartender. The pin was made of gold and had a skull carved into the center of it with a reaper blade on either side. It was the exclusive pin a prospective client was supposed to show in order to solicit the world's deadliest group of assassins, the Bourreaux. The holder of this pin would be paired up with a fixer for the Bourreaux and the two parties would discuss the details of the transaction: the target, the preferred timeline for the hit, the best way to kill the intended victim, and of course, the compensation. Incidentally, Diablo had already had to pay a pretty penny to someone with underworld connections just to get ahold of this pin.



The bartender's eyes shifted from the pin to Diablo, before he pointed the demon to another room with a jerk of his chin. "The guy you want is in the back."

Diablo silently placed the pin back in his pocket and walked through the door that led to a private room in the back. The difference between this room and the barroom he'd just come from was night and day. Not only was the interior immaculately clean, the furnishings were as ritzy and ornate as an aristocrat's boudoir. This kind of interior design wouldn't have looked out of place in a mid-tier mansion, or perhaps even somewhere grander. Even Diablo was momentarily taken aback by the sudden change of scenery.

"Hey, buddy! Ya just gonna stand there? Or ya gonna shut that door already?" a surly voice called out to him. "I don't want the stink of that tavern gettin' in here."

Diablo's eyes landed on a demon who was about the same age as himself, but who had a face as unsightly as a goblin's and a stature to match. Sitting in front of a table, the male demon took a casual sip of his brandy.

Diablo quietly shut the door behind him, and the goblin-faced demon motioned for him to sit in an empty seat facing him. Diablo privately didn't take kindly to being ordered around, but he complied all the same.

"If we was runnin' a normal bar or café, this is where I'd be servin' you cups of tea on the house," Goblin Face said. "But 'cause of this thing we do, nobody wants to touch our drinks. Still, I'll offer ya up some tea anyway, since you're a guest."

Diablo hesitated. "Thank you, but I'm fine."

"Guess ya won't be breakin' that streak, then," Goblin Face said. "Since I know ya ain't here for a nice li'l Sunday chat, let's get down to business." The host rearranged himself in his seat. "So who're we needin' to take care of?"

Still internally annoyed at the disrespectful treatment he'd received, Diablo pushed an envelope full of documents toward him. "This is the person I want killed."

The short demon took the envelope, opened it, and whistled in astonishment at the contents. "Ya want us to rub out an A-rank adventurer? Talk about high profile."

"Will you be able to do it?" asked Diablo.

"Sure as eggs," Goblin Face replied. "The Bourreaux can snuff out wealthy magnates, kings, and even aristocrats, so long as

there's good money in it."

The implication of the final part of that statement didn't escape Diablo's notice. The go-between had basically said the assassins would be quite willing to kill Diablo himself if someone were to take a hit out on him. A feeling of dread intermingled with Diablo's annoyance.

"That said, if we're wastin' an A-rank adventurer, I'd say we're talkin' in the range of *this* much." Goblin Face wrote some numbers down on a piece of paper, then passed it across to Diablo. The figures were written down instead of said out loud to prevent any arguments later about the initial quote.

Diablo's eyes widened as large as saucers when he glanced at the asking price. "That's outrageous! How can it cost that much to kill a human child, A-rank adventurer or not? That's outright robbery!"

"Whoa, slow down there, buddy," Goblin Face soothed. "Nobody here's runnin' a swindle. This is simply how much money a job of this type will naturally involve." He waited a beat before explaining the reasoning behind the figure. "Sure, the kid's an inferior, but he also reached A-rank in record time. Ya must know how hard it is to kill a regular A-rank adventurer, and this kid's a complete wild card. Ya think ya can pull off a tricky job like this without payin' a premium?"

Diablo had no reply to that. Any inferior child that became an adventurer usually got killed within their first few months of questing. Yet Dark had not only survived long enough to make a name for himself, his party reached A-rank in the shortest amount of time in history. Anyone wishing to assassinate such a target would naturally be extra cautious.

Diablo gnashed his back teeth. The pin he had needed to purchase to even speak to the fixer had already cost him a considerable amount of money, and yet here he was, being asked to part with the entirety of his savings to complete the job. However, Diablo faced total ruin if he didn't get rid of Dark, who he knew as Light.

I can always raise taxes on my subjects to top my savings back up again, Diablo thought. *Right now, my only priority is to make sure that Light is erased permanently.* Imposing a painful tax hike on the commoners in his domain was a sacrifice Diablo was quite willing to make to ensure his survival.

"I understand," he eventually said. "I agree to your terms."

“Thanks a bunch, chief!” Goblin Face replied. “Also, that’s just an estimate. There *may* be some extra costs added later. Deal?”

Diablo choked back his rising anger. “Y-Yes, we have a deal.”

What he really wanted to do was berate the short demon for taking advantage of him in his hour of need, but he instead took a few short breaths to steady his nerves and asked a follow-up question to satisfy his curiosity.

“How much would it cost to assassinate the Wicked Witch of the Tower, out of interest?” Diablo asked. “Bear in mind that I am not actually requesting you slay her.”

“The witch?” Goblin Face replied. “We’d never consider a hit job against her.”

The unequivocal nature of his response shocked Diablo greatly. Even the Bourreaux, the deadliest group of assassins in the world, willing to murder all targets regardless of sex or age, would never attempt to assassinate the tower witch?

Goblin Face chuckled sheepishly at Diablo’s reaction. “We’ve had plenty of folks come to us to ask us to whack her, but honestly speakin’, that job’s too big to figure out a normal price tag, and even if we *did* throw out a guesstimate, the sticker shock would make all ’em clients back out.”

In other words, the Bourreaux knew no one would be able to afford the asking price to assassinate the Wicked Witch, so the organization had decided to preemptively refuse any such requests. Diablo wasn’t completely convinced by this explanation, however. *Could I maybe find everyone who hates the witch and band together to share the cost of killing her?* he thought.

Goblin Face brought the topic of conversation back to Diablo’s target, Dark. “So are there any, ya know, stipulations you wanna add for bumping off this A-rank kid?”

“Stipulations?” Diablo repeated.

“Yeah, chief,” Goblin Face said. “With these things, we can snuff out other people near and dear to the target if ya want, whether that be friends, family, a lover, a neighbor—ya name it. We do what we can to complete the job to your satisfaction. Although, of course, all of that extra work may cost extra.”

Light—or Dark or whatever his name is—has made my life a living hell, thought Diablo. *If it’s possible, I’d want that boy to suffer before he dies—enough to make him wish he’d never been born in the first place!* Light was responsible for Diablo incurring Voros’s

wrath, which had made his status very precarious, so simply killing his former partymate wouldn't be enough to settle the score.

"I want my target's demise to be so cruel, he begs for a quick death," Diablo stated. "And I would gladly pay extra for that if necessary."

"Good call, buddy!" Goblin Face replied cheerily. "Pleasure doin' business with ya, chief. And I hope you'll think of us the next time ya need a hand too!" All smiles, the go-between thrust out a hand for a handshake, and without even the slightest hesitation, Diablo shook it, officially sealing the deal.

Chapter 6: The Mansion

After Diablo had departed from the dingy old tavern, the goblin-faced go-between took another leisurely sip of his brandy. He saw no need to rush back to headquarters in a timely fashion with this new assignment because it was frankly too low priority.

"Who the hell comes to us to kill one lousy inferior kid, even if he *is* A-rank?" Goblin Face complained to no one in particular. "The only thing those small-time barons have got goin' for 'em is their bottomless pride. How can *anyone* be such a pitiful chump?"

After many years of working as a fixer, the demon had developed a knack for identifying easy marks. This client had been wearing a hood for the whole duration of the exchange, so it was impossible to get a good read on his face, but there was no mistaking his verbal reactions and ragged breathing: he was a typical upstart social climber whose massive pride overcompensated for his being a relative nonentity.

"A real muckety-muck would always keep a poker face when discussin' payment, whatever I threw out there," Goblin Face continued. "Ya intimidate the other side by being as immovable as a boulder, not by throwing hissy fits. And ya don't ever try to bamboozle an *actual* high noble, 'cause that's sure to come back to bite you in the keister."

The demon recalled learning that lesson the hard way, resentment building up inside him as he took another sip of his drink. Back then, he had been several years dumber, and he'd wanted to leave his mark as a valuable earner, so he had started indiscriminately overcharging clients. However, one of the customers got their revenge by sabotaging the demon on a separate assignment. The Bourreaux blamed Goblin Face for the screwup, and he would have been slain on the spot if he hadn't promised to make more money for the organization.

Really thought I was a goner back then, Goblin Face thought. To help him meet his new quota, a more experienced fixer introduced him to the art of pinpointing and shaking down the true suckers—namely the bottom-level aristocrats who were full of pride. A wide variety of people approached the Bourreaux for

hit jobs, but because of the high asking price, the deals that were usually closed were the ones made by wealthy merchants, nobles, plutocrats, organizations, or royalty, and the majority of the requests were for slayings to get rid of unwanted figures, with a few being for revenge killings. In particular, a lot of low-rung aristocrats who weren't all that wealthy at the outset would contract hit jobs, despite needing to break the bank to do it. This set would usually be targeting political opponents or a sibling in an inheritance feud or even a romantic rival.

"That guy was an upstart, but he rules over a fiefdom," Goblin Face remarked. "His type is easiest to dupe, 'cause he'll eat whatever number I give 'im, then cover the gaping hole with a tax hike."

Although his cavalier wording suggested otherwise, Goblin Face was generally careful not to quote too high a price, since there was a limit to what even a desperate aristocrat would accept. The skill to straddle that line was one born from experience, and the demon had successfully used all of his negotiating techniques to swindle Diablo out of a large sum of money. Goblin Face chuckled at his latest coup, his mood lifted once more.

By the time the demon had finished drinking, the bar had already closed up for the night, so he used the opportunity to exit out the back of the private office and head to the mansion that was the headquarters of the Bourreaux. The mansion was in the heart of the slums, and although this part of the city was basically lawless, there was one rule that every inhabitant made sure they abided by: never mess with the mansion.

The building was as stately as any mansion located in the gated portion of the royal capital, and it had a well-manicured lawn and an iron fence surrounding it. An ornate fountain sprayed a bouquet of pristine water into the air in front of the building that had an equally immaculate exterior. It really was as if someone had plucked a mansion from the aristocratic quarters and plonked it down in the middle of the slums.

However, everyone and their mothers knew the mansion belonged to the Bourreaux, and the gruesome fate that awaited anyone who dared to cause trouble in or around the premises. The constables who kept the peace in the city refused to interfere with anything to do with the mansion, due to strict orders from above. As such, the building went completely

untouched by outsiders.

On the flip side, the mansion was a symbol of aspiration for the slum dwellers, especially the youth who hoped to become part of the Bourreaux someday. The organization maintained a semblance of order in the slums, receiving payment for rendering the service, and although being hired muscle was considered a step down from being a full-fledged assassin, these grunt jobs still commanded respect in the slums.

Goblin Face—who was ranked higher than the vigilante foot soldiers—arrived at the mansion and entered through the rear. It was a tacit rule to use the back entrance as much as possible, since going through the front gate drew too many eyes. Goblin Face waved to the guard on duty as he strolled inside, but he suddenly noticed the air was heavier than he was used to, and immediately knew who was inside the mansion. Cold sweat formed not just on his brow but on every inch of his body.

Goblin Face swiftly made his way down to the “Lounge” on the floor below. Only select members of the Bourreaux who had demonstrated their abilities were allowed inside the Lounge. Multiple layers of magical defenses shielded the area, and secret—and not-so-secret—passageways crisscrossed the floor. Those allowed in the Lounge had their choice of food, drinks, drugs, women, and men to sate their appetites, and because the Lounge was so much more secure than any other lodging available, those with access would usually spend their nights there and mingle with other colleagues who were between hits. That was how the Lounge had gotten its name, though the social club also served as a place for new contract killing jobs to be assigned, as well as a hub for swapping intel. Goblin Face was allowed in the Lounge because he was a deputy who brought new work for the Bourreaux, and when he finally reached the entrance, he gulped with fear as he peered inside.

The Lounge was a large parlor that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a royal palace, with luxurious sofas dotted around the shag-carpeted room, walls filled with paintings commissioned from famous artists, vases filled with fresh flowers, and a grand chandelier lit by magical items that hung from the ceiling. Waiters stood at the sides of the room, ready to attend to the needs of the guests and their women. Most of the female escorts in the Lounge wore skimpy lingerie and flaunted looks that outclassed even the most expensive prostitutes found

elsewhere.

At present, everyone in the Lounge was shrinking away from the source of the cold, menacing aura, which appeared to be a man who was only 150 centimeters tall, making him shorter than most of the women in the room. He was wearing baggy clothes and a scarf bearing a large skull that covered his mouth, and one look from his piercing glare was enough to cut people down where they stood. Gira was the one who had founded the Bourreaux and who was presently serving as the boss of the organization. The diminutive leader was clearly disgruntled at the crowd around him.

"Tell me. The meaning of this," Gira said, his halting voice sounding as dark and gravelly as a knife-wielding serial killer's. Goblin Face had spoken with a number of assassins who were at the top of their game, but none of them spooked him like the boss did, which was only natural, since Gira was a Master aligned with the Demonkin Nation whose power level went far beyond all other known assassins. But Gira had kept that little tidbit from Goblin Face and the others in the organization.

"W-Welcome back, boss," Goblin Face said, nervously rubbing his hands together. "Not often we see ya around here."

Gira looked Goblin Face dead in the eye, which nearly caused the demon's heart to stop. Goblin Face knew that if he ended up angering Gira further, his leader would literally destroy the entire mansion and everybody in it. Gira's hobby—or rather, his whole reason for being—was to slice apart anything living and nonliving, and he spent day after day cutting up countless monsters, animals, inanimate objects, and even people. Gira had founded the Bourreaux so that he would have an outlet for his passion, while also earning funds on the side. But he had the power and temperament to reduce the whole organization to a hole in the ground if his mood called for it. Because Goblin Face was a veteran member of the Bourreaux, he knew full well that he was staring at a dangerous beast that might go berserk at any moment.

A few more moments passed before Gira finally replied. "Been meaning to come. Here today. But when I came..."

Gira's shadowy glare swept across the room, causing almost everyone in the Lounge to shiver like newborn lambs. Out on the streets, the assassins were feared worse than angels of death, but here in that moment, they couldn't control their nerves.

“Nobody noticed. When I entered the room,” Gira remarked. “You have lost your touch. All of you. Is this the Bourreaux? Pathetic. Bunch of weaklings. Every last one of you.”

Of course we’re weak compared to ya, boss! Goblin Face screamed in his mind. *We can’t measure up to ya at all, so give us a break, will ya?*

Judging by Gira’s words, he had deliberately used his elevated power level to completely erase his presence before entering the Lounge, just to test the assassins here. When he saw the people in the Lounge continuing to chat away without even noticing him, he became displeased. Normally, there would have been no excuse for this complete oversight because most of the people in the Lounge were top assassins, but Gira’s capabilities were so advanced, it would have been nothing short of impossible for anyone else in the organization to have noticed their boss in incognito mode. In other words, Gira was being absurdly unreasonable and nearly everyone else in the Lounge was thinking along the same lines as Goblin Face. All except for one new recruit who was apparently completely unaware of Gira’s powers.

“Shut up, you dumb shrimp!” the fresh hire spat. “What gives *you* the right to come in here and talk shit about us? All you’ve done is prove you’re a better cat burglar than most!”

This new assassin was a good two meters tall and had only one eye. He rose from his sofa and strode menacingly toward Gira, and because he was such a hulking mass of muscles, the floor practically shook with every step he took.

“They say you’re the boss of this joint, huh? Well, who gives a rat’s ass?” the demon cyclops sneered. “As far as I’m concerned, might makes right, and you being the founder ain’t gonna help you in a scrap, half-pint!”

“No! Get away from him, you dumbass!” Another assassin tried to warn the newbie cyclops, but it was already too late, because the sound of fresh meat hitting the carpet echoed around the parlor.

“Huh?” The assassin looked down, wondering where the sound had come from, then all of a sudden, a rush of pain assaulted his body, causing him to bellow his lungs out. It was his own left arm that had suddenly fallen to the ground, and he was bleeding heavily from the stump that remained.

A distance of several meters still lay between the cyclops and

Gira, and the latter hadn't appeared to move a muscle. Although the demon who was now missing an arm was a new face in the Lounge, he was still an elite assassin who had earned his place to be there. But the cyclops had no idea how he had just lost his arm, and neither did the other assassins in the room.

The dismemberment continued, however. Next to be lopped off was the cyclops's right arm, then his left leg was cleanly sliced through, followed by his right leg. The cyclops managed to take one last breath before his head flew off his neck like a blood-drenched shuttlecock. Despite everyone in the Lounge having a close-up view of this piece-by-piece mutilation, no one had the first clue how Gira could have accomplished such a feat from a distance. The severing of the left arm that started it all could possibly have been written off as being too sudden to track the exact movement, but despite attempts to closely follow the subsequent strikes, the gathered assassins had no idea where the attacks had come from. It was like the cyclops had independently shed his limbs like some break-apart doll while screaming from the pain of it. As for the cyclops himself, the gulf in power levels between him and Gira was so huge, he couldn't see how he was being sliced up, let alone respond to the incoming attacks. That stark difference in levels was firmly communicated to the rest of the frightened demons in the Lounge.

"Felt like nothing," Gira mumbled, looking down contemptuously at what remained of the cyclops's corpse. "No skill. No strength. Should kill 'em all. Start over."

The other assassins stiffened on hearing his mutterings. If Gira really meant what he was saying about rebuilding the Bourreaux from the ground up, then there was no hope of anyone presently in the room getting out alive. There was a moment of deathly silence before some rather ebullient voices from over by the entrance started goading Gira into indulging in his bloodthirsty impulses.

"Hear! Hear! You said it, boss!" yelled a loud and comically pretentious voice. "The Bourreaux has no need for weaklings!"

"Agree I! Agree I," croaked another.

"Those dweebs should've figured out a long time ago that they weren't cut out for this group," the bored, uncaring voice of a woman piped up. "Then they could've killed themselves and saved us the trouble."

“Indubitably!” called out yet another voice. “Unskilled assassins are *indeed* a waste of our time! They simply besmirch the Bourreaux name!”

Everyone in the Lounge shifted their attention from Gira to the five newly arrived assassins who were standing in the doorway. Unlike everyone else in the room, these five seemed to show no fear toward their boss. Mad Pierrot—who was a tall, handsome demon wearing a clown suit—continued to incite Gira into slaughtering all of the other assassins.

“Not only are these recruits incredibly weak, they also have incredibly bad manners,” he said. “I was beginning to wonder myself if they truly belonged in the Bourreaux. So I say we should wipe the slate clean and start afresh.”

“Agree I! Agree I!” The next demon assassin to speak was short of stature and had the face of a toad. He tittered innocently as he beat his unusually large belly with his hands, his whole childlike demeanor—highlighted by his penchant for constantly flipping words around while speaking—standing in stark contrast to his monstrously ugly features.

“This is why I can’t stand guys like that muscle-bound meathead,” the lone woman of the group said with a flick of her wavy hair. “Who even tries to challenge the boss when they’re so weak? Honestly, we’ve gotten so big now, we’re bringing in talentless nobodies who seriously can’t hack it.”

This particular demon was a succubus who boasted a large bust and a wasp waist, her stunning figure wrapped in tight bondage leather with a coat hanging from her shoulders. Although the Lounge hired high-class courtesans on retainer to entertain the male guests, none could compete with the succubus in terms of looks or overall seductiveness. Some of the lower-level assassins in the club even forgot how terrified they were of Gira in that moment, their eyes glued to the female assassin.

“Precisely, my fair lady!” the fourth demon said stridently, his arms crossed. “The Bourreaux has swollen to a point where it has attracted far too many incompetent buffoons! If our esteemed boss will allow it, I shall carry out the culling of these oafish amateurs myself!”

At over two meters tall, the demon who had just spoken was even loftier than Mad Pierrot, and it was easy to tell that he was also more muscular due to him being shirtless. Another curious

thing about him was that he had four eyes on his bald head, but it was all overshadowed by the scars that seemed to cover every inch of his upper body. Just looking at this assassin gave you a pretty good idea of how much conflict and carnage he had encountered and somehow survived.

The final assassin of the five was wearing a tattered black cloak that covered him from head to toe and he hadn't opened his mouth once the entire time he had been standing there, though it was plain to see that he was quite ready to slaughter all of the other demons in the room if Gira gave the word. At 180 centimeters tall, this assassin wasn't exactly short, but he was as scrawny as a wizened tree and so completely lacking in visible muscle that, at first glance, he looked as if a small kid could break him in half with one punch. But all of the skilled professionals in the Lounge were able to tell that this cloaked assassin was second only to Gira when it came to the lethal threat he posed.

All five hired killers exuded a kind of pride that set them apart from the others in the Lounge, who were presently cowering under Gira's menacing glare. Nobody in the room had noticed their arrival until four of them decided to speak, though in fairness, Gira's bloody escapades had been drawing most of the attention. Even so, the new guests considered themselves to be in such an elite class of assassins, they were confident they'd be the only ones to survive if Gira made good on his threats and started slaughtering people indiscriminately.

"Oh. You came too?" Gira mumbled, his homicidal overtones softening on noticing the five's presence, which was in fact his way of expressing his delight at running into people he hadn't seen for a while. The five assassins approached Gira, and the one dressed in a clown suit was the first to open his mouth.

"A pleasure to see you again, boss," Mad Pierrot said. "I heard you'd be here after I finished up my assignment, so I sprinted over to show you my beautiful face."

"It's so nice to finally see you again, boss!" the succubus gushed.

"Here same! Here same!" the toad demon babbled.

"Indeed, indeed!" the bald demon agreed. "My body is trembling with joy at this rare opportunity to see you again, our most esteemed boss!"

"Very glad. To see you too," Gira said in usual staccato fashion,

though there was a hint of fondness to his tone this time. It almost sounded like he was speaking to his pets. “I’ve heard. About your exploits.”

In the same way that the five of them were happy to receive such praise from someone who was several magnitudes more powerful than them, Gira was clearly in a much better mood for seeing his favorite assassins. Goblin Face and the other demons in the Lounge breathed silent sighs of relief.

The five members of the Morte Spada were undoubtedly the proverbial apples of Gira’s eye—so much so, in fact, that he would sometimes give them magic items or weapons to further boost their abilities as gifts. Compared to the other assassins in the Lounge, the Morte Spada were a league or two above.

The Morte Spada excitedly ushered Gira over to a sofa so they could relate to him in detail how they had faithfully carried out their most recent assignments. The people already sitting on the sofa obediently stood up to give the higher-ranking members some space, and spent the rest of the time standing perfectly to attention like naughty school children forced to stand in the hallway as punishment. But nobody complained about this unfair treatment. In fact, if anything, they hoped this cozy little get-together would make Gira forget all about his previous threat to eliminate everyone he viewed as unfit to belong in the Bourreaux. And maybe they would get their wishes, for Gira brightened even more while listening to the reports from the Morte Spada.

“Not *only* did I murder my target, I also killed every single member of his immediate family, plus some other relatives,” Mad Pierrot boasted. “Then for the pièce de résistance, I gibbeted them in the nude for all to see.”

“That’s nothing,” the succubus scoffed. “I just got back from killing *my* victim, but I made sure to slaughter his children, his wife, *and* his mistress first, right before his eyes.”

“How utterly lukewarm for someone supposedly in the Morte Spada,” the four-eyed demon sniffed. “I, on the other hand, reduced a whole village to ash, along with my target and all of the residents.”

These exploits weren’t the type of things that any ordinary assassin would be capable of, given the scale and absurd excesses of their brutality, but each member of the Morte Spada was more than proficient at taking out scores of people in

addition to their assigned target, if not hundreds. They weren't the top dogs in the top society of assassins for nothing, after all. Even the others in the Lounge had chills running down their spines while listening to the lurid accounts of the Morte Spada's antics.

That wasn't the only thing making them shiver, though. This was the first time all five Morte Spada assassins had been seen with Gira without him summoning them first and there was a sense of foreboding in the air because of it. It was much more common for Gira to meet one or two members spontaneously, if their schedules just happened to align for it. But with the full roster in the building, the vibes were noticeably more tense than usual. The Morte Spada viewed one another as rivals, each seeking to one-up the other in front of their boss, and due to this, the conversation was starting to escalate into a genuine war or words. What had started out as a relaxed chat was threatening to boil over into an all-out brawl at any moment. The lower-ranking assassins standing around the sofa were sweating bullets by this point, largely because if the Morte Spada did engage in an impromptu death match, the junior assassins would be the first to die in the cross fire.

Gira, meanwhile, was reveling in the white-hot rage the members of the Morte Spada were directing at each other. This was precisely the sort of pressurized, dog-eat-dog situation that really scratched an itch for him. He decided to further instigate his bloodthirsty assassins by throwing them some red meat.

"No use talking," Gira muttered. "Don't tell. Show." He turned to Goblin Face. "Have new work? Target strong?"

"Y-Yes, of course, boss!" Goblin Face said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "This one'll be *really* tough to beat too!" He paused, then related the assignment Diablo had given him. "The name's Dark. He's the leader of an A-rank party of humans called the Black Fools. The client wants us to make the kid suffer in the most gruesome way possible before finishing him."

Under normal circumstances, the leader of an A-rank party would be considered a powerful target, but the mention of the race of the party caused opinions to be decidedly mixed.

"Are you suggesting we dispatch the leader of a party filled with *inferiors*?" The four-eyed demon sighed. "Hardly amounts to a preternaturally formidable opponent, does it? Even if his party *did* reach A-rank. Alas, even the quality of our targets has sunk to

a new, wretched low."

The toad demon tittered disdainfully. "Humies! Humies!"

"That party of disgusting-looking inferiors even has a woman who shamelessly lets people go around calling her a 'fairy princess,' of all things," Mad Pierrot said. "But someone's finally seen fit to assassinate someone from their party, huh? It's what those inferiors deserve for forgetting their place."

"But we only have to kill the leader?" the succubus whined. "Why can't we kill that golden knight and the fairy princess too? I hate to agree with this infinite narcissist here, but if I were going to assassinate one of them, it'd be that attention-starved prima donna who thinks she's something out of a fairy tale."

The willowy, cloaked assassin said nothing, but like Mad Pierrot and the succubus, he was already aware of the Black Fools as the adventuring party that had reached A-rank in record time. Unlike the first two members of the Morte Spada who had spoken, completely dismissing the Black Fools as worthless inferiors, the last three had some grudging respect for them. As top assassins, they constantly kept on top of the latest information concerning powerful warriors, and the name of the Black Fools had been mentioned on the grapevine.

Even Gira narrowed his eyes on hearing the name of the next target. *Black Fools. Partners of Wicked Witch,* thought Gira. *Not like other trash humans. Made A-rank fastest. Could all be Masters? No. Not possible.*

Gira had also heard of the Black Fools, but he quickly rejected the possibility that this party of mere humans could be made up of all Masters. Sure, they had demonstrated superhuman abilities in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, as well as during the Elven Queendom's Great Tower operation, the dungeon clearing mission on the Dark Elf Islands, and the Wicked Witch's war against the beastfolk, but at the same time, was it even feasible for three Masters to randomly encounter each other and form a party?

Almost impossible, Gira thought. *More believable if Doc succeeded. In his experiments.* If anything, Gira believed the Wicked Witch of the Tower was helping the Black Fools out in some way—or perhaps, manipulating them—and that was how they had thrived in their recent exploits.

That witch. Killed Daigo. Moron only cared 'bout experience points, thought Gira. *Could mean she's a Master.* Of course, any

sensible person would suspect the Wicked Witch of the Tower of being a Master.

Should I rattle witch? With Morte Spada? Gira had originally planned to have his five top assassins compete against a powerful target, but hearing the name “Dark” had planted another objective in his mind. Though naturally, he wasn’t going to tell the Morte Spada about his updated plans, for even though he adored them, they were still disposable as far as he was concerned. If they were to die on a mission, Gira could always find himself some more favorites, he reasoned.

“A contest. For the Morte Spada,” Gira announced. “First to bring me Dark’s head wins.”

“Splendid idea, boss!” Mad Pierrot cooed. “A proposal worthy of my beauty!”

“Best is boss! Best is boss!” the toad demon chanted, mangling his word order yet again.

“Oh, so all I have to do is be the first to cut off his head?” the succubus queried. “Well, that’s easy enough.”

“Indubitably so!” the four-eyed demon agreed. “I doff my cap to your wisdom, esteemed boss!”

The skinny demon offered no reply, but it was clear he was also pleased at getting this opportunity to prove his worth to Gira. Although none of the Morte Spada saw Dark as a genuine threat, they all relished the idea of competing against one another. As for Gira himself, his real goal for this assignment was to unsettle the Wicked Witch by siccing his assassins on Dark, who was known to be a valued accomplice of hers. He thought it was likely that the witch was a Master, so he was interested to see how she would respond. Of course, at that point, he had no idea he was dealing with powerful Gift-summoned warriors, who all possessed power levels between 5000 and 9999.

☆☆☆

A few days later, a few fairy maids were busy sweeping in a hallway on the bottom level of the Abyss, when all of a sudden, they shrieked and pressed their backs against the nearest wall. Aoyuki had just appeared out of the blue, but unlike normal, her eyes were hidden below the rim of her cat-eared hood, and if that weren’t unsettling enough, the red-hot rage emanating from her diminutive frame was almost tangible.

Aoyuki stamped her way between the frightened fairy maids, totally furious about the latest intel she had just received from her operatives. She had been told that a group of assassins known as the Morte Spada had been given the green light to kill and behead Dark, Light's alter ego. Perhaps then, it was no surprise that anyone wishing harm on the dungeon master she revered as a god would make her livid.

Chapter 7: Aoyuki's Fury

I was at my desk in my executive office at the bottom of the Abyss reading the latest updates on the harassment campaign we had launched against Diablo.

"Looks like everything's going well so far," I said.

"It most certainly is, Master Light," Mei replied, smiling warmly. "It is all thanks to the hard work of Mera and the Mohawks in the villages."

I had planned this latest operation after what had happened on my visit to see Lilith at her palace the other day. In the middle of our meeting, she had received a note from the Demonkin Nation basically informing her that demons were going to carry out some violent, cross-border raids of Human Kingdom villages to teach her a lesson. I agreed to deploy my own forces to repel the raiders, which was when I hit upon the idea of using these incursions to humiliate Diablo and completely ruin his life.

The crux of my scheme was to completely massacre the demonkin soldiers who came to pillage the villages *except* for those who had links—however small—to Diablo. They would be well taken care of and allowed to return home, leaving behind their brethren to be slaughtered as a warning to others. Thanks to Mera and the Mohawks, all of the border raids so far had failed miserably, and enough survivors connected to Diablo had made it back for Prince Voros to become suspicious of him. According to the report Mei had brought me, the prince had even ended up summoning Diablo to his palace to yell at him. My scheme was going so perfectly, in fact, that I burst out laughing halfway through reading the report. My only gripe was that I wasn't able to observe Diablo trying and failing to defend himself against the prince's rebuke of him.

"Ah, I wish I could've used the SSR Clairvoyance card to watch Diablo getting yelled at," I sighed mirthfully. "But the card doesn't work from the dungeon—probably because he's too far away—and I didn't have time to get myself any closer."

But beside that one minor issue, my plan was going off without a hitch whatever way you cut it. I put down the report and turned to Aoyuki, who was standing beside Mei.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting,” I said.

“No, don’t be, master,” Aoyuki replied. “As your servant, I’ll gladly wait until the end of time if you order me to do so.”

“As always, I’m glad you and everyone else are so devoted to me,” I said. They really didn’t need to take it *that* far, though, and I was *this* close to chuckling out loud at her response, which would have only made things more awkward, especially since Aoyuki had gone out of her way to come to my office to personally deliver her report.

Any information from Aoyuki usually went through Mei, who brought me the daily briefings my head of intel put together, so straightaway, this bit of information must have been important enough for Aoyuki to come and tell me about it personally. Furthermore, although she was attempting to keep it contained while in my presence, she was radiating a murderous aura that could still have injured a regular person if one had come into contact with it. At Level 9999, if Aoyuki released even a little dark aura, it was a fairly safe bet that it would be noticeable. *I almost never see Aoyuki this angry,* I thought. *What the heck has set her off?*

As I silently questioned her mood, I addressed my lieutenant about her presence. “So you said you had something to report to me?”

“Yes,” Aoyuki said, then started telling me what I needed to know in a no-nonsense manner. She had received an emergency tip-off from one of our operatives that we had installed in a particular guild, who had passed it on to one of Aoyuki’s tamed monsters. The operative had told her that some people had been asking around for information on the Black Fools, and on Dark in particular. If they had simply been gathering info on the Black Fools to assign a quest to them, there would have been no need for the tip-off, but in this case, the people who were doing the asking were incredibly shady. For one thing, they were using illegitimate means to gather information on my party, alongside going through the proper channels of the guild. If I were to guess, I would say it was a pretty safe bet that these sleuths were building up a profile to assassinate me. I figured that was why because this wasn’t the first time this had happened, and these snoops were going through the same song and dance that my party and I had been through before up on the surface.

We’ve made a pretty big name for ourselves as a party made up

of "inferior" humans, so it comes with the territory, I reflected. *It's usually people who are jealous of us, or bigots looking to cut my party down to size as a warning to other humans. But we've always been several steps ahead of them, so none of the assassination attempts so far have stood a chance.*

It went without saying that all of the would-be killers who had plotted assassination attempts on us in the past were no longer among the living. For reference's sake, basic jealousy was the number one reason my party kept getting targeted for assassinations, and namely because of our "fairy princess," Nemumu. Bad guys attracted to Nemumu's beauty would try to snuff out me and Gold so they could have her all to themselves.

I guess that was what they meant by the phrase "madly in love." Aside from the carefully planned assassination attempts, we'd also had to deal with a bunch of people who had simply picked up the nearest weapon and tried to end our lives. Those kinds of assailants were usually other adventurers, or chubby merchants, or apprentices of some sort or another. They'd often yell out the craziest things while swinging their weapons toward us.

"You lowlifes! Unshackle the one I am destined to be with!"

"Princess Nemumu! Your prince has come to save you!"

"I'll rescue you from your prison!"

These should probably also have been counted as assassination attempts, if we were being loose enough with the definition to incorporate them, which would mean Nemumu—through no fault of her own—was the main reason for us constantly being targeted. Of course, whenever these spontaneous crimes of passion would arise, it was never in our best interest to actually kill the attackers, so Gold would usually bash them unconscious and hand them over to the authorities. I'd hazard a guess that all of these assassination attempts were part of the reason behind Nemumu's unfriendly attitude toward people up on the surface world.

But listening to Aoyuki's report, it was clear we weren't dealing with comically crazed love rivals this time. The people digging for dirt were from an extremely notorious league of assassins.

"The Bourreaux?" I repeated, rubbing my temple with my hand. "I think I heard about those guys back when I was still in my old party. They were reputed to be the finest group of

assassins anywhere in the world."

If I was recalling correctly and I had heard talk of the Bourreaux in the past, it would've been in one of the taverns I'd visited while I was still in the Concord of the Tribes, though it was equally possible that I was misremembering, since drunks tended to talk about all sorts of urban legends.

"So the top assassins from the top society of assassins are targeting Master Light?" Mei asked.

"Yes, the Morte Spada," Aoyuki replied curtly. "That is the name of the worthless rabble who have dared to wish death upon master."

Aoyuki's dark aura suddenly flared up again, indicating that the source of her anger was hearing that someone wanted to kill me. Oddly enough, I could barely keep myself from smiling from ear to ear, knowing that she was so enraged on my behalf.

"Master," Aoyuki said, her hood hiding her eyes in what could only be described as a menacing fashion. "I would like you to command me to massacre every single one of these fools who dares to think above their station. I will set upon them like a hound from hell, and make sure that each one meets their doom, capturing them alive so that my canines can devour them before your eyes, master."

"I would also request that you give that order, Master Light," Mei stated. "I will join Aoyuki in capturing these uncivilized miscreants and present them to you tied together at the necks with a length of rope. They will know who exactly they were trying to assassinate before suffering cruel, painful deaths."

Mei looked every bit as incensed as Aoyuki, who was practically a ball of fury herself by this point. This time, I did chuckle awkwardly, waving my hand to get my lieutenants to stand down.

"Okay, let's all relax, shall we?" I said. "I know you two could take those guys down in your sleep. They have no talent besides a slight one for killing people, anyway. And yes, I'm very happy that you are so angry on my behalf, but it makes much more sense to capture them and quiz them about who put the hit out on me."

I paused and turned in a seemingly random direction. "In fact, I already have a pretty good idea who hired them, given the uncanny timing," I said, envisioning Diablo in some far-off place. "We might not need to quiz them after all."

☆☆☆

So my alter ego, Dark, was marked for death by the Bourreaux, the world's deadliest group of assassins, and if that weren't enough, the top five assassins in said society, the Morte Spada, had been tasked with the assignment. I'd had to step in to stop Aoyuki and Mei from surrendering to their emotions and taking out the Morte Spada themselves in order to give me enough time to turn the tables on the assassins on my own terms. This time, the plan wasn't an elaborate one: all I needed to do for it was put the word out that the Black Fools would be staying in the Human Kingdom's royal capital for a while, then stand around as bait, waiting to capture whichever Morte Spada assassin came to kill me. I also thought I'd use the scheme as an excuse to visit Lilith again and give her an update on the situation, so I contacted the fake Yume to set up a meeting between us. Yume came back to me later to confirm that Lilith was available during one of the dates I had specified and that particular date left us with enough time for word of my visit to the Human Kingdom's capital to reach the ears of the assassins.

Traveling by normal means, my party and I set off from the Great Tower and crossed the Elven Queendom to enter the Human Kingdom. We didn't encounter any of the Morte Spada on our journey to the Human Kingdom capital, and nothing else happened along the way that was worth mentioning.

We made sure to book a suite at the same upscale inn we had lodged in the last time we'd stayed overnight in the capital, and scheduled our stay for several days. We sent the palace notice of our arrival, making sure to relay the exact day and time we were planning to go see Queen Lilith, and since our audience with her was still a day away, we decided to spend our downtime taking in the sights and sounds of the capital. I ended up wandering the streets with Nemumu, while Gold went off by himself to meet up with some old acquaintances and go drinking. All of this activity was supposed to put us out in the open as a way of drawing out the assassins, but if anything, Gold was the most active in our party when it came to going out on the town. Every time we came to the capital, he would make the rounds to see friends and take them all out drinking, and his circle of drinking buddies seemed to grow with each visit. He'd often go off and do it all on his own time, without Nemumu or myself tagging along.

Seriously, Gold's an expert at making friends, I thought, honestly impressed.

While touring the marketplace with Nemumu, we noted that things seemed no worse than before now that Lilith was queen. Sure, the kingdom was having to deal with some soured international relations in the shape of the demonkin, the dragonutes, and the centaurs all kicking up a fuss, but the kingdom had established friendly ties with the five other nonhuman nations, plus the Great Tower, so if anything, the kingdom's citizens seemed to have more money in their pocket, thanks to the rebalancing of the tariffs. It was still slow going, naturally, but I could sense the oppression of humans becoming less of a problem as time went by.

"Lord Dark…" Nemumu uttered.

"Yeah, I picked up on it too," I whispered. It appeared one of the Morte Spada had swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker. I allowed myself a slight smirk under my SSR Fool's Mask at how well my scheme was going.

The next day, my party and I went to the royal palace at our stated time to have our meeting with Lilith. Like the time before, she received us in her executive office, and I took a seat on the sofa opposite her, though unlike that time, Lilith looked well rested and in good health.

Last time, she looked like she was practically at death's door, I thought. *She was really getting swamped by all of her new responsibilities. Plus, it didn't help that the mass exile of spies had created a severe labor shortage at the very start of her reign. I'm glad those SSSR Sleep-B-Gone tablets are doing their job.* Those pills had been exactly what she needed, and the best part about it was they had no harmful side effects.

"I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for protecting my people from those Demonkin Nation soldiers, Lord Dark," Lilith said, a huge smile plastered across her face. "I honestly have no idea how I can repay you!"

"Oh, don't worry about it," I said. "Our operations at the border are doing the trick for me too, and I'd have felt bad if I'd allowed the folk in those villages to come to harm in the knowledge that I could have prevented their suffering."

For context, there were presently only five people in the office. Lilith and I were sitting on sofas facing each other, while Gold and Nemumu stood behind me and Lilith's Yume stood

behind her sofa. I'd used my anti-espionage cards on the room to give us an extra layer of privacy, but Lilith still referred to me as "Lord Dark," just to be on the safe side.

The new queen and I chatted at length, updating each other on the current state of play. Of course, our two sides were in regular contact anyway, but having two leaders speaking face-to-face like this was important for building ties. However, I only told her things that had already been relayed to her kingdom via lower-level channels; I said nothing about the ongoing plots to have me assassinated.

Lilith didn't have anything particularly new to report either. Clowe was still dead set on overthrowing Lilith, and his backers were maneuvering in the background to that end. The Demonkin Nation hadn't backed down with regard to their pressure campaign or their cross-border attacks. If there was anything new that was worth noting at all, it was about her father, the former king.

"My father is now obsessed with *another* woman," Lilith said. "He wants me to increase the national budget so he can support his latest infatuation."

Even though she was well rested and in good health, Lilith's eyes dimmed as she spoke about the situation. She was now queen, yes, but it also shouldn't be forgotten that she was a teenage girl, still some way off from her sixteenth birthday, being badgered by her father to send him money for him to spend on romancing a woman who was likely to be in a less than reputable line of work to say the least.

"I don't object to my father indulging in his, ahem, appetites now that he is liberated from his burdensome duties, but sending written petitions for the nation to *increase* the budget simply so he can afford to woo and support his new woman is outlandish," Lilith ranted. "I'm dealing with an avalanche of important paperwork pertaining to far worthier causes for the kingdom and its people, and I'd much rather spend my time with those tasks instead of having to read my father's requests and write back with the latest excuse on why I have to reject them."

She paused, looking entirely fed up with the situation. "First of all, why is he even pursuing another woman? I don't want a new stepmother. And how would I even approach a woman of that ilk if I were ever to meet her?"

I chuckled nervously, since I had no idea what I could say to

make her feel better about it. It would certainly be a scandal if the nation formally approved a bigger budget to finance the former king's new playboy lifestyle, but it was clear Lilith was never going to go along with that idea anyway. But even if the funds requested were barely noticeable in the grand scheme of things, she would still have to deal with an extremely uncomfortable family issue, and I could understand her frustration.

I wrapped up my visit after listening to a few more of Lilith's complaints, then left the palace with my party after making sure I'd given her an extra bottle of the Sleep-B-Gone tablets. As we approached the inn we were staying at, Nemumu updated me on her situational assessment.

"I believe we'll arrive just in time, Lord Dark," she said.

"Thanks, Nemumu," I acknowledged.

We purposely didn't slow our pace as we made our way to the inn, since it was in the middle of the afternoon, and everything about the scene looked normal, with people milling about on the streets. We finally arrived back at the inn and opened the door, which would usually prompt greetings from the staff inside, but we instead came face-to-face with a demon in a clown costume.

"I see you've finally decided to come back, Black Fools," he sneered.

He was over 190 centimeters tall with a chiseled build and long hair that was dyed all the colors of the rainbow. As for his clown suit, it was pretty standard, complete with a red ball for a nose, while his face was colored white with two dark patches over his eyes, one star-shaped and the other in the shape of a half-moon.

Although the demon looked, well, clownish, I could practically smell the bloody stench of all the people he had killed over his career, which I estimated had to be well over a hundred, maybe two. At this point in proceedings, the clown assassin was behind a sofa facing the door and leaning over it.

Why's he standing behind a sofa? I wondered. Beyond the sofa was the inn's front desk, while to our right was the dining area. The couch and the clown behind it were on the left side of the lobby. My team and I made sure to act all shocked and ready to engage in combat so the assassin wouldn't be suspicious, and it seemed to work, since he had an air of confidence about him as he continued speaking to us.

“Well, my, my. It’s been many moons since I’ve faced prey so ready to fight back,” the clown remarked. “And it also appears I’m the first to take a stab at you, so to speak. It’s thanks to all the beautiful work I put in, as well as my simply fabulous luck. Once I’ve sliced your head off, my boy, then I shall be the *true* second-rank assassin in my organization.”

The clown pretentiously flipped his long hair to one side in time with the last syllable, the rainbow-colored strands seeming to shimmer in the sunlight from the windows, making this completely unnecessary affectation appear somehow magical.

“Hold up. The *second*?” I blurted out. “So you’re not the top assassin?”

“The ‘top’ assassin would be our boss,” said the muscle-bound clown. “He’s the best assassin in the entire world, to be exact. No one can outdo him.” He paused, a look of sheer admiration spreading across his face. “He is extremely powerful. Even I—the most beautiful specimen in the world—cannot help but be *entranced* by him!”

“Oh, so *he’s* the best assassin in the world, not you?” I replied. “Not that I care either way. Whatever the case, you’re the one who’s been hired to kill me, right? If that’s how it is, you *sure* you wanna do this out in the open?”

I had honestly been expecting some proper cloak-and-dagger stuff from someone who claimed to be a top assassin, but here he was in plain sight for all to see in the middle of a lobby, where he was at a numerical disadvantage in a three-on-one. But the demon clown simply scoffed at my question.

“I hear your party reached A-rank in record time, but in the end, you people proved you really were just a bunch of inferiors,” the assassin said. “You don’t even know that you’ve already lost.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Gold moved himself around in front of us and raised his shield, while Nemumu bent her knees slightly, ready to spring into action if necessary, but the clown paid no heed to either of them and held up the handkerchief for us all to see.

“This is an ordinary handkerchief, and as you can see, I have nothing up my sleeves,” the clown began. “But watch what happens when I ball this handkerchief up in my hand and count to three. One, two, three, presto!”

The clown opened his hand to reveal the handkerchief had turned into a large cloth sheet, which he then momentarily laid

over the sofa before whipping it away to unveil a woman—one of the inn's staff—lying unmoving on what had previously been an unoccupied sofa. She didn't seem injured in any way, and since her chest was moving up and down regularly like she was breathing, I could only assume she was just unconscious.

Oh, so that's *why he decided to stand behind the sofa,* I realized. *He wanted to pull this stunt.* If this had been a magic show, I might even have politely clapped, but the sinister smirk on his face told me he wasn't trying to entertain us.

"I hear you are friends with that harlot, the Wicked Witch of the Tower, yes?" the clown said. "If that's true, that suggests you believe in her 'Absolute Autonomy for all Humans' principle, so naturally, you wouldn't do anything that might endanger this slumbering beauty right here. Am I correct?"

The large sheet in his hand had disappeared and had been replaced by a large dagger. What he was obviously trying to say was the staff member on the sofa was his hostage. Gold didn't take too kindly to this big reveal.

"To think the reason you decided to show yourself openly was just so you could resort to this underhanded ploy…" he growled.

"Uh-oh. You're starting to *frighten* me," the muscle-bound clown taunted. "My hands are trembling so much, I think I might be forced to drop this oh-so-big knife onto this lovely lady here."

He threw in another threat that wasn't so thinly veiled this time to rub his superior position in our faces. "I'd advise you not to get distracted by what's lying on this couch, though, for she's not my only hostage. I've hidden a large number of magic items around the city that will start emitting poisonous gas if I so choose. The gas will then blanket the city too quickly for you people to do anything about it."

We glared in silence at the assassin, prompting him to continue his little spiel. "You luckless baboons lost the moment I, Mad Pierrot, appeared before your eyes! For I am the most *beautiful* member of the Morte Spada, the top assassins in the Bourreaux! My boss is the one who named me so, because I am *far* more powerful and more handsome than any of the monsters or mediocre warriors you might have fought before!"

The demon clown—who apparently went by the name of Mad Pierrot—continued to gesticulate wildly like a theater minstrel, focusing on nothing else but stroking his own ego as his long hair swung left and right. Once he had finished his rather

overexaggerated appraisal of himself, he turned his broad grin toward us and leered at us like we were small puppies he was about to torture.

"So what is your choice to be, Black Fools?" Mad Pierrot asked. "If you continue to stall, the whole city will be destroyed, along with this girl. However, if you—the child named Dark—surrender to me quietly, I'll be more than willing to spare this town of inferiors, including this girl. So what will it be? Will you continue to side with the witch and her laughable so-called 'autonomy for humans'?"

"Surrender? To *you*?" I shot back. "Why would I waste my time doing that?"

"My word. It appears you're more heartless than I realized," Mad Pierrot remarked. "It's a pity, really. I expected you folks to amuse me by agonizing over this dilemma I'd set up for you." But he quickly stopped looking so disappointed and shrugged dismissively. "Who would've envisioned that you would ultimately value your own lives over your precious 'absolute autonomy for humans'? It's so anticlimactic, I could weep."

"Well, I'm sorry to break it to you, but I'm not abandoning *any* principles to save my skin," I said. "Here, lemme show you."

I activated my Item Box and released a bunch of cube-shaped boxes onto the floor where the pompous clown could see them clearly. Needless to say, these cubes were the magic items he had been talking about that were supposed to start emitting poison gas on his command.

"You see, we've already located and removed all of these poison-filled contraptions you'd placed around the city," I explained. "We neutralized the gas in them too."

"Th-Th-That's impossible!" Mad Pierrot spluttered. "How did you find all of those cubes so *fast*?! Th-This has to be a trick! Yes, that's it! You're trying to bluff me into believing you!"

The fact his first thought was to assume we were bluffing was so predictable, I shrugged my shoulders extravagantly and sighed loudly. "I knew you'd say that. If you still doubt me, you can always activate the boxes and call my bluff. Not that it'll do you any good, of course, since I'm not tricking you."

Mad Pierrot grabbed something from his pocket that looked like a small plank with a magic gem in the middle of it. He pressed the gem and whispered something into it, which I guessed must have been the magic spell that activated the

cubes. And as if to confirm my theory, some of the cubes did open, though notably, not all of them. Maybe he'd just opened a few as a test.

A shocked expression appeared on Mad Pierrot's face as he stared at the handful of open cubes. And like I'd told him, the gas coming out of the cubes wasn't going to poison us, because we'd already counteracted its effects.

"Those are *my* cubes!" Mad Pierrot yelled. "How the hell did you find them? How?!"

"Well, if you don't mind me asking, what made *you* think I wouldn't be on the lookout for assassins seeking to take me out?" I retorted. "When we found out someone was placing weird cubes all over the capital, of *course* we were gonna collect them up, check them out, and neutralize them before they could do any damage. Did you really think we would just sit on our hands and wait for you guys to come and slit our throats?"

To be more precise, my allies in the Abyss had been tracking Mad Pierrot ever since he'd showed up in the Human Kingdom capital, which meant that whenever this clown had placed a cube in a location, the ally watching him at that particular moment retrieved it immediately.

"Oh, and another thing: we already knew you'd ambush us in this inn," I said. "We unfortunately had to let you stun the staff here, but we figured you'd keep them alive and use them as hostages."

Mad Pierrot went so pale, I could tell through his clown makeup. But I wasn't done making him squirm yet.

"We also worked out why you'd decide to attack us in this lobby instead of somewhere more secluded outdoors," I said. "You soaked your hair and clothes in poison beforehand and wanted us in an enclosed space to breathe it all in, didn't you? That'd explain the clown suit, since it gives you an excuse for making all those wildly exaggerated movements with your body and hair."

Now that I had revealed that we had seen through his other trick, Mad Pierrot was sweating so much, it was like someone had dumped a bucket of water over his head.

"And when you picked your poison, you went with one that causes paralysis instead of death, didn't you?" I added. "Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but we're immune to all poisons, so it wouldn't have mattered if it was supposed to kill us, paralyze us,

or make us fall asleep.”

Mad Pierrot was sweating even more by this point, and all the haughtiness that had been on display only a few minutes before had completely evaporated. He started scowling maliciously at me, which would have tipped me off that I was right on all counts if I hadn’t already known, since my allies had been keeping tabs on him this whole time.

In any case, if Mad Pierrot was considered one of the best assassins the Bourreaux had to offer, their standards were set way too low. For one thing, he was paying way too much attention to me and what I was saying, and not nearly enough to what was happening right under his red clown nose. Sure, I was basically trash-talking him by this point, but a *real* assassin would have been a lot more professional than this. I sighed at just how utterly incompetent this loser was, which made him jolt his shoulders back in fear for some reason.

“Look, I get that you’re too stunned to speak after realizing that I’ve got you all figured out,” I said. “But you’re an assassin, right? You’re not supposed to let me distract you this easily. Do you really belong to the top group of assassins in the world? If so, how can you *not* have noticed that we’ve already rescued your hostage from the sofa?”

Mad Pierrot at last looked down and did a double take when he saw that I was right. “When did that happen?!”

“Right around the time Lord Dark revealed your scheme to poison us,” Nemumu said from behind Mad Pierrot’s ear. “That’s how slow you were to notice!”

Nemumu aimed a well-placed knifehand strike to the side of Mad Pierrot’s neck, who yelped then promptly blacked out. She had pulled off that maneuver with the hostage under one arm, meaning she had been the one who had stealthily rescued the staff member before positioning herself behind the clown. I looked down at Mad Pierrot to check that he was truly unconscious, and the fact that his eyes had completely rolled back into his head basically confirmed it. I sighed again.

“I thought I’d need to watch myself because he was supposed to be one of the best assassins in the world, but he wasted way too much time on his stupid gimmicks,” I said. “At first, I even thought all his showboating was an elaborate trap, but turns out, it was just weak nonsense.”

“I really do have to question who would give these scoundrels

the title of the ‘world’s best assassins,’” Gold remarked. “‘The world’s best clown show’ would be much more fitting, what, what?”

Nemumu had placed the inn worker back on the sofa and was setting about tying up Mad Pierrot. “Lord Dark, I think it’s wise to assume that this guy is the weakest member of the Morte Spada. I see many signs to suggest it.” She pulled the ropes tighter. “For instance, no real assassin worth their salt would go to the trouble of taking hostages just to antagonize their intended target. That’s the approach of a thrill-seeking petty criminal. My belief is he was allowed to be a member of the Morte Spada due to what must have been his incredible luck so far.”

Nemumu finished tying up Mad Pierrot, then used an R Wash card to clean her hands that she had sullied by touching the poison-soaked demon.

“However, I believe the other four that will also try to attack you will be genuine assassins,” Nemumu said with a super-serious look on her face as she finished washing up, then turned to face us. “I’m not saying that as your partymate, but as the UR Level 5000, Assassin’s Blade. You need to take extra care when traveling around up here on the surface, Lord Light. You may be safe down in the Abyss, but we’re dealing with a group that are experts in stealth, tactics, and elimination.”

She continued to look me straight in the eye, her gaze hardening. “They will undoubtedly use everything they have in their arsenal to make sure that you end up dead. Even if they have lower power levels, you must not let your guard down. One slip is all a real assassin needs to slay you.”

Since Nemumu was the best assassin I knew, I saw no reason not to believe her when she said a real assassin at the top of his or her game would be perfectly capable of killing me, with or without their power level being maxed out. And moreover, I could tell that Nemumu was deathly worried about me.

She knelt down before me. “Speaking as the Assassin’s Blade, I will do everything in my power to protect you from other assassins, Lord Light, even if they try to attack you all at once.” Despite reputedly being an all-powerful dungeon lord, I still found myself moved and heartened on hearing that Nemumu would do everything in her power to protect me from danger, wherever it might leap at me from. I showed my appreciation for the consummate dedication she had for me by removing my

mask and smiling at her.

“Thanks, Nemumu,” I said. “I’ll be counting on you from here on out then.”

“Yes, my lord!” she replied excitedly. “I dedicate my entire body and soul to protecting you from the filthy blades of those lowly assassins!”

With the way Nemumu’s eyes were shining, I could tell that she was already visualizing in her mind how to counter the threats posed by the real deadly assassins still in the Morte Spada.

Chapter 8: The Real Deadly Assassins?

“You no-good maggots…” Nemumu wailed. “H-How could you *embarrass* yourselves like this?!”

We were presently in the training arena at the bottom of the Abyss, and Nemumu’s livid voice echoed off the craggy, rock-filled surroundings. In fact, she was practically in tears addressing all five members of the Morte Spada in front of her. We had basically caught them in our sleep.

“I mean, for crying out loud! Is the art of assassination a *game* to you people?!” she yelled. “Why couldn’t a single one of you engage in a *serious* assassination attempt? And you call yourselves the best assassins in the world? Gold was right! You really *are* the world’s best clown show!”

Mad Pierrot and the other four members of the Morte Spada had been placed on chairs and bound by the Dorn Fesseln, Ellie’s strategic-class spell that could confine a prisoner in coils of steely, thorny vines regardless of their level. Nemumu was furious at how none of these supposedly top assassins had displayed even the slightest sliver of competence at their jobs when they had tried to attack us. After each failed assassination attempt, we captured the Morte Spada member and brought them to the Abyss. We had just collared the last of the assassins in the group, and Nemumu was giving them all an earful.

“You, Mad Pierrot!” Nemumu screeched. “Assassins never waste time monologuing! Nor blackmailing their targets! And is poison your *only* weapon of choice? Learn some more tricks, why don’t you?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am…” Mad Pierrot said in a trembling voice. We had shaved his head and changed him into a different set of clothes so that his poison wouldn’t affect anyone in the Abyss.



“And you, Toadboy!” Nemumu barked, turning to the second assassin in line. “You tried to shoot stomach acid at us, didn’t you?”

“Yes, indeed I did,” said the toad-looking demon with the round belly.

“Did you *really* think that was the quickest way to off someone?” Nemumu yelled. “What was stomach acid supposed to do? Gross us out? And why the hell are you constantly mangling your sentences? Is it some kind of affectation?!”

“Yes, I felt it was necessary,” the toad demon explained, his diction unexpectedly articulate. “It was a device I was using to distinguish myself from the others so that I left a more lasting impression on the boss.”

“You should focus more of your energy on being a better assassin instead!” Nemumu admonished him. “I mean, what kind of assassin wastes time pretending he can only talk like a baby?!”

Her gaze shifted onto the only woman among this line of supposedly “elite” assassins who had been found wanting.

“And you’re the walking honey trap who weaponizes her looks to ensnare men, then kills them with her delayed-action poison,” Nemumu said. “I’ll give you credit for being the most assassin-like in your approach.”

“Th-Thank. You’re very kind,” the succubus said, a coquettish smile dancing across her face. It was all she could really do while tied up by Dorn Fesseln. Nemumu responded to it by glaring daggers at her, wide-eyed and furious.

“But you should never do what you pulled in broad daylight in the middle of that restaurant! You interrupted us while we were drinking tea, dressed like an obvious prostitute! Seriously, learn to read the room! And why in the world would you show up in *that* outfit in front of Lord Dark— Excuse me, Lord Light? Couldn’t you see that he looks no more than twelve? Why is it so hard to use your head?!”

The succubus shrieked in fear, but Nemumu huffily ignored her.

“Next!” She stalked toward the biggest assassin of the bunch, a heavily scarred demon with four eyes and plenty of rippling muscles. “You were the absolute *worst* of the group, and it wasn’t even a contest! Why would you even think to charge at us head-on from somewhere we could see you? And in the middle of the day, no less. Do you seriously call yourself an assassin?!”

“B-But to date, that method has been my most successful one…” the four-eyed demon started to protest.

“I don’t care *how* many people you’ve killed that way!” Nemumu roared at him. “Are you an assassin or a hired goon?! If you *are* an assassin, then don’t charge at us like some brain-dead bull! Assassins don’t cut corners!”

Not to discount what Nemumu was saying, but back when I was in the Concord of the Tribes, I heard tales of a world-famous assassin who killed people not from behind, but by showing up in front of them. Of course, those stories weren’t about this guy she was presently yelling at, but about a legend who lived a while back, and the fact that people still brought up that particular assassin kind of disproved her assertion, I would have thought. I assumed that sort of method would still be against her principles, though.

Nemumu moved on to the final Morte Spada assassin we had caught. “We took you down without even realizing you were there! Yes, going unnoticed is the number one skill an assassin needs, but you’re such an invisible nobody, there’s literally nothing I can say about you! Nothing!”

“Um, I’m…” said the skinny assassin in the full-length tattered cloak, sounding uncertain. “I’m sorry.”

Nemumu wasn’t kidding either. We had literally beaten this last guy while we weren’t even looking. Even here after the fact, I still had no clue how exactly we took him out of commission, and neither did Nemumu or Gold. To his credit, I had to admit that he had come closest to duping us, though it hadn’t really amounted to anything.

Once Nemumu was all done with her yelled critiques, she grabbed her head in frustration. Gold couldn’t resist poking fun at her.

“‘You need to take extra care when traveling around up here on the surface, Lord Light,’” Gold quoted, mimicking Nemumu’s voice. “‘We’re dealing with a group that are experts in stealth, tactics, and elimination. They will undoubtedly use everything they have in their arsenal to make sure that you end up dead. Even if they have lower power levels, you must not let your guard down. One slip is all a real assassin needs to slay you.’”

Nemumu flinched at hearing her words quoted back at her, before turning beet red to the tips of her ears. Gold simply chortled and continued quoting her.

“‘I will do everything in my power to protect you from other assassins, Lord Light, even if they try to attack you all at once.’” He couldn’t stop himself from roaring with laughter. “And you were so dramatic about it!”

It was at this point that Nemumu let out a scream. “Gold!” she cried, then banged on his armor with the handles of her knives. He continued clutching his sides, even as Nemumu rained blows down on him.

“Nemumu, m’girl, how could I *not* laugh at that?” Gold teased. “You even made me fear the worst when you spoke so highly of these blighters. But all of your so-called ‘*real* assassins’ turned out to be bigger clowns than the first chap, which means those dire warnings were all hilariously pointless!”

“Gold,” I chided. “I think you should let up a little.”

He turned to me and executed an impeccable impression of Nemumu. “‘I dedicate my entire body and soul to protecting you from the filthy blades of those lowly assassins!’”

“Pfffft!” There was no way I could contain my laughter after that—not in the face of Gold speaking in that high-pitched, feminine voice, and *especially* with the knowledge that none of their “filthy blades” had managed to do anything.

Seeing me joining in with the laughter was too much for poor Nemumu, who was so traumatized, she crouched down on the ground and covered her face, still holding her knives. It looked like her entire tanned body was glowing red due to the shame of it. I took pity on her and apologized.

“S-Sorry about that, Nemumu,” I said. “I still appreciate your undying loyalty to me. Honest!”

“Myaaah…” Nemumu whined, sounding a lot like Aoyuki when in cat mode and looking like one of those adults who had only just that second realized how utterly cringeworthy they had been in their younger days when they believed the whole world revolved around them.

We should give her some space. At least until she’s recovered, I thought. I shot warning looks at everybody else in the training arena, then turned my attention to the Morte Spada.

I cleared my throat. “So what should I do with you guys?” The captives all shuddered as one at my question.

“But before I go any further…” I continued. “Ellie, are you all done extracting everything useful out of their memories?”

Ellie was with us in the training grounds and she now spoke

up. “I most certainly am, Your Blessedness. But I’m afraid not a single one of our guests knows the name of the ne’er-do-well who hired them to carry out your assassination. Since it appears to be someone else who negotiated the contract, I’m afraid I haven’t been able to identify the client. Please forgive me, Blessed Lord.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said. “Besides, we’ve already got a fairly good idea who hired these bums.”

“Yes, I believe so too,” Ellie said, clearly with the same person in mind: Diablo. “Mera’s operations in the border villages must be working far better than we could’ve imagined. This just proves what a master strategist you are, Blessed Lord! I cannot hope to match your genius!”

I laughed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Ellie.” If we were being honest here, she was a far better strategist than some second son of a peasant farmer, but I could tell her words weren’t just empty flattery and she really did think that highly of me. In such a situation, it was better to just accept the compliment and move on than it was to try and argue the point.

“But anyway, since you’ve extracted all the useful information you can get from these guys, it means we’re done with them,” I declared. “And since they know about us and the Abyss, I say we should—”

“N-No, please hear me out, Lord Light!” Mad Pierrot begged. “I-I’m one of the top assassins in the Morte Spada, so I could be *very* useful to you, my lord! I’ll quit the Bourreaux, and serve only you, Your Grace! Just please spare my life, Your Lordship!”

“Don’t be so asinine, Mad Pierrot!” the toad demon piped up. “You are no better than me! Not by a long shot! Lord Light, don’t listen to this narcissistic kook! Allow me to serve under your command!”

“Lord Light!” the succubus called out. “Wouldn’t you rather have a beautiful woman like me by your side than any of these icky men?”

“What would a self-styled strumpet like *you* have to offer His Excellency?” the four-eyed demon said, finding his voice. “Lord Light, ignore these ignoramuses and allow me to be your retainer! These muscles prove that I can be a worthy servant to you!”

The skinny, cloaked demon also opened his mouth to plead for his life, but a voice icy enough to freeze blood stopped him

before he could utter a word. “Shut your mouths, you third-rate assassins.”

Nemumu had seemingly fully recovered from her humiliating episode and was glaring at the Morte Spada with her bloodshot eyes as wide as saucers, her hands firmly gripping both of her daggers, and dark energy radiating from her core as if it were lava.

“Not only do you *dare* to offer up your trash-level skills to Lord Light, but you’re even willing to go as far as professing loyalty that we all know is a *lie*?” Nemumu growled, raising her knives. “And you did this *after* so insolently interrupting our lord while he was still speaking. Since you walking garbage piles don’t even seem to realize the lines you’re crossing, allow me to personally carve the lesson into your bodies, minds, and souls using these!”

“Nemumu,” I jumped in. “I’m glad that you’re angry for my sake, but we’re not going to kill them. I’m still planning to use them for something.”

“F-Forgive me, Lord Light,” Nemumu pleaded, suddenly regaining her composure and returning her daggers to their sheaths. “I couldn’t control my emotions.”

After experiencing the pressure exerted by Nemumu’s Level 5000 rage, the Morte Spada looked like their spirits were on the verge of leaving their bodies. Even Ellie and Gold had been pissed off enough by their actions to start reacting in a similar way before I’d ultimately told Nemumu to stand down.

“Ellie, their leader’s a Master residing in the Demonkin Nation, just like Miki was, right?” I queried.

“Yes, I believe there is no mistaking that,” Ellie replied. “From what I could make out from their memories, their leader possesses capabilities that are practically unthinkable up on the surface world.” According to Ellie, their boss had a power level of around 7000, meaning he had to be a Master.

“We still owe those Masters for what they did to the Great Tower,” I noted. “I say we use these assassins to pay them back in kind.”

“How do we do that?” Ellie asked, sounding curious.

“Well, first of all, we need to wipe these guys’ memories of everything they’ve seen of us and the Abyss,” I said. “Then we’ll dump ’em alive someplace that’ll grab a lot of eyes. We can even put up signs identifying them as assassins for the Bourreaux and listing all of the crimes they’ve committed and all the victims

they've killed. Of course, we'll do this *after* we've permanently weakened and incapacitated them so that they won't be able to get away. That way, we'll be able to punish the Morte Spada for everything they've done up to now."

I turned to Ellie. "I'm also thinking of using this stunt as part of our harassment campaign against Diablo. Is it possible to pull it off while keeping the assassins alive? If not, we can always just kill them and put their bodies on display."

Losing face was the thing that any organization hated the most, and for a group like the Bourreaux which leaned heavily on its reputation as the world's deadliest society of assassins, it would feel like a death sentence. So sending their top assassins back to the Demonkin Nation alive and gift-wrapped would not only send out the message that they had monumentally failed to kill Dark, but the very act itself would torment the Bourreaux to no end. Viewed like that, killing the Morte Spada would have been doing the Bourreaux a favor.

"We can easily erase their memories using your cards, Blessed Lord," Ellie said. "But from what I found in their memories, they've ended countless innocent lives of all races. I don't believe our prisoners deserve such mercy, Your Blessedness." Her brow furrowed. "Instead of just erasing their memories, I believe we should completely destroy their brains. I can make the process as painful and excruciating as possible, but I promise it won't be fatal. At least, not immediately. Not only would we be completely enfeebling them, but they won't have the capacity to remember anything, much less how to even speak their own names. Then we'll expose them in public along with a list of their crimes, and from there, we'll let the authorities or the Bourreaux themselves execute them if they so choose."

Everyone in the Morte Spada recoiled with alarm on hearing this plan, and they all started pleading for mercy even louder than before. I winced and looked across at Ellie, who got the message and activated a Silent spell to block out their voices.

"Thanks, Ellie," I said. "Okay, in that case, we'll do it your way. Once you're finished with it, be sure to write all the crimes they've committed on huge signs for everybody to see, and when you're ready to dump them all in a public place, please let me know so that I can fill you in on how we're going to harass Diablo next."

"As you wish, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, bowing to me with

a bright smile on her face. “Allow me to take these cretins off your hand.”

Satisfied with this response, I turned to the Morte Spada, who were all still begging for clemency inside the Silent bubble. “So tell me, how many of your victims pleaded for their lives, just like you’re doing right now?” I asked them. “And how did you guys respond, *especially* to those who were completely innocent? I think you and I both know the answer, so take what’s coming to you.”

I couldn’t hear their responses to this because of the Silent spell, but they had apparently heard me just fine, since they all started to struggle and yell even more. I ignored them and departed from the training grounds.

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A few days later, the five detainees appeared from nowhere in the middle of a plaza in the Demonkin Nation’s royal capital. Due to irreversible brain damage, none of the assassins could communicate verbally, and the only sounds they could make were soft moans and gurgling. The incapacitated demons were surrounded by ostentatious signs that both identified them as the Morte Spada, the top five assassins of the Bourreaux, as well as meticulously listed the numerous crimes they had committed. It didn’t take long for their boss, Gira, to hear about the fiasco.

Chapter 9: A Lie

The mansion serving as the Bourreaux's headquarters stood in the middle of the slums in the Demonkin Nation's capital, and inside it, the Lounge served as the main gathering place for its assassins. At this moment, however, the air was laced with a suffocating chill.

The ice-cold waves were emanating from a short man who was sitting on a couch and stewing. This was the founder of the Bourreaux and a Master, Gira, and at last, he opened his mouth to speak. "The Morte Spada. Recovered yet?"

"N-No, boss," an underling replied. "We've hired the top mages and healers in the nation, but everyone's saying it's impossible to cure them."

The members of the Morte Spada had been found dumped in the middle of a plaza in the city that same morning. Although they were all still alive, they had been too mentally incapacitated to string a coherent sentence together, and worst of all, someone had placed signs around them listing all of the people they had killed, which included nobles, merchants, and innocents who had been caught up in horrific massacres. The signs had also exposed the people who had put out the hits and their reasons behind it. All of this information had been written in large letters that could be read by anyone just passing by.

Of course, the signs were hardly proof of anything, but the court of public opinion had still convicted these named clients, despite desperate denials to the contrary. This was especially true for those who couldn't explain away how their past rivals had conveniently died of unnatural causes. Thanks to these revelations, the Bourreaux had suffered a near-irrecoverable loss of reputation, and it was clear that no one would want to trust their organization to carry out an assassination if the job couldn't be completed confidentially.

For Gira, the Bourreaux group was no more than a hobby to make him a quick buck, and his lack of attachment was so all-encompassing that he was perfectly willing to destroy the organization and everybody in it if doing such a thing served his mood at that particular moment. However, Gira's pride was not

so disposable, and if someone saw fit to throw mud on his face, he wouldn't remain quiet about it. It was his injured pride that had turned the Lounge colder than an ice house.

"No point. Asking Morte Spada," Gira said. "But I can tell. *He* did it. Dark."

Before anyone else in the room could react, everything around Gira started to be slashed apart as if someone were waving around invisible knives, gouging chunks out of the walls, the ceiling, and the furniture. This continued for a good few seconds, as if Gira was releasing all of the pent-up rage he had built up. The assassins standing around him couldn't tell how he was cutting everything up, despite each of them being highly proficient combat experts who had earned their place in the Lounge. All they could do was stand completely motionless and hope they wouldn't end up getting filleted too.

The mass severings eventually settled down, and still sitting on the sofa, Gira made a declaration.

"I'll kill him. Dark," Gira mumbled. "Disgraced us. Must kill all. Dark friends. Associates. Neighbors. Pets. Farm animals. I'll chop apart. All of them. Embarrassed us. He did. The Bourreaux. Mobilize to kill Dark. All of you."

"Y-Yessir!" all the assassins responded, wasting no time in scrambling out of the Lounge. After watching them all leave, Gira rose from his sofa, and made sure to dice up this piece of furniture too, purely out of spite. Nobody still in the room could work out how he had been able to accomplish the feat without even touching the sofa.

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"What is *wrong* with you people?!" Diablo screeched, spittle flying everywhere. "Was that scene in the plaza the best the 'world's deadliest league of assassins' could manage?!"

The door to the back room at the run-down tavern in the slums had been flung open and in strode Diablo, already ranting and raving. The instant he saw his disgruntled client, Goblin Face grimaced, but that didn't stop Diablo from hectoring the fixer.

"This isn't what you promised me!" he roared. "How could *all* of your top assassins have been defeated like that in one fell swoop? And why were they claiming I'd ordered a hit on Prince Voros? My target was Dark!"

“Relax, boss man. Take a breath,” Goblin Face said, trying to calm the situation.

“I can’t *afford* to relax!” Diablo yelled. “I paid you an absolute fortune to take care of one little problem, and now I find myself in an even bigger mess! I will *not* allow you to make light of it!”

Diablo had every reason to be violently upset. Not only had the Bourreaux failed to assassinate Dark, the signs placed around their incapacitated bodies made an incriminating claim about him paying the Bourreaux to carry out a hit job on Voros. The worst part was that the assertion was partly true, since he *had* hired the Bourreaux to carry out an assassination, just on someone else. It went without saying that Voros would know what kind of organization the Bourreaux was, and this latest revelation came hot on the heels of Diablo’s suspected entanglement with the Wicked Witch coming to light.

Diablo had just received word that he had been summoned to the castle again, and he was in the process of steeling himself for what was sure to be a harrowing experience. The previous time he found himself in front of Voros, he had been subjected to verbal evisceration, and ordered to surrender to house arrest. There was no telling what awaited him this time around, and just thinking about what might lie ahead consumed him with abject misery. Consequently, Diablo channeled all of his grim fears and frustrations entirely onto the hapless fixer from the Bourreaux.

“Okay, sir. You’re right. That’s on us,” Goblin Face said, trying to placate Diablo. “But ya can rest easy, I promise. That stupid stunt Dark pulled in the plaza really got the boss’s goat, so he’s decided he’s gonna ice the kid himself. I cannot stress enough that this is the boss we’re talking about here, so that punk and all of his little friends are as good as dead. So there’s no need to blow your stack, ’cause it’s all already taken care of.”

Diablo hesitated. “Are you absolutely *sure* your boss will get rid of Dark?”

“I swear it on my great-granddaughter’s tombstone. The boy’s a goner,” Goblin Face assured him. “Our boss is so powerful, he could even shiv the dark lord if he wanted to. A small-time mutt like Dark doesn’t stand a chance against our leader. Poor kid. He sure woke up a sleeping dragon this time.”

Goblin Face further smoothed things over by promising that the Bourreaux wouldn’t charge extra for Gira’s deployment, and he spoke with his hands together in a pleading way. Goblin

Face's newfound obsequiousness eventually won over Diablo, who also regained his composure after realizing just how emotional he had been acting. However, he couldn't leave without making doubly sure that things would go more smoothly this time.

"Tell me again: are you certain your boss will kill Dark?" he asked.

"You can count on it," Goblin Face assured him.

Perhaps I can still save myself, after all, thought Diablo. *In which case, all I have to do is navigate this meeting with the prince very wisely.* In order to clear his name, he had the option of getting someone from the Bourreaux to explain to Voros that Diablo hadn't actually put out the hit on *him*, but in reality, the demon prince was highly unlikely to let an assassin come anywhere near him for obvious reasons, so that idea was a total nonstarter.

Plus, I'd still have to explain exactly why *I wanted to assassinate Dark,* Diablo mused. *But if I can come up with a good alibi, I may be able to salvage an acceptable way out of this crisis.* Diablo knew he was grasping at his last straw and had no choice but to trust Goblin Face and the Bourreaux. He left the tavern, still running mental simulations on the kind of damage control he would need to perform in his upcoming visit with Voros.

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I was in my executive office in the Abyss, reading the latest update on Diablo. "Seems like he's feeling the heat, exactly as planned."

"Indeed, Master Light," said Mei, who was standing in front of my desk like usual. "According to our most recent reports, Prince Voros of the Demonkin Nation has become aware of the fabricated revelation that Diablo hired the Bourreaux to assassinate him, and he is now completely enraged."

Anyone with half a brain could have guessed that it was Diablo who had been behind the Bourreaux's repeated assassination attempts on me. Or rather, on my alter ego, Dark. Unfortunately for them, my party had easily caught all five of their top assassins, and I'd used them as pawns in my revenge on Diablo. However, it turned out that the assassins we caught had committed all kinds of mass slaughter of innocents, so instead of just wiping their memories like I'd initially planned, I

had Ellie scramble their brains entirely, turning them into vegetables. We had dumped them somewhere in the Demon Nation's capital and surrounded them with a load of signs detailing all of the assassinations they had carried out, as well as their other crimes. However, we had made sure to insert exactly one lie onto these signboards: that Diablo was making attempts to assassinate Prince Voros. The best part of all was that everybody would naturally think that Diablo was indeed plotting to kill the acting monarch since everything else written on the signs was verifiably true.

"I'll bet Diablo's banging his head against the wall right now trying to come up with some way to explain away that false accusation to the prince," I said with a smirk.

"I believe that is certain, Master Light," agreed Mei.

But as fun as it was imagining Diablo taking another giant leap toward ruination, I couldn't bask in the glory of this one victory forever. After what I'd done to humiliate the Morte Spada, it was all but guaranteed the rest of the Bourreaux would now be out to get me.

"I'm actually glad 'Dark' is still on their hit list," I said. "After all, I still need to draw out and capture that Master leader of theirs and pump him for info."

"In the interests of caution, I suggest we dispatch people who will safeguard friends and others who know you by the alias 'Dark,'" Mei said. "Our agents will maintain surveillance from a distance until we can resolve the issue at hand."

"Yeah, I'll let you take care of that," I replied. If anyone was able to protect my friends up on the surface world, it would be my allies in the Abyss who were good at covert operations. But at this particular moment in time, what we needed to do was lure the boss of the Bourreaux out in the open. Unfortunately, we still hadn't come up with a decent plan to make that happen.

"But first thing's first," I said. "We need to get the dirt on Gira if we're ever going to capture him." From her memory probes on the Morte Spada, Ellie was able to find out Gira's approximate power level, as well as how he looked and his personality. But strangely enough, those same brain scans had turned up nothing about Gira's actual abilities, his approach in combat, or even if he'd ever seen combat at all.

"Apparently, Ellie was unable to retrieve any other relevant information from that clown show—forgive me, from the Morte

Spada," Mei informed me. Evidently, even my head maid didn't think much of the self-titled "world's top assassins."

Nemumu actually yelled at the Morte Spada about how shockingly pathetic they were, I thought. *So it's no wonder that Mei thinks they're a bunch of clowns too.*

And in truth, I couldn't have agreed more with that sentiment. But there were still too many things we didn't know about Gira for my liking, since the Morte Spada had even failed at being good sources of intel. I sighed and rubbed my temple with my fingers.

"It kills me to say it, but I guess we're gonna need *her* help again," I said. "I feel really bad for Suzu, though."

Mei didn't say a word in response, but she definitely felt the same way because her face twitched, though the movement was so slight, it was barely perceptible. The only reason I happened to notice it was because we'd been in each other's company for so long. I was actually impressed that anyone could make Mei react reflexively like that.

"Sorry to do this to you, Mei, but could you send for Suzu for me?" I said. "Also, have them bring our 'guest of honor' to the training grounds in the usual restraints. Once everything's ready, let me know."

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei replied, bowing in her usual picture-perfect way.

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As you might have guessed, I had decided to do another quid pro quo exchange with Miki in order to get more info on Gira. Miki was a Master who had once belonged to the same Demonkin Nation faction as Gira, before defecting to our side after falling madly in love with Suzu. We usually kept her locked up in a cell, but we occasionally brought her out for questioning when it was absolutely necessary. As with the previous times, when we arrived, she was shackled to a chair in the middle of a training arena by Ellie's Dorn Fesseln vines, and around her neck was an SSSR Curse Collar. Not only did this Curse Collar sap Miki of her elevated powers, the Dorn Fesseln was in place to make doubly sure she couldn't escape. Even so, we conducted all of our interrogations in a training arena, just to be on the safe side. Since the training grounds were in a wide-open part of the Abyss

that was still rocky and undeveloped, if by some million-to-one chance Miki *did* break free of her restraints, we would be able to engage her without causing too much damage to the rest of my underground stronghold.

"You wanna know *more* about Gira, the big boss of the Bourreaux, you say?" Miki asked coquettishly. "In that case, Miki had better *get* what she wants."

Miki was a stunningly beautiful teenage girl whose long blonde hair still had a silky sheen to it, despite her being cooped up in a cell all day every day. Even her skin was smooth and pristine, with the only visible blemish being the dark mark of a bee on her right cheek, looking like a tattoo a gang member would have. If there was one thing that had changed about her, it was how she seemed to have more meat on her bones now, probably due to a lack of exercise. It just went to show how incredibly skinny she had been back when we first encountered her. Almost too skinny, in my opinion. But now that she was filling out her clothes, it was a safe bet that all of the men up on the surface world would have called her one of the hottest girls they had ever seen if you'd asked them. Heck, most of them would be falling over themselves to put a ring on it.

But this attractive teenage girl was now smiling and leering like a greasy, middle-aged womanizer waving around a bag of coins at the next girl he had decided to purchase. Those lascivious eyes were firmly on Suzu, who was standing right behind me.

"Yeah, yeah, I know the drill," I said, sighing with pity for Suzu. "We give you what you want in exchange for the information we want. But I hope you won't forget our rule: we won't agree to anything Suzu clearly doesn't want to do."

"Yup, I remember *that* part," Miki said, her eyes glued on Suzu. "But seeing her up close and *personal* like this is an absolute *feast* for Miki's eyes."

The only way to accurately describe Miki's extra-steamy gaze was that she was practically violating Suzu with her eyes alone, and if I had to guess how she felt about it, I'd say the gunner's skin was probably crawling worse than if she'd had actual live slugs slithering all over her body. Suzu hugged her musket, Lock, tightly to her chest and crouched down behind my back in abject terror.



Does Miki really understand what our deal is? I wondered. But since I didn't really have time to be getting uneasy about the whole setup, I went ahead and asked the most pertinent question that would get the ball rolling.

"All right, so what is it you want in exchange this time?" I said.

"Oh, *this* time, I want..." Miki deliberately let a pregnant pause hang briefly in the air above us before another depraved grin flashed across her face. "I wanna lick my sweet Suzu *all over* her gorgeous body to my heart's content!"

Even though she was behind me, I could tell Suzu was furiously shaking her head at this while trying hard not to retch. "No way," I said flatly.

Miki wasted no time in voicing her next wild fantasy. "Well, in that case, Miki wants the bathwater my *sweet* Suzu has soaked in for hours!"

My curiosity got the better of me on this one. "Why would you want *bathwater* of all things?"

"Why *wouldn't* I want my sweet Suzu's bathwater?" Miki shot back breathlessly. "There's *so* much stuff I could do with her bathwater, I wouldn't know where to begin! Like, I could drink it straight, mix it with booze, or even pour it all over my food! Or better yet, Miki could fill a bath with the bathwater and plunge into it to become one with her *sweet*, sweet Suzu! I'd feel her warmth, and *my* water would mingle with *her* water! In fact, I could even get her water to go inside me—"

"Enough!" I barked. "I'm sorry I asked."

I had to stop Miki's little fantasy before she said something that went totally beyond the bounds of what could be considered offensive. In addition to Suzu, Mei and Ellie were present in the training grounds to help me interrogate Miki. All of us had high resistance stats against psychological attacks, but Miki's words still had the power to test the limits of our sanity. But of course, that was only if I let her make us nauseous, which I wasn't going to. I turned to Suzu to see how she felt about it, and as expected, she shook her head "no" as tears welled up in her eyes. I didn't blame her for her reaction. I wouldn't have the nerve to give someone my used bathwater either, especially now I knew it'd be used for something unthinkably nasty.

"That's not happening either," I said. "I keep telling you that you have to come up with something more realistic that won't repulse Suzu."

“Oh, come on! I was being *totally* realistic!” Miki wailed. “Okay, fine. In that case, my sweet, darling Suzu should cook Miki a homemade meal. And she should wear a frilly apron like a newlywed. And the meal should be made with *extra* love, just for Miki.”

“Leaving the ‘extra’ love part aside, you just want a meal?” I said incredulously. It seemed like a weirdly normal demand compared to the freaky requests that had been tumbling from Miki’s mouth moments before, and I was sure Suzu would have no problem accepting this compromise. I turned to see how Suzu had reacted to this suggestion, but was met with total silence. She seemed very unwilling to cook any food for Miki.

“Suzu?” I queried. Her reluctance seemed strange to me, since I would have thought that whipping up some food would have been no big deal. I knew Suzu occasionally made her own meals, so it definitely wasn’t because she didn’t know how to cook and was worried she might embarrass herself.

Because Suzu was still awkwardly hesitating over the suggestion, her intelligent weapon, Lock, spoke up instead. “Um, might I have a word, Lord Light?”

“Lock?” I said. “Sure, go ahead.” Suzu started freaking out, as if she were afraid Lock was going to spill some huge secret, but since I had already given Lock permission to speak, Suzu couldn’t do anything to stop her rifle from talking, so she simply stood there, panicking.

“Thank you, Lord Light,” Lock said. “You see, the thing is my partner here has been practicing cooking for a while now, but all of that hard work has been to prepare herself for when the opportunity might arise to serve a home-cooked meal for you to eat. In fact, her dream is for you to be the first to taste her home-cooked food, Lord Light.”

“Oh, now I get it,” I said. “No wonder you’re so reluctant to agree to that suggestion, Suzu.”

The confession caused Suzu to blush so deeply, she felt the need to look down and cover her face with one arm. If she hadn’t been holding Lock, she would no doubt have covered her face with both hands. Mei and Ellie both had feel-good smiles on their faces at Suzu’s girlish predicament, and Miki looked like she was about to explode from what she would have termed the “peak cuteness” of seeing Suzu blushing so much.

Is there anything Suzu does that Miki doesn’t *like?* I thought,

weirdly impressed.

What really astonished me, however, was finding out that Suzu had gone to all the trouble of cooking in the dungeon's main kitchen just so she could cook me a meal someday. Not only was I deeply touched by it, I now had no choice but to refuse the request. I didn't want to trample all over Suzu's hard work and dedication just for Miki's gratification.

"Then, how about you use this opportunity to make food for Light, my sweet Suzu?" Miki interjected. "Just seeing you cook a homemade meal like a newlywed will be more than enough to satisfy Miki. And once Light is all done eating, he can share whatever's left with me."

"What? You'd be willing to accept that?" I asked.

"Yup, sure thing!" Miki replied. "Just knowing that I'm eating something my darling Suzu has cooked for you with all her love would be sublimely sweet, even if it's just your leftovers."

"Look, partner," Lock said to his wielder. "I think this is about as good a concession as you're likely to get. And besides, Lord Light will be eating your food first, so this is your big chance."

After Lock's extremely rare endorsement of one of Miki's suggestions, Suzu nodded gently, meaning we had a deal. I was glad I would get the intel I wanted on Gira, but I was even more thrilled to be the first to taste the results of Suzu's cooking practice. In fact, I was starting to think I should set aside some time so that more people could give me food or other things they had worked hard on just for me.

I must remember to talk to Mei about that, I thought to myself as the preparations were made to have Suzu cook a meal on the spot.

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It took a little bit of time, but we eventually managed to throw together a makeshift kitchen in the middle of the training arena. We'd had the option of letting Suzu make the meal in the real kitchens that already existed in the Abyss, but Miki had specifically said that she wanted to watch Suzu cook the meal wearing a frilly, newlywed bride apron, and I didn't really like the idea of relocating her to the cramped cafeteria kitchen. After all, if she got loose in there, she could wreak havoc and cause extensive damage, though I figured the chances of that actually

happening were slim to none. But instead of doing that, we manifested new kitchen equipment in the middle of the training grounds using my Unlimited Gacha cards, and asked Suzu to cook on location, as it were.

She's really focused on doing it, I thought. *I guess that's because I'm going to be eating it.*

Although Suzu was wearing a cute, frilly apron like Miki wanted, her facial expression made her look as serious as a soldier in the middle of combat. The vibes she was radiating were so tense, I was starting to doubt if this was really what it was like to live with a newlywed wife. But Miki seemed to have no issues with the obvious tension in the air, and even though she was still restrained in her chair, she looked like she was on cloud nine.

"My sweet Suzu is making a homemade meal just for *me*!" Miki squealed between lustful sighs.

Miki does *know Suzu isn't actually making that food for her, right?* I thought. *We agreed she's only going to be eating the leftovers of whatever Suzu cooks for me.* But Miki seemed happy enough with everything that was going on, so I decided not to spoil her fun by correcting her.

Before I forget to mention it, the meal Suzu was making was a stewed Hamburg steak with salad, bread, and corn soup on the side, then fruit for dessert. Suzu had chosen these dishes because she already had all of these foodstuffs in her Item Box, and because they were the things she felt most confident making. It also looked like she was making quite large portions as a thank-you to Miki for meeting her halfway. Or at least, Suzu was making a lot of her "special stew-like sauce" that could be poured onto future Hamburg steaks. The same went for the bread and the corn soup. Since Suzu had the most practice in making these things, she was able to go about cooking the meal with expert precision.

Miki chuckled deeply like a lecherous creep. "So this is what it's like to be newly wedded to my sweet Suzu, huh?"

Nobody spends their newlywed life tied to a chair, do they? I thought, and it took quite a bit of effort not to say it out loud.

Shortly after, Suzu finished cooking and started placing the meal on the table where I was sitting. The stew-like sauce she poured onto the Hamburg steak was still piping hot, and the corn soup equally gave off inviting steam. The bread had been

made from scratch, as had the dressing on the salad. Suzu really had put every effort into this.

"All right, time to dig in," I said, causing Suzu to nod twice. I plunged my fork and knife into the Hamburg steak, and when I sliced into the meat, I found the insides were filled with softly melted white cheese. I cut off a big piece and ate it. Suzu's sauce had a rich flavor to it with a hint of sweetness that paired very well with the steak, and the cheese gave the bite a pleasantly creamy texture.

"I like how the meat and the cheese taste together, but I'm really loving this stewed sauce the best, Suzu."

Despite looking on anxiously as she watched me eat, Suzu suddenly brightened like a bouquet of flowers on hearing my review of the meal. But I wasn't just flattering her. I really thought the sauce Suzu had tipped over the steak tasted awesome. I even tore off chunks of the bread and dipped it into the stew-like sauce because it was just that delicious, and I frankly didn't care how bad my table manners were.

The corn soup was just as sweet as the yellow corn kernels in it, and those kernels made the soup chunky, just the way I liked it. The salad dressing was tasty too, completely canceling out any bitterness from the vegetables. Suzu had chosen exactly which fruit I would like for my dessert, and it was nice of her to take the extra step of cutting them up into bite-size pieces. When I was all done eating, I gave my thanks for the scrumptious meal.

"Suzu, everything tasted incredible," I said. "By all means, you should cook something like that for me again, if you ever get the chance."

Suzu hesitated, then spoke in a voice that was so soft, only I could hear it. "Thank you very much, Lord Light." I could tell her smile came right from her heart. "I'm so glad I could cook for you."

Seeing her beam so radiantly made me happy for her too. Unfortunately, the moment was interrupted by another loud, steamy sigh from Miki.

"I can't *believe* I get to see such a pure, adorable smile from my sweet Suzu," she sighed happily. "Miki's tummy is all full just from *that* meal."

Should she really be saying that before even eating a bite of Suzu's cooking? I thought. Though as it turned out, Miki wasn't just saying things, for she did indeed feel fully sated after seeing

me and Suzu smiling so broadly at each other. We got a fairy maid to place the leftovers in her Item Box so that she could give Miki her share at a date of her choosing, and since time didn't exist inside Item Boxes, the food would remain fresh as it was in that moment. And because Suzu had made a lot of extra food, Miki would be able to enjoy her meal for quite a long time if she wanted to. Miki told us she would rather enjoy the food in the privacy of her own cell instead of eating it under our watch anyway.

She'll hopefully actually eat *the food like a normal person,* I thought, recalling all of the stuff Miki had said she planned to do with Suzu's bathwater if she ever got her hands on some. I wasn't going to pry about her plans out of fear that I might hear something totally gross and kinky that would surely haunt me for the rest of my days. Not touching on the subject was definitely the wisest choice here.

After the fairy maid had placed the leftovers in her Item Box, a more serious expression suddenly appeared on Miki's face. "Now that I have what *I* want, I'll tell *you* all I know about Gira."

"Yes, by all means, go ahead," I said.

Her serious face disappeared again and she broke out into a giggle. "*However*, I'm so thrilled to be getting a homemade meal made with *extra* love from my dear sweet Suzu that I'm even willing to share info on the other two Masters in my old faction."

Just so we were clear on this, Suzu had made that meal for me, not Miki, and she was just getting the leftovers. Therefore, if any love had been put into that home-cooked meal, it was certainly not for Miki.

Still, she seems happy enough, so I won't rain on her parade, I thought. It'd be a stupid thing to do anyway, especially when I had the chance to get intel on all of the other Masters in the Demonkin Nation clique. Everyone else in the arena took their cues from me and didn't say anything to contradict Miki, so we all waited patiently for her to speak, but as she was restrained by the Dorn Fesseln and her energy-sapping Curse Collar, she simply stuck her tongue out playfully.

"But just to warn you, I don't really *know* much about those guys, so Miki won't be of much help," she said. "I hope you won't be *too* mad?"

"Huh? But I thought you said they were your comrades," I replied.

“I guess we *were*, in a way, but that doesn’t mean we did much bonding,” Miki said. “Like I said before, there are two factions of Masters: one worships C, while the other sees C as the enemy. I was on the side of the worshippers, but the only thing that really connected us was that we each had a wish and we hoped that C would eventually grant it.”

Miki took a moment to think. “So I *wouldn’t* have called us comrades as such, but rather, a loose collective who barely shared the same interests. We didn’t *trust* each other enough to reveal the *full* extent of our abilities to one another. I’d say the people you have *here* associate with each other *way* more closely than how we did in my faction. Maybe even a little *too* closely, if we’re being honest.”

Miki looked from Mei to Ellie to Suzu when making her last point. But she was right in that a group of people weren’t likely to completely trust each other, even when they shared a common purpose. There would be even less room for mutual trust the more powerful an organization became. I often forgot this detail, but all of my allies were summoned from my Unlimited Gacha cards, and almost all of them had sworn undying fealty to me, their summoner. However, that wasn’t really typical in other organizations, and for someone like Miki, who once belonged to a group whose only common thread related to their own self-interests, seeing a large group of people trusting each other completely would seem pretty odd. I nodded in agreement, which prompted Miki to continue.

“Okay, I’ll start with Gira, the guy you wanted to know about originally,” Miki said. “He’s as short and slender as a woman, but he’s very powerful, so you need to watch out for him. The dude loves cutting up *everything* with his own two hands, whether it’s living or not. He’s like what you’d get if a knife-wielding maniac was ever given superpowers. He’s with my old faction because his wish is to try to cut up C using his powers.”

“And you’re *okay* with him wishing that?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m cool with it,” Miki said nonchalantly. “Like I say, my faction was formed because each of us had our own goals and those goals were something to do with C. It was nothing more than that. And besides, I don’t think Gira would ever have been able to cut up C in a million years.”

On a side note, Miki’s wish had been for C to make the ideal harem for her, but she had abandoned that wish and defected

over to our side on meeting Suzu and falling in love with her at first sight. With her now being so near to Suzu, Miki felt like she was in paradise, though I had a feeling Suzu would have described the situation more as a nightmare. But I digress.

"That's why Gira formed his own society of assassins. So he could indulge in his fetish and get something useful out of it," Miki continued. "Me personally, I don't see the point of running around with a group of low-level killers. Maybe he just wanted to be the 'big boss' or something? He never really gave off *that* vibe to me, though. But anyway, he's the only one of us who has a whole organization behind him. True, that organization is filled with nothing but low-level fodder, but going up against an entire organization is nothing like fighting an individual, so you'd better take care."

"Thanks for the advice," I said diplomatically. Of course, Miki had no idea that we had already destroyed the Morte Spada, though she did have a point that even the best assassins that they had were so low when it came to competency, Nemumu had been left in total shock.

"But Gira's very strong in his own right," Miki said. "I'd say he's around Level 7000 or so. But I can't tell you how he fights at all. In fact, I don't think I've ever even seen him perform an attack with my own eyes."

"You mean you've never seen him in battle?" I asked.

"No, what I mean is I've never seen him move a muscle or do anything to *execute* an attack," Miki said. "I've seen him in battle plenty of times, since he used to come with me and that leveling freak, Daigo, whenever we decided to crawl through some dungeons. He used to tag along because he got a kick out of cutting things up. But from the outside, his targets always seemed to just fall to pieces by themselves."

Miki cocked her head to one side questioningly. "I don't know if he uses a weapon or magic to do it either. But since he looks like an assassin, maybe it's some kind of secret weapon he's using?"

If Miki was lying to us, she sure wasn't acting like it. I turned to Mei to see if she had detected any falsehoods using her abilities, but she nodded once to confirm that the blonde girl was indeed telling the truth and she really didn't know the mechanics behind Gira's preferred method of combat.

"Next, I'll tell you about Doc," Miki said. "He's super tall and

always wears a white lab coat. He's also constantly doing live experiments on humans."

"Human experimentation?" I echoed with disgust.

"His wish to C is to lead the human race to a whole new future," Miki said. "As you know, humans are the weakest race in this world, and he wants humans to get stronger so they won't be at the mercy of all the other races. But since we haven't found C yet, he's decided to take things into his own hands..."

Her face crinkled in a rare display of revulsion. "He performs experiments on humans in an attempt to create superhumans. He describes what he does in ways that make it all sound lofty and cerebral, but I promise you, he's a total psychopath. He's not even a real doctor. He carves up and dissects his victims like a butcher."

I could tell that Miki didn't care for this "Doc" person one bit.

"Doc has a lab near the Demon Nation's capital, but you'd better not go near there, since it's filled with all sorts of gross crap," Miki warned. "As for his combat abilities, he's just like me in the sense that they're modest at best. I'd say he's around Level 5000, but he's also a buff and debuff specialist, so you shouldn't underestimate him. You never know what he's got up his sleeve."

Miki skipped Daigo "since he's long gone," and went straight to the leader of her faction.

"So the thing about our leader is that he's someone who basically just keeps us together rather than ordering us around all the time," Miki explained. "His name is Goh, and he has these thick dreadlocks. If you ever run into him, your best bet is to just keep on walking instead of trying to fight that diesel train. And I'm saying that for your own good, not because I think you guys are weak or anything. Goh really is tough to beat."

"How tough are we talking?" I asked.

"Seriously tough," Miki said with a straight face. "And it's not because he wields any mythical-class weapons or items either. To put it another way, you know how you fought Daigo and his twin Elemental Blades, and he called them the 'most powerful mythical-class weapons in the world'? Goh is a master of close combat, but Daigo never fought him. Daigo didn't see Goh as his rival, just as a guy who could be way stronger than himself."

Miki adopted a more jokey, playful tone. "Take it from me, kid, you don't wanna go fighting a bruiser like him. Goh's the only one of us whose level is over 9000, so you'd better be careful—"

Miki didn't get the chance to finish, because the murderous aura I suddenly unleashed washed over her and stopped her from speaking.

"Level 9000?" I repeated softly.

I knew my dark energy was scaring Miki out of her wits, but I couldn't have controlled myself even if I'd wanted to. When Ellie had performed a memory probe on my sister, Yume, shortly after I had reunited with her, we found out that a human with a power level above 9000 was responsible for destroying my village and killing my parents.

"According to your dear sister's memories, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure that looked human floating in the air while your dear elder brother carried her to safety," Ellie had told me at the time.

That figure had hovered in the sky and rained down hell on my village, razing it to the ground, and judging from the hazy silhouette Yume remembered seeing, the assailant had no anatomical features that were unique to any of the other races. The power level was an estimate based on the trace mana that had been observed in Yume's memory. Ever since, I'd been hunting for the Level 9000 human who had destroyed my village and murdered my parents, but I hadn't even hit upon any leads before this point. The attacker could have been a Master, or it could have been someone like me, a human with a Gift that helped them to artificially max out their power level; I was unable to say for sure either way.

But I had just gotten a lead on who the killer might be, and my blood was instantly boiling at the thought of it. Mei, Ellie, and Suzu had picked up on what I was so mad about, and they too were enraged on my behalf. Miki was still in the dark about the whole context for our rage, causing her to panic.

"H-Hey, waitaminute! Why are you all suddenly so mad?" she asked. "Was it something I said? If so, I apologize. Just chill out, please! Miki doesn't wanna fight you all now. Especially not with her dear sweet Suzu here!"

"Miki, let me ask you something," I said darkly. "Do you know what this Master named Goh was doing three years ago? Was he out destroying human villages?"

"Three years ago?" Miki repeated. "I told you, we aren't that close to begin with. We basically do whatever we want in our own lives and don't go sticking our noses into each other's

business, unless we're called up to do something. I honestly wouldn't have a clue if Goh was going around wiping out human villages three years ago."

I looked at Miki's face in silence as I tried to get a read on her, and although she seemed deathly scared, she seemed to be speaking honestly enough. I turned to Mei again, and she confirmed my suspicions with a nod. As far as Mei's lie detection skills could tell, Miki was telling the truth.

"Okay, I want you to tell me more about this Goh," I said. "I'm curious about him being a master of close combat. Is close combat the only thing he's good at? Does that mean we assume that he's not capable of ranged attacks?"

The shadowy figure that had destroyed my village had done so from up in the sky, meaning the assailant had used ranged attacks. If Goh was as capable at ranged attacks as he was in close combat, he would become the most likely suspect. Miki hummed and took a few seconds to think about the question I'd posted before answering.

"Yeah, I think it's a pretty safe bet," Miki said. "I've seen him fight a whole bunch of times, but he's always relied on hand-to-hand combat. That's not to say he's *completely* incapable of ranged attacks, of course. I mean, with his power level, he can turn a boulder into a powerful, long-range missile just by throwing it. Plus, I wouldn't be surprised if he's got a trick or two up his sleeve that he's never revealed to us."

Miki did her best to strike a boastful pose despite her restraints. "Even Miki still has one super-awesome secret weapon she's never told anyone about. So you can safely assume that Goh is capable of anything. Not assuming that would be crazy stupid in my opinion."

In other words, we couldn't rule out Goh being secretly capable of long-range attacks, although nobody had ever seen him executing any attacks like that. This information didn't give us any decisive evidence to clear or convict him. I thought for a little bit, then came to a decision.

"Okay, new plan. When we capture Gira, we're also gonna capture Goh and pump him for info," I said.

"What?! Are you serious?" Miki squeaked. "I just *told* you that Goh's way too powerful. Why would you want to go looking for trouble?"

"Because there are a few things I really need to ask him," I

declared. “And the only way to do that is by detaining him.”

My dark aura flared up again, making Miki flinch and give up on trying to talk me out of it. My main priority, however, was to find Goh, who came as close as anything to fitting the profile of the Level 9000-plus human who had destroyed my village. I needed to ask him if he was the one who had committed such a senseless act, even if he really was so dangerous that Miki of all people was worried about my safety.

As for Miki herself, I had her sent back to her cell, since we were all done talking. Once we had made sure that Miki was securely locked away again, I called my allies for an impromptu strategy meeting on how to go about capturing Goh, whom I suspected of razing my village and slaughtering almost everybody in it, including my parents. My vendetta against my sworn enemies in the Concord of the Tribes was still my overarching objective, of course, but whoever wiped out my village had to pay.

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A small crowd had assembled in my executive office, and from my seated position, I cast an eye over my troops, who all had grim looks on their faces. They understood the importance of the upcoming operation and the atmosphere was tense and electric. I went ahead and gave my allies a rundown of the situation to make sure everybody was up to speed.

“At first, I’d planned to capture the founder of the league of assassins that tried to kill me, Gira, who also happens to be a Master,” I began. “But after interrogating Miki, we’ve found out that Gira’s faction in the Demonkin Nation boasts another Master who is over Level 9000. As you all know, a human with that same power level was responsible for destroying my old village and killing my parents.”

The minds of everyone in the room turned to the day they had found my village in ruins with corpses strewn all over, and they silently fumed at the memory, their anger ratcheting up the tension even more in the enclosed space. Even I could feel myself unleashing murderous vibes along with the rest of them.

“I thought I was only going to capture Gira, but there’s been a change of plan,” I said. “Now, we’re also going to locate and capture the other two Masters in the Demonkin Nation: Goh and

Doc. We need to question them to determine whether Goh really is the one who committed that massacre. If he is, he will answer for his crimes, but the only way we can make sure he does is to mobilize against him."

We were going to catch and detain the three remaining Demonkin Nation Masters, but the slight snag in the plan was we had no clue where to find two of them.

"Miki says Goh and Gira are always heading off to parts unknown to do whatever it is they go off to do, and as a result, they're not in constant contact with the other Masters," I reported. "However, we *do* have a good idea where we will find Doc."

Whenever it was necessary to contact all the Masters, the message was relayed through Doc's laboratory, so in order to capture the other Masters, we first needed to grab Doc.

"As such, I'm assigning Mei, Nazuna, Jack, and Suzu the task of going to Doc's lab and capturing him," I announced.

"On my honor as a maid, I will apprehend the one named Doc without fail," Mei stated.

"I'll do my darndest for ya, master," Nazuna piped up.

"Got your back, bro," Jack added. "The mission's good as done when I'm on the case."

Suzu excitedly nodded twice, showing just as much enthusiasm as the others.

"If it were up to me, I'd join the four of you in capturing Doc," I said. "But Gira's on the move to catch and kill my alter ego Dark for leaving him with egg on his face. Since I'm the bait, I'll need to go with my party to lure him out into the open."

Since I couldn't go capture Doc myself, I had elected to send some of my best people to do so in my place. Mei was a very capable leader, Nazuna was the toughest fighter in my arsenal, Jack was the best tank I had, and Suzu had superior scouting abilities and firepower to match. There was no better lineup for locating Doc, overwhelming him in battle, and clapping him in chains.

"Mei, you'll be in command of the operation," I instructed. "The objective is to capture Doc, but if you feel like you or anyone else on the team are in danger, you're authorized to retreat. I do want answers from these Masters, don't get me wrong, but everyone's safety comes first."

"Master Light..." Mei looked overwhelmed with emotion. "We

do not deserve such kindness."

The last thing I wanted was for Mei or any of my friends to also lose their lives while trying to get to the bottom of how my entire village was wiped out. Having something like that happen because of that would kill me.

"Next, Ellie will join myself, Nemumu, and Gold in capturing Gira," I continued. "Aoyuki and Iceheat, you two will be on standby here in the Abyss in case we need any backup."

"I'll do everything I can to assist you, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie replied.

"I'll put my life on the line to capture Gira, my lord!" Nemumu vowed.

"Never fear," crowed a boisterous Gold. "You're in good hands with yours truly, old boy!"

"Mrrow," Aoyuki mewled.

"Understood, Master Light…" Iceheat said.

Since Gira was already apparently out for blood for what we had done to his Morte Spada, all we had to do was dangle bait in front of him and wait for him to take it. On encountering him, I would need Ellie to put up an antiteleportation barrier around the combat zone. But while the other two members of my party had excitedly expressed their resolve in capturing Gira, Aoyuki and Iceheat had been a little more muted in their responses. I could only assume Aoyuki and Iceheat would rather have been on the front lines instead, but it seemed they acknowledged that being available as backup was an important job too.

"Khaos, Orka, you two will also be on standby over at the Great Tower just in case we need you two," I said.

"I will comply," Khaos replied curtly.

"We shall do our level best to oversee the tower and the adjoining city in Miss Ellie's absence, my lord and master," Orka said with a reassuring smile. "So please consider yourself free to execute your operation without worrying at all about what is taking place back at the home, as it were."

I let my eyes once again sweep over everybody in the room. "Each and every one of you will need to prepare for your assignments. Let's make sure we capture all three of the Masters that are left in the Demonkin Nation."

This was met with a roar, spurring me to rise from my chair in order to go get ready for battle myself. As I walked out of my office, I felt the proud gazes of everyone on my back.

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Just as Light and his allies were readying themselves for their next mission, a figure in the Demonkin Nation's capital was steeling himself for a battle that would prove to be no less consequential. Complying with Voros's summons, Diablo walked the halls of the royal palace once more, his face haunted by all-consuming dread.

Chapter 10: Assassination Alibi

Diablo stalked silently through the palace until finally arriving at the royal office, where he had previously been on the receiving end of a severe tongue-lashing from Prince Voros for crimes he hadn't committed. He stood in front of the entrance, took a few shallow breaths to steel his nerves, then balled his trembling fingers into a fist and rapped on the double doors. Several seconds later, a demon maid opened the door a crack to see who had come to see her master. Diablo told her his name, then stood there at the door for a few more minutes while the maid informed Voros that he had arrived. When the maid returned, she ushered Diablo inside the office.

Sitting at his executive desk was Voros, the de facto ruler while his father, the king, was bedridden. As soon as Voros became aware of Diablo's presence in the room, he stopped doing the paperwork he had been attending to and broke out in the broadest "go to hell" smile he could muster for his guest.

"I am *so* glad you were able to make it to my humble abode, Diablo," Voros said mockingly. "I was so afraid that you'd already absconded from the kingdom, I was in the middle of organizing a manhunt. But now I can *thank* my lucky stars that all of that work has gone to waste!"

"A-As your loyal retainer, I would never dream of ignoring a summon from Your Highness, Prince Voros, and it is beyond imagination that I might flee this nation for any reason," Diablo said, choosing his words carefully as sweat flowed profusely from his brow. Last time he had come here, Voros had screamed in his face and called him a traitor to his homeland. This time, Voros was pretending to go for the buddy-buddy approach, and that was far more disconcerting. The prince ensured that each word was steeped in icy sarcasm, and behind his manufactured smile lay eyes that bored into Diablo like venom-tipped spears.

Voros didn't show one iota of sympathy for Diablo's clearly visible terror. The maid was dismissed with a wave of a hand, which left Diablo alone in the executive office with Voros. Or so he thought, at least, as the prince had guards positioned in blind spots around the office, ready to pounce if Diablo made the

wrong move.

Voros placed both of his elbows on the desk, rested his chin on interlaced fingers, and spoke in a hollowly congenial tone. “So Diablo, do you know why I have called you here?”

“Yes! Of course!” Diablo squeaked. “I’m here to clear up a misunderstanding, and—”

“Oh! There was a *misunderstanding*, was there?” Voros said flamboyantly, even throwing his hands up in the air in what could only be called a hammy fashion. “By all *means*, go ahead and tell me what I have misunderstood, my most *excellent* Viscount Diablo!” he continued. “Was it all a ‘misunderstanding’ that you went to the Bourreaux to mark me for death? Did my investigators ‘misunderstand’ you going to see one of their fixers in the slums? Did we all ‘misunderstand’ the fact that you subsequently raised taxes in your realm out of the blue in order to pay off the astronomical debt that contract killing had placed you in?”

The prince’s eyes narrowed murderously. “This explanation of yours had better be *extremely* persuasive, if you know what’s good for you.”

“You are correct, Prince Voros. I did indeed make contact with a fixer connected to the Bourreaux,” Diablo said, before quickly adding, “But I swear it wasn’t to mark you for death! I took out a contract on someone *else*, but those signs falsely claimed I was targeting you! It was undoubtedly someone who was plotting to drive a wedge between you and me, Prince Voros!”

Diablo was putting his whole heart into pleading his case, but the prince saw no reason to believe him.

“Oh? So you sneaked into the slums to meet a fixer to assassinate *someone*,” Voros said in an openly snitty tone. “But that someone couldn’t *possibly* have been me, because you have absolutely no *reason* to kill me, is that right?”

“E-Exactly, Your Highness…” Diablo said, wiping sweat off his brow with his handkerchief. For obvious reasons, he couldn’t admit his *real* target was the human boy he had failed to kill on an old assignment. If he came straight out with the truth, Voros would be well within his rights to dispossess Diablo of his title, his land, and all his riches. As such, Diablo was left with few options.

“Th-The contract you mentioned relates to some personal affair that I hesitate to burden your ears with, Your Highness,”

Diablo said. “However, it’s a *highly* complicated matter that relates purely to my domain. From my perspective, I felt it necessary to eliminate a lingering uncertainty that threatens my authority, and I determined that my best approach was to enlist the services of an assassin. I felt the higher taxes were justified due to this unavoidable decision I needed to make.”

Diablo continued to mop the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief as he spoke. He hoped his choice of words would hint at his motive being to assassinate his older brother, who was his rival, rather than killing Light, which was his real objective. The governance of a fiefdom and all of the related intrigues were matters that were strictly left to the feudal lords themselves, meaning it wasn’t an area that either Voros or the king were entirely free to get involved in. If Voros were to stick his nose in the internal machinations of a fiefdom, the other lords would complain that he was meddling in what they saw as their affairs. Although Diablo made sure not to say it openly, the implication he was making was that he was trying to put an end to his sibling rivalry for good, and it wasn’t something Voros should be concerning himself with. Although there were always exceptions to this unwritten rule, the prince did indeed find himself in a difficult position.

“Huh. So it’s a ‘complicated’ matter involving your domain, is it?” Voros said, leaning back into his seat. He still suspected Diablo was planning to have him assassinated, but he wasn’t free to swiftly sentence him to death, because while he had admitted that he had ordered a hit, he claimed it was on someone else, which could very well have been true. And if Voros were to execute someone simply for hiring an assassin, it would insinuate that every feudal lord engaging in similar transactions could face capital punishment. Unrest and rebellion would ensue among the ruling class, and the nation would be left in ruins.

“I suppose it would be rather uncouth of me to interfere in an issue concerning your fiefdom,” Voros relented, swallowing back his impotent rage.

“Your wise judgment is most appreciated, Your Highness,” Diablo said, openly sighing with relief.

“However, mere words are not enough to convince me.” Voros’s gaze hardened. “Diablo, you will need to demonstrate your loyalty to me.”

“L-Loyalty, you say?” Diablo squeaked.

“It’s a fairly simple test,” Voros said. “As you *surely* already know, our operations into the Human Kingdom have so far been entirely unsuccessful.” This talk of “operations” referred to the cross-border raids on human villages by Demonkin Nation soldiers disguised as bandits. However, up to that point, these commandos had all been repelled by a purported servant of the Wicked Witch of the Tower, along with a squad of Human Kingdom knights.

“Do you still deny having any connection to that witch, despite the many letters she has sent to you?” Voros asked.

“O-Of course I do!” Diablo said quickly. “I have absolutely nothing to do with the Wicked Witch!”

“In that case, you won’t have any issue with conscripting soldiers from your domain to take part in the operations, will you?” Voros said simply. “If you’re truly not in league with the witch, you’ll willingly lend a hand to slaughtering those inferiors across the border, yes?”

“Y-You want me to conscript men?” Diablo repeated.

“That’s what I said,” Voros confirmed. “This simple favor should be enough to prove once and for all where your loyalties truly lie, Diablo.”

He scowled a silent addendum: *And if you refuse me now, you’re finished.* Diablo naturally took the hint.

Prince Voros still doubts my loyalty… Diablo agonized. *Then again, he’s giving me a chance to prove my fealty to him and my nation! And all I need to do is enlist some men and send them off to destroy those louse-ridden inferiors? Even if it does turn out to be a disastrous suicide mission, everything should work out in my favor in the end, so long as I’m still alive and breathing!*

Even in the event of his fiefdom suffering a devastating loss of able-bodied men due to war, Diablo figured he was smart and talented enough to be able to rebuild his domain if he could just keep himself among the living. And so, Diablo readily agreed to the favor in the most straightforward, gentlemanly way he could assume.

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness,” he said. “I shall gladly prove my fealty to you and the crown by recruiting soldiers to fight for your most worthy cause!”

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A few days after speaking with Diablo, Voros contacted Doc to summon the Masters the Demonkin Nation was hosting to come to his office at the palace, but in the end, only two Masters showed up to the appointed meeting. Daigo had of course been killed when he had launched an impulsive assault on the Great Tower, and Miki was being kept prisoner by Light and his allies after being caught spying. To those not aware of what had gone down at the Great Tower, Miki had simply disappeared without a trace, though Daigo could safely be written off as deceased.

Gira wasn't available because he was off taking revenge on some adventurer by the name of Dark who had embarrassed him and the Morte Spada. Even when the others had tried to contact him, he had chosen to disregard the messages given to him entirely rather than put his pursuit of this adventurer on hold. As a result, the only Masters who actually answered Voros's summons were Doc and his leader, Goh. Sitting behind his desk, Voros voiced his irritation at Gira's absence.

"I'm not pleased that he has flagrantly ignored my summons," he sniffed. "I can understand that his mind is elsewhere due to the scandal that's affected that tiny organization of his, but that doesn't mean I'm any less displeased about it."

Goh expressed his umbrage at being summoned altogether by letting out a loud sigh that was nearer to a groan. "You sure are generous to him. Wish ya could spare some of that love for the rest of us who don't wanna be here for this weak crap."

"I second that sentiment, Mr. Goh," Doc piped up. "I was just on the verge of making a breakthrough in my research."

The two Masters showed very little deference to the de facto ruler of the Demonkin Nation. Goh was presently seated on a sofa with his feet rudely propped on the coffee table, while Doc sat on a separate, single-seat sofa, still in his white lab coat that was covered in blood from his human test subjects. The prideful Voros would normally have been infuriated at the lack of manners on display, but he knew there was no point complaining about their disrespectful attitude. Instead, he dispensed with the pleasantries and got right down to business.

"I'm afraid I'm very short on 'love' to give to you gentlemen at the moment," the prince said. "What I *do* have, though, is the right to invoke the contracts you signed with us."

He glowered at Goh and Doc. "As you know, our nation is presently carrying out punitive operations against the Human

Kingdom. However, to date, none of these missions have been successful. It appears that trollop of a human queen has used her wiles to jump in bed with the Wicked Witch, and in return for having her backside licked, the witch has lent the queen one of her powerful subordinates to repel our soldiers."

Voros's face crinkled in frustration. "It pains me to say this, but no one in our army is able to fight this minion of evil. But even so, the honor of our nation will not allow us to admit defeat! For that reason, I am enforcing your contracts and sending you both to get rid of the interloper."

"Perfect. So now you're waving our contracts in our faces," Goh said. "Ya don't even need me to wipe out this one little boogeyman at the border. Let a buncha cupcakes fight each other. That's what I'm about."

"I'm also busy with my experiments which are about to bring about a new future for the human race," Doc added.

"Do I need to remind you both of your contractual obligations?" Voros seethed. "We have treated you *very* well, I might add, so I'm expecting you to return the favor in full!"

Roughly speaking, the Masters had signed their names to an agreement that guaranteed them funds, resources, and other forms of assistance from the Demonkin Nation, and in exchange, the Masters were to lend their destructive powers to resolve any issues that couldn't be settled by the demonkin themselves. The reason Goh and his faction were able to do what they wanted without worrying about money or any other kinds of limitations was due to the backing they received from the Demonkin Nation, while the host nation viewed all of these gifts and favors granted to the Masters as insurance for resolving practically any issue that might crop up. The only exception to this was the Demonkin Nation couldn't go declaring war on the Dragonute Empire, because the demons knew their rival race had their own set of Masters. But as it stood for Goh and Doc in that moment, they found themselves unable to refuse Voros's request, given how long they had been able to do their own things with the demonkin covering all of their expenses.

Goh clicked his tongue and sighed again. "Damn, this is dumb. But like ya say, the contract's bindin', and if nothin' else, I'm a man of my word."

"I will also abide by my contract, since I have little choice in the matter," Doc said. "If I were at liberty to do so, I would never

choose to purposelessly harm humans. On the other hand, it is but a small price to pay to secure a future for the human race. This also presents an excellent opportunity to deploy my masterpiece to the front lines of a battle."

As Doc busily justified his need to participate in the cross-border raids on the human villages, Voros dropped another assignment on the Master.

"In addition to taking care of the witch's minion, I will also need your help with something, Doc," he said.

"You need *my* help, specifically?" Doc was a lanky guy who was a good two meters tall and wore a blood-spattered lab coat and a creepy full-face mask. He tilted his head to one side in a vaguely cutesy manner, which made for a darkly comical visual.

"You two will be entrenched with commando units conscripted from a certain viscount's fiefdom," Voros said, paying no heed to the bizarre head gesture Doc had just made. "I need you, Doc, to brainwash at least some of these soldiers and get them to kill their viscount master. Think you can do that?"

The viscount in question was, of course, Diablo, and Doc responded casually, as if he were giving a diagnosis to a patient.

"I can certainly do that. Easily, in fact," Doc stated. "However, a procedure like that will leave the subject acting in ways that will likely seem unnatural to others. They won't be able to approach anyone without raising suspicions, and once I've brainwashed someone, I am unable to return them to normal. Are you fine with all that?"

"I don't care," Voros said. "I just need these soldiers to slay their viscount. We can come up with cover stories to explain their conditions later on."

Voros's cover story for the whole thing was quite simple, though: feudal serfs already fed up with Diablo's high-handed rule were pushed over the edge by an emergency military draft and killed their lord in an act of mutiny, leaving the kingdom free to take over the domain.

"Such a dumb chore," Goh drawled. "Woulda wasted less time if ya'd just killed the viscount yourself yesterday."

"Yes, I'm aware I'm doing this by a rather roundabout method," Voros began. "But that scandal with the Bourreaux has made all of the nobles suspicious of each other, so if I were to rely on a typical assassination to eliminate the viscount, it would

only serve to alarm the nobles further. Many, if not most, might then start agitating for independence, and the whole nation would plunge into internal discord. But a lord being killed by his own disgruntled soldiers would barely raise an eyebrow. The viscount in question recently imposed painful tax hikes on his people, so that adds another layer of plausibility."

Voros grimaced and addressed his invisible foe. "Oh, Diablo, if only you hadn't tried to hire the Bourreaux to take my life, I wouldn't have been forced to engage in this cumbersome skulduggery."

Voros clearly hadn't believed the alibi Diablo had given him a few days prior, instead forsaking him completely. The prince had only asked Diablo to donate soldiers to serve in the Human Kingdom raids so the troops could be used as pawns in a revenge killing. *That turncoat has totally forgotten how much he owes us for restoring him to his peerage as a reward for getting rid of that false Master,* Voros thought. *May he be killed by his own soldiers and suffer eternally at the hands of the Undergod!*

"If you plan to slay this viscount of yours that way, do I have your permission to convert the soldiers into living bombs that will explode when in close proximity to the target?" Doc asked.

Voros had been busy cursing Diablo in his mind, and was caught completely off guard by Doc's suggestion. "Come again?"

"If living bombs are not to your liking, I could install drills in the arms of the soldiers instead," Doc continued despite Voros's clear bewilderment. "Or I can transform their bodies so that they spray poison everywhere and render the entire fiefdom uninhabitable. I promise you these options will most definitely eliminate the target you mentioned."

"A-Are you *insane*?!" Voros screeched. "Why would we destroy land? That's a valuable asset! Just do as I say and don't go doing anything gratuitous! Brainwash Viscount Diablo's soldiers into killing him! Nothing more!"

"I see..." Doc said. "So you are implying I *should* take those extra steps I mentioned?"

"Don't be absurd!" Voros yelled. "I clearly just told you no! Why can't you follow a simple order?!"

Voros explained to Doc once more that he was absolutely *not* to engage in any wacky gimmicks during his mission. Pretending this was all some comedy routine he was watching, Goh exploded into a rare fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Chapter 11: The Plan to Capture Gira

Sometime later, I held a strategy meeting in my office in the Abyss with the people who would be capturing Gira with me. The team tasked with capturing Doc were preparing for their mission elsewhere.

"Miki told us that Gira is a master assassin who's around Level 7000, but she also said that she has no idea how he actually cuts down his opponents," I said, summarizing the information we already had. "Any target he picked seemingly just fell to pieces before her eyes, and she doesn't know if he uses physical or magical attacks to achieve that."

I was sitting at my desk with Ellie, Nemumu, and Gold standing in front of me.

"Not knowing what Gira's *exact* tricks are spooks me a little, but if he's only at Level 7000, me and Ellie should be able to overpower him if it comes to it," I reasoned. "However, the biggest problem we face is how to lure Gira out into the open and ensure that he doesn't get away."

"How do you suppose he'd get away, milord?" Gold asked. "I was of the mind that this plan was rather straightforward: we three act as bait while Miss Ellie casts her spells to keep that rotter where he ought to be."

"Yes, I expect Gira to come straight to us to take revenge for how badly we embarrassed his assassins," I said. "But what I don't believe he'll do is come waltzing into an obvious trap. We should assume that he'll leave himself some way to escape, and if we're honest, we don't really have a lot of options when it comes to where we can battle him."

I took a moment to think about those options. "We definitely can't wander the city streets waiting for him to attack us due to the number of potential casualties and destruction of property that would invite. But if we try to fight him somewhere safer—like out in a deserted wasteland, or at some ruins, or in an abandoned village—there's more chance of him finding a way to cut his losses and escape."

"That is certainly plausible, Lord Light," Nemumu agreed. "He was the leader of the Morte Spada, so it wouldn't surprise me if

he was also a cowardly weasel who runs away instead of staying and fighting with honor."

Nemumu furrowed her brow as she recalled the Morte Spada and how little effort it had taken to capture all five of them. They had been such a bunch of clowns, even Nemumu had suffered secondhand embarrassment due to their ineptitude, mostly because of how mercilessly Gold had mocked her earlier warnings, and the fact that I had laughed along with him. In any case, it seemed Nemumu didn't think much of the boss of that clown show, Master or no. However, I was still pretty sure that their leader would at least be shrewd enough not to walk straight into a trap.

Gold hummed as he cupped his chin with his arms crossed. "Now that you mention it, milord, it's best we avoid wandering the city streets, lest we inadvertently invite severe damage to be done to them. But I can't imagine someone like him showing himself in a wide-open field somewhere else."

"And that's the issue," I agreed. "That's why I called you all here, to see if you had some ideas."

"Blessed Lord Light?" Ellie piped up, offering her thoughts for the first time in the meeting.

I turned to my deputy. "You got something for me, Ellie?"

"Yes, indeed I do, Your Blessedness," she replied. "And for this scheme, I would prefer it if you allowed me to be the one to lure this Master to you."

"Well, let's hear your plan first," I said.

"Of course, Blessed Lord!" Ellie said excitedly. She told us her idea in her usual clear, melodious voice that was as pleasant to the ear as a peal of church bells. Her songlike tone took some of the edge off the outlandish and admittedly cruel things she was saying.

"Okay, that definitely sounds crazy enough to work," I remarked. "But don't you think it might be a little *too* crazy?"

"Your mercy and generosity is like the rain providing life-giving water after a long drought, Blessed Lord," Ellie said. "But there is absolutely no reason to show mercy to the ringleader of the villains who tried to take your life!"

Her rebuttal grew more intense as she went on. "In fact, that filthy, disease-ridden sewer rat isn't worthy of your divine attention *at all*, but he dared to place a target on you, Bless Lord Light! I promise no effort will be spared in preparing the most

fitting battleground for him!"

Nemumu and Gold were just as taken aback by Ellie's scheme to draw out Gira as I was, but they had been thoroughly convinced by the second half of Ellie's plan of building an arena for us to fight the Master.

Personally, I would've been open to just fighting him anywhere that wouldn't put innocent people at risk, I thought. I wasn't sure Ellie needed to take things *as* far as she was suggesting, because he was after a boy adventurer by the name of Dark, not Light, the dungeon lord.

Ellie took a step forward and concluded her proposal. "I will prepare a multitude of backup plans so that Mr. Gira cannot escape, so allow me to deliver him to you."

I sat back in my chair and went into deep thought. *Honestly, I don't even care where we fight Gira, just so long as we bag him. Then again, I know I can trust Ellie to capture him alive, since she's the smartest person I have in the Abyss, and she seems extra confident that her scheme will work too. In fact, I should let her have this one as a way of making up for what happened with Miki.*

I leaned forward in my chair and addressed Ellie. "If you really think your plan is foolproof, then I'll let you handle it. And if you succeed in capturing Gira, I'm willing to completely forgive you for the careless security breach at the Great Tower. Keep in mind that you *are* dealing with a Master here, even if he's only Level 7000. Nothing is foolproof and there's always a chance you'll fail me again. Do you still think you can do it?"

To this day, Ellie still felt awful about how Miki had infiltrated the city that had been built at the foot of the Great Tower, which had allowed her to send intel back to the demonkin Masters, causing Daigo to wreak havoc around the tower. I was constantly telling Ellie that it wasn't her fault, but she still wanted me to punish her in some way, which I'd purposely been putting off because I felt she didn't deserve it.

It's all because of Miki and Daigo that I'm in this bind in the first place, I mused. *So if Ellie wants an outlet to unleash her pent-up guilt, she might as well take it out on one of their Master buddies. At least this way, nobody in the Abyss can accuse Ellie of getting special treatment, and it's pretty much a guarantee that she'll be able to capture Gira, given how confident she is.*

I'd been racking my brain for a while to come up with the best way to "punish" Ellie without going too hard or too soft on her,

but thankfully, Gira had provided me with the perfect way to kill two birds with one stone. As for Ellie, she looked remorseful for a second when I reminded her of the fiasco at the Great Tower, but quickly recovered and agreed to my compromise-slash-ultimatum with gusto.

"Of course I can do it, Blessed Lord!" Ellie declared. "By all means, allow me this honor!"

I nodded with approval and officially set our operation against Gira in motion.

Chapter 12: Queen Lif VII's Trauma

"Oh, this is so delightful," sighed Queen Lif VII, the Elven Queendom's monarch, after taking a sip of her tea during a midafternoon tea break at the palace. *At last, I've regained enough peace of mind to be able to enjoy a simple cup of tea again,* she thought.

The source of her previous anxieties that she had only just recently overcome had stemmed from the Wicked Witch who lived in the tower that had appeared out of the blue in the queendom. Lif had sent her elite White Knights out to eliminate a Red Dragon that had been sighted at the tower, but the entire order—including her son, Hardy the Silent, who was their commander—had been killed in action. Not long after, the Wicked Witch had flown into the elven capital accompanied by a huge swarm of dragons and forced Lif—and by extension, the whole Elven Queendom—to capitulate to the Great Tower.

Why did we ever think meddling in the affairs of that diabolical woman would be a good idea? Lif wondered as she sat in her parlor. *No, I should be asking myself why that monstrous fiend ever showed up in this world in the first place? If you were to tell me that she was the Undergod of Evil who had risen up to the surface, I would believe it.*

Now that Lif had sufficiently recovered from her past trauma, she was able to accept some of the responsibility for the calamity that had befallen her nation. *If only I hadn't allowed that rotten chancellor to provoke me into sticking my nose into that tower's business, I wouldn't have had to go through that ghastly experience,* Lif reflected.

On the day the Wicked Witch overthrew the Elven Queendom, she subjected the queen to the torture of having her memories read by sorcery. The sheer pain of that experience had caused Lif to lose weight, and from then on, she had suffered an endless series of thunderclap headaches. Ever since that fateful day, Lif had vowed never to engage in any action that might invite the displeasure of the witch, with a view to avoiding another mind probe, for the first had been so harrowing, it had felt like someone was taking a jagged knife to her soul. Lif was able to

maintain her sanity throughout by constantly reminding herself how faithfully she had served the Wicked Witch.

"I've prohibited all forms of human slavery in our realm, as ordered by the Great Witch," Lif whispered to the tearoom, as if reciting a prayer from memory. "I've thoroughly abided by that 'Absolute Autonomy for all Humans' edict. We've sent the humans supplies and resources, and on top of everything else, I invited the Great Witch to the summit and voted in favor of Queen Lilith's coronation. I've demonstrated my total devotion to the Great Witch, so everything's fine. Everything's fine. Everything's fine..."

Indeed, the Elven Queendom had bent the knee to the Wicked Witch in a way that would have been unthinkable only several months before. Of course, some of the elves had refused to go along with the new decrees and attempted to retaliate against the humans, but the tower witch had easily dispatched these renegades, and had thankfully never blamed the queen for the incidents. All the queen had to do was remain obedient to the witch.

"This way, I won't have to go through having my brain being churned up like curdled milk again—" Lif muttered before being interrupted by a familiar, mellifluous voice.

"May I take up a moment of your time, Your Majesty?"

Lif raised her head and standing in front of her without any forewarning was the Wicked Witch of the Tower, whom the queen still regarded as the Undergod in the flesh. Although Lif should have been able to see the witch's face from her vantage point in her chair, she was unable to get a good look under the hood the witch was wearing. This was entirely exactly by design, of course, for Ellie was wearing the SSR Faceveil Hood, an Unlimited Gacha item that stopped people from seeing the features of the wearer.

"G-Great Witch!" Lif immediately sat up straight. "I-It is an honor to welcome you to my palace!"

Although she was every bit as flustered by the witch's sudden appearance as her attendants were, she was able to maintain a measure of poise and even managed to flash a polite smile at her guest. After all, this wasn't the first time the Wicked Witch had appeared out of the blue at her palace without any prior notice. The previous time, the witch had wanted Lif to invite her to the summit in the Principality of the Nine, which was paired

with an order to back Lilith's enthronement.

"Why, thank you, Your Majesty, for receiving me at such short notice," the Wicked Witch said without paying any heed to Lif's evident nervousness. "Anyway, now that we've gotten all those silly pleasantries out of the way, I've come to ask you another favor."

"A-Another favor?" Lif echoed trepidatiously.

"Yes, precisely. You see, I'm in the middle of planning a highly, *highly* critical operation that will require your full cooperation to ensure that I get the most perfect of outcomes," the Wicked Witch said. "Will I be able to count on your aid, Your Majesty?"

Although the Faceveil Hood was supposed to conceal the witch's entire face, Lif did catch a glimpse of a beautifully radiant smile stretching from ear to ear. Lif knew refusing this request wasn't an option, so she assented and waited to hear what the Wicked Witch had in store for her.

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In the basement lair underneath the Bourreaux's mansion, Gira was busy with a little bit of open-cavity surgery on a live, unanesthetized body. The subject under the knife was Mad Pierrot, whose moans and screams due to the unbearable pain of the procedure intermingled with the sound of bloody tissue being ripped away. Because Mad Pierrot had suffered severe permanent brain damage at the hands of Dark, the demon was unable to form anything coherent that would amount to a protest at the gruesome act Gira was currently performing on him. The other members of the Morte Spada, all similarly incapacitated, lay in a limp pile in the corner of the private operating room, waiting their turns to be surgically reconstructed by Gira and his scalpels.

Gira had recovered the members of the Morte Spada after their living shells had been dumped in the middle of a plaza in the Demonkin Nation's capital. Not only had this group of top assassins failed in their assignment to rub out Dark, the human adventurer had even put up signs listing past assassinations and who'd hired them. This reprisal had completely humiliated and disgraced the Bourreaux, angering Gira into making his own move against Dark.

Gira was solely focused on his preparations to strike back at

the leader of the Black Fools, to the point where he was even ignoring messages from Doc calling for all of the Masters to attend a meeting with Voros. These macabre, unmedicated procedures Gira was performing on the Morte Spada also served as punishment for the former elite assassins, as well as an outlet for the Master to vent his frustrations.

Dark not alone, I bet, Gira thought as he sliced through another organ. *Tower witch. Must be involved.*

The Black Fools were the fastest party to reach A-rank in recorded history, but they were still just a bunch of humans who couldn't possibly have been Masters. It made more sense for the Wicked Witch to be a Master herself, propping up the Black Fools from the shadows. Gira had deployed the Morte Spada to take care of the assignment they'd received to assassinate Dark, with his unspoken motive being to rattle the witch, yet the gambit had spectacularly backfired in the form of the Morte Spada being beaten and subjected to the most embarrassing spectacle imaginable. However, the outcome had confirmed in Gira's mind who it was he was *actually* up against.

That witch. Must be a Master, Gira thought. *Sent Morte Spada back. Made that scene. But came back so soon? Impossible. If no Master involved.*

Gira knew the Morte Spada had traveled to the Human Kingdom as part of a contest to see who could assassinate Dark first, but their incapacitated bodies were put on display in the Demonkin Nation very soon after the assassins would have presumably arrived at the Human Kingdom's royal capital. Under normal circumstances, the newly impaired Morte Spada would have had to have been carted back to the Demonkin Nation—a journey that would have taken long enough for Gira and the rest of the Bourreaux to learn about the failed assassination attempts and prepare in advance for this act of retribution. If Gira had to guess how they had managed to do all that so quickly, he would have surmised the Wicked Witch had intervened in some way, then used a spell or magic item to teleport the Morte Spada back to the Demonkin Nation's capital.

The Black Fools. The witch. Will pay dearly, Gira thought darkly. *Make fool of me? Won't get away.*

Gira himself had received multiple requests to assassinate the Wicked Witch, but he had routinely ignored such petitions. The Great Tower was in the middle of a thick, untamed forest inside

the Elven Queendom, and he figured just reaching the tower would be too much trouble, no matter how much money he received to carry out the assignment. However, the sums had most definitely changed.

Will kill her. For insulting me, Gira thought. *Wonder how they smell? And feel? Her internal organs. Can't wait.* A rasping chuckle escaped from under his skull print scarf. *Easy to beat. If spellcaster. Can turn tables. Even if higher-level. If lower-level, torture to death. If higher-level, make slip. Break her. Watch her cry. Can't wait.*

Gira's game plan was to dispatch Dark first, then seek out the Wicked Witch and murder her as well. If she had a higher power level than himself, that would be all the better to satisfy him. If anyone else had known what Gira had in store, they would have felt chills creeping up their spines.

Should destroy it all. The Bourreaux, thought Gira. *Worst-case. Can make another. Easy enough. Finding new people.*

Gira wasn't quite enraged to the point of just recklessly obliterating the Bourreaux, but the option was clearly still on the table if the organization couldn't recover its credibility. The Bourreaux was nothing more than a hobby to him, and he had no particular attachment to the group, so he could always go off and form a new league of assassins if he felt it was necessary. To him, it was as logical as tossing away an old toothbrush and getting a new one.

In any case, I won't die. Not ever. No matter what happens, thought Gira. *All a game to me.* And he had good reason to believe he was invincible against any opponent. *But don't want to use it. My last resort. Comes with a price.* Gira was just like Miki in that even though they weren't up in the Level 9000 range, they both possessed at least one overpowered trick they could manipulate to their advantage to give them an edge in any encounter.

Gira continued with his crude surgery on Mad Pierrot but found himself distracted when he heard an eruption of noise from outside the mansion. "Hm? Noisy. Should be quiet."

This was something of an understatement, given that the sounds coming from outside were loud enough to reach all the way to the interior of the makeshift operating room Gira was working in. *Gang war?* Gira wondered before dismissing the notion as ridiculous. *No one dumb enough. To make noise. Outside*

this building.

The Bourreaux might have taken a major reputational hit after Dark humiliated the society, but not to the point where the people of the slums would break the unwritten rule of not causing a scene outside the mansion. Curiosity eventually got the better of Gira and he left his lair to find out what was going on. He climbed a flight of stairs and looked out of a first-floor window. If you'd given him ten guesses to predict what he thought he would see out there, he still wouldn't have been close.

A bunch of elves in gaudy costumes were parading up and down in front of the mansion, many of which were wearing sandwich boards or holding up signs bearing messages. Others seemed to be waving flyers, while yet more played instruments to draw even more attention to them. Strangely enough, the elves themselves seemed like they were engaging in this spectacle totally unwillingly, with some even shedding tears while bellowing out their slogans.

"This is a message for Gira, the Master in the Demonkin Nation!" the elves yelled hoarsely. "The Black Fools will be waiting for you at the water fountain in the main avenue of this city! If you're a real assassin and not a giant chickenshit coward, you will be at the fountain at the appointed date and time! We repeat—"

In other words, the elves were acting like street demonstrators delivering a direct and frankly inflammatory challenge to Gira from the Black Fools, their message containing the time, date, and location of where the duel was supposedly due to take place. In the slums, causing a commotion outside the Bourreaux mansion was tantamount to a suicidal act, and no one even passed through the area unless they deemed it absolutely necessary. This tacit rule meant it was always quiet and peaceful in the general vicinity of the mansion. At least, it had been up until this moment.

It hadn't crossed the mind of anyone in the slums to assault the elves—not even the dwellers most prone to violence with the least to lose—for the elven race possessed strong spellcasting abilities, making them risky targets for low-level demons. No, instead, the slum dwellers fearfully kept their distance and formed a wide ring as they watched this outrageous spectacle, or else simply left the area altogether to ensure their own safety.

If Gira and what was left of the Bourreaux were to start a war with the elves, the ensuing damage could very well end up redrawing the map of the slums.

As for the elves themselves, they hadn't willingly signed up to this foolish stunt, and one of the flamboyantly dressed rabble-rousers grumbled silently to himself. *How could our queen order us to risk our lives like this just because the tower witch threatened us?*

Though deep down, he knew he and the other elves had little choice in the matter. If they refused, the Wicked Witch might send her dragon army to raze the rest of the Elven Queendom to the ground, along with all of their loved ones. The elves weren't prepared to gamble with the very survival of their country just for the sake of their dignity.

More groups of elf picketers were parading around other parts of the city—the main avenue, the workshop district, the market area—all repeating the same message of provocation directed at Gira.

"If you try to run away from this fight, the Black Fools will find you, collar you, and put you down like the flea-ridden mutt you are!" the elves outside the mansion hollered. "If you wish to see another day, you will come down to the fountain, drop to your hands and knees, and beg the Black Fools to spare your worthless life! They will still kill you if they don't like the way you grovel, but do your best and show them what the leader of the Bourreaux is made of!"

These inflammatory chants were all part of Ellie's plan to draw Gira out into the open—the same plan that had somewhat unsettled Light, Nemumu, and Gold when they first heard it. Ellie had strong-armed Lif into sending elves to the Demonkin Nation to parade around the capital in ridiculous outfits while issuing a challenge to Gira. The demonkin had all but barred humans from entering the nation, so folk from another race were needed to easily gain access to the capital in order to cause an uproar.

As another "favor" to Ellie, Lif had officially called these elf infiltrators "envoys," a position that granted them diplomatic immunity. This meant they were free to picket in areas across the Demonkin Nation capital, including along the main avenue, without any soldiers putting a stop to their activities. However, this gross breach of faith done on behalf of the Black Fools only confirmed to the demonkin that the elves were now lapdogs to

the human race, which in turn meant elves would be subject to the same hostile treatment as humans.

Another grim aspect of this ploy was that Ellie was exposing the elves to all the potential hazards that could result from a stunt of this nature. If Ellie had opted to deploy people from the Abyss to carry out the picketing, Gira could have become enraged and killed them on the spot, which would of course have saddened Light. However, Ellie wasn't going to bat an eye if any or all of the elf "envoys" were to perish in the Demonkin Nation after making these provocations. They were all sacrificial pawns to her, plain and simple. And thanks to this total lack of consideration for the elves' safety, the taunts could be extravagantly acerbic and trenchant to get the desired effect.

Gira watched the picketers from the window, growing so incensed at the sight, he could only growl and snarl gutturally. Not only had the Morte Spada embarrassed him, but there was an army of elves making fun of him in front of his own estate. If Gira backed out of going to the fountain on the designated day, his reputation would never recover. Even the other Masters in his clique would start calling him a "giant chickenshit coward" if he ignored this challenge, even if everyone including Gira knew he was walking into a trap.

On the other hand, even if Gira decided to back out of the proposed duel out of an overabundance of caution, Ellie would be able to track his moves thanks to the multiple layers of precautionary measures she had put in place. There was no point in him fleeing because Ellie would be on top of him immediately, though Gira had no way of knowing this at the time. But the highly offensive taunts had successfully injured Gira's pride enough to push him into facing the Black Fools out in the open. He was still confident of the outcome, however, because he planned to put into play one or two trump cards that would ensure victory for him.

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Right around the time Gira was coming to the decision to accept the challenge the Black Fools had thrown down, Ellie was inspecting an underground arena that would serve as the venue for the fight.

"At least I was able to finish this place," Ellie said, her head

turning this way and that as she took in her surroundings.

The ceiling was high enough to be nearly invisible to the eye, and the square-shaped field was so wide, you could have comfortably fitted three castles side by side with room to spare. But if there was one complaint gnawing away at Ellie, it was how dull and lifeless the arena looked.

"While I *suppose* this place is big enough for Blessed Lord Light to fight his enemy, it's not nearly stately enough to showcase his talents in battle," Ellie mumbled to herself. "With the time I have remaining, I must renovate this place so that it fully complements the glory of His Blessedness. Perhaps I should start by creating a towering statue in his likeness."

The plan was to teleport Gira and the Black Fools to this arena and have them both battle it out. Ellie had constructed this massive underground colosseum using her magic, but she was starting to think the space needed more in the way of embellishments.

"Oh, but there's a risk a statue might break during the battle..." Ellie thought aloud. "That would be incredibly disrespectful to His Blessedness, so I should dismiss the whole statue idea. Perhaps engravings on the walls would suffice? Of course! These walls *must* contain engravings of Blessed Lord Light in all his magnificent glory! And there must also be drawings of crowds exalting the Blessed Lord! And a throne! Yes, a throne for His Blessedness to recline on while he waits!"

Ellie had a euphoric expression splashed across her face as she imagined the truly splendiferous arena she was about to create for her beloved dungeon overlord.

"Now, I can't take any shortcuts in preparing this main arena for my Blessed Lord," Ellie reminded herself. "However, I do want to make *extra* arenas to serve as backups in case something goes wrong. I don't have a lot of time to do that, though. I wonder if it's too late to push back the date of the challenge..."

Of course, the white-hot fury Gira was presently feeling didn't even come into the equation, but regardless, Ellie dismissed the idea of trying to move the fight and refocused on getting down to work.

"In any case, I've got so much to do and so little time to do it in," Ellie said to herself. She hummed a happy tune as she got to work redesigning the arena walls using her magic.

Chapter 13: The Showdown

“You’ll pay for what you’ve done to us, Elven Queendom!” Voros cursed, slamming his fists down on his desk in the executive office at the royal palace. The prince was reacting to reports he had received of groups of elves parading around the capital causing a ruckus. The disturbances weren’t violent in nature, but the elves were going all around town clad in sandwich boards, playing instruments, and loudly shouting profanity-laden challenges to Gira and the Bourreaux.

Under normal circumstances, the city constables would have been sent in to break up these rabble-rousers, issuing them with warnings, or simply fining and jailing any troublemakers who were noncompliant, but because these elves had been officially made envoys, the authorities couldn’t touch them, meaning all anyone could do was stand and watch as the elves continued creating a disturbance.

“I had an idea what was going on when that elf queen betrayed me back at the summit,” Voros muttered. “But this just proves she’s become a wholly committed handmaid to that witch!”

Voros was the one who had called the summit at the Principality of the Nine in order to address the threat posed by the Wicked Witch of the Tower. However, Queen Lif had surreptitiously invited the witch to attend the summit, before proceeding to appear visibly terrified in the presence of the sorceress when she showed up there. Four other nations had joined the Elven Queendom in backing Lilith’s ascension to the throne of the Human Kingdom, an act that had completely humiliated Voros at the summit.

However, the prince had decided not to immediately retaliate against Lif for what she had done at the summit. It was clear that she had been intimidated into committing that act of betrayal, and the Demonkin Nation shared long-standing friendly relations with the Elven Queendom. Moreover, he had considered punishing the Human Kingdom for colluding with the tower witch top priority. Or at least, that was until this debacle. With these latest developments, Voros had no choice but to treat

the Elven Queendom as an enemy state, much like he now viewed the Human Kingdom.

"I don't *care* if she's being threatened by that infernal witch!" Voros declared. "Nobody chooses to cast aside their pride and become mindless puppets *that* willingly! Have the elves abandoned all of their self-worth as a race?"

Shock and pity at the behavior of the elves was mixed in with Voros's unmitigated anger at their actions. It also didn't help that this disturbance was at a rather unfavorable time for Voros.

"That Gira is too proud for his own good," Voros stated. "I'm sure he'll happily accept this challenge that has obviously been thrown down by that witch, meaning she might decide to show up as well. Since Gira's a Master, he *should* be capable of defeating that witch single-handedly, but it would have been better if Goh and Doc were available to send as reinforcements to make sure we end up with her head on a platter."

Voros rubbed his temple as he thought back to how he had already sent Goh and Doc to the Human Kingdom to provide backup for the cross-border raiders. There was no point recalling the two Masters, since there was no way they'd make it back here in time. Another constraint was that the success of the cross-border raids were viewed as key to the Demonkin Nation saving face, which meant getting rid of the monster woman who had been massacring all of the commandos was considered high priority.

"I could also forcefully awaken C and have him get rid of the witch…" Voros thought aloud before dismissing the idea. "No, I can't do that. That's too much of a risky gamble."

The Demonkin Nation had C's body in their possession, and Voros had considered reviving the entity and deploying it to provide Gira with some backup, but the idea was quickly shelved. *They tell me unsealing C without going through all the proper steps might lead to unpredictable consequences,* thought Voros. *Plus, there's no guarantee C will follow orders anyway once he is awakened.*

Although the appearance of the Wicked Witch presented a problem for Voros, he didn't see it as a big enough deal to reveal the Demonkin Nation's secret weapon. The prince also had to weigh up the risk of the Masters on his side—or the Masters in the Dragonute Empire—simply coming to forcefully take C from the demonkin.

“If that happened, unsealing C would just cause more problems for us instead of helping Gira,” Voros decided. “I hold the power of this whole nation, yet there seems to be little I can do.”

Voros let out a rare fainthearted sigh, then spent the rest of his time basking in the sunset.

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On the day of the showdown, a large crowd had gathered at the water fountain in the middle of the Demonkin Nation’s capital. All the spectators had come because they had heard the elves announce the time and place, and they were obviously interested to find out what was about to go down. I was standing in front of the fountain with Nemumu and Gold, waiting for Gira to show. One might wonder how we came to be there, given that not only were the Black Fools all human but also known associates of the Wicked Witch. Well, in truth, it would have been next to impossible for us to cross the border into the Demonkin Nation on our own, but because we had accompanied the elven “envoys” across, we were easily allowed passage without anyone even looking at us. *We probably can’t use the same trick twice, though, since the demonkin will be on to us now,* I thought.

The elves in question were dotted among the onlookers, because if any constables were to show up to put a stop to our duel, they were under contract to form a blockade and intervene in the actions of the authorities by exercising their diplomatic immunity. I was pretty sure the elf envoys were quite unwilling to act as shields, but we needed them here as insurance, and all in all, it seemed to be working. There were a few constables milling around who gave us some hard looks but didn’t dare to get involved, because the elves had warned them beforehand not to interfere. They also seemed to have their hands full just dealing with all the curious onlookers. Unfortunately, some of them had started to notice Nemumu.

“Check out that chick! She’s super hot!” someone in the crowd remarked.

“Is she really gonna fight the Bourreaux? The guys who have killed aristocrats and world-famous adventurers?” another wondered aloud. “Can she even handle ’em?”

“I wanna protect her before she gets hurt,” a third onlooker said. “Maybe she’ll even tie the knot with me!”

Irked, Nemumu tugged her scarf upward so it would cover half of her face, then gave the crowd such a dirty look, it silenced all of the catcalling. By contrast, Gold was getting some decidedly less sleazy feedback from the crowd.

“Gold! Let’s go for a beer when this is over!” a spectator called out to him.

“Good luck, Mr. Gold!” another onlooker yelled.

“Gold! Hurry up and knock those assassins on their duffs so you can tell us more tales from your quests!” cried a third.

“I’ll be sure not to disappoint all you good sirs and madams in this matchup, what, what?” Gold replied, waving to the crowd. In other words, he had already created himself a fanbase in the Demonkin Nation’s capital.



It's literally only been a few days since we crossed the border with the elves, and we've hardly spent any time in this city, I thought. *Gold seriously has a real knack for bonding with pretty much anybody at any time.* Once again, I was bowled over by Gold's sheer likability. *He has to be the best in the Abyss at making friends with just about everyone…*

My fascination with Gold's friend-making skills was cut short by the ominous presence I finally sensed approaching our location. Even though the source of the foreboding was still quite far off, I could practically smell the odor of blood in the air. Nemumu stopped being outwardly fed up at all the lecherous stares she was getting and stared in the same direction as me, as did Gold, who paused in his crowd-pleasing.

Eventually, we caught sight of a whole group of people whose heads were covered by tattered hoods. I would have taken them for a bunch of beggars if it wasn't for the intimidating vibes coming from them. Their sinister auras also seemed to spook our onlookers into simmering down. The group appeared to be led by someone who was much shorter than the others, and he was wearing a robe of much finer quality than the rest of his motley crew. When this diminutive figure stopped, the others came to a halt as well.

"Are you Gira, the Master from the Demonkin Nation?" I asked.

"Yeah," the short man growled. "We doing this? Right here?"

If I had been a low-level human, just hearing Gira's voice would probably have been enough to kill me stone dead. I was willing to bet he would've immediately started indiscriminately attacking me, my party, and spectators alike if I had said yes to his question.

I personally had nothing against our spectators, so instead of trying to incite him into a potentially deadly fight, I adopted a disarming attitude.

"I'm afraid our duel won't take place here," I said. "I was thinking we could have our face-off someplace where we can *really* cut loose."

"Lead the way. Now," Gira said in his usual staccato manner. "Need to hear you scream. All of you. Can't wait. Another second."

Gira's words drew a flinty stare from Nemumu, and Gold felt the need to flash her a look warning her not to do or say

anything she might regret, though he did also raise his shield just in case he needed to cover me if a fight suddenly broke out.

Sure, there's always the worst-case scenario of us doing battle in public and putting all of these people in danger, I thought. *But isn't Gira acting a little* too *much in good faith?*

Gira was supposed to be the leader of the world's deadliest group of assassins, and from all that Miki had told me, he seemed like the cold-blooded type who would knife anyone in the back without a second thought. Yet he had come to this duel right on time and seemingly without any surprises, which I just found plain odd.

Is he planning something? Acting purely on a hunch, I sent instructions to Ellie via an SR Telepathy card, then pulled another card from my pocket, moving my hand in a very deliberate fashion so that I would not alarm Gira.

"In that case, we'll leave this place," I said then activated the SSR Teleportation card. In a flash, my party and Gira's band were warped from the middle of the city to the underground coliseum Ellie had built for us. Gira looked left and right to take in the new scenery, but because he was wearing a hood, I couldn't tell if he was astonished by what he was seeing or not.

As for the arena itself, it was roughly the size of three castles end to end and had a bunch of engravings on the wall that looked like they had taken way more work than was needed. If that weren't enough, there was also this huge, flashy throne in front of me, as well as something that looked like an altar. Just to be clear, I had never asked for any of these embellishments to be made, but they certainly reflected Ellie's tastes.

"I've made sure to fashion an arena that will be most suitable for you to fight in, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie had told me in an earlier briefing. What I *would* have preferred was a combat zone where teleportation didn't work and where nothing could get in my way. I really hadn't been expecting to be surrounded by intricate, wall-to-wall engravings, but I laughed it off, since it wasn't really something I could get mad about.

Gira stopped his rubbernecking and turned to face me again. "We do battle? Here? You sure? About making this your tomb."

"Yeah, this place will work just fine," I said. "As your tomb, that is."

"Really?" Gira asked again. "Then die!"

He unleashed a torrent of murderous aura that he had

obviously been holding in for quite a while. He definitely wanted to pound the three of us into the dirt for making a fool of him, no two ways about it. Even though Gira hadn't moved an inch, his hood fell from his head, and I instinctively brought the Gungnir in my hand around to shield myself. I ended up being hurled backward, as if someone had kicked me like I was a leather ball. Neither of my Level 5000 allies had been able to react quickly enough to the attack.

"Milord!" Gold yelled.

"Ligh— Lord Dark!" Nemumu said, all flustered.

I grunted in pain due to the impact, but I still managed to land on my feet, even if I had skidded backward for a good distance, carving grooves into the previously pristine floor.

"Don't worry! I'm fine!" I called over to them. "But watch out. There's definitely something funny about his abilities!"

Miki had said that Gira was around Level 7000, and from what I could tell using my Appraisal confirmed it. The trouble was, what was actually displayed on the screen was partly scrambled: *Level 70?? Human Male, Gi?? As???sin.* I could take a guess at the last part being "Gift Assassin," but I had been unable to perceive or track his previous attack in the slightest, despite being Level 9999. Was that even possible for a Gift?

And if that weren't enough, that first strike had been powerful enough to actually hurt me, my arm still stinging from the shock, even though the Gungnir was still intact. I had been able to block that hit mostly due to dumb luck, and not because I had been able to see the attack, which I couldn't at all. This unsettling fact made me recall what Miki had warned me about back in the Abyss.

"I've seen him in battle plenty of times, since he used to come with me and that leveling freak, Daigo, whenever we decided to crawl through some dungeons," Miki had said during the interrogation. *"He used to tag along because he got a kick out of cutting things up. But from the outside, his targets always seemed to just fall to pieces by themselves. I don't know if he uses a weapon or magic to do it either."*

We may be dealing with a tougher opponent here than we bargained for, I mused.

Fury continued to radiate from Gira, and when he spoke, it was in a deep, raspy voice through his scarf. "No one makes fool of me. No one. You. Dead. All of you. I been waiting. To butcher

you. You'll suffer. So die. Chop you up. Into monster food. Then chop them up too. The monsters. That witch, dead. Tower, dead. Anyone still breathing: dead!"

That final word was filled with all the pent-up malice and resentment he held for us, and the roar he let out served as a signal to the others Gira had brought along with him to attack us all at once. The figures in tattered hoods rushed headlong at us and screeched creepily in a way that made them sound like otherworldly creatures.

"You wretched lot aren't even armed!" Gold exclaimed. "You're jolly well taking us for pushovers, aren't you?"

Gold swiftly got to work on the mob, knocking one down with his shield, then swinging his sword at the others. He was barely breaking a sweat due to how low-level these minions were, but as soon as he cut one down, he made a discovery that caused him to pause.

"Gadzooks!" he cried out. "You're that clown!"

The foe Gold had just upended lay flat on the ground with his hood down, revealing a face that we all recognized as Mad Pierrot's, the first Morte Spada assassin we had taken down. On closer inspection of the rest of the mob, we saw the other four members of the Morte Spada as well as some other demons, including one that had the face of a goblin. Judging by their glassy gazes, none of our attackers seemed to be in possession of their mental faculties, and they all seemed to be moving like puppets on strings.

We knew that Ellie had turned the Morte Spada into mindless vegetables before tossing them back to the Demonkin Nation, but they were now moving with more skill and precision than they had demonstrated during our first encounters with them, as were the other assailants Gira had brought with him.

"Don't you dare come near Lord Dark, you zombie creeps!" Nemumu yelled, slicing the heads off anyone who was unfortunate to get within reach of her two daggers. Sure, the Morte Spada might have somehow become better fighters, but they were still nowhere near being a match for the Assassin's Blade. Suddenly, alarm bells sounded in my head.

"Nemumu! Get back now!" I yelled.

Nemumu instantly obeyed and jumped back, then looked down at her exposed chest in confusion. The fabric had been sliced clean open, meaning that whatever weapon had just done

that had barely missed her skin. If she had hesitated for even a millisecond, there was a good chance she would have ended up losing chunks of flesh.

Gira had sneaked up on Nemumu from behind the mob and executed his invisible knife attack on her. Instead of showing concern for his ally, Gold chortled heartily at Nemumu's expense.

"Now that's what I call a close shave, what?" Gold guffawed. "If your baps had been any bigger than beestings, we would've had a right old mess on our hands."

Gold's comments made Nemumu go beet red as she desperately tried to protect her modesty by covering her chest with both hands. "Dammit, Gold! Do you ever keep that sleazy mouth of yours shut?! Jackass!"

While keeping tabs on the semidistracting conversation my two allies were having, I took stock of the present situation. *Gira's mystery attacks are starting to become a problem,* I thought. *We at least managed to draw him here, but Gira has a higher power level than Nemumu and Gold, so we need to stay sharp.*

Gira's power level was at least 7000, while Nemumu and Gold were both Level 5000. *I'm not getting the sense that he brought these reanimated lackeys with him* just *to distract us while he launches attacks from the rear, though,* I pondered. *You've really gotta watch out for bad guys with mysterious abilities, no matter how low their power levels might seem.*

I was willing to admit that Gira was pulling quite a clever trick by suppressing his presence, then attacking from the middle of his horde. But that in no way changed what I needed to do. *I have to inflict enough damage to him so that we can easily apprehend him and take him for a mind probe,* I thought. *But I feel I should contact Ellie first, just to be on the safe side.* Despite being in the middle of a battle, I activated my Telepathy card so that I could converse with Ellie.

Gold turned to Gira after flattening the mob in front of him. "Your assassins may have improved a touch, but this lot is still a complete clown show compared to us. You won't defeat us, no matter how many of these blighters you throw at us."

Gira's invisible attacks might be presenting a problem, but we could still beat his lackeys while brushing our teeth. Bringing the Morte Spada with him was like showing up to a sword fight with a pocketknife. This pretty much proved Gira didn't know how to prepare for a battle. Or it would have done, if we had been

facing any normal opponent.

Gira looked down at his dead lackeys without an ounce of sadness or pity in his eyes, instead scowling at them with pure, unadulterated contempt before placing his foot on the head of one of the nearest corpses.

“Didn’t expect much. From these failures,” Gira said haltingly. “Utterly useless. Trash. Trash-level.”

I was under no illusion about what kind of guy would create an entire league of assassins, but I couldn’t help feeling pretty pissed off at him calling his fallen subordinates “trash” while treading on one of their skulls.

“*We’re* the ones who beat them, so I don’t think you should go blaming them,” I said. “And is that really any way to treat people who are fighting for you?”

“They lost. To a dumb brat. And his little friends,” Gira scoffed. “They’re a disgrace. Nothing more.” He proceeded to grind his foot deep into the skull in a naked attempt to cheese me off yet further.

“Real underlings: useful. Trash: useless,” he continued. “Get the point? Softhearted brat.”

I couldn’t find any words to respond with. I knew Gira was just trying to get under my skin by hurling cheap insults at me, but it was working all the same. I simply couldn’t get over how he was treating his allies. He had clearly picked up on how pissed I was, because he suddenly had a grin on his face so lurid, I could practically see it through his scarf.

“Wonder how you’ll look,” Gira said. “When I kill. Your buddies. Stone dead.”

“Nemumu! Gold! Run!” I yelled. We quickly backed away from Gira moments before huge gouges appeared in the ground where we had just been standing. They looked like giant claw marks, and glancing up, I saw Gira’s eyes dancing in their sockets. He was enjoying this way too much.

“Keep running. Like mice,” Gira muttered. “You can run. But for how long?”

I was probably powerful enough to withstand one of these invisible hits if I took it head-on, but I couldn’t say the same for Nemumu and Gold, who could very well suffer fatal wounds. Gira was right, though: if all we did was run around, sooner or later, he might end up catching one of my teammates.

“We can’t evade your invisible attacks forever, sure,” I

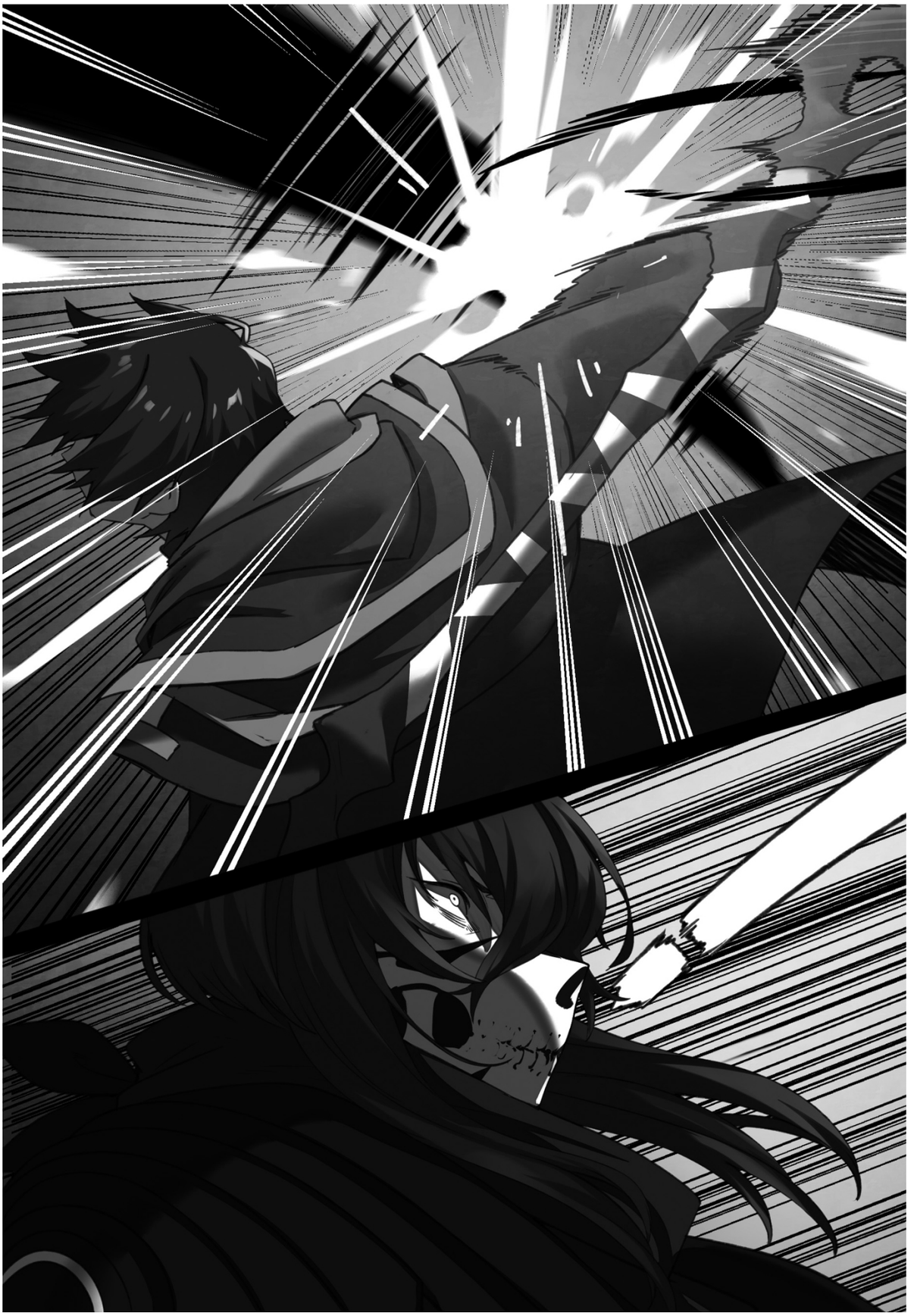
admitted. “But that’s only true if they *stay* invisible!” I produced a gacha card. “SSSR Truth’s Eye—release!”

Activating it didn’t seem to do anything. Or at least it didn’t for Gira. He spent several moments looking around and squinting, trying to figure out exactly what kind of magic I had just cast.

“A bluff?” Gira finally concluded.

“We’ll see,” I said with an open-armed shrug. In the same movement, I bashed away one of Gira’s once-invisible blade attacks as it came in from the right.

Gira’s previously narrowed eyes widened like saucers, unable to hide his incredulity at me using my Gungnir to beat away his incoming strike with such precision. Taking advantage of Gira’s momentary confusion, I leaped toward him, making sure to avoid the two giant talons that tried to slash at me. In total, there were six giant swordlike claws coming out of Gira, and I could see and dodge each and every one of them, thanks to my Truth’s Eye.



But that wasn't the best thing about the Truth's Eye. The card could also confer the ability to my allies.

Gold erupted into one of his trademark belly laughs as he blocked two of the claws. "Nothing can pierce this Auric Knight's defenses once an attack is visible, what?" he bragged.

"Well, in that case, less talking, more shielding!" Nemumu cried, blocking two more of the mega-claws to open a path for me to strike. She had already stitched her top back together by this point.

I wasn't about to let this opportunity go to waste, especially since Gira hadn't imagined that anyone could actually *defend* against his talons. I buried my Gungnir deep into Gira's solar plexus, and the pain from the strike made him gag. That single blow hammered him into the ground, as if *he* were the leather ball this time. Gira gingerly lifted himself up off the floor and cradled his abdomen, his eyes as wide as they could go.

"I-Impossible..." he rasped. "My attacks. You repelled them. How?"

"Why would I reveal my secrets to an opponent?" I said. "Do you really think I'm as stupid as you are?"

My attempts at trash-talking him caused Gira to scowl at me with a new level of hatred, but I thought nothing of it, and along with the rest of my team, I simply stared down at him with cold eyes. So how had I been able to figure out how to see Gira's attacks? Yes, I had used the SSSR Truth's Eye card, but there had been more to it than that.

Going on what Miki had told me, I exercised caution on Gira's initial attacks. At first, I had thought he was using a weapon that could hide its attack patterns from anyone below a certain power level, but the first time I sustained one of his hits, I honestly had no idea where the blow had come from, despite my Level 9999 abilities. I toyed with the idea of Gira's attacks being so fast, even *I* couldn't see them, but I quickly rejected that notion because it just wasn't possible. I mean, I should at least have been able to sense a movement in the air or some other kind of sign if he had launched an attack.

Then, while we were cutting down his gang of meat puppets, I hit upon a realization. He must have been using a power that was similar to my SSR Conceal card, which hid the user's entire presence from being picked up both physically and magically by others. Gira's abilities were basically identical to that Unlimited

Gacha card.

Going by that logic, I decided to use the “anticard” to the SSR Conceal: the SSSR Truth’s Eye. Since my Gift could literally produce an unlimited variety of cards, this meant that more often than not, there was a card that worked in the exact opposite way to another card. For example, if I had a pair of cards, one with fire properties, one with ice, and they were both similar rankings, they would cancel each other out if I were to activate them at the same time. The same would happen with a pair of light and darkness cards. There were also cards specifically designed to nullify other cards. Collectively, we called all of these types of cards “anticards.”

The SSSR Truth’s Eye was able to make invisible things visible and could cancel out concealing powers. That made it the perfect anticard to completely nullify the effects of an SSR Conceal card. And just as I had reasoned, the Truth’s Eye also proved to be the perfect anticard to counteract Gira’s abilities, since after using it, I was now able to see all six of his giant claws in all their glory. The talons seemed to sprout out from beneath Gira’s cloak, and they were about the same height as him, though from what I’d seen, they could stretch and constrict like snakes.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would say these claws were magic weapons that came equipped with an ability similar to the SSR Conceal card. Anyone using that card would be able to completely hide themselves from me and my allies unless we specifically knew they were using it. If I hadn’t known about the SSR Conceal card, I probably wouldn’t have figured out Gira’s secret, and both Nemumu and Gold might not have escaped this fight unscathed. But as it was, we could now see the claws, making it easy to block them and engage Gira directly.

At first, he was clearly pissed that I had deciphered the mystery behind his tools of the trade, then mocked him about it to boot. But right in the middle of glaring at me, he started chuckling at length in a creepily husky voice, as if something within him had snapped. When he stopped, his eyes once again filled with murderous rage.

“You’re the first. To see my claws,” Gira admitted. “But it’s only one trick. I have many. Don’t get cocky. Boy!” He removed his scarf as he hissed the next words at me. “You’ll *wish*. My claws. Had killed you!”

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While Light and his party were busy with Gira, Mei led her team to Doc's laboratory on the outskirts of the Demonkin Nation's royal capital. The lab was nestled deep inside a forest that the royal family used for hunting. Mei had received this information from Miki's interrogation, and her search and capture team had spotted the cave that served as the entrance to the laboratory right where she had said it would be. The cave wasn't that deep, and at the rear of it, there was a door leading to the underground facility, though it was disguised to look like part of the rock.

"This place is rigged with magical defenses, but my partner here can disable 'em, no sweat," Lock said, wriggling and clicking with every word. Suzu, the Level 7777 gunner, silently and methodically used her elevated detection abilities to locate and disarm every single trap and alarm that had been placed around the entrance to the cave.

"Gotta hand it to our target, though, for thinking about building his secret lab in a place like this," Lock said. "These hunting grounds are off-limits to ordinary citizens and adventurers alike, so he'd be free to kill any unauthorized intruders he finds. On top of that, the kingdom's authorities are in charge of security in these woods, and—oh, it looks like she's done."

As Lock had pointed out, Suzu had finished disabling all of the traps. Everyone in the team had already made themselves invisible using SSSR Conceal cards, with Suzu at the vanguard to take care of the magical defenses. Mei picked up the loose thread of conversation by restating their objectives for this mission.

"As a reminder, we are here to apprehend the Master of the Demonkin Nation who goes by the name of Doc," Mei said. "Our orders are to capture him alive. He must not die as a result of this operation."

Doc served as the nexus relaying messages to the other Masters in his faction, so having him in custody should lead to the remaining Master, Goh, being captured for Light and his allies to extract critical information from him.

"The assailant who destroyed Master Light's village was a human with a power level above 9000," Mei stated. "The leader

of these Masters, Goh, has a power level in that range, so we must apprehend him as well. Failure is not an option on this mission, so I need you all to keep that firmly in mind."

"Ya got it, Mei!" Nazuna piped up. "This Doc guy ain't gonna get away from me, if that's what master wants!"

"We're tryin' to bag the chud who mighta wasted the Lightmeister's village..." Jack said. "I'm puttin' this Doc character in a cage, or I ain't the alpha bro!"

Suzu nodded excitedly. Other than her, the team spoke as loudly as they wanted, because they had used a gacha card to create a soundproof bubble around them that no noise could escape.

Mei nodded her approval at the spirit shown by the group under her command. "Suzu will lead the way so that she can disarm any remaining traps we may encounter. I will be ready to engage our target at all times and capture him with my Magistrings. Jack, you will provide cover in case the target decides to attack us. Nazuna, you must under no circumstances *do* anything or *touch* anything unless a battle breaks out. I cannot be any more serious when I tell you this."

She then addressed the entire team. "Although apprehending our target is critical, keep in mind that we may need to abandon this objective and retreat, depending on how the situation unfolds. Do not forget that Master Light is prioritizing our safety over the success of this mission."

After everyone had answered in the affirmative to Mei's satisfaction, the head maid initiated the infiltration of Doc's lab. Suzu opened the camouflaged door and led them down the stairs beyond, taking extra care to sweep the area for any traps or potential assailants using her heightened senses. Thanks to Suzu's scouting abilities, there was almost no chance of Doc or anyone else on his side knowing that intruders had entered his lab. But there was one slight problem that Nazuna immediately commented on.

"Is this place supposed to stink this bad?" She pinched her nose at the back of the line. "Ya think this Doc guy knows we're here and this is him attacking us?"

"No, I do not believe so," Mei said, her brows furrowing at the stench. "This odor could very well be due to a lack of ventilation in this active underground laboratory."

The noxious smell of blood, rotting flesh, and chemicals grew

stronger with every step the infiltration team took down the stairwell. However, it wasn't the least bit plausible that Doc would have set off a stink bomb to thwart the intruders—not when there were plenty of other defensive measures he could take that would prove far more effective.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Suzu headed in a direction where she could feel a presence. The others followed, making sure to walk the exact same path as Suzu, so they wouldn't trigger any booby traps. Although the entrance to the laboratory had been quite narrow, the place itself was as wide and spacious as a mansion. There was even a dining room, a large hall, and a guest parlor, by the looks of things.

The further they went, the more the scenery started to change. Mei's team entered a room that was filled with cages stacked on top of each other, each one stuffed with a monster, and all types imaginable on display. Nobody wanted to even contemplate why Doc would be keeping a collection of monsters down here. The cages soon became prisons holding humans of all ages and of both sexes, and although they were most certainly alive, none of them spoke or even moved a muscle. One might assume that they were sitting motionless because they had given up all hope, but the more likely explanation was that this listless, inert state had been forced upon them, either by a magical spell or by some other kind of intervention. Otherwise, the prisoners would likely have committed mass suicide if they had enough agency and were left unsupervised.

Mei's team continued to inspect the other sections of the laboratory in search of Doc, but they were unable to locate the Master. However, their lack of luck wasn't the only thing making them wince.

"This is truly horrific," Mei said. "I am thankful Master Light did not accompany us to see this."

Suzu and Jack nodded at the sentiment, while Nazuna scrunched her face up in disgust. Along the way, they had passed long-deceased human corpses that had been dismembered or fused together with monster organs. Other bodies had clearly been melted down using chemicals and mixed together to form sludgy, gruesome amalgamations. Many of the other victims they saw had been treated in ways that a mild-mannered person would hesitate to even put into words. The team finally arrived at a large pit that was filled with corpses.

Among the cadavers, there were thousands of bodies—perhaps tens of thousands—that had been rendered undead in some way. The souls of the living dead wailed, their voices filled with bitterness, pain, and misery, and they were the kind of voices belonging to people who wished to finally be allowed to die in peace, but who were forced to relive the cruelty of their final moments. Mei's team wanted to free these souls from their eternal agony, but they knew it was out of their hands.

"If we purify these souls, our target may find out that we have infiltrated his laboratory," Mei said. "In any case, purifying this number of souls would be beyond our mana capacity."

"Hell, I doubt even Miss Ellie could purify 'em all," Jack remarked. He usually referred to his allies in the Abyss as his "bros," but Ellie was one of the few exceptions to this rule. And although she boasted the largest reserves of mana in the Abyss, it still wouldn't be easy for her to purify such a massive number of souls unaided, and even if she could feasibly do it, she would likely need a source of extra mana and a sizable amount of time to achieve the feat. Another alternative was to simply burn the undead bodies and cremate them properly.

"I can't believe he would do this to members of his own race and just leave them here to suffer," Lock murmured. "Is this Doc person really human?"

Suzu gripped Lock a bit tighter, though not necessarily because she thought Doc was literally a nonhuman monster like her intelligent weapon was suggesting. She was also confident she would prevail over Doc in a battle if it came down to it. No, it was because now that she was faced with the sheer extent of Doc's barbarity, Suzu couldn't stop chills from running down her spine.

"We will continue our search for Doc," Mei stated after a pause. "If he has left this laboratory to evade capture, we shall focus our efforts on finding clues to his whereabouts, then pursue him."

Suzu agreed and started leading the team through the laboratory once more, but when all was said and done, Doc was nowhere to be found in the underground facility. However, nobody was particularly disheartened, because they had also found no signs to suggest that Doc had left the lab in a hurry to escape their clutches.

"If that jerk did notice us comin' his way, it don't look like he

grabbed what he could and bailed," Jack observed. "If anything, we just happened to show up while he's out. So do we wait around for him or what?"

"Let me think about it," Mei said, closing her eyes and weighing up her options. The team could either wait in the lab and ambush Doc on his return, or they could teleport back to the Abyss and try again later on. Both choices had their advantages and drawbacks, and Mei also explored some possible third options as well.

While the maid was busy brainstorming, Nazuna's eyes swept over the sights available to her in the team's present location, the laboratory's study. Aside from around the entrance, shelves stuffed with books and research documents covered every inch of wall space, and there was also a desk with paper stacked sky-high on it.

The team decided to stay put in the study for the time being, since the stench was the least pronounced in there. However, the team took care not to touch any of the books on the shelves, no matter how bored they were, because any one of the books could have been a magical trap, or pulling a book off a shelf might have caused an avalanche of printed material to spill out across the floor. In that event, even if they subsequently restored the books back to their places on the shelf, just one thing out of place would be enough to tip Doc off that someone had been in his lab.

Nazuna walked past the desk and saw something that piqued her interest. "Huh? What's this?"

Before Suzu and Lock could do anything to stop Nazuna, she grabbed a sheaf of papers that had been sandwiched between some books. This act caused Mei to rub her temple in pained frustration, since she had warned Nazuna repeatedly not to touch anything or do anything out of turn down here. She was just about to scold Nazuna for not following her orders, when the vampire knight beat the maid to the punch by showing her the papers she had picked up.

"Hey, Mei," Nazuna said. "Look at the name written here."

Mei read the name and audibly gasped, as did Jack, Suzu, and Lock.

Chapter 14: Versus Gira

“You’ll *wish*. My claws. Had killed you!” Gira removed his scarf to reveal a mouth filled with razor-sharp, knifelike teeth. If that weren’t enough, he used the giant claws sprouting from his back to elevate him into the air, making him look like some kind of six-legged spider. If I hadn’t activated the SSSR Truth’s Eye, I would’ve thought he was being hoisted into the air by invisible strings hanging from the ceiling.

“Curse your fate,” Gira said, “and die!”

He hurled himself forward using his giant spider legs—the force of his leap enough to fracture the floor—and sped toward us faster than I would’ve anticipated.

“You do know that I can still see how you’re attacking us, yes?” Gold pointed out. “Now, have a little taste of one of my golden sword strikes!”

Gold charged toward the onrushing Gira and weaved between his claw-legs to get in close, though this just prompted Gira to boost his speed yet more. But my Level 5000 knight was still able to track his movements and engage him, and he finally got in close enough to swing his sword at the Master’s head in an effort to chop it off. He wasn’t successful, however, as Gira caught the blade in his mouth, munched on it as if it were glass, and swallowed it.

“You *ate* my sword?!” Gold yelped incredulously. “How strong *are* those bally jaws of yours?!”

“Next. Your head!” Gira screeched. He swung a giant claw at Gold, who was still too stunned by what he’d just witnessed to react. He was only saved in the nick of time by Nemumu jumping in and blocking the claw with her knives.

“Gold! Move it or lose it, you dolt!” Nemumu screamed at the knight, which was enough to snap him out of his stupor and make him beat a hasty retreat. Gira refocused his claw attacks on Nemumu, making the talons twist and turn in ways that would have been impossible for a living creature. Guess they weren’t magic weapons for nothing.

Nemumu grunted and contorted her body out of the way, then put some distance between herself and Gira while evading

his claws three more times. However, the precision attacks of the giant claws were getting too fast and furious for her to evade them for much longer.

"SSR Fire Boulder—release!" I yelled, launching my own attack at Gira. As the name implied, the Fire Boulder was a giant rock covered in flames, but despite being a little basic, it seemed to do the trick. Gira crossed a number of the giant claws in front of him to protect him from the Fire Boulder, while planting the rest in the ground in a defensive stance. The Fire Boulder was still powerful enough to blast Gira backward, however, the claws cutting big, long grooves into the ground. I wasn't really expecting the Fire Boulder to take Gira down, but it bought Nemumu enough time to reach my position.

"Thank you so much, Lord Dark," she said.

"Those jaws of steel are just as much of a bother as those blinkin' claws!" Gold muttered. "I didn't expect him to chew my sword up like it was mint imperial!" He activated his Item Box and pulled out a spare sword. "Milord, I suggest we keep our distance and whittle him down to size."

"I'm running with Gold's idea!" I announced. "You two, provide me with backup! SSSR Pyroblade Blitz—release!"

The Pyroblade Blitz combined wind and flame properties to unleash a storm of fiery slash attacks. Since I was the Black Fools' mage and most adept at ranged attacks, I went on the offensive, and because I didn't need to worry about hurting or freaking out any bystanders here, I was free to use whatever cards I wished.

"Weak attack," Gira said. "Won't hurt. At all!"

He swung his spider legs around like a whirlwind to deflect all of the Pyroblade attacks. However, it had made him stop in his tracks, just like I had intended.

"SSSR Azure Blaze Pillar—release!" I yelled. A huge column of fire erupted out of nowhere and swallowed up Gira, the flames so hot, they burned a pale blue, and even from a safe distance away, my party and I could feel the heat from it. Any normal opponent wouldn't have stood a chance of surviving this attack, yet Gira merely leaped out of the fiery column like a grasshopper. What was more, he looked perfectly fine, aside from a handful of scorch marks here and there.

I pulled out another card to use on Gira now that he was in midair and unable to move out of the way, but before I could release it, he opened his mouth and roared, spitting shards of

metal at me at high speed.

"Milord! Nemumu! Get behind me!" Gold yelled as he quickly maneuvered himself in front of us with his shield up. He managed to deflect the sharp projectiles that banged repeatedly against his shield, sparing us from damage, but this distraction had allowed Gira to land and he was ready to pounce once more.

"Did he really just spit your sword at us, Gold? The one he bit off?" I asked. "Those pieces must have been in his belly, not his mouth, since he was speaking normally before that. I don't think my stomach could handle it if I tried that."

"Yeah, that feat was practically inhuman," Nemumu agreed.

Not just practically, I thought. *I don't think this Gira is human at all. Or even a living creature, for that matter.* Not only was there something off about Gira's whole attitude, his astonishing ability to chew up swords and spit them out at will had convinced me that our opponent was not all he made himself out to be. It was right at that moment that I received a return Telepathy call from Ellie.

"Blessed Lord Light!" she said. "Forgive me for replying so late, but I've finally found the real Gira!"

Nice work, Ellie! I responded via the Telepathy link. *Perfect timing too!*

I took off my mask and turned to face my opponent, not as Dark the adventurer, but as Light, the overlord of the Abyss. This whole while, I had been buying time for Ellie to locate the *real* Gira, but now that she had found him, there was no longer any need to hide my true strength or power level.

"It's time to put your dolls away, Gira," I said. "Or is hiding and having your mannequin army fight for you the only thing you're good at?"

The fake Gira didn't say anything, instead taking a few steps back in response to all the extra energy I had started exuding. He grimaced at me in the knowledge that he was now facing a near-insurmountable gulf in our power levels.

"I knew from the very start that there was something off about you," I said. "You showed up for our duel right on time, knowing we'd have set up some sort of trap, and you allowed yourself to be teleported here without so much as a whimper."

Sure, *maybe* Gira might have been irate enough at the elf picketers to act that recklessly, but if I were in his shoes, I definitely would have been a lot more cautious in my approach,

since I would be putting my life on the line. It just didn't make sense for him to take the bait so willingly. Because I'd suspected Gira had sent a phony, I'd gotten Ellie to run Appraisals on Gira and everyone else who had shown up at the fountain as a bit of extra insurance. But she hadn't found anything out of place at the fountain, which had only raised my suspicions even further.

"Another thing that smelled fishy about all this was that you really don't seem like the type who loves to slice and dice stuff," I continued. "You're reputed to have a fetish for cutting things up with your own hands, yet all you've done so far is attack us with either those giant talons or your mouth."

Maybe you could have argued that Gira liked cutting things up with those giant invisible claws, but that didn't sit right with me. Sure, if we ignored everything Miki had said about his knife fetish, I probably wouldn't have suspected a thing, and the Appraisal did say that this bad guy right here was the real deal. But if this was supposed to be a replica of Gira, the UR Double Shadow card would have created a better body double than this, because there were just a few too many inconsistencies. There could only be a few other explanations for this, and if I were to hazard a guess at what the true one might be, I'd say that this Gira in front of me was some kind of golem being manipulated remotely using a spell or a magic item or something. If that were the case, all the pieces would fit.

"You chomped on Gold's blade, swallowed it, then spat it out again at me," I pointed out. "There might be a living creature out there that could pull off that kind of trick, but it would make a whole lot more sense if you were actually a golem. Maybe even a golem from the ancient civilization. And if you could control a dummy that looked just like you, you'd have no issues walking into a trap and being teleported away by your foes, since the worst that could happen would be the golem being destroyed."

I had my battle with Cavaur to thank for this particular deduction. The flesh zombie which was used as a spy by its creator—one of the Dragonute Empire Masters, Hisomi—was in fact a product of a failed experiment to replicate the effects of a magic item from the ancient civilization. That item had allowed a person to project their own consciousness onto an avatar in order for the user to operate from a safe, remote location through the living dummy. After learning that such a magic item had once existed, I was more or less able to guess what Gira had

been up to.

"Damn," said Gira. "Figured out my trick. This brat." Gira—or I should say, the fake Gira—scrunched his face up like a real person would.

"The other Masters. Didn't see through it. Not for many, many years," the fake Gira continued. "Magic item. Ancient civilization. You're the first. To get it all right. You're good. I'll admit it. And this energy. What power level? You really human? A Master? How'd you reach this power level?"

"Like I said before, I'm not as stupid as you are to reveal my tricks to my opponent," I said.

Even though Gira was operating a golem, I could tell that my last comment had stung him from the avatar's expression and its general overtones. *Honesty, it's very hard to tell that this is a dummy, given its facial expressions and the whole breathing thing it's got going on,* I reflected. *If the attacks this thing was pulling off end up being no different from what the real Gira can do, then this technology is seriously mind-blowing.*

I was well aware that the ancient civilization had weapons and magic items that were unable to be replicated in the present day, and it looked like this golem had been made using very advanced methods. The golem had even managed to fool my Appraisal.

Meanwhile, the fake Gira's shoulders slumped in apparent resignation before he lowered himself to the ground so that he could stand on his own two feet.

"Your power level. Higher. Than the real me," the fake Gira said. "Can't defeat you. With this body. Not even if I tried. Futile to resist."

"If you're going to surrender quietly, you should do it now," I warned. "I'm willing to go easy on you, since I need to interrogate you anyway."

"Surrender? No." The fake Gira snorted in derision before ripping the clothes around his abdomen area. He then sliced open his own belly to reveal what was inside.

The inside of his belly had the normal flesh and organs you'd find in a regular living creature, but there were also gears, tubing, and other artificially made thingamajigs mixed in. But the object that caught all of our eyes was the giant magic gem embedded smack-dab in the center of the abdomen. It was undoubtedly the biggest magic gem I'd seen on the surface

world, and I wondered if it was supposed to be the golem's core that gave it life. But this wasn't the time to be speculating about the mechanics, because a huge amount of mana was flowing into the giant gem—a lot more than even a Level 9999 like me could safely ignore. In fact, the gem was absorbing so much mana, it wasn't able to contain all the energy, and it started to crack. I immediately figured out what the fake Gira was up to.

"Are you planning to blow yourself up with that magic gem?!" I yelled at it.

"Yeah," the fake Gira smirked triumphantly. "This gem. Kills you. Dead."

Practically as soon as Gira had leveled that threat at us, the minions of his that we had already slain rose from the dead, and as one big mass, darted toward us.

"I'd been wondering why he would have even bothered to bring this useless lot with him," Gold remarked. "They're clearly meant to slow us down while he blows us all to kingdom come! Of all the dastardly cads we've encountered up to now, this rotter really takes the biscuit!"

I knew each of us had made sure that every last one of Gira's lackeys was dead and without a pulse, because frankly, we weren't stupid enough to overlook potential survivors. But Gira must have done something to his minions that allowed him to manipulate their bodies even after death, and he was making use of that ability to attack us with corpse puppets so that we couldn't escape without a fight. It only took us a second to hack ourselves a path through the mass of minions, but that critical second was all the fake Gira needed.

"You're dead," Gira announced. An explosive ball of light formed around him which started radiating toward us, faster than lightning. Faced with that sight, I had to think just as fast.

I can probably survive that explosion, I thought. *But I'm not so sure about Nemumu and Gold.* I had a feeling in my gut that told me the energy from the magic gem would likely cause real damage to my two fighters if it hit them. We didn't have time to teleport out of the arena, but there *was* one ultrarare card that I figured could get us out of this jam.

Just as the destructive ball of light was about to reach us, I activated the gacha card I had in mind. "UR Time Stop—release!"



As soon as the words left my mouth, our entire world turned black-and-white, and everything was put on hold. The UR Time Stop was a card that froze time for exactly one minute while allowing the user to move around in that time.

"Thank you so much for saving us, Lord Light!" Nemumu gushed. "We're still alive because of you!"

"To think the blighter would actually go and blow himself up when driven into a corner," Gold tutted. "Though putting on a puppet show with a cast of dead bodies just to slow us down was even less foreseeable. What a dreadful little scalawag, what?"

As per the card's instructions, I should theoretically have been the only one moving and talking once the UR Time Stop was activated, but Nemumu and Gold were also still able to move about because they each had a UR Time Crash card in their possession.

For those wondering, the Time Crash card had the effect of canceling out any time-stopping magic a foe might unleash, though it only worked on the wielder and nothing beyond that. Furthermore, the card triggered automatically on finding itself within a time freeze's area of influence, which meant Nemumu and Gold didn't need to activate it to be able to keep moving around.

"I'm just glad you two are all right," I said. "I'm going to try to counter this blast, so you'd both better get behind me. The UR Time Stop card is about to run out."

The three of us moved farther away from the bright explosion, and as instructed, my two teammates took up positions behind me as I pulled out another card that I would need in order to negate this blast.

"Okay, that's sixty seconds up...now," I announced. Our surroundings regained their color once more, and the sphere of destructive light started moving again, swallowing up Gira's lackeys as it barreled toward us. But we weren't the least bit worried about it this time.

"UR Gravity World—release!" I yelled, unleashing a black hole larger than the ball of light. The dark mass of gravity collided with the explosion, and at the point of contact, all of the energy formed a funnel that was subsequently sucked into the black hole.

The Gravity World card worked by vacuuming foes into a black hole, but this time, it was the explosion that was sucked up,

along with whatever was left of the fake Gira and his minions. Once the Gravity World had finished absorbing everything in front of us, the black mass shrunk and disappeared, leaving silence and a not-so-slight problem in its wake.

"That's just typical of a UR card," I sighed. "Who would've thought it would be powerful enough to wreck Ellie's arena this bad?"

The Gravity World was just what we had needed to counter the explosion triggered by the fake Gira, but it turned out that its suction power had been enough to blow a huge, clean-edged hole into the ceiling of the coliseum, and we were left looking up at the sunny sky above. Ellie—the Forbidden Witch herself, no less—had made this arena strong enough to withstand all sorts of attacks without anyone on the surface world noticing, yet my UR card had just punched a gaping hole into its ceiling.

"I unleashed that Gravity World because I was looking for something that'd completely cancel out the blast from that giant gem," I muttered. "But I guess I got carried away."

Thinking about it after the fact, I could've used the breathing room afforded to us by the Time Stop card to teleport me and my team out of the arena and left the fake Gira to destroy himself and his flunkies. I thought I had been making a rational, split-second decision on the battlefield, but it dawned on me that I'd actually been in too much of a panic due to my desire to protect my allies. Using a weapon that was so overpowered for the situation was such a rookie mistake, I couldn't help facepalming in embarrassment. Gold apparently agreed, since he made a point of acting like he hadn't noticed.

"Like you say, old bean, that black hole had quite an advantage over that weasel's explosive rock, what?" Gold offered charitably.

Nemumu, on the other hand, genuinely hadn't noticed my slipup and was once again quick to laud my heroics. "You're so amazing, Lord Light!" she gushed. "You're even powerful enough to destroy walls that were erected by Miss Ellie! Only you could surpass our might, my lord!"

I decided I couldn't stand there and act embarrassed forever, so I turned and faced my two partymates. "Thanks, Nemumu. But what are we gonna do with the hole in the ceiling? This place is far away from any settlements at least, but we can't just go and leave the arena unfixed. Someone up on the surface might

discover the hole. Or worse, fall into it and die. I'd better cover that thing up if I wanna sleep well at night."

"So we're not going to teleport to Ellie and provide her with backup?" Nemumu asked.

I shook my head and Gold did likewise.

"It wouldn't do for an overseer like milord to swoop in and take credit for capturing a foe from a subordinate," Gold explained. "A true ruler knows when to delegate assignments, and to whom. Another thing to keep in mind is that even Miss Ellie would not be pleased if we intruded on her turf, whether under orders from milord or no."

Gold made his shoulders shudder in a jokingly dramatic way, but he was right in everything he'd said. By this point, Ellie would have already relocated the real Gira to a separate arena equipped with a teleportation jamming spell to prevent him from getting away, and when it came to fighting ability, she was second only to Nazuna. Even Nemumu winced at the thought of barging in on Ellie while she was battling. Neither Nemumu nor Gold would stand a chance if they stood in the way of the superwitch, but my two teammates were so loyal to me, they would have happily thrown themselves headlong into Ellie's battle if I ordered them to.

This whole thing showed that if I give out the wrong orders because I've misjudged a situation or an enemy, I'll end up getting Nemumu, Gold, or the other people in the Abyss killed, I thought absentmindedly. *I was merely the second son of a peasant farmer up until a few years ago, but now, I have so many people by my side. I still can't believe how far I've come.* I'd chosen this path because it was the best way to complete my goals, but I felt duty bound to make the right decisions every time, as well as make sure that my friends were well taken care of.

"Lord Light, is something wrong?" Nemumu asked. She must have noticed the grim look on my face.

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about," I replied, flashing her a quick smile. "First things first, let's cover up this hole, shall we? I wonder which gacha card will do the trick…"

Chapter 15: The Avatar Golem

At around the same time that the fake Gira was blowing himself up in an attempt to destroy the Black Fools, the real Gira was lying in bed in a room deep underground, below the Bourreaux's mansion. He was dressed in his usual baggy clothes and a scarf with a skull pattern that covered his mouth, while atop his head, he was wearing a helmet of sorts.

He rose into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, removed the helmet, then threw it down on the mattress like it was a piece of junk. Even though half of his face was still covered, Gira's piercing gaze eloquently conveyed his all-consuming irritation, and he clicked his tongue like a kid who had just lost a multiplayer game.

"Can't believe. I used it," he muttered. "My last resort."

Gira glanced down at the helmet lying on the bed. "No. High-level, they were. Could've had more moves. Up their sleeves. Best choice, hit 'em. With biggest attack. Before *they* made a move. Still a waste. But no choice. Give up. On secret weapon."

He still felt bitter about losing his Avatar Golem, but he managed to convince himself that sacrificing the weapon had been his best course of action. When Gira had first gotten a good look at the Black Fools via the Avatar Golem—through which he could feel the battleground experience with all five senses—he thought the golem would be enough to defeat them, but it soon became clear that his opponents had been disguising their true abilities using an as-yet-unknown mechanism. The one named Dark, in particular, had a power level that far surpassed Gira's own. So faced with that power imbalance, his only choice had been to overload the giant magic gem that served as the Avatar Golem's core with mana and unleash a deadly explosion. While sacrificing the golem had been a painful decision, it was one Gira felt he could live with. However, there was one thing that was troubling him.

I destroyed it. The Avatar Golem, he thought. *But didn't see all. Not to the end. They didn't run far. Must've got 'em. I think.*

Unfortunately, Gira had no way of confirming whether or not he had actually destroyed the Black Fools. There was a chance

Dark had survived, but as for the other two, at the very least, they would've come off much the worse for wear. As a result, it would no doubt take the Black Fools an inordinate amount of time to heal and regroup, giving Gira more than enough time to go on the run.

Dating back to the ancient civilization, the Avatar Golem was a magic item that allowed the user to transfer their consciousness into it via a link created by wearing the accompanying helmet, with the physique, mana, and several other attributes of the user also being mapped onto the empty husk. In other words, without the link, the Avatar Golem had no eyes, nose, mouth, or other organs, but when a link was established, the golem took on the same outward appearance of the user, up to and including the sex organs.

Gira had found the Avatar Golem in a dungeon in the Demonkin Nation. Due to his nation having a lot of dungeons—third only to the Dwarf Kingdom and the Dark Elf Islands—Gira would regularly explore dungeons for his own amusement as well as personal gain, though not quite as frequently as that leveling junkie, Daigo. At some point, Gira stumbled across the Avatar Golem in an ancient ruin that had transformed into a dungeon, and he had immediately put it to use, leveling up by defeating opponents remotely. Not only was the Avatar Golem useful for shielding Gira from risk, he could use it to go as deep into dungeons as he wanted, since it needed no food nor provisions to keep going. Eventually, Gira got into the habit of simply deploying the Avatar Golem as his stand-in whenever he had to go and meet other people, and it was such a perfect replica that nobody noticed it wasn't the real deal, not even Goh or the other Masters.

"Very useful item. Real shame," Gira grumbled. "But had to. Cut losses. Might be lucky. Find another. Better than alternative."

Gira got up from where he was perched on the bed and set off for the kitchen for a drink to wet his dry throat. But as soon as he walked out of the room, he nearly physically bumped into the last person he was expecting to encounter.

"Good morning, Mr. Gira," a young woman chirped in a euphonious voice. "You mustn't sleep in so late. It's bad for your health."

Gira flinched as his eyes landed on the stunningly beautiful young maiden. At around 160 centimeters in height, she was

already taller than him, but she wore a witch's hat that made her seem even taller still. Her long blonde hair perfectly complemented her hourglass figure to the point where she looked like she had been sculpted by a god. Her beauty was so sublime, in fact, the eye tended to get drawn away from the four grimoires that were floating around her.

The witch was standing in the lounge area that made up part of Gira's private suite in the mansion. No one aside from Gira himself was allowed to set foot in his suite, which only added to the shock of the encounter and made his brain freeze up for a second or two. The maiden—Ellie—took advantage of his momentary hesitation to produce a card from her cleavage.

"Teleportation—release, shall we?" Ellie said with a smile.



Gira's shock was compounded yet further as his surroundings instantly transformed and he found himself in an arena that looked a lot like the coliseum his Avatar Golem had just been battling in. It took Gira only one more second to realize he was up against a very formidable opponent who had dragged him into a sticky situation. He fought back the urge to cluck his tongue in annoyance, and instead lowered his hips in preparation to counter any attack that might be forthcoming. While he did this, he took stock of his surroundings: he was in a vast arena with a hard floor and a ceiling so high, he could barely see it. Gira estimated that a large castle could easily fit within this space, though unlike the previous arena, there were no intricate engravings on the wall or a throne taking up space. The coliseum was simply designed, as if it were a warehouse for storing goods.

"I created this place as a backup arena where Blessed Lord Light could battle you if necessary," Ellie explained. "I've made it so that no one can escape this area, but since it was only a backup, I didn't have time to spruce it up as I would have preferred. So I'll have to ask you to please stop staring at everything so intently, because it's embarrassing."

Ellie started blushing in apparent shame, but Gira wasn't the least bit perturbed by Ellie's cloyingly bashful histrionics.

"You serve that Master? An ally?" Gira said curtly.

Ellie raised a hand to cover her mouth in another show of ashamed astonishment. "Oh, how rude of me. I totally forgot to introduce myself. If you'll allow me..."

Ellie moved one foot back, placed her right hand on her witch's hat, and gripped the hem of her skirt as she curtsied and flashed Gira a beautiful smile.

"You may call me the SUR Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie. I am a faithful servant of Blessed Lord Light, as well as his future bride. I hope we will become well acquainted."

"SUR? L-Level 9999? Witch?" Gira's eyes widened. "*You're* the Wicked Witch? Of the tower?!"

"Indeed, I am the Wicked Witch," Ellie confirmed. "As ordered by my Blessed Lord, I've come to apprehend you. Because I'm relatively skilled in the art of sorcery, I was able to detect trace mana flowing in a certain direction beneath your mansion. I used that mana channel to locate your *real* body as opposed to that impersonator you sent in your place."

Gira remained silent, so Ellie continued. “All I had to do after that was bring you to this arena, which I have magically made foolproof against teleportation spells, so you have no means of escape. Forgive me for being so late in bringing you here, and for using very forceful and unladylike methods to do so.”

Of course, Ellie had no compunction about surprising Gira and whisking him away to this arena, meaning this apology was completely perfunctory and totally condescending. In fact, her whole attitude conveyed to him that she thought he was entirely beneath her. It took Gira a few more seconds to recover from his initial shock, though when he did, yet more questions flooded into his mind.

Level 9999. Mind games? Gira thought. *But. Can feel energy. From her. Can’t read stats. With Appraisal. Must be blocked. By her level. But this energy. Huge. Just like Dark. From what I saw. With Avatar Golem. A sorceress. Can pull illusions. But this? Not a bluff. And there’s someone. More powerful? Leading her? Is it C? No. If C, would’ve ended everything. By now. Then, this “Blessed Lord Light.” Just like C? Almost like C?*

Gira still had no idea that the “Blessed Lord Light” mentioned by Ellie referred to Dark, and he jumped to the conclusion that the one the witch paid fealty to was an entity on a similar footing to C.

Then, why? If that’s the case? Gira’s mind raced back and forth between multiple theories about what was actually happening, but all his speculation only raised more questions.

“Why you here alone?” Gira unintentionally said aloud.

Ellie quizzically cocked her head to one side. “Why should *that* be an issue?” If she had done that cutesy gesture up on the surface world, all the males in the vicinity would have fallen in love with her regardless of whether they were young or old, child or adult. However, due to Ellie being such an enigmatic opponent, Gira couldn’t afford to get distracted by any romantic feelings that might stir within him. Feeling like he needed to exercise extreme caution, he swiftly took in his surroundings once more.

“Your level. Higher than mine. Witch,” Gira remarked. “But still think. You can capture me? Alone? No friends? Better odds. With backup.”

“Oh, so that’s what you meant,” Ellie said, softly clapping her hands together once. She had a captivating smile on her face

and her response was triumphant. “Yes, I do have other allies, though I’m hesitant to ask for their help to defeat such a worthless opponent. In fact, allowing Blessed Lord Light to dirty his hands by capturing a filthy rat such as yourself would be highly discourteous to him, which is why I have elected to apprehend you single-handedly.”

Still peering around in case a surprise attack was launched on him from any direction, Gira felt a sudden rage as Ellie flung disparaging barbs at him. This was the first time he had ever encountered anyone with the gall to mock him to such a degree and right to his face, and his pride was thoroughly stinging as a result.

“Don’t get carried away. Whore,” Gira seethed. “Think your level’s that high? To kill me? Not nearly. Just a witch. Easy to kill. Start by carving. From toes up. Make you sing. Through tears. What I wanna hear.”

“Oh, gosh. What a terrifying prospect,” Ellie mocked. “You shouldn’t say such things to a fair maiden like myself. Not that I’m bothered by it one bit, since you won’t even get close to carrying out that brutish deed.”

“You’re dead,” Gira spat. “You’ll see ’em. Taste ’em. Your bleeding guts. Cut you up. Make you tell me. Everything. All the info. Then kill you. Dead!”

Gira unleashed the full force of his palpable Level 7000-plus malice on Ellie, but the superwitch reacted to the murderous aura as one would to a slight breeze, her expression remaining relaxed and composed.

“You’re welcome to try. If you can,” she retorted. “Still, you’re just a filthy sewer rat who only knows how to hide from his enemies, so I doubt you’re capable of living up to your threats. But by all means, engage me to the best of your pitiful abilities.”

“You’re dead, witch!” Gira snarled. “*Worse* than dead!”

He dashed forward, with a katar dagger immediately appearing in each hand.

“Phantom Mitosis!” he yelled, splitting himself into ten identical copies that were all ready to make mincemeat out of Ellie.

“Oh, goodness. So you can make duplicates of yourself, can you?” Ellie said, slightly surprised. “That’s very interesting. For a parlor trick. Sacer Arbor!”

Ellie countered with a strategic-class spell, causing dozens of

living, breathing trees to sprout up out of the ground. Not only did these trees create a near-impassable obstacle for the enemy, they could stab foes with their branches and turn them into more trees. The Sacer Arbor spell would have been highly potent against just about any opponent, but the multiple Giras quickly proved to be a rare exception.

"You're *chopping up* my Sacer Arbors?" Ellie yelped.

The Phantom Mitosis skill was able to create exact copies of its wielder, even down to their attacking capabilities, and because it was the world's top assassin, Gira, using the skill, the mob of Gira copies easily managed to hack their way through the thicket of murder trees. Ellie wasn't about to just give up, however.

"Divine Wind Storm!" she yelled, breaking out another strategic-class spell.

The Divine Wind Storm was designed to shred a target into fragments using a whirlwind of wind blades, but instead of killing the Giras, Ellie merely sought to blow them back to give herself some space. As anticipated, the ten Gira copies were too lightweight and short in stature to withstand the concentrated gales, and they were lifted up into the air and scattered like dry autumn leaves. Ellie didn't let up on her attacks.

"Elemental Summon, Surrogate Spellcast, Parallel Tomes," Ellie chanted. "Activation phrase: Incant to wilt flowers. Bloom to end all! Veir!"

The four grimoires that had been dancing around Ellie in midair suddenly opened and rapidly flipped through their pages.

"Fortress Impact! Magma Wave! Heavy Metal Rain! Terra Chain!"

Ellie channeled the forces from the summoned elementals into upgrading the grimoires so that they would unleash four strategic-class spells simultaneously: the Fortress Impact spell would summon a whole fortress to drop on the target; Magma Wave would manifest lava and engulf the opponent in molten rock; Heavy Metal Rain would start a downpour of melted globs of metal on the foe and the surrounding area; and last of all, the Terra Chain was a gravity spell that would pin the enemy to the ground with enough force to make a crater. All four attacks were strategic-class spells of the highest order, and the spectacle made for an epic battle in its own right, taking place as it was in this underground coliseum. Ellie's spells caused the ten Giras to

be pressed into the ground until they formed a depression, then the resulting fortress debris, magma, and molten metal filled up the crater, sending thick smoke rising into the air.

"That hailstorm of molten metal was too much," Ellie groaned, pressing a handkerchief to her mouth and flapping at the air in front of her. "Perhaps I should've picked a different spell instead of Heavy Metal Rain."

Ellie's reaction was totally counterintuitive to what one might expect from someone who had just put their opponent through hellfire. Once she was done talking to herself, a figure flew up through the smoke and the flames, and landed on the edge of the crater.

"Several strategic-class spells. You. All at once," Gira muttered. "Maniacal witch!"

"I didn't *think* you'd perish from that little warm-up, but I'm glad to see you're still alive and well."

Gira had lost all of his Phantom Mitosis copies, but he had managed to escape himself, if only barely. Parts of his clothes, hair, and skin were badly burned, and both the handles and the blades of the katars he was holding had melted, making them too damaged to be useful anymore. Ellie, on the other hand, had yet to even move from her starting position, the witch a picture of impeccable composure. As she had said, those strategic-class spells were just five-finger exercises to her.

It was at this point that Gira finally came to fully understand the near-measureless gulf in abilities between himself and Ellie. But instead of letting himself feel crestfallen, he doubled down on his belief that his victory was assured.

Four strategic-class spells. In no time. My god... thought Gira. *But still just typical mage. Stands in one place. Like gun turret. A sitting duck.*

Gira's headline stats displayed his Gift as "Assassin," but if the stats screen had provided a little more detail, it would have read "Assassin (Mage Slayer)." There were multiple kinds of assassins, and Gira was the type that specialized in killing mages. However, it was doubtful if that specialty alone would be enough for him to pull off an upset victory over a sorceress with a power level that was 2000 levels above his—but only if Gira didn't call on the other secret weapon afforded by his ability.

Gira tossed aside his ruined katars and summoned the weapon in question. "Greed Grid!"

A skeletal figure wearing a tattered hooded cloak and holding a giant scythe manifested behind Gira. Without skipping a beat, he grabbed the scythe from the Grim Reaper figure, struck the ground with the blade so that it dug in, and started reciting an incantation.

"The road to death revealed to me! Dead wolves' ribs eternally! The bones grow old and turn to dust! Slay the wise ones as you must! Fool's Slope!" Gira said.

Ellie raised her hands in front of her in a defensive stance so that she was ready for anything, and kept her eyes glued on Gira to see what he would do next. But after about a minute of nothing happening, Ellie again tilted her head curiously.

"Isn't that supposed to have done something?" Ellie finally remarked. "Was it a dud?"

"Dud? No," Gira replied. "You'll see. Now!"

He rushed toward Ellie, swinging the scythe, but she simply shrugged at the spectacle.

"Haven't we already done this?" Ellie sighed. "There is no art in your approach. Even a stray dog is able to learn new tricks."

She proceeded to unleash another litany of strategic-class spells. "Dragon Maws, Hell Hounds, Venom, Ice World!"

Dragon Maws caused a number of clay dragon mouths to rise up out of the ground and attack the foe, and despite being made of dirt, these jaws could be strengthened by saturated mana to make their crushing bites more powerful than a real dragon's.

Hell Hounds manifested five giant hunting dogs that would pursue their intended target for all eternity if they had to. There was no escaping the hounds, even if the one being hunted scurried to the ends of the world or made an interdimensional hop through time and space, for the hounds could cross any boundary and would never cease giving chase until they had finally ripped their target apart. This meant that the only way to survive the Hell Hounds was to destroy the entire five-strong pack.

Venom was a spell that produced flesh-eating slime mold that would relentlessly cause damage to the target until it was completely digested. Because the mold wasn't an actual poison, it was impervious to all antitoxins and magic, and the only way a victim could recover was if they had the power to get rid of all the mold spores at once, even as they struggled in their life-or-death situation.

The final attack, Ice World, was a spell that would encase foes and objects alike in ice within a vast area of effect, leaving only the spellcaster and their allies untouched. Ellie's basic strategy was to slow Gira down using the Dragon Maws and the Hell Hounds, debilitate him using Venom, then entrap him with Ice World.

Gira, however, managed to expertly counter every single one of these strategic-class spells. He slashed the earthenware Dragon Maws with his scythe, before using the same weapon to vanquish the house-sized Hell Hounds, who had all charged at him as one. Gira then withstood both the Venom and Ice World spells by pulling out a magic item that produced a force field around him. While he was doing all of this, he struggled to get close enough to Ellie for his scythe to reach her. The normal reaction to an opponent engaging in such a useless attempt would be to sneer at him, but Ellie was growing more alarmed by the second.

There's still no sign that him striking the ground with that scythe has done anything, Ellie mused. *That Grim Reaper simply vanished after handing the scythe to Mr. Gira. From what I can tell, the weapon is only capable of physical force, and I can't sense anything abnormal about it. If he's trying to deceive me, this act has dragged on for far, far too long. But if that scythe isn't a trick…*

As she had this back-and-forth with herself, Ellie prepared to cast another strategic-class spell. This one wasn't intended to slow Gira down, but to torch him to within an inch of his life.

"Plasma Sundow—" Ellie had expected a giant, ultrahigh-temperature ball of energy to form above her head, but there wasn't even a fizzle. The misfire initially shocked Ellie, but she realized what had caused the spell to fail almost immediately.

"Oh, *now* I see!" Ellie said excitedly. "So *that's* why you buried your scythe in the ground!"

"Not the time. Or place. To be impressed," Gira harrumphed. "I'll have. Your head!"

He closed the gap between them in a fraction of a second and swung his scythe at her, but her Level 9999 abilities allowed her to track his moves precisely and dodge the blade by a hair. Ellie did a backward flip in the air—clasping her hat with her hand to hold it in place—landed on her other hand, then pushed off again to end up back on her feet, the gap between her and Gira reestablished.

“Well, I know I cast that last spell, since I felt the mana flowing through me, but nothing happened,” Ellie remarked, still fascinated. “I’m very familiar with this phenomenon, since it shares the same mechanics as spell cancellation fields you find in dungeons.”

“Correct,” Gira drawled, smirking with a newfound wicked confidence. “You’re clever, witch.”

“Still, do you *really* think it will give you the edge over me?” Ellie parried. “Honestly, you’re as much of a fool as you are a mouse of a man.”

“Can’t fool me,” Gira said. “You’re a mage. Now powerless.”

Gira had Ellie pegged as a conventional mage who was rarely mobile and stood on one spot in a safe, rearguard location, like a gun battery. To counter such fighters, he knew he had to either spring a surprise attack, wait for the mage to run out of mana, or completely negate their spellcasting abilities. A surprise attack was off the table because they were already facing each other head-on. Waiting for her mana stores to deplete also wasn’t feasible, since there was no telling how much mana the witch had to play with at her elevated power level. That only left the final option, so Gira had decided to reveal his ace in the hole.

“This Greed Grid. From the Grim Reaper of Avarice,” Gira explained. “Strike the ground. Form a center. You’re stuck. In cancellation field. Can’t cast spells. But you figured it out. Fast. Pretty smart. For a witch.”

Ellie giggled and elegantly tossed her hair to the side. “Please, you flatter me.”

Gira wasn’t sure if Ellie was completely oblivious to his sarcasm or if she understood his intimation and said the line anyway, just to aggravate him. Whatever the case, Ellie seemed as calm and collected as ever, as if she wasn’t the least bit concerned that she was standing in the middle of a spell cancellation zone. This attitude of hers ticked Gira off, but he managed to keep himself in check, largely because he needed to buy some time.

The Greed Grid. Furthest extent. Of Mage Slayer, he thought. *Powerful weapon. But also with drawbacks.*

One of these drawbacks was that Gira could only create the Greed Grid by taking the time to manifest the Grim Reaper of Avarice, grabbing the scythe from the summon, and creating an epicenter in front of him. Another hitch was that it took a

considerable amount of time for the grid to actually form. Although the area of effect expanded at a faster velocity with each minute that passed, Gira still needed to wait for the grid to become big enough to be effective, so he engaged in some conversational bluster with Ellie in order to buy enough time for the Greed Grid to enlarge to the point where she would be trapped by the sheer magnitude of the spell cancellation field, and with little hope of escaping from its bounds in time.

The third drawback was that the Greed Grid required souls from living beings to form, and a larger grid necessitated consuming more souls. Due to this prerequisite, Gira was constantly on the hunt for more souls, which was ultimately why he had established the Bourreaux and why he often frequented dungeons to kill monsters. He didn't just engage in those activities for pleasure, but for his own personal benefit too.

The biggest downside of all, however, was that the Greed Grid served as a double-edged sword. Any mage caught within the field wouldn't be able to cast spells, but it meant neither could he. Yet despite all of these liabilities that came with the Greed Grid, Gira found the skill to be highly useful when battling mages, and it was a weapon that could only be produced by a Gift bearing the name "Assassin (Mage Slayer)."

Meanwhile, Ellie was staring intently at the large scythe, not as an opponent in a battle, but as a curious researcher.

"It's normally an extremely difficult feat to create a spell cancellation field," Ellie remarked. "A highly skilled mage would need to arrange a whole load of large bits of equipment and go through multiple steps and rituals in order to activate a field. Yet you were able to create a cancellation field using just that puny little scythe. I find that highly intriguing. Does that thing share the same properties as a dungeon core? If so, that would make it even more intriguing."

Gira snickered darkly. "Big talk. But time's up. You're mine."

Gira knew the Greed Grid had expanded to a point where Ellie could never hope to run beyond its boundaries. At least not while staying within this arena.

"You kept yapping. Greed Grid got bigger," Gira said. "Can't escape. Even at your high level. You're a mage. Only cast spells. Me, agile. You, not."

Gira assumed he would be able to overpower Ellie even though she was 2000 levels higher than him, because to him,

despite her power level being 9999, she was simply a glorified mage, making her subpar to frontline combat warriors with a similar power level when it came to physical strength and athleticism. On the other hand, Gira was a Level 7000 assassin with physical abilities that allowed him to move around fast enough to get him within range to cleave Ellie in half with his scythe, especially if her back was turned because she'd decided this was a good time to turn tail and flee.

Gira's tactics were cut-and-dried, yet potent: take her spellcasting out of the picture, then kill the mage using physical dexterity alone. Knowing he at last had the upper hand, Gira fired a barrage of demeaning commands at Ellie.

"Grovel. For your life," he growled. "Without clothes. Down. Hands and knees. Say you're sorry. For defying me. Your lord and master. Rub your cheek. On ground. Cry eyes out. Look miserable. Look pathetic. Make me pity. Do that. Easy death. Maybe."

Ellie refused to respond, so Gira continued with his taunting. "Don't wanna die? Act like a woman. *My* woman. Witch. Use your looks. Your nice body. Spread your legs. Wide open. Beg for me. Like a whore. Do that? Won't kill you. Maybe. If you ask nice. What'll it be? Choose!"

Gira emphasized this final remark by tapping the scythe multiple times on the ground. Scoffing extra triumphantly, he continued to taunt and humiliate Ellie. "Too proud, witch? You choose death? A horrible one? For dignity?" he hissed. "Sure hope you did. Chop off your feet. Your arms. So you can't run. Or move. Next, your stomach. Slice it open. Rip out your guts. Shove in your mouth. Make you taste them. Eat your fill."

The insanity in Gira's tone ratcheted up a few octaves. "Next, your face. Peel off the skin. Like an onion! You're high-level. You'll survive. The skinning. The evisceration. All you'll do is suffer. And suffer. And suffer good! Your fault! For challenging me!"

Despite his rant, Ellie remained totally placid. If anything, the look in her eyes had shifted from one of a scientist's curiosity to one of contempt for someone she regarded as lower than a worm. She finally sighed irritably and responded.

"Honestly, your scythe is such an unusual case, I wanted to observe it further for research purposes, but you keep on interrupting my concentration with your vulgar wittering," she complained. "This is why I detest men, save for Blessed Lord

Light.”

Ellie fixed her icy, aquamarine eyes on Gira once more and sniffed with derision. “Do you really think I’d run away or beg for my life? Why would I even think of doing something so *inelegant*? Especially against someone who’s basically a mouse in all senses of the word.”

“You realize? How screwed you are? Witch?” Gira asked in his usual staccato manner.

“You should be asking yourself that question,” Ellie clapped back. “Do you genuinely have no idea who you’re facing, despite everything you’ve been through? In that case, allow me to demonstrate again—Nova Ray!”

Despite standing right in the middle of an antispell zone, Ellie easily managed to cast another strategic-class spell at Gira, and this time, it produced a laser beam as thick as a pillar. He managed to evade the beam at the last second by leaping to one side, but this feat owed everything to his instincts, rather than being a calculated response, so the fact that he was completely unharmed by the blast was nearly a miracle in its own right.

Gira reflected on what had just happened, his face a picture of sheer astonishment. “Impossible. Just impossible! You used magic. In my cancellation field. *How*?!”

Ellie giggled and dutifully answered. “Your Greed Grid is undoubtedly a powerful skill. So powerful, in fact, that I’m unable to cast an ultimate-class spell, let alone a strategic-class one. Well, apart from a *few* exceptions, I’m afraid.”

“Exceptions? Like what?” Gira screeched.

“You actually demonstrated one such exception several minutes ago,” said Ellie. “Or perhaps you failed to realize what you were doing?”

Gira mentally retraced his steps right back to the moment he planted the Greed Grid scythe in the ground, frantically searching his memory for where he had gone wrong or inadvertently tipped his hand, but he found nothing. Yet he also couldn’t dismiss Ellie’s statement as her way of trying to hoodwink him, because the sorceress had found a way to unleash a real strategic-class spell that had nearly taken him out.

Ellie got tired of waiting and explained it to him. “Mr. Gira, do you remember when you used that magic item to shield yourself from my spells earlier? That was one exception.”

Gira’s eyes widened as it dawned on him what she was talking

about. Using an item, he had been able to activate a force field to protect himself against her Venom and Ice World spells. *Can't cast spell. In cancellation field. Not ever,* Gira thought. *But cancellation fields. Useless. Against magic items.*

For example, if someone wanted to use a Beast Orb to summon a powerful monster while in the middle of the Greed Grid, they were free to do so. But that same magic user would be unable to summon exactly the same monster if they tried doing it by magic spell. Or to put it another way, it would be like someone stopping another person from eating a cake by preventing them from baking it in the first place, but if the cake was already baked and in the person's hand, there was no way of stopping it being eaten.

Ellie turned her gaze to the four Vier spell books that were continuing to circle around her menacingly. "Another clue to the antimagic field's exceptions is that my Fantasia, Rhapsody, Scherzo, and Symphony grimoires are still continuing to work as normal, even inside the field. This is such a massive giveaway that even an untrained rottweiler would have realized by now."

Ellie's eyes narrowed seductively as she flashed Gira a deceptively alluring smile. "You see, my Vier books are actually a collection of phantasma-class items, although in my opinion, their power is nearer to that of a mythical-class weapon. A semimythical item, if you will."

Ellie was laying it on thick by this point, striking a triumphant pose with her shapely bust thrust forward. "To put it plainly, my Fantasia, Rhapsody, Scherzo, and Symphony are accessories to my spellcasting. By summoning elementals through my grimoires and having them assist me, a strategic-class spell can be executed independent of any cancellation field that may have been activated."

It should be mentioned at this juncture that summoning an elemental was an extremely difficult feat—one that was nearly impossible for your run-of-the-mill mage.

"By using supplemental magic, I'm able to execute highly difficult spells with relative ease. Delayed-activation spells are but one example."

"That's it!" Gira exclaimed, a wave of realization finally washing over him. "Delayed activation. That spell."

For the curious, a delayed-activation spell was a type of advanced technique employed by mages who wish to store a

chantless spell to be deployed at will. The idea was to recite the chant for the spell, then magically postpone the spell's activation so it could be used at a later date. Because the spell had already been cast, technically speaking, a delayed-activation spell would still work in a cancellation field, much like Beast Orbs.

On paper, a delayed-activation spell sounded like an extremely useful tool, but the technique came with multiple limitations, the first of which being the extremely high level of difficulty of mastering that class of spellcasting. The second was that the act of keeping a delayed spell "in stock," as it were, was a mana-consuming exercise in itself, so the spell couldn't remain on standby indefinitely.

For these reasons, it was widely believed among sorcery experts that it simply wasn't realistic to keep a stockpile of multiple delayed-activation spells. Since Gira was a Mage Slayer, he was intimately familiar with the ways of spellcasters, along with the advantages and pitfalls involved with delayed spells. Now that he knew the secret behind Ellie's surprise Nova Ray, he laughed maniacally with a renewed sense of triumph.

"So that's it? Your last card to play? Witch?" Gira spat out. "Yes. Delayed-activation spells. They work. In cancellation fields. But! What's your stock? Ten spells? Twenty? But you're abnormal. So a hundred? How many? All attack spells? Will they work? Against me?"

Even a Level 9999 witch like Ellie, who was given a boost by her grimoires, could only have around a hundred delayed-activation spells in reserve at most, Gira reasoned. And not all of the spells in that inventory would be designed for offensive purposes, because that would just be highly irrational. Any competent mage capable of using such an advanced technique would surely have spells set aside for healing, defense, transport, rearguard support, and other noncombat purposes.

It was also implausible for Ellie's delayed-activation spells to all be strategic-class, the most difficult category of spells in the known world in terms of their implementation and controlling them. If Ellie were smart, she would have thrown in a bunch of combat-class spells that were much easier to whip out, or tactical-class spells, since they could be used in any situation. But as Gira had proven earlier, there weren't many spells of *any* class that were capable of putting him out of commission.

She has twenty. Maybe thirty. More or less, he thought. *I got*

enough items. Should hang on. Till she runs out.

All Gira had to do was somehow dodge and evade the couple dozen spells Ellie had in her arsenal, and once he'd done that, killing her where she stood would be a piece of cake, no matter what power level Ellie was. He licked his lips and continued taunting the witch.

"Come on. Witch. How many? You have?" Gira rasped. "Still think? You can beat me? Fight you head-on? Don't have to. I can't cast spells. Will keep my distance. Take my time. Wait you out. You'll lose focus. When that happens. You're done. Dead!"

Gira's smirk slowly crept higher up his face. "Got experience, witch? Of waiting out long battles? Have the nerve? To not slip up? Even for a second? If you slip. This scythe. Your guts. Ripped out. Your precious womb. In my hand. Crushed to paste. Before your eyes. Me? I'll laugh. C'mon! How d'ya wanna die? Tell me. May grant your wish. Mood's good. Right now."

"Ten thousand," Ellie replied.

"What? Ten thousand?" Gira repeated, totally perplexed. "That's a death? What kind?"

It was Ellie's turn to smile evilly at her foe. "Since you said you wanted to know, I always keep ten thousand delayed-action spells at the ready."

Gira breathed in and out a few times, utterly baffled by what he was hearing, but the moment he wrapped his head around what she meant by this number, he was in instant denial.

"I-Impossible!" he cried. "No! No! No way! No mage! Has ten *thousand*! No matter their level!"

"I believe I have already introduced myself as the SUR Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie, future wife and current servant of the Blessed Lord Light. As his loyal retainer and soon-to-be consort, maintaining a constant supply of ten thousand delayed-activation spells is a trivial task for me. Of course, I credit the ability to do so to my own strengths, as well as the supplemental powers granted to me by my grimoires."

As if to prove what she was asserting, an explosion of luminous energy erupted from the grimoires circling Ellie, who had an angelic smile on her face. "Perhaps we should start off with the first thousand strategic-class spells I have at the ready, hm? What do you say?"

Exactly one thousand orbs of light hovered behind Ellie like stars in a midnight sky, each twinkling sphere representing a

delayed-action spell ready to be unleashed. The flickers of light resembled a constellation that was entirely contained within the underground colosseum. In any other context, it would have made for a gorgeous, wondrous sight. But as it was, each fragment of starlight contained a highly destructive spell ready to zero in on Gira. If all one thousand spells were discharged at once, the Master would have no hope of making it out of there in one piece. For the first time in the battle, Gira looked fearful and desperate, which was unsurprising because anyone faced with this brilliant kaleidoscope of carnage about to rain down on them would have the same reaction.

Gira's voice trembled as he addressed Ellie. "Y-You damn freak…"

The witch puffed out one of her cheeks in a cutesy pout, as if she were a teenage girl who was angry at her boyfriend for forgetting their anniversary. "The sheer nerve of some people! Of course, Blessed Lord Light is more powerful than me, but that's a given. Nazuna, on the other hand, puts me completely to shame with her combat abilities. So why must *I* be labeled the monstrous 'freak,' hm?"

"Wh-What?!" Gira spluttered. "Those people. More powerful? Than *you*?!"

Realizing from her tone of voice that Ellie wasn't fooling around, Gira's face contorted into a grief-stricken mask of despair. Ellie soon recovered from the insult and allowed her usual winning smile to return to her face once more.

"Now, let's see how long you can last against my cache of spells," Ellie teased. "Do try your best to escape my traps, like the grimy little sewer rat you are!"

Epilogue

“I think this ought to just about do it,” I said, using my gacha cards to put the finishing touches on the slapdash repair job I had done on the ceiling above the underground arena. I had used the UR Gravity World to neutralize the fake Gira’s explosion, but that move had ended up opening a gaping hole in the ceiling, allowing natural light to shine inside. While the arena was located far from any populated areas, we couldn’t risk someone happening upon this location and either seeing what was down here, or falling to their death. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a “Fix a Giant Hole in the Ceiling” card, so I’d jerry-rigged a temporary solution with a bunch of other cards in my inventory.

“That’s so amazing, Lord Dark!” Nemumu cooed. “You’ve completely covered it up!”

“It’s perhaps a *mite* rough around the edges compared to Miss Ellie’s workmanship,” Gold said, a little more critically. “But in terms of covering up that bally hole, it definitely got the job done, what?”

Nemumu sulked at Gold for not heaping as much praise on me as she had done, but the knight simply shrugged it off. I wasn’t really bothered by Gold’s less-than-effusive praise either, and I was just about to say so to defuse another fight, but Ellie called me via Telepathy before I could open my mouth.

“Blessed Lord Light, do you have a moment?” she asked.

“Ellie?” I said. “Sure, go ahead.” If she was contacting me, that meant she had taken care of everything on her end. As a sidenote, Ellie would usually cast a spell to make sure that nobody could listen in to our Telepathy calls, so we were free to say anything we wanted in them.

“Thank you for granting me your time, Your Blessedness,” Ellie said. “I’d like to report that I have successfully apprehended the real Mr. Gira. I had originally planned to teleport to the Abyss with him, but then I thought I should notify you first so you could have the chance to observe him.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see what our puppet master looks like before we do anything to him,” I said to Ellie. Gira had given us far too much trouble, and I wanted to confirm this was indeed the guy

we were after. Since a mind probe was pretty much guaranteed to uncover a bunch of murders he'd committed—of humans and of other races—Gira's execution was a foregone conclusion.

"All right. Let's meet up in the dungeon's training grounds," I said through the telepathic link.

"Understood, Blessed Lord," Ellie replied. "I'll teleport there first and await your arrival."

"Yeah, thanks, Ellie," I said. "I'll be there in a few."

Nemumu and Gold dutifully remained silent while I spoke with Ellie, and since they couldn't hear what my lieutenant was telling me, I gave them a quick rundown of the situation when we were done.

"Ellie says she's caught Gira," I told the pair. "She wanted me to go take a look at him before she probed his memory. Are you two ready to teleport?"

"Of course I'm ready, Lord Dark!" Nemumu gushed. "I'm *always* ready whenever you're ready!"

"I too am quite eager to leave, milord," Gold added.

After getting confirmation from my two partymates, I took out an SSR Teleportation card and released it. The scenery around us dissolved, then transformed into the training grounds on the bottom level of the Abyss. There, we found Ellie waiting for us, along with a figure on the floor tied up in Dorn Fesseln vines with his head covered by a tattered hood. This was apparently the real Gira.

"Welcome back, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said, curtsying gracefully with one hand gripping the hem of her skirt while the other made sure her witch's hat didn't fall off her head. I raised my hand airily to acknowledge Ellie, then quickly shifted my gaze to the prisoner on the ground.

"So this is Gira in the flesh, is it?" I asked.

"Indeed it is," Ellie confirmed. "But I would rather you took a look for yourself, Blessed Lord. Voilà."

Ellie gave Gira a little tap with her shoe, although the kick still had enough force to turn him over onto his back to reveal his face. Of course, Ellie had done the "grand unveiling" in an unusually silly way, but at least I was getting to see what Gira looked like.

"Wow," I breathed. "He looks exactly like the dummy he sicced on us. Well, if you ignore all the burns, the frozen skin, and the open wounds, that is."

“I wished to capture him in a more *peaceful* manner, but Mr. Gira was surprisingly resistant,” Ellie explained. “It would’ve been much easier to just kill him rather than going through all the trouble of keeping him alive.”

According to Ellie, Gira had used a skill that had robbed Ellie of her ability to cast spells, though she managed to overcome this handicap by firing off a bunch of other spells she had actually cast in advance which she had been holding on to for whenever she needed them. Gira had withstood a good thirty of Ellie’s strategic-class spells before finally running out of magic items to help him, at which point he tried to run around and dodge the spells like a frightened sewer rat, even though it was only delaying the inevitable. In the end, Ellie succeeded in taking down Gira using fewer than forty of the spells she had in reserve.

Despite all of his injuries, this Gira looked exactly like the golem I had fought, right down to his skin color, the length of his eyelashes, and even the number of hairs in his eyebrows. Even identical twins weren’t *this* identical. We used an Appraisal and x-ray vision to confirm this Gira was the real deal, and he checked out on both counts.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I would’ve been able to locate and capture Gira just using my own powers, and even if I could, it’d probably take way too long anyway,” I said to Ellie. “But you were able to do all of this in practically no time at all. That’s something only you, the Forbidden Witch, can do, Ellie!”

“Y-You’re too kind, Blessed Lord!” she said, blushing all the way to the tips of her ears. “But all of my power belongs to you—I mean, all of my body, all of my mind, all of my mana, and every single fragment of my soul are wholly in your possession, Your Blessedness. Therefore, my achievements are entirely your achievements, Blessed Lord Light!”

Ellie was clearly ecstatic that I was praising her, but in spite of that, she kept up her humble veneer, even going as far as to insist that I would’ve caught Gira “just as quickly, if not faster.” I was still personally of the opinion that I would have had a lot more trouble apprehending the real Gira, even if I’d used all the gacha cards available to me, and it was really only thanks to the Level 9999 superwitch that I hadn’t had to worry about tracking the guy down in a timely fashion.

“Ellie, due to your meritorious deed, I hereby absolve you of all culpability for the security lapses at Tower City,” I said in a

semisolemn tone. “From now on, I expect you to serve me and everyone else with a completely clear conscience.”

“Your words humble me, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said. “I will not allow myself to grow complacent over my accomplishment, and I vow to serve you most honorably through self-improvement.”

Ellie curtsied once more, and she lowered herself so proudly and serenely this time that I was convinced she no longer felt any guilt over the Miki incident, not even in the slightest. Of course, what I *didn’t* know at the time was there was another storm brewing near one of the Human Kingdom villages that Mera and her team had been assigned to safeguard.

☆☆☆

Goh groaned loudly and at length as he led a contingent of warriors along a mountain path toward the Human Kingdom.

“God, this is horseshit,” Goh cursed.

“I completely empathize with you, Mr. Goh,” Doc said from right behind him. “I for one would much rather complete this mission promptly so that I can get back to my research.”

An irked Goh clicked his tongue at the farcical idea that he’d be kindred spirits with Doc, who was still wearing his bloodstained lab coat. Trailing the two Masters was a suspicious-looking figure in a full-length hooded cloak, and then behind them came a company of demonkin soldiers disguised as bandits that had been dispatched to raid villages.

Normally, no Master would have participated in a minor operation like this, but they had nonetheless been deployed as insurance just in case the company encountered the woman who had slaughtered all of the previous raiding parties. The woman had been described by the relatively few survivors as a powerful killing machine that had been sent by the Wicked Witch of the Tower, and it was because of her intervention that the Demonkin Nation had so far been unsuccessful in punishing the Human Kingdom.

Because Voros’s pride wouldn’t tolerate the idea of prematurely terminating these cross-border raids, he had invoked the contracts his nation had signed with the Masters to deploy these superpowered humans to assist with the operations. The Masters had been reluctant at first but had soon relented, since the Demonkin Nation had kept up their side of

the bargain by being faithful hosts attending to the Masters' every need, financially or otherwise.

"Hope this warrior chick's tough enough to give me a half-decent workout," Goh groaned.

"I shall let you handle the Wicked Witch's henchwoman, Mr. Goh," Doc said. "I wouldn't describe myself as a particularly strong fighter, which is why I have brought along a bodyguard out of a sheer abundance of caution. In addition, Prince Voros enlisted me to perform a separate task."

Doc—who was also wearing his mask on this mission—glanced over his shoulder toward this "bodyguard" of his, but his gaze wasn't actually focused on his hooded attendant. He was looking at the dozens of demon soldiers following behind him. All of the raiders had been conscripted from Diablo's fiefdom, and Doc had been assigned the task of brainwashing at least some of these soldiers into committing an act of mutiny on their feudal lord and killing him. Voros was thoroughly convinced Diablo was in league with the enemy, so he had handed down this death sentence in secret, intending to seize Diablo's domain in the name of the kingdom after his untimely death in the military revolt. Goh recalled the roundabout method Voros was undertaking in order to eliminate a perceived foe, and sighed internally once more.

Christ, these power struggles are always super dumb, no matter what world I'm in, Goh thought. *But I guess I'm just as guilty as the next guy. Since I'm now knee-deep in all this Wicked Witch crap, I might as well mention it to those dudes the next time I talk with them.*

Goh groaned inwardly. *Man, why do I gotta go through all that shit just for a bit of insurance?* But in the middle of grumbling, Goh suddenly tensed up, his gaze sharpening, although he made sure to keep his reaction low-key.

"Hey," Goh whispered.

"I already sensed it," Doc replied. "My combat skills may be lacking, but I am adept in matters like these. Allow me to blind the lookout."

Doc cast a spell that fooled a certain spy monster that had been sent to maintain surveillance on the mountain trail. Thanks to Doc's keen senses, the raiders were able to approach the border without alerting Light's side.

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Once they had descended from the mountain, the company of soldiers decided to stop for a rest, though neither Goh nor Doc needed one. Goh expressed his displeasure at essentially being held back by low-level troops, while Doc used the opportunity to mingle with the soldiers. *I wonder which ones I should brainwash,* Doc thought to himself as he airily shot the breeze with the raiders.

When the troops felt they were well rested enough to continue, they headed straight for the nearest human village on their itinerary. By this point, both Goh and Doc felt they no longer needed to conceal their presences in any way. Mera—who was stationed at the village in question—naturally sensed this unsuppressed wave of energy before the raiding party had even come into sight, and rushed to warn the Mohawks. Along the way, the chimera ordered all of the misshapen spawns lying in wait in the village to come out of their houses and remerge with her. Mera finally made it to the Mohawks' dwelling and barged straight in.

"Hey, we have an emergency," she said.

"What kind? What's going on, Ms. Mera?" asked the red-haired Mohawk leader.

All five Mohawks were presently eating breakfast in their Human Kingdom-issued armor, though none of them were wearing the matching helmets. The Mohawks were moderately surprised by this turn of events because there hadn't been an attack for weeks, though in spite of this, Mera and the Mohawks had still kept up their watch duty rotations so they would always be at the ready in case there was another raid.

"I sensed some very serious threats coming our way," Mera told them, a grim expression on her face. "One bogey *definitely* has a power level higher than mine. Maybe that's why they aren't even bothering to hide their energy from us. I won't be able to protect you boys if they attack, so you'd better head back to the Great Tower now."

"Roger that. Just like we planned," the Mohawk leader said. "You take care here too, Ms. Mera."

"Take care!" the other Mohawks chimed in, all bowing to the chimera.

Mera giggled and waved them off with both of her sleeved

hands. “You know I will, sweeties. I’m not about to take any needless risks either.”

Her operation had come with some written instructions outlining the responses each of her team was supposed to take in the event of certain scenarios. If Mera encountered a foe with a power level that surpassed her own, the Mohawks were mandated to use a Teleportation card to immediately relocate to the Great Tower. They would only get in Mera’s way if they remained there, and they were not allowed to teleport to the Abyss, since there was a chance the enemy might use a spell or a magic item to track them there. The Great Tower was the optimal destination since they were already known to be working for the Wicked Witch.

As for Mera, she had to remain in the village and deploy her spawns to engage the overpowered enemy, then watch the battle unfold for as long as she could right up until the moment she felt forced to teleport herself away for her own safety. That way, she would take back intel that would inform Light’s next move.

Mera hadn’t been selected for this particular mission in the border villages just to give the demon commandos a harrowing, nightmarish experience. No, it was also because Mera was able to create multiple spawns that could test potentially dangerous foes, and from these battles, she could make a mental note of the number of hostiles, their abilities, their physical appearances, and their weaponry from a relatively safe position. Once all of that intel had been gathered, she would use the SSR Teleportation card to escape.

The Mohawks first put their breakfast leftovers into their Item Boxes, along with all their other belongings so they wouldn’t leave any clues behind for the enemy to find. This ability came courtesy of the SSSR Item Box cards they had been given. Once they were all finished packing, the Mohawk leader produced a Teleportation card.

“Stay safe, Ms. Mera,” the leader said. “SSR Teleportation—release!” It took the Mohawks less than a second to phase out of the house. After making sure her charges were finally gone, Mera turned in the direction the hostile energy was coming from.

“Seems our unwanted guests have noticed me too, because they’re heading straight for me,” she said, cackling darkly. “One

of them is *definitely* above my weight class. I may have to call Miss Nazuna to handle them if it comes to it. But if they *do* turn out to be manageable, I'll just stay here and put 'em on the brunch menu."

Instead of feeling fearful and overwhelmed, Mera believed she could get away with making one of her spawns fight the incoming threat, and observing from some inconspicuous hiding place after turning herself invisible to her opponent's senses. At the climax of the battle, she had the option of having the spawn self-destruct and the resulting explosion potentially taking her foe with it.

In other words, Mera was adopting tactics similar to what Gira had employed in his fight with Light's party. But little did she know that she was about to get the biggest shock of her life—one that would throw all logic out the window.

End

Extra Story 1: The Melancholy of Acting Abyss Dungeonmaster, Iceheat

“I need Master Light to review *this* document, but I myself can sign off on this one,” Iceheat murmured to herself. She was alone in Light’s executive office on the bottom tier of the Abyss and busily engaged in paperwork.

Iceheat was performing the tasks Mei would usually have done if she hadn’t at that moment been leading a manhunt for Doc, a Master in the Demonkin Nation, while Light himself was off on a different mission revolving around another Master, Gira. Since Iceheat was the Abyss’s deputy head housekeeper, she had been tasked with taking over Mei’s role as chief maid and dungeon administrator in her absence, a job that included doing a *lot* of paperwork. When she reached a good place to pause, she took a sip of the tea she had brewed for herself and sighed deeply.

“Left behind again,” she grumbled. Her best friend, Mera, had teamed up with the Mohawks on an ongoing mission to drive off demonkin infiltrators from Human Kingdom border villages, and Jack and Suzu were part of Mei’s operation in the Demonkin Nation, which left Iceheat as the sole Level 7777 warrior still in the Abyss.

She knew she was just as powerful and skilled—if not more—as her three other Level 7777 cohorts, yet her abilities never seemed to be the best fit for any of the missions. The fact that she had been relegated to a backroom role in the Abyss had nothing to do with Light being dissatisfied with her performance, yet even so, she couldn’t help wondering.

“How long do I have to wait before I get another opportunity to prove my loyalty to Master Light?” Iceheat asked herself.

Her last achievement, if the term even applied, was when she captured the twin White Knight elves, Nhia and Khia, at the Great Tower. Since then, Iceheat had either been sidelined from a mission, or if she did end up participating in an operation, her specific assignment invariably went awry for one reason or another. She had even gone as far as collecting a bunch of good

luck charms after consulting Mera on the topic, in order to turn around what she considered to be an unnaturally long streak of bad luck. Yet she still saw no signs of her fortunes improving.

"No, this is no time to think about that!" Iceheat yelled in an attempt to rouse herself. "Showing loyalty isn't limited to battling up on the surface! Running the Abyss smoothly and flawlessly in Master Light's absence is every bit as valid for showing your loyalty as anything else! There's no difference!"

From where she was sitting at the adjunct's desk, Iceheat gazed across the office at the executive desk, where Light would usually sit. *I'm performing Miss Mei's work of doing the administration for the Abyss, and Miss Mei was the first to be summoned by Master Light,* thought Iceheat. *I wonder what would have happened if I myself had been the first to be summoned instead...*

Iceheat's mind drifted off into a fantasy where *she* was the first summon, protecting a young Light from the nightmarish monsters prowling around at the bottom of the Abyss. In her daydream, they spent all their days together, just the two of them in the biggest, deadliest dungeon in the world, with Light's power level still in the low double digits. Just imagining such a heavenly scenario gave Iceheat an intoxicating rush of euphoria.

But in all honesty, I don't think I would've possessed the strength of character to advise Master Light to forge a kingdom in the Abyss in order to get his revenge on those who wronged him, Iceheat thought. *Not like Miss Mei did back then.*

Of course, a first-summon Iceheat would have known Light would need an army if he was going to make good on his vow for vengeance, meaning it couldn't have just stayed as the two of them alone in the dungeon forever. However, the temptation to keep Light all to herself would have been dangerously overwhelming for Iceheat, and for that reason, she held Mei in very high esteem for selflessly suggesting to Light that he build a kingdom. This respect came from Iceheat's perspective as Mei's subordinate and as a fellow maid.

Miss Mei disregarded her own desires to serve Master Light faithfully. She really is the leader among maids! Iceheat thought to herself. *I myself should dedicate more of my time to mastering her maid's code so that I can become more like her...*

Iceheat was deep in contemplation when an unexpected voice interrupted her reverie: "Mroow!"

Iceheat shot up from her chair, screaming like a teenage girl. With her heart still pounding fast, she addressed the unannounced visitor.

"M-Miss Aoyuki! You gave me a shock," Iceheat said. "I was *this* close to blasting you by mistake."

"Rroww mroww!" Aoyuki protested, pointing to the door.

"Huh? Oh, so you *did* knock?" Iceheat interpreted.

"Mew," Aoyuki confirmed.

In other words, Aoyuki *had* knocked at the door several times, but when she didn't get a response, she took the liberty of entering the executive office. Iceheat realized she had been so engrossed in her daydream, she had completely failed to notice that someone was at the door, so she immediately apologized to her superior.

"Please forgive me for my lapse in attention," Iceheat said. "I myself will take care not to repeat the mistake again."

"Nmrrow mrrow," Aoyuki purred gently, as if to say, "Don't sweat it." In the same breath, the SUR warrior handed Iceheat a sheaf of documents.

The grappler maid took it from her with both hands. "I thank you for your leniency. I also thank you for these documents."

"Mroww." Aoyuki smiled and waved at Iceheat, signaling that her work here was done, then she turned to leave the office. Iceheat paused, then decided she had to speak up now, since like her, Aoyuki was usually passed over for surface world missions.

"Excuse me, Miss Aoyuki," Iceheat ventured. "May I ask you something?"

"Nrrow?" Aoyuki mewed, spinning around.

"Because of your unique abilities, you usually get held back here in the Abyss during missions. Does that bother you at all?"

"Rraow!" Aoyuki said with a smile, which indicated that her answer was an emphatic "no."

Aoyuki was the third-best fighter of the four SUR warriors, bested by Nazuna and Ellie, but more proficient than Mei. Aoyuki was powerful in her own right when fighting alone, but where she really excelled was when she was leading an army of monsters into battle. But to date, no opportunities has arisen for Aoyuki to command an army of overpowered creatures to take on Light's foes. But despite being relegated almost exclusively to noncombat roles, Aoyuki didn't seem to express any grievances

about the situation. Her denial had been immediate and unequivocal—so much so, in fact, Iceheat was left at a total loss for words.

Aoyuki followed up by tilting her head downward slightly, so that the edge of her cat-eared hood covered her eyes in a vaguely ominous manner.

"If you find that anything is upsetting you, I suggest you inform our master in person," Aoyuki said in a cool, even voice. "Master is highly magnanimous when it comes to our needs. He is able to provide for the desires of his servants. The real problems at hand are any disruptions to your duties caused by a failure to voice your discontent. Do know that, above all else, master values our honest opinions."

"I'm not discontent at all with the duties that Master Light has given me, but..." Iceheat paused. "But it's simply that I myself am concerned about there not being many opportunities to wield my weapons on Master Light's behalf. Thank you for listening, Miss Aoyuki."

"Mrrroww," Aoyuki purred, looking up and smiling at Iceheat, before waving a hand at her, which was likely her way of saying, "Don't mention it." Iceheat reflected on what Aoyuki had told her while gazing at the monster tamer's cute gesticulations.

I do have a bad habit of keeping my insecurities bottled up to myself, because I'm afraid of what Master Light might think of me if I were to complain to him about it, Iceheat thought. *But Miss Aoyuki's right. Master Light isn't the type of gentleman who thinks less of his subjects when they bring up a concern. In fact, I myself am being disloyal to Master Light for doubting his benevolence!*

As Iceheat started to come to terms with her own faults, she inwardly lauded Aoyuki for helping her to make this breakthrough.

Because I rarely ever speak with Miss Aoyuki, my usual impression of her is someone who gets angry like a cat whenever Miss Nazuna is bothering her, Iceheat reflected. *But she really is a Level 9999 retainer, just like Miss Mei. A true paragon of principle.*

Just as Iceheat was beginning to see Aoyuki in a whole new light, someone else knocked at the door to the office. Iceheat called out for the visitor to enter and the door swung open to reveal Annelia, the UR Level 5000 Cardkeeper. Together with her brother, Alth, Annelia ran the Card Depository, one of the busiest parts of the Abyss. But despite her hectic work schedule, she had

managed to find some time to come visit Iceheat in the office, and the Cardkeeper scurried up to the grappler maid.

"Oh, Icy-poo! I heard everything, sweetie!" said a visibly concerned Annelia. "Are you still feeling grumpy about not getting to go on missions? I've been so *awfully* worried about you! But don't you worry, kiddo! I made sure to finish up all my work extra early so that I could come and keep you company. Just let me take really *good* care of you and forget all about your saddies, okay?"

"Ah." Iceheat clutched her head and groaned. "Oh, no..."

Annelia considered herself a big sister to everyone in the Abyss, regardless of their age or rank, and as such, she referred to everyone she liked as her "kiddo," taking it upon herself to baby them like a real elder sister would. Much like a lot of people in the Abyss, Iceheat found Annelia's frankly odd behavior grating and demeaning.

"No, look, everything's fine," Iceheat said as politely as she could manage. "I've already talked it over with Miss Aoyuki, and thanks to her, I feel like I myself have made something of a breakthrough. Isn't that right, Miss Aoyu— Huh? Where did she go?"

Iceheat had been about to call on Aoyuki to back her up and convince Annelia that her "services" were not presently needed, but despite craning her head in every direction, she couldn't find the SUR warrior anywhere in the office. It turned out that Aoyuki had made herself practically invisible to the senses and sneaked out the door before Annelia noticed she was there. Aoyuki was the most resourceful of all the four Level 9999 warriors, and she wasn't above throwing Iceheat to the wolves if that was what it took to escape from a potentially aggravating situation.

She abandoned me to save her own skin? Iceheat realized. *Miss Aoyuki!*

"You poor, poor thing," Annelia cooed. "You're so crushed, you're seeing things. But don't worry, honey! I'll stay with you *all* day until you're feeling better, okay?"

Despite the rather infantilizing offer, Iceheat knew Annelia meant well, which placed her in the difficult position of trying to turn the Cardkeeper away without needlessly antagonizing her. Meanwhile, Aoyuki was half skipping down the hallways of the Abyss, delighted that someone else had been caught in Annelia's smothering clutches and not her.

“Mrrrew,” Aoyuki purred as she pranced back to her work.

Extra Story 2: Khaos and Orka Meet Tower City

With Ellie busy on her mission taking care of Gira, Khaos and Orka had been left with the responsibility of overseeing the Great Tower and the adjoining Tower City settlement. Because the two UR Level 8888 warriors had initially presented themselves to the outside world as deputies of the Wicked Witch, it was only natural that they would defend the city against high-level threats while she was away from her tower.

But despite being purported retainers of the Wicked Witch, both Khaos and Orka showed their faces in Tower City very infrequently, so their name recognition was surprisingly low among its residents. Before Ellie went off on her mission, she ordered her two deputies to go out and show themselves to the citizens while she was gone, reasoning that this was a “good opportunity” for the city to get to know them. However, the population of Tower City was too large, and the majority of the people were too busy for any formal introductory gathering with Khaos and Orka, so it was decided that an event of that kind would be limited to a select number of influential people. Since holding a simple meet and greet would have reflected poorly on the “Great Witch,” as she was known by the citizens, the meeting was organized as a standing-room-only, buffet-style dinner party inside the Great Tower.

Around a hundred people were invited to the gathering, and all marveled at how exceptional the food, liquor, and desserts were, as well as how the fairy maids waiting on the guests shone with a beauty that was out of this world. A multitude of magical light sources illuminated the banquet hall so that it was as bright as a terrace at midday, and musicians filled the air with refined harmonies. Some of the invitees were merchants who had attended banquets held by hosts from other races, and they all confirmed that the extravagance on display far exceeded anything they had witnessed in previous gatherings, which indicated that the Great Witch had the kind of resources that trumped aristocrats and royalty of all the other races. And so,

the stage had been set for a highly engaging and enjoyable banquet, although there was one issue that was threatening to derail everything.

“So you’re telling me that music *isn’t* a thriving industry in the nation you’re from?” Orka asked a delegation from the Tower City merchants’ guild.

“I’m afraid not, Lord Orka,” one of the delegates replied. “Most humans are too poor to have the means to enjoy music. But I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the city you’ve managed to build here! There are plenty of jobs available for anyone willing to work hard and earn a good living, and the pay is good enough for people to enjoy the finer things in life.”

“Here, you can work hard and still have enough free time to enjoy music,” another guild merchant piped up. “Not only are people able to attend musical performances, they can even decide to start making music themselves. And when that happens, music professionals and craftspeople see new demand, generating more business for our own guild.”

“One day, the Great Tower will produce an artist that will leave his or her mark on music history,” another delegate said confidently.

“I can hardly wait for that moment!” Orka beamed. “Let us raise our glasses to the *brillante* future that awaits our human musical artists!”

“Hear! Hear!” cheered everyone in the group. But while Orka was deftly entertaining the guests like the masterful host he was, he was also accompanied by his self-styled younger brother, Khaos, who had more of an unapproachable attitude.

“I can see you have a passion for music, Lord Orka,” one of the attendees said. “B-But would you care to share *your* preferred pastimes with us, Lord Khaos?”

There was a pregnant pause, before Khaos gave a curt response to the question. “Reading and training.”

“Oh! Well, I’d expect nothing less from one of the Great Witch’s right-hand men,” the invitee said. “Not only do you endeavor to expand your mind, you are also diligent in your attempt to master the art of combat. No doubt you could teach us a thing or two!”

“I’ll drink to that!” another guest piped up.

“My son is close in age to you, Lord Khaos, and I only wish he was as dedicated to his studies!” a third voice added.

The guests were doing their best to praise Khaos and get on his good side, but their efforts only had the opposite effect on him, and he maintained a disdainful silence. He was of the opinion that the invitees didn't need to engage in such empty flattery because he was duty bound to protect everyone in the Great Tower and the adjoining city who was weaker than him anyway. Khaos had willingly taken on the mantle of being their protector because he was subordinate to Light, and by extension, Ellie.

Khaos's understanding of the laws of nature was that the strong must protect the weak, and the weak must be protected by the strong. If the weaklings in the city were to be in danger at any point, he would be required to step in to defend them, no matter their status. He felt the guests didn't need to go to such lengths to curry favor with him to be assured that they would receive his protection, but instead of conveying these sentiments earnestly to those around him, the warrior mage simply stewed over it quietly.

Have we said something to offend him? the invitees thought as one, with awkward smiles on their faces. Since the conversation had basically died, the group decided to go mingle somewhere else.

"I-If you'll excuse us," one of them said, before leaving with his group. Even though Khaos was supposed to be one of the hosts of the banquet, he found himself completely alone, with none of the guests approaching him.

Out of concern, a fairy maid drew closer to Khaos and whispered to him, "Mr. Khaos, you need to try to be more sociable. You'll only end up frightening the citizens instead of properly introducing yourself to them."

"I will not present a false facade," Khaos protested. "In any case, I fully intend to protect this city from whatever danger befalls it, so there is no special need for anyone to like me. Besides, I despise building relationships based on favoritism."

What is wrong with this guy? the exasperated fairy maid thought. From Khaos's perspective, all he really had to do was let people see what the Wicked Witch's deputy looked like. His only job was to protect the city, not to win some popularity contest. But to the beleaguered fairy maid, Khaos was expressing the typical mindset of a social misfit.

"Yes, I'm sure you *are* able to immediately resolve any

problem that requires the use of force," the fairy maid said patiently. "But there may come times when you need to instruct citizens to evacuate or take shelter. In order for you to be successful in that, you need people to trust you, otherwise they might hesitate and end up putting themselves in danger. The last thing we need is a completely preventable tragedy on our hands."

Khaos didn't say a word in response, partly because he inwardly acknowledged the fairy maid's point was completely indisputable, but also because he wasn't quite ready to admit he was wrong. Yet these conflicting emotions were written all over Khaos's face, and this didn't escape the fairy maid's notice. She glanced across at another fairy maid and indicated with her eyes that she should bring a certain guest over to chat to Khaos. The other fairy maid approached the guest in question—Quornae—and suggested she should introduce herself to Khaos.

Quornae's blonde hair was twisted into ostentatious coils and she had come to the banquet in a red and white vestment akin to a cleric's. The teenage girl walked up to Khaos and introduced herself, completely ignoring the unapproachable vibe he was radiating.

"Greetings and salutations to you, Lord Khaos," she said in her usual operatically bombastic way. "I am Quornae, and I am a priestess devoted to spreading the good word of Towerism. It's an honor to finally meet you, my lord."

"Khaos," the unrelentingly brusque warrior mage muttered by way of self-introduction. He was still sore at being out-argued by the fairy maid, but his discourteousness also stemmed from the fact that he was familiar with the Towerists and what they stood for.

I've heard of these Towerism people, he thought. *They've invented an entirely new religion, and worship the Wicked Witch as a god, the fairy maids as angels and holy messengers, and someone named Miya as a saint. She probably wants to convert me and Orka to her faith, and as the witch's deputy, I'd find myself in an awkward position if I refused her attempt.*

Khaos's mind went into overdrive as he searched for a good excuse for rebuffing the proselytizing he was anticipating from Quornae, but in fact, the girl with the pushy-looking, angular eyes went off on a completely different, totally unexpected tangent.

“Do you refer to yourself by any other title, Lord Khaos?” she asked.

Khaos was taken aback by the question. “Another title? What do you mean?”

“Oh, please forgive me for jumping to conclusions,” Quornae said, blushing but not necessarily embarrassed. She softly cleared her throat, then launched into a lengthy oration. “You are the lord who serves the Great Witch of the Tower, earning her confidence as a trusted commander. To the celebrants of our religion, you’re an officially recognized object of worship, but unlike the Great Witch and her fairy maids, I and my fellow believers find it hard to envision who you *really* are by your formal name alone. That is why I believe you should be known by a *second* holy title, much like the highly exalted Saint Miya!”

“First of all, I am not an object of worship—” Khaos started, trying to launch into a rebuttal before getting summarily cut off.

“But rest assured, my lord!” Quornae asserted proudly. “For I am quite the connoisseur when it comes to conceiving the perfect title for someone!” She struck a dramatic thinking pose. “Since you serve the Great Witch as her bodyguard, that would make you the ‘Guardian of the Great Witch.’ No, that’s no good. That would imply you’re *only* the protector of the Great Witch, instead of the protector of all of us. Then, how about the ‘Silver Guardian,’ in homage to your hair color? Or perhaps the ‘White Aegis,’ since your hair is the same color as this tower.”

She suddenly cupped both hands over her left eye as she shuddered with apparent jubilation. “Ooh! My eye is tingling with inspiration!”

Khaos was so unnerved by the teenage girl’s shtick, he took half a step back, droplets of sweat forming on his brow. This confrontation was reminding him of his initial encounter with Annelia, whose sisterly excesses had aroused the same type of dread in him that he was feeling right now—a dread that couldn’t be found on any battlefield. As an ultra-rare Level 8888 warrior, Khaos was unquestionably much more powerful than Quornae, yet this teenage girl had managed to give him goose bumps all the way up his spine. It was at that moment that Orka noticed Quornae appeared to be stumped, so he briefly paused from chatting with the other guests to interact with her.

“Miss Quornae, do you mind if I interrupt?” Orka said. “Not only do I serve the most noble Witch of the Tower as her

bodyguard, but I am also a well-known musician. To that end, I wish for my secondary title to be the ‘Great Witch’s Musician.’”

“Oh, is that so?” Quornae replied. “Very well, Lord Orka. You shall henceforth be known as the ‘Great Witch’s Musician.’”

Orka flashed the teenager a quick smile before returning to conversing with the other guests. Khaos was aghast at the sharp wit the Pied Fiddler had just demonstrated, since he had managed to keep his discourse with Quornae comfortably concise by suggesting a rather bland nickname. Khaos glared at his “older brother,” but Orka diplomatically ignored the dirty look he was receiving and continued working the room.

However, this meant Khaos was left alone with Quornae once more, and she seemingly had no plans to part ways. Khaos glanced over at the fairy maids for help, his eyes filled with contrition over his previous ill-mannered attitude. Seeing that Khaos had finally learned his lesson, the fairy maids decided to throw him a lifeline.

“Miss Quornae, perhaps now isn’t the best time to designate a devotional title to Lord Khaos,” one of the fairy maids said. “I suggest you take some time to consider all the options and make your decision at a later date.”

Quornae hummed as she contemplated this. “I think you might be right. Deciding on the perfect title for Lord Khaos shouldn’t be rushed.”

Another fairy maid came over to shepherd her away from Khaos. “Miss Quornae, we have guests over here who wish to know more about Towerism. Would you care to enlighten them?”

“We do?” she said. “But what about—”

“Don’t mind me,” Khaos said briskly. “Go spread the word.”

“Well, if you insist, Lord Khaos,” Quornae replied. “I bid you adieu.”

The teenager bowed and followed the fairy maid to the indicated guest. Khaos watched on as one of the most bizarre people he had ever met walked away.

“Thanks. For helping me,” Khaos said to the fairy maid who was still next to him.

“It’s our duty to support someone like yourself who takes his job *seriously* in service of the Great Witch,” the fairy maid said with a slight hint of admonishment.

Khaos winced, but he got the implied message: he had to engage with the people of Tower City cordially and in good faith,

just like Ellie had ordered. When the fairy maids next brought over guests, Khaos assumed a more formal approach to interact with them, which was a vast improvement over his previous demeanor. He didn't want to risk another cringeworthy encounter with Quornae, after all.

Extra Story 3: Negotiating with the Border Villagers and the Aftermath

On waking to start another day of work, the residents of one particular Human Kingdom village that bordered the Demonkin Nation were greeted by a breathtakingly glamorous tall woman, whose very distinctive cackle filled the morning air.

“Keh heh heh heh!” she chortled. “So who’s the leader of this place?” The woman cut an unusual figure by herself, but the five thuggish-looking men in shades and sporting Mohican-style haircuts following her were even weirder sights for the villagers.

“Yo, so this is the place we’re gonna take over, is it?” one of the men said.

Another hooted darkly. “Man, this village’ll be perfect for ambushes.”

“Hells yeah! Can’t wait to go buck wild around here!” screeched a third.

It went without saying that these comments from the suspicious-looking Mohawks spooked the villagers into thinking *they* were going to be the targets of the banditry implied, and in spite of her beauty, Mera exuded an overwhelmingly threatening aura that scared the villagers even stiffer. Realizing that she needed to defuse the situation quickly, Mera pulled out a sealed envelope and flashed it at the villagers.

“Relax, babes,” she said with a friendly chuckle. “We’re not here to hurt you. In fact, me and the Mohawks you see behind me are the best friends you’ll ever have. We’re here on the orders of Queen Lilith, so could you please go fetch your village chief or whatever so I can give this to him?”

“Oh, um, sure! Right away!” a male villager replied, before making a beeline for the village chief’s house at top speed. The villagers had no way of verifying what Mera was saying was true, but given how intimidating she was, they decided it was just best to do what she said. A few minutes later, someone that looked like he might be the chief arrived to deal with all the commotion. Although he was past middle age, he still appeared well-built and robust enough to work in the fields.

Mera cackled softly. “Are you the chief of this village?”

“I am,” the chief replied. “And might I inquire as to who *you* are?”

“Your ruler has ordered us to provide emergency military assistance to this village, hun,” Mera explained. “We’re associates of the Great Witch of the Tower. Here’s the letter containing the royal decree. You can go ahead and read it, by the way.”

“Thank you, madam,” the chief acknowledged, timidly taking the letter from her. He perused the message, which seemed simple and to the point, and perhaps more importantly, backed up Mera’s claim.

We have reason to believe soldiers from the Demonkin Nation are going to cross the border and attack your village, the letter read. *By my authority as Queen Lilith, ruler of the Human Kingdom, the residents are hereby ordered to evacuate the village and to follow all instructions given to them by the liaison named Mera. As your queen, I assure you that you will be compensated for any loss of property, and that you will be provided with food, clothing, and shelter while you are away from your homes.*

The chief was completely befuddled by the message. “Um, excuse me, madam, but are you sure everything written in here is true? First of all, this seems to imply that Princess Lilith is now queen. Isn’t her father still the governing monarch?”

Mera guffawed. “I guess the news hasn’t reached this neck of the woods yet, huh?” She collected herself and gave the village chief a quick rundown of recent events.

“A summit was held at the Principality of the Nine, and it was there that Princess Lilith was officially named queen after winning a vote held by the other nations, dearie,” she explained. “But the demonkin haven’t taken too kindly to the fact that Queen Lilith has replaced her father, so they’re preparing to launch a series of incursions across the border. We’ve been sent out here to provide you with protection from those raids, as you just read in that letter, sugar.”

Mera’s synopsis caused a buzz to break out among the rest of the villagers who had also gathered to listen. By this point, the village chief was sweating so much, he pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his forehead. But he was not completely convinced of the need for him and his people to abandon the village.

“W-We’re honored that you have come to help us, madam,” the chief said. “But this order is so abrupt. It hardly gives us any

time to prepare. We have women, children, and sick folk who would be much too weak to make the kind of journey being suggested. And since this is such a remote village, we won't survive if we can't manage our crops and livestock. I don't see any way in which we can comply with this order."

"Look, hun, the letter said you'll be fully compensated for any loss to your properties. That includes harvests and livestock," Mera insisted. "The Great Witch herself guarantees you will be back in the same position once this whole thing blows over, so you can be assured of it. Oh, and another thing, darling: everyone here will be relocated to your destination in a flash using a teleportation item. Over there, you'll find all of your basic needs taken care of, and there'll even be entertainment. And if there are any sick or injured people who need help..." Mera turned to the red-haired Mohawk leader behind her. "You're up."

"Right you are, Ms. Mera!" he replied. "Okay, boys, show 'em if ya got 'em!"

The Mohawks reached into their bags, but instead of pulling out weapons like the villagers were all expecting, they produced premium-grade healing potions. The elixirs were all products from Light's Unlimited Gacha cards, and they were far more potent than even the highest-quality potion available up on the surface. However, the Mohawks holding up the potions were licking their lips a little *too* enthusiastically.

"Wahoo! So who do we got who's injured here?" one of the Mohawks shouted. "This'll put 'em outta their misery *real* quick!"

"Yo, look at their faces!" another Mohawk pointed out. "They must be stoked to be gettin' the good stuff!"

"It's just what the doctor ordered, and *everyone's* gonna get it!" crowed a third.



The reason the Mohawks were so overexcited was because they saw this as their chance to redeem themselves after a series of failed missions. Mera cackled dryly as she attempted to clear up the obvious misunderstanding arising from their unbridled enthusiasm.

"Don't worry, huns, they're healing potions. They're not harmful in *any* way," Mera assured them. "We're going to give them to anyone who's sick or injured so that they'll be taken care of. Is there anything else I should be made aware of? I'm here to make sure you all relocate with peace of mind, so don't be shy if there's anything at all you're worried about. Oh, and by the way, since this is a *royal* decree, you don't have the right to refuse the evacuation order, sweethearts."

The village chief and the other residents were too stunned to say anything. Apparently, they were being offered the most painless and risk-free evacuation order imaginable, and what was more, it was an offer they couldn't decline, even if they wanted to.

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It only took half a day to tie up all the loose ends, then the entire population of the village translocated to the Great Tower using an SSR Teleportation card. Fast forward to the following day, where Mera and the Mohawks were busy making preparations to engage the incoming demonkin raiders.

"Well, anyway, it looks like I'll be in charge of taking care of the fields," Mera said, before chuckling like always. "Or rather, the fake villagers I spawn will do all the work."

"Right you are," said one of the Mohawks. "After all, we gotta keep this Human Kingdom armor on at all times, so we can't be seen outside whenever we got downtime."

The Mohawks' main role was to signal to the demon marauders that the Wicked Witch of the Tower was closely allied with the Human Kingdom, but if a demonkin scout were to spot Human Kingdom knights loitering in the village, the raiders would likely exercise more caution than normal. For that reason, the Mohawks would have to conceal themselves and only come out when engaging the demons.

Mera chortled. "I'm more familiar with taking care of livestock. All the animals come from the Great Tower, anyway.

Unfortunately, babes, I've never worked the fields a single day in my life."

The villagers had been allowed to take their farm animals with them when they teleported away, so the animals in the village at present had been raised at the Great Tower. The livestock had been replaced in order to fool the demon raiders into thinking the village hadn't been evacuated. But since there was no way of teleporting farmland, the villagers had been left with no choice but to abandon their fields, with only defenders inexperienced at farmwork around to tend to them. If the worst were to happen to the crops, Mera had already promised the village chief that the Great Tower would purchase their yields at whatever price the villagers asked for them. And if that weren't enough, the tower would fully compensate the villagers.

"We ain't never worked a farm neither," another Mohawk piped up. "Might be worth getting someone on Telepathy who can tell ya the ins and outs of it."

Mera cackled. "That's not a bad idea, actually. A lot better than just plowing ahead and damaging the crops because I don't know what the hell I'm doing. That would just be throwing mud in master's face."

Light had given his personal guarantee that all of the villagers' properties would be safeguarded, so allowing the crops to spoil would be a bad look, regardless of whether the farmers would be compensated for it. For that reason, Mera had taken it upon herself to volunteer to look after the fields.

Mera chuckled again. "After all, this is all for master's sake, huns."

"Damn straight!" the Mohawk leader agreed. "We're gonna go to the mat on this mission too, even if it means our 'dos get all messed up!"

The knight armor the Mohawks had been assigned to wear also came with helmets which squashed the trademark hairstyle they were so proud of, but they were willing to put up with the inconvenience to serve their beloved dungeon lord.

Mera nodded in approval at the Mohawks' fealty to Light, the strength of which matched her own loyalty. "I know I can count on you, sweeties. Let's reel in those demon dumbasses and make this mission a success for master!"

The Mohawks all roared in agreement, their voices ringing out high into the air above them. They firmly believed that every

breath they took was for the greater good of Light. Meanwhile, the evacuated villagers were settling into their new lives at the Great Tower.

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Once the villagers had teleported to the tower, a fairy maid escorted the new arrivals to a grazing area that had been recently cleared on the outskirts of Tower City.

“And these facilities come with the field,” the fairy maid said, indicating the buildings dotted around the large, flattened area.

“Wh-What a huge pasture!” one of the villagers exclaimed. Indeed, the space they were being given was large enough to fit all of the farm animals they had brought with them, plus a load of buildings and other structures where the livestock could shelter. Fencing ringed the wide-open space to make sure that none of the animals could wander off, and magic had been used to grow the grass to a suitable grazing length.

The fairy maids had known that the villagers would be bringing their livestock with them, so they had taken great pains to set up a pasture that would meet their needs. In fact, the animals had already been relocated to the fields, and they were presently milling around, chewing the cud.

“We’re aware the grazing area is close to the forest, but the Great Witch has used her powers to put up a force field that will protect your livestock from any monster attacks,” the fairy maid explained. “And just to make extra sure, we fairy maids conduct patrols morning, noon, and night, so there is no need to be concerned about their safety.”

The fairy maid turned to another part of the crowd around her. “However, we feel you may still worry about your livestock, so we have built lodgings for you only a few minutes away from this pasture so that you can easily come and check up on your animals any time you wish. Of course, we will not charge you anything for your new accommodation, and everything else is free too. So please relax and enjoy your stay.”

“Excuse me, but why would you go to such lengths just to help us?” the village chief asked. After all, not only had the people in the Great Tower built a space for them to look after their farm animals, but they’d even gone as far as to build brand-new shelters for the villagers themselves. Yet despite all this,

they were insisting on not accepting any kind of payment for food or lodging. The arrangement sounded too good to be true, and the chief figured there had to be some kind of catch.

The fairy maid flashed him a sunny smile. “Queen Lilith was so distressed by the demonkin’s threats of violence, she sought the counsel of the Great Witch, ruler of the tower. The Great Witch was moved by the compassion Her Majesty expressed for her subjects, so she decided to help her. So please, direct your thanks to Queen Lilith for making all of this possible.”

“I-I see,” the village chief said. “So Queen Lilith really does care deeply about our well-being…” Some of the villagers were even shedding tears at Lilith’s philanthropic gesture, as described by the fairy maid, who waited for the small crowd to settle down again before transitioning to the next phase of the tour.

“Next, I will take you to your lodgings,” the maid said. “There is enough space for everyone, plus all of your belongings. Once you have settled into your new dwellings, you may ask whichever fairy maid is on duty to show you around the city. You’re free to call on the maid at any time.”

When the villagers reached their new temporary homes, they were once again awestruck at just how impressive the buildings looked, both from the outside and on the inside. Although the buildings had been prepared for them in short notice, every thought had seemingly gone into the furnishings and interior design. The lodgings were more luxurious than what the villagers were used to, and some of the arrivals had doubts over whether they were truly welcome to set foot inside.

But it only took the villagers a few days to grow accustomed to their new digs, and they started asking the fairy maids to give them tours of Tower City. None of the residents in the city appeared to be jealous of the favorable treatment the villagers were receiving, since they had all been told in advance that the villagers had been rescued from potential slaughter at the hands of the Demonkin Nation. The citizens therefore took pity on the villagers instead, and expressed their sympathy in a number of different ways.

“Here, this one’s on the house. Eat up,” urged the owner of an outdoor food stall.

“It’s a shame the demonkin are taking their anger out on you fellas,” said a patron in one of the taverns. “Actually, you know what? Put your drinks on my tab. Whaddaya say?”

The female villagers out visiting shops also received the same treatment from their Tower City counterparts.

"It must've been extremely tough for you to leave your homes at such short notice," sympathized one of the many women in the city. "If you ever need anything, just ask."

The people of Tower City were extremely generous, not least because most of them were in gainful work and could afford to be so. Due to the first-rate reception they had received at the Great Tower settlement, a rather unexpected consensus started to take hold of the younger villagers.

"Chief," one of the evacuees started. "We wanna stay an' raise our cattle here in Tower City!"

"I'm gonna marry me one of these city girls and settle down here," said another young man.

"We don't want to go back to that village!" exclaimed a young woman. "We don't have all these pretty dresses over there!"

The group wanting to settle permanently in Tower City even included firstborn sons who were in line to take over family farms. The mass defections alarmed the village chief, who went to the fairy maid on duty for advice. She decided the problem was way above her pay grade, so she reported the situation via Telepathy to Iceheat, who was serving as the acting administrator of the Abyss in Mei's absence.

"I myself am not quite sure what the appropriate response should be," Iceheat admitted when the fairy maid asked her for orders to resolve the issue. There had been a double purpose to extending a favorable reception to the villagers, which was to burnish the impression they had for Lilith. If they had been treated poorly, their antipathy would have been directed at the young queen, and the Wicked Witch—and by extension, Light—would have lost face, since they had been entrusted with the villagers' care. To avoid such an unfavorable outcome, the Great Tower had practically rolled out the red carpet for their guests, but this approach had brought with it the unintended consequence of threatening to tear the villagers apart.

"We will need to consult with Miss Mei on this matter when she is back," Iceheat said, concluding the Telepathy call. She figured there were some problems where it was perfectly reasonable to pass the buck—or rather, to escalate the issue to a senior manager. With her mind made up, Iceheat instructed the fairy maid to stall for time until Mei returned from her mission.

Afterword

I am the author, Meikyou Shisui, and I wish to thank all of you for picking up this tenth 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!*

The *Unlimited Gacha* light novel series has finally reached the tenth volume milestone! This has only been possible thanks to the commitment of all of you readers out there, and I'm truly grateful for your support!

Before I continue, I must warn you that I'll be talking about a few spoilers for this volume in the act of sharing my thoughts on it, so for those of you who wish to read the story first without being spoiled, consider yourselves suitably warned.

Are we all good to go now? Okay.

This volume is the first part in a two-part installment, which is a first for this light novel series. In the web novel, the corresponding "Demonkin Nation Arc" was divided up into three parts, but when adapting the arc for the light novel, I figured retaining that three-part format wouldn't lend itself to easy reading, so I went ahead and rewrote it into a two-part arc.

As a result, out of all the volumes so far, this one (probably) contains the most pages for the main story. On the web novel platform, *Shosetsuka ni Naro* ("*Let's Become a Novelist*"), I'm able to type away without worrying about a page count, but with print novels, there are limits on character counts, which I was reminded of during this process.

That said, I personally enjoyed writing all of the scenes featuring Ellie, Mad Pierrot, and the other members of the Morte Spada, and Light versus the fake Gira, as well as plenty of other highlights. In fact, thanks to that, I ended up writing additional content, which got me into even more trouble regarding the page limit (*laughs*).

Now, without further ado, on to the acknowledgments!

Once again, I wish to extend my gratitude to tef for providing such awesome and adorable illustrations, on top of all the wonderful character designs for this volume. Thank you for your

breathtaking artwork in this volume too! I personally love the color illustration of Ellie where she unleashes her massive amount of attack spells. I couldn't believe my eyes when tef drew that scene, and a superb color illustration of it, no less! When this series was still only in web novel format, that scene with Ellie was a fan favorite (and a personal one for me too), so I couldn't wait to see how it would be illustrated. So imagine my surprise when the scene was in color, not black-and-white. I was truly overwhelmed!

Of course, the insert illustrations are as wonderful as ever, with one of my personal favorites being the picture where Mad Pierrot is bound to a chair, his hair sheared off and having been changed into a different outfit. And if that weren't enough, that image was paired with a drawing in the background of what Mad Pierrot looked like before he was captured, and the combination of the two was so striking and surreal, I couldn't help laughing.

The cover illustration, the color illustrations, and the character designs are also of such high quality that I'm always impressed whenever my supervising editor shows me the latest piece you've drawn. I truly can't thank you enough for drawing such wonderful artwork, tef!

Next to thank is my supervising editor, plus HJ Novels' editorial team! I'm eternally grateful for your tireless efforts on my behalf, and I apologize for causing trouble for all of you! I'll probably continue to be a nuisance, but I hope we can maintain a good working relationship going forward.

I also wish to thank Takafumi Oomae, the fine artist behind the manga adaptation of *Unlimited Gacha*, new chapters of which are published every Tuesday on the Magazine Pocket app. I'd also like to express my gratitude to the editorial department at Kodansha. Thank you for publishing such an enjoyable manga!

Just imagining the day that Oomae gets around to illustrating some of the scenes in this tenth volume of the light novel fills me with excitement. We'll see: Mera and the Mohawks in battle; all the bits where Diablo is backed into a corner by Light's attempts to frame him; Light, Nemumu, and Gold taking on the Morte Spada; and the battle between Ellie and Gira! I personally can't wait for Oomae to draw the manga chapters depicting the events of this volume, and I hope we will get to it soon!

Last of all, I want to thank all of you, the readers! You're the reason this series has made it to its tenth volume, and I deeply

appreciate your unwavering support! The eleventh volume should be released in November of this year, if things proceed smoothly (please bear in mind that this is just my own prediction.)

The eleventh volume will include a lot more in the way of battle scenes featuring Aoyuki, the Level 9999 warrior who has had notably less “screen time” than her peers. Light will finally get his revenge on Diablo, and Light’s older brother will also make an appearance.

As we speak, I’m hard at work penning a bunch of new scenes so that you, the reader, will get to enjoy a story that is more amusing, enjoyable, intense, and emotional than the web novel version. I hope that all of my work will pay off and the book I produce will be highly entertaining to read.

Once again, thank you all for your commitment in reading up to this point! I am deeply honored by the number of readers that are following this series, and I hope you will all continue to support me!

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 which has a date of or around July 19, 2024, and follow the instructions in the entry. 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 date above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that’s released, so please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read all the past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **ellie**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired.]



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. 10


Goh
A Master from the Demonkin Nation.
A small crowd had assembled in my executive office at the bottom of the Abyss. I gave my allies a rundown of the situation to make sure everybody was up to speed.
"There's been a change of plan. We're going to capture all the Masters in the Demonkin Nation and make them answer for their crimes."
Gira
A Master from the Demonkin Nation. Founder of the Bourreaux.
Doc
A Master from the Demonkin Nation.


"I believe I have
already introduced myself as the
SUR Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie,
future wife and current servant of
the Blessed Lord Light."
"As his loyal retainer and soon-to-be
consort, maintaining a constant supply
of ten thousand delayed-activation
spells is a trivial task for me."

Bonus Short Story

The Morte Spada's Diabolical Plot to Annihilate Dark!

"I still can't believe that ridiculous clown we had the misfortune of blundering into yesterday, what, what?" Gold remarked.

"Remember, Gold, that guy was supposed to be an assassin, not a real clown," I reminded him.

The Black Fools were presently on a quest that involved us trekking through a forest near the Human Kingdom capital, though in reality, this was all part of a ruse to draw out the remaining Morte Spada assassins so we could capture all five of them.

Only the day before, we had taken out the first of these assassins, Mad Pierrot, after returning from visiting Lilith. Mad Pierrot had been such a joke of an assassin that Gold actually thought of him as a "clown" in every sense of the word. But Nemumu—who was a UR assassin herself—warned us not to be complacent with the others just because Mad Pierrot had been easy to beat.

"Lord Dark, I think it's wise to assume that this guy is the weakest member of the Morte Spada," Nemumu had said at the time. "I see many signs to suggest it."

She warned us—and me, in particular—to stay sharp as if my life depended on it, since the other four Morte Spada assassins were likely to be very formidable opponents.

We chose to go questing in this forest to draw out another assassin or two, since we didn't want the bad guys putting innocent lives in danger, like Mad Pierrot had at our inn. However, nobody on my team was picking up on any signs of an assassin nearby.

Nemumu looked at a map in her hands, then turned to me. "Lord Dark, we've arrived at the swamp."

"Thanks, Nemumu," I said. Our quest was to harvest a bunch of Swamp Mushrooms that supposedly grew in this part of the forest.

“They say these mushrooms grow on the trunks of trees around the edge of the swamp,” I said. “But it looks like they’re gonna be hard to spot.”

“In that case, milord, maybe it’s best if we circled around this here bog to make sure we haven’t missed any,” Gold suggested.

“Good idea,” I said, smiling back. After all, we could take our time on this one, since it wasn’t an urgent quest. And besides, there was bound to be at least one of these mushrooms growing *somewhere*. We searched along the edge of the swamp water for the mushroom, and because of that, our attention was entirely focused on tree trunks rather than the swamp itself. But thanks to our overpowered senses, we registered that something was about to bubble up out of the murky water, and leapt out of the way just in time.

The next thing we knew, a small geyser of liquid hit the tree we had just been standing in front of and melted its trunk into a muddy mess, which caused it to topple over with a loud crash. We turned our attention to the center of the swamp to try to identify the source of the acidic spray, but before we could, an explosion of childlike tittering rang out around the bog.

“For you good! For you good!” crowd a head that popped up out of the water. “Miss made me with my attack acid you!”

Our assailant turned out to be a demon who looked a lot like a giant toad, though he was shorter than us and had a fat potbelly. It appeared he had been lurking underwater using a magic item to breathe this whole time so that we wouldn’t notice him there. There was one thing about this guy that was distracting me from everything else about him, however.

Why’s he babbling like a baby? I wondered. *He must be one of the Morte Spada, but what’s with the messed-up word order?*

I hadn’t really caught what the guy was saying, but what had come across was that he was acting like a smug little gremlin. He was practically spouting gibberish, meaning I would’ve had to pause and piece his words back together like a puzzle if I were to try to have any kind of conversation with him. Well, that was if I *wanted* to go through that headache.

The toad demon tittered again, thinking our silence meant we were afraid of him.

“Now understand? Now understand?” he babbled. “Member I am of Morte Spa—”

“Thunder Arrow—release!” I yelled, filling the pond with

projectiles from thirty R Thunder Arrow cards. Because our assassin was still almost wholly submerged in the water, he was unable to hop away in time and ended up getting electrocuted midsentence. After that, all he could do was convulse violently and babble even more incoherently, before losing consciousness and floating to the surface.

"Did this chap not think to shield himself against waterborne electrical charges?" Gold scoffed, eyeing the now-still body with disdain. "That's the first thing anyone should plan for when springing this kind of trap, or else what's the bally point of hiding in the water? Isn't he supposed to be a top assassin too?"

"Beats me," I said. "What I am wondering is why he mangled his words like that. Was someone forcing him to do it? Or is it supposed to throw off his targets somehow?"

I decided to stop questioning it and got started on tying up the bad guy for easier transport to the Abyss. We could always wake him up and ask him those questions directly later on.

☆☆☆

After wrapping up our quest to gather Swamp Mushrooms, we grabbed a late lunch at a restaurant and discussed our encounter with the toad assassin over some tea.

"That ruddy clown was one thing, but that blooming fool we faced today was poorly prepared to say the least," Gold remarked. "And he was supposed to rank among the *best* assassins in the world, no less!"

"You thought so too, huh?" I said. "I bet his standard method is to hide in a pond, lake, or some other body of water, then suddenly jump out and spit that tree-melting acid at his victims. But if that's his usual shtick, why would he leave himself totally exposed to an electric shock? Shouldn't he have figured that one out from experience? What do you think about it, Nemumu?"

"I believe this particular assassin is just as bottom-of-the-barrel as that Mad Pierrot character," Nemumu sniffed. "But with that said, I'm really expecting the next three assassins to be the *actual* deadly threats I warned you about. Assassins of that type would employ all sorts of skills that no ordinary person could dream of, exploiting every psychological chink in your armor—"

"Hey, you got a minute?" A succubus had approached our table and cut Nemumu off as she was rounding off her sentence

with a dramatic flourish. The stranger had long wavy hair, and the dress she was wearing had a side slit so long, it exposed most of her thigh. And as if that weren't enough, her neckline plunged so low and showed off so much cleavage, she was dangerously close to having a wardrobe malfunction. The succubus, whose eyes were glued on me, had strode over to our table and bent over at the waist to give me a particularly good view of the cleavage in question.

"Hiya, handsome," the succubus purred. "If you're not too busy, why don't you come and spend some quality time with me?"

"Thanks, but I'm talking with my friends at the moment," I said flatly.

The succubus giggled flirtatiously. "Oh, shy, are we? Don't worry, babe. You can leave all the pleasuring to me. I'll take you straight to the Goddess in no time flat."

She extended her right hand toward me, with the obvious intent of taking me away from the table, but it was then that I noticed the ring on her finger that had a tiny needle sticking out of it. The needle seemed to be moist with something, and I felt I could safely assume that the "something" was poison. Thankfully, I didn't need to worry about the succubus touching me.

"Don't you dare try to lay your filthy hands on Lord Dark!" Nemumu screamed as she grabbed the succubus by the arm. The grip was so sudden and unexpectedly tight, it took the succubus a couple of seconds to realize that Nemumu had actually crushed the bones in her arm. The subsequent wail the succubus let out was loud enough to make Nemumu grimace, and she landed a quick knifehand strike to the side of the succubus's neck to knock her out and shut her up. The other customers in the restaurant craned their necks in our direction due to the commotion, but Nemumu ignored the attention and removed the ring from the finger of the succubus, who had slumped unconscious to the floor. Nemumu held up the piece of jewelry for all to see.

"This ring has a needle in it!" Nemumu said, projecting her voice so it could be heard all through the restaurant. "And this looks like slow-acting poison on it! She was trying to kill you, Lord Dark!"

She placed the palm of her hand on her forehead. "Unlike

those two other maggots we faced, she was the most like an assassin, apart from the fact that she showed up in the middle of the day while we're having tea. Oh, and not only is she dressed like a prostitute, but she tried to seduce someone who looks like a child!"

By this point, Nemumu was full-on shouting, and she turned to lecture the horizontal succubus, who couldn't hear her anyway because she was still unconscious. "Did someone curse you with the inability to read the room? Anyone with a couple of brain cells to rub together would know not to just go up to your target and talk to them in that situation! If you *do* have to approach the target, there are thousands upon thousands of better ways of doing it!"

Once Nemumu had regained her composure again, we apologized to the restaurant staff and the other diners, and even picked up the bill for all the other customers. We restrained the assassin, and with Gold carrying the prisoner out, we left the establishment. For obvious reasons, we couldn't teleport to the bottom level of the Abyss in the middle of the restaurant with all those people watching us. But as soon as we stepped outside, we heard a booming guffaw that seemed to be directed at us.

"Tis I, a fine member of the Bourreaux, the world's most ruthless circle of assassins!" roared a muscly, four-eyed demon as he stampeded toward us, arms outstretched. "But it is even more bitterly unfortunate for you, for I am also an elite among the elites of the Morte Spada!"

The guy saying all this was over two meters tall, shirtless, and had so many scars all over his body, they overshadowed the fact he had four eye sockets.

"Are you the one named Dark, the A-ranked adventurer?" the four-eyed demon bellowed. "Well, I bear no ill will toward you, my boy, but I fear I must end your life— Ack!"

Nemumu landed a flying side-kick that plunged deep into the demon's abdomen. "Don't announce who you are in broad daylight! And you call yourself an *assassin*?"

The demon's hulking frame flopped and tumbled over and over across the ground like a ludicrously large rag doll before finally coming to a complete stop. Though he was out like a light from that single blow, Nemumu wasn't done berating him.

"What in the *hell* is wrong with you people?" she screeched, her face flushed with fury. "If you really feel the need to identify

yourself as an assassin, there are *better* ways of going about it! Right now, you're just being a complete jackass! And what the hell were you even trying to pull, anyway? Was *that* seriously what you call an assassination attempt?!"

Nemumu gave the big galoot the loudest and longest dressing down out of all of the assassins we had encountered so far. As he watched her unload on the hapless demon, Gold mumbled what had obviously been on his mind this whole time.

"Like I said before, old boy," he muttered. "'World's best clown show' would have been a much more fitting moniker for these chaps than 'world's best assassins,' what?"

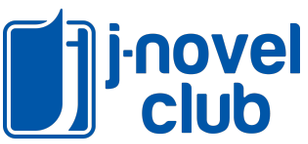
I was unable to come up with an argument to counter that observation, so I just looked away in vicarious embarrassment.

☆☆☆

When all was said and done, it didn't really take us all that long to capture all five members of the Morte Spada. The last guy we nabbed was a demon whose whole body was draped in a tattered cloak as if he were some kind of phantom. In fact, we happened to take him out without even knowing he was there, and in all honesty, I still couldn't tell you how we beat that last assassin, and nor could Nemumu or Gold. He literally managed to get himself clobbered before we even noticed his presence.

We decided to keep the Morte Spada detained in one of the training arenas in the Abyss, and it was there that Nemumu had the opportunity to once again rip into the detainees for their ineptitude.

"H-How could you *embarrass* yourselves like that?!" she yelled before telling them directly to their faces exactly how they had failed big time at being assassins.



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Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2025
Premium E-Book for cbg