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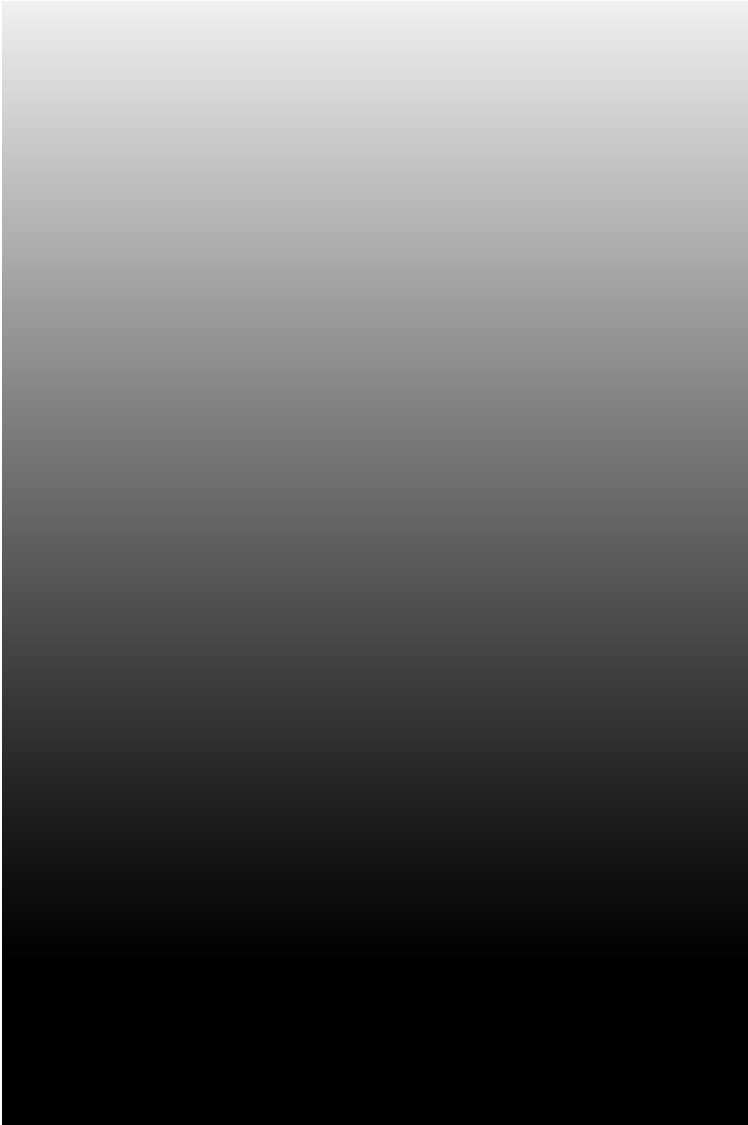
Daisuke Aizawa

Illustration by
Touzai

THE Eminence IN Shadow

I honestly can't remember what
catalyzed this desire. All I know is I've
admired shadowboxers for as long as I can remember.
Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was
all in for anything that featured a mastermind,
or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them.

“The Thirteen Nightblades, huh? Fascinating...”



*People ruling from the shadows? I'm so jealous!
How dare they upstage me!*



Jack the Ripper

Christina Hope

Gray

Alexia Midgar

Cid Kagenou

“We’re dealing with a **serial killer** here.”

“That there is a **massive clue!**”

“Is that...a calling card directed to the **Thirteen Night-blades?!?**”

Eminence in Shadow



Christina
Hope

“He’s
in a
league
all his
own.”

“The
way he’s
moving...
No, it
can’t be.”

“E-EEEEEEK!”

Kanade

Alexia
Midgar

Jack the
Ripper

The Eminence in Shadow



“Enough
already!”

Omega

Lambda

Chi

Nu

Eta

Beta

Akane
Nishino

“What’s
going on....?”

“Oh,
**forget
this.**
It’s time
**I used
force.**”

“I heard
a big com-
motion.”

Epsilon

Eminence-Shadow

PROLOGUE

There Are People Ruling the Midgar Kingdom
from the Shadows? I'm So Jealous!

CHAPTER 1

Enter Jack the Ripper!

CHAPTER 2

Assassins at the Sleepover!

CHAPTER 3

Deciphering the Calling Card!

CHAPTER 4

The Monster Becomes a Legend!

AUXILIARY
CHAPTER

Following in the Monster's Footsteps!

SIDE STORY

The Grassland Vow

CHAPTER 5

Welcome to the Shadow Garden!

EPILOGUE

That Nostalgic Smell

APPENDIX

THE Eminence & IN Shadow

06

Daisuke Aizawa

Illustration by
Touzai


New York

Copyright

The Eminence in Shadow 06

DAISUKE AIZAWA

Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher Cover art by Touzai

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KAGE NO JITSURYOKUSHA NI NARITAKUTE ! Vol. 6

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I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
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behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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There Are People Ruling
the Midgar Kingdom from the
Shadows? I'm So Jealous!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Prologue

Prologue

There Are People Ruling the Midgar Kingdom from the Shadows? I'm So Jealous!

Skel and Po lie sprawled out across their desks.

"It's over."

"It's finally over..."

The three of us just finished up our Midgar Academy final written exams.

"You guys wanna go over the answer sheet and see how we did?" I ask.

Losing Isaac was a major blow, but I managed to pull through by cheating off the crib sheet I got from Nina. I'm actually pretty proud of how I did. I tailored my scores for each topic so I would just barely avoid failing in each of them.

"Are you outta your mind?" Skel replies.

"It's not like we can change our scores now," agrees Po. "Besides, the practical exams are next week."

"Yeah, fair," I admit.

I was pretty sure there was no way in hell they would be interested. That was the whole reason I asked. Thank goodness they weren't, or that could've backfired badly.

It's been about a month since the terrorist attack with the white fog, putting us about halfway through the second month of the year. Things got kind of hectic when the Knight Order came in and did their investigation, but things at the academy have settled down since then.

Still, it's awesome how many terrorist attacks this fantasy world has. Back in my old world, all I got to do was occasionally hunt down hoodlums.

Oh, and Claire's been in a coma ever since.

I'm honestly not that torn up about it, and I've certainly been enjoying my newfound freedom. Zeta says she'll wake up sooner or later, so I'm sure she's probably fine. It might affect her job-hunting prospects, though.

Actually, wait a minute. She never took her final exams. Please tell me they're not gonna hold her back a year. The sooner she graduates and gets out of my hair, the better.

"So what do you guys want to do?" I ask. "We could study for the practical exam—"

"Are you outta your mind?" Skel replies.

"Now that we're done with the written test, we're free to screw around as much as we want until the practical exam comes up," agrees Po.

"Yeah, fair."

"And if you think you can just take our money and run, then you've got another one coming. We've got fat bankrolls, and we're coming for you."

"We have the power of Mitsugoshi Installment Payments on our side!"

Skel gives me a seedy grin as he flashes me a stack of bills, and Po starts shuffling a deck of cards.

"Now, onward to our battlefield!" Skel cries.

"I assume you mean my room, right?"

"You should go ahead and take a shower first," Po says. "We're not letting you sleep a wink tonight."

"I shower in the mornings like a normal person."

They carefully pin me in from both sides.

Then I hear Christina's voice. "I'm sorry, Kanade. This is all my fault."

"Oh no... What am I going to do?" The girl standing across from her looks oddly familiar. "I can't believe Miss Eliza is going to walk away scot-free..."

Tears run down the girl's face.

Oh, now I remember. She's the one we saved back in the fog.

"C'mon, let's do this thing," Skel urges me.

"Don't go getting cold feet on us, now," Po says.

"All right, all right, I'm coming."

As I leave the classroom, there's just one thought on my mind: Being a major noble must be sweet. They can get away with anything.



"There's always something so hollow about total victory," I mutter to myself as I lie on my bed of money.

Skel and Po bailed before the clock even hit midnight. Midway through the game, I started cleaning them out with mechanical efficiency, and my winnings gradually piled higher and higher.

Once the passion fades, all that remains is boundless emptiness...

"Heh-heh-heh... I sounded like a real high roller there."

I get up from my bed and start gathering up the stacks of bills I spread across it for the bit. All told, we're looking at two million *zeni*. Thanks, Skel and Po. And thanks, Mitsugoshi Installment Payments.

"So this is the limited-edition deck Mitsugoshi put out, huh? I hear these are wicked expensive...but it's also kinda creepy."

The theme of the design is "horror." I should probably just sell it.

It's still too early to go to sleep, so I guess I'll get some training in.

Right as I start working my magic, though, I spot a gleaming card that has fallen by the side of my bed.

"Huh, what's that?"

The card is gold and shiny and looks super fancy. The front says "*Royal Mitsugoshi Deluxe Bar Membership Card*" in beautiful lettering, and the back says "*Member #001, Cid Kagenou.*"

“Oh, right. Mitsugoshi was opening a fancy members-only bar, and Gamma gave me a membership card.”

I completely ignored it because I assumed they were gonna use the knowledge they stole from me to rip off everyone who went there.

“A fancy bar, huh...?”

I snatch a glance at my fat bankroll. I *do* have a soft spot for those scenes you occasionally see in spy movies where people have a secret conversation in a quiet bar.

“And hey, maybe I can get them to give me a friends-and-family discount.”

Worst-case scenario, I can always dine and dash.

All right, let’s do this.

If you’re gonna do spy stuff, you gotta do it in a suit. The one I wore as John Smith is in tatters, so I decide to wear the Mitsugoshi-brand suit I got from Alpha.

After polishing my shoes and giving my hair a slight part down the middle, I head out for my nighttime jaunt through the capital.



“I think this is the place...”

To my surprise, I find the fancy bar underground just off a tiny alleyway. Its door is unobtrusive and features the Mitsugoshi logo and a delicate engraving. I guess this place is going for a “secret hideout” kind of vibe.

I’m a little bit nervous as I open the door and head in. The room is quiet. The whole place is indirectly lit, and the array of dim pendant lights above the bar counter makes it look like a glowing sea of stars. The floor is made of wolfking stone, and it looks like each table is made of a single plank of Yggdrasil wood. We’re talking hundreds of millions of *zeni* worth of stuff, and that’s just at a glance. A shiver runs up my spine as I calculate the risk and returns of looting the place.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Oh, uh, hi.” My reply comes out dumber than I intend, possibly because I was thinking about something unscrupulous. “I’ve got my membership card right here.”

I reach into my pocket to pull out the shiny golden card, but the hostess shakes her head. “I assure you that won’t be necessary, Mr. Cid Kagenou. Welcome to our humble establishment. We have a VIP room in the back, if you’d be interested...”

She turns her heterochromatic eyes to the seats over in the corner.

“Nah, I’ll go with the counter.”

It takes me a moment to make up my mind, but if you’re doing spy stuff, you gotta sit at the counter.

“Very well. Please follow me.”

“Sorry, but...have we met somewhere?”

She’d turned away to lead me to my seat, but when I ask the question, she looks back at me in surprise. She’s a half-elf with dark hair and different-colored eyes: gold and silver.

“We met at Mitsugoshi,” she tells me.

“Oh, right, you were there with Gamma.”

“I’m honored that you remember me. My name is Omega. Now, your seat is right this way.”

I follow Omega to the counter and sit down. The bartender looks familiar, too. She’s a blond elf with bobbed hair wearing a men’s uniform.

“You were there at Mitsugoshi, too, weren’t you?” I ask her.

“You honor me. My name is Chi.”

“I’m Cid Kagenou.”

“Oh, I’m well aware.”

Chi gives me a composed bow, but for some reason, her fingers are trembling. Maybe she hasn’t been tending bar for very long or something.

This is the person you've got working at your swanky bar?

"I'll have..."

I've already got my order all picked out. I'm in the mood to reenact everyone's favorite spy movie.

"...a vodka martini."

I then drop my voice to a low, resonant bass.

"Shaken, not stirred."

At times like these, it's important to carry yourself like a hardened badass. I can't let them find out that this is my first time going to a bar like this. Instead, I need to lay on the silent pressure like *I'm* the one testing *them*.

"One shaken vodka martini, coming right up."

Chi's expression is tense, and she takes a deep breath to steady her shaking hands.

Now that I think about it, maybe that shaking is actually part of the cocktail-making process. The more I stare at her, the more intense the shaking gets.

"I see..." I mutter.

I dunno much about cocktails, so this is valuable info I'm learning. Apparently, the trick to being a good bartender is how badly your fingers are shaking.

At that point, a question dawns on me. Since when has this world had vodka?

"How strange..." I say.

Chi freezes.

It's okay, I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about the fact that vodka even exists in this world.

The moment I start questioning it, though, I realize that the answer is obvious. The girls did this.

"I never took you for a vodka martini drinker," comes a clear, beautiful voice from behind me.

I know who it is without even having to turn around.

“Hello, Alpha.”

“It’s been too long.”

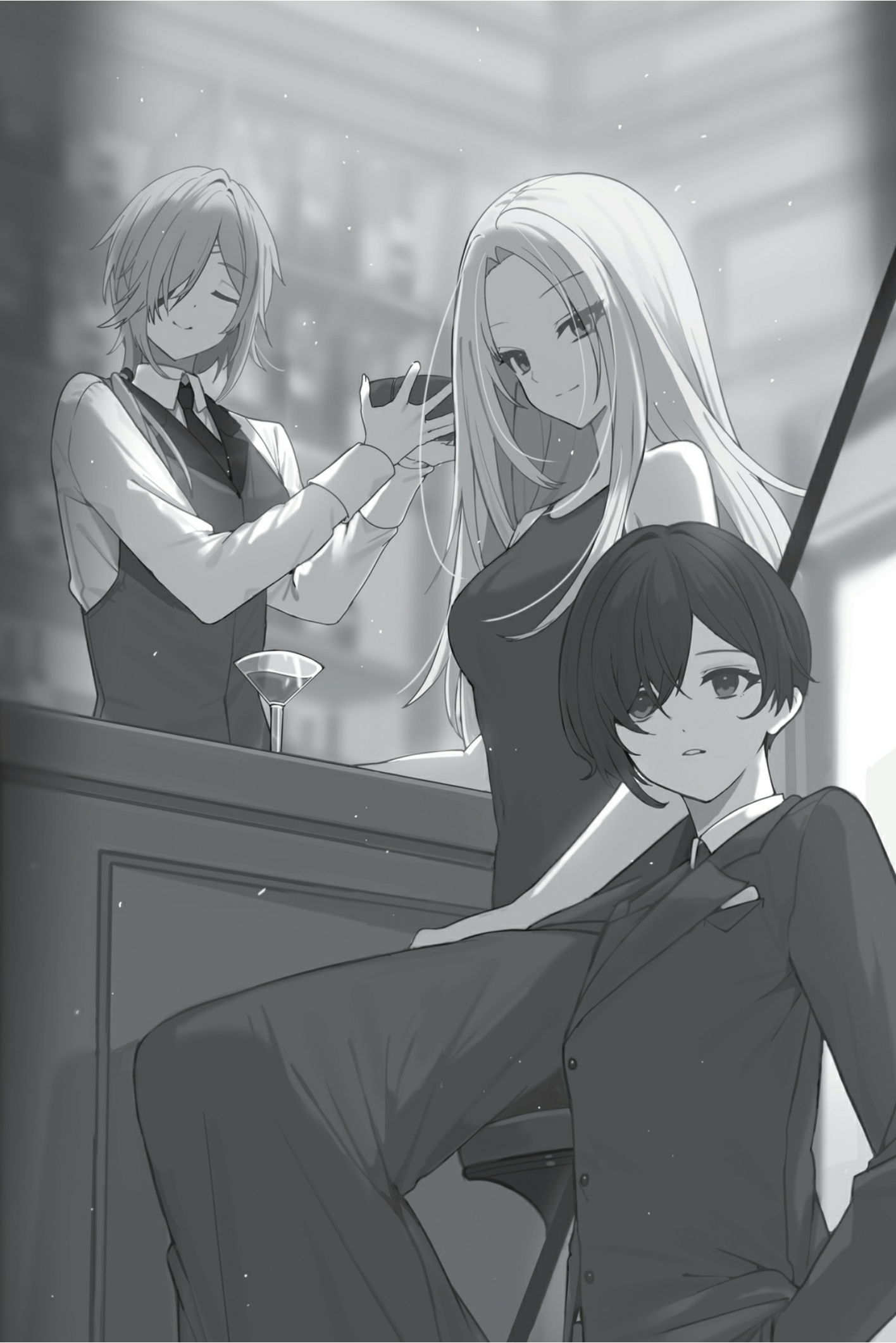
“True that.”

She seems a little more grown-up than the last time I saw her. She has gorgeous blond hair and blue eyes, and her understated dress matches the bar’s ambience perfectly.

“I thought you didn’t care for liquor,” she notes.

“Did I say that?”

“Not out loud. I just can’t think of a single time I ever saw you enjoying a drink.”



Dang, she's sharp. By and large, I can't tell one alcoholic drink from the next. I'm just drinking 'cause it looks cool.

"It's not like I hate it or anything."

Alpha giggles. "You really do, don't you?"

"Thank you for waiting. Here's your vodka martini," Chi announces.

Her hands are still trembling as she sets the cocktail in front of me. She's getting more jittery by the moment. She must really be a pro.

"I'll take a Manhattan," Alpha says.

"Coming right up."

Alpha's order, the Manhattan, is a whiskey-based cocktail. The problem is, there's no good reason for whiskey to even exist here.

"So you finished re-creating whiskey," I say, feigning confidence to bait her into giving up information.

"It certainly took us long enough, but yes. We haven't started selling it, but once we do, we believe it'll command a considerable price. The Velgaltan noble we had taste-test said he would value it at twenty million *zeni* a bottle."

"I—I see..."

I knew it. I never should have gotten carried away and bragged to them about how much I knew about distilled spirits.

"We couldn't have done it without your knowledge," Alpha adds.

"Uh-huh..."

You can say that again.

I'm so frustrated, I down my entire vodka martini in a single gulp.

"How was it?"

"Not bad."

Yep, that sure tasted like alcohol.

Alpha smiles. "Heh-heh..."

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just pleased.”

“About what?”

“That suit. You’re finally wearing it.”

“Ah, right.”

“I ordered that specially. It’s made of blackworm silk.”

“Ooh...”

Blackworms are like the silkworms from my old world, only they’re massive, violent, and poisonous to boot. It takes a master hunter to harvest their silk, a fact that’s reflected in its price tag.

“You know, I forgive you for breaking your promise,” she says as she gazes in delight at me in my suit.

I’m gonna be honest: I have no idea what promise she’s talking about.

“Thank you for waiting. Here’s your Manhattan.”

“Much appreciated.”

Seems like Alpha’s in a good mood today. She takes a sip of her Manhattan and nods. “Something a little more aged would have suited it better, but this isn’t bad.” She sets down the glass and looks back at me. “Now, you can’t stand alcohol, yet you came to the bar anyway. Did something happen?”

“Huh? Nah, nothing special. I just found the membership card lying in my room.”

“Ah, and you were concerned about being surveilled. In this bar, we can speak freely. There’s no one here at the moment but the initiated.”

All of a sudden, she gets dead serious. In other words, she’s decided to play along with my little spy act.

“Good to know. How’d that one mission go?”

“Ah, the mission,” she says, her expression still just as serious. “I listed the details on what happened in Oriana in my last report.”

“Right, the report. I read that in the three seconds between completing one mission and starting the next.”

The Shadow Garden sends me a huge number of reports on a regular basis. That said, they’re all written in some ancient script I can’t read, so I always just incinerate the reports as soon as I get them.

“Three seconds? Are you accelerating your brain’s processing speed or something?”

“Heh...” I silently raise my glass to my lips.

“Ah, it’s a technique you can’t talk about yet. I can tell it must require a profound degree of talent. Between the burden it would have to place on your brain and the risks it would carry if things went wrong... I agree, we’re not equipped to handle something like that. I will say, though, that we’ve been dutifully training in accordance with your instructions. When we’re ready, please do teach it to us.”

“I’ll be expecting great things from you.”

“I won’t let you down. I swear it on my life!”

“And how’s that one mission going?”

“Everything is proceeding smoothly. Rose Oriana has made up her mind to serve as the queen and fight.”

“Just as originally planned, then.”

“You must have foreseen this conclusion the moment you first made contact with her. You were so fixated on her, I started to get a little jealous,” Alpha jokes.

“She’s a necessary piece in the plan.”

“I see that now. We need her in order to drag them out into the light.”

“Into the light?”

“What’s the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. I was just examining the situation from all sides and envisioning the worst possible outcome the near future might bring.”

“You really do pay attention to every possibility, don’t you? I just wish you would pay a little more attention to the rest of... No, it’s nothing.” She starts to say something but stops herself. “You’ve never changed. All this time, you’ve been chasing a giant dream. It’s too big a dream for the rest of us to grasp more than a fragment of...but the preparations are finally complete, aren’t they?”

“If you cast your gaze to the horizon, we’ve only taken the very first step.”

“I understand that. With the Shadow Garden’s funds and technology, we can reshape the Oriana Kingdom. You can leave that part to us. We have everything going smoothly at the moment.”

“I see. If things are going smoothly, then I leave it in your hands.”

“Ah, and one other thing. We updated the ancient script cipher.”

Alpha hands me a few sheets of paper. I can’t help but grimace when I see how absolutely covered they are in ancient script that I can’t make heads or tails of.

“That there is the decoder sheet, but perhaps the cipher was too simple for you,” she tells me.

“Uh-huh...”

This is a disaster. My eyes hurt just looking at this thing.

“I’ll take an apple juice,” I say as I stow the papers in my pocket.

Chi’s eyes widen in surprise. “Huh? Oh, of course. One apple juice, coming right up.”

“Moving on: We have the incident at Midgar Academy. I received a mission report from Zeta. Though it certainly took her long enough to get it to me,” Alpha says with a sigh. “I swear, that girl wouldn’t know a deadline if it hit her in the face. Would you mind having a word with her?”

“She’s got her own way of doing things.”

“You really have to stop spoiling her. Still, it was thanks to her that we managed to wipe out the Fenrir sect.”

“Ah yes. The Fenrir sect. Of course.”

“She rooted out their hideouts and escape routes ahead of time. Once you beat Fenrir, it took her less than half a day to annihilate them. She was almost *too* effective.”

“I see.”

I guess she’s talking about those terrorists.

“Because of the situation in Oriana, we had barely any personnel on hand,” Alpha continues. “I find it hard to believe they managed to take out the entire Fenrir sect in half a day with just Zeta, Victoria, and a handful of Numbers. Still, this is Zeta we’re talking about, so I imagine there are a lot of details that didn’t make it into her report.” She heaves another big sigh. “Can you please talk to her? And tell her to take her reports seriously? That, and to avoid taking risks she doesn’t need to.”

“Yeah.”

“Make sure you do it, okay?”

“Yeah...”

“Thank you for waiting,” says Chi. “Here’s your apple juice.”

“Yeah!”

This really hits the spot. They used some good apples in this stuff.

“Zeta handled the cleanup, too,” Alpha explains. “She did a good job covering our tracks, and the Cult of Diablos did the same thing with their Knight Order insiders. That’s why, officially, the whole thing is being treated as a terrorist attack.”

“Going with the same story as always, I see.”

“Then there’s the matter of Claire’s coma. Zeta’s report wasn’t particularly informative. We may want to examine her again...”

“Nah, it’s fine. Let her sleep.”

At this point, it’s pretty much a given that she’s going to have to repeat a year, so there’s no point waking her up a second sooner than we have to.

“But—”

“I can handle the situation with my sister.”

Alpha gives me a small smile. “Very well. I can tell you’re worried about her, too.”

“Oh, right, speaking of the terrorist attack...” I think back to what I heard Christina talking about in the classroom earlier. “Our student council vice president, Eliza, took advantage of the chaos to attack other students.”

“Eliza... Ah, from that major aristocrat family.”

“Yeah, that one. The Knight Order was investigating her crimes, but it sounds like she’s going to be found innocent.”

“Do you want her to be found guilty? I’m sure we could—”

“Nah, that’s not what I’m asking. The ruling itself doesn’t actually matter. It’s just, there was a bunch of evidence and testimonies, so the fact that she’s just walking makes me feel a little...”

...jealous, honestly.

“That’s fair. You’re right: The corruption in Midgar runs deep. The nation is bigger than Oriana, but that just means the corruption is even more ingrained. And Eliza Despoht’s father, Marquis Brad Despoht, is the leader of a faction that symbolizes that rot.”

“Hmm.”

“The faction is called the Thirteen Nightblades. As the name suggests, it’s a secret society of thirteen of the Midgar Kingdom’s movers and shakers. People call them Midgar’s rulers in shadow, and they have strong ties to the Cult of Diablos and other criminal organizations. Brad Despoht must have been the one who gave the order to have Eliza cleared of all charges.”

“Rulers in shadow, you say...”

Alpha pulls out a sheet of paper with a portrait and a bio on it. “In all likelihood, this is the man who handled all the specifics, Earl Shoddi Goodz. He’s the lowest-ranking member of the Nightblades, a close confidante of Brad Despoht, and a formidable prosecutor. He’s the man in charge of handling cases brought against the nobility. He’s going to avoid prosecuting and claim the

evidence wasn't strong enough."

So this is Shoddi Goodz, huh? He looks evil as sin.

While we're here, I have Alpha give me a look at the other twelve bios as well.

"Even with all the eyewitness accounts and evidence?" I ask.

"This happens quite frequently. As soon as he becomes involved, everything gets swept under the rug."

"You don't say."

"And it isn't just Shoddi Goodz, either. The other Nightblades corrupt Midgar by abusing their authority as well. Due to their ties to the Cult, nobody can lay a finger on them, and they've only grown more arrogant over time."

"Those Thirteen Nightblades sound like a lucky...I mean, an evil bunch of dudes."

"We plan to deal with them eventually, but we have our hands full rebuilding Oriana at the moment. For now, we're just letting them be."

"I see..."

So this is what big shot fantasy-world nobles are capable of, huh? They're rulers in shadow who can get away with anything.

I chug my apple juice and rise to my feet. "I just got a fantastic idea. Thanks, Alpha."

"You look excited. What are you thinking?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"All right. Well, if you need help, you know where to find me," Alpha replies, then fades into mist and vanishes.

Damn, girl. That was one slick way to make an exit.

"You can put the drinks on my tab," I tell Chi.

With that, I mask my presence and vanish into the dark of the night as well.



Earl Shoddi Goodz looks up with a start and gazes out his window.

Outside, he sees the Midgar nightscape illuminated by the city's streetlamps. He thinks he senses someone watching him, but...

"Must be imagining things," he murmurs as he turns back to his paperwork.

The fire in his hearth crackles, and his fountain pen glides across the paper. The night is quiet.

Goodz sets down his fountain pen and takes a sip of his cold coffee.

"It tastes exquisite, even cold. Mitsugoshi's top-grade beans are really something else."

He nods several times in satisfaction, then turns his gaze back to the documents on his desk. On them, they have the details of the events of the Eliza Despoht incident, the costs associated with the cover-up, and a list of people they need to buy off or silence.

It looks like he's going to be able to get her off the hook, but it was by no means an easy thing to do. There were too many witnesses, and the fact that a royal—Alexia Midgar—and a major aristocrat—Christina Hope—number among their ranks is especially problematic. He had to make a lot of promises to a lot of people in order to get their testimonies thrown out.

Goodz stands up and stares out the window. His reflection in the glass is that of a tired, middle-aged man with a face like a toad's.

"I'll be expecting my due compensation for this, Mr. Despoht."

The work he's been doing has been backbreaking, and there are still some people who need to be eliminated. That minor noble witness Kanade is liable to be a problem if she isn't dealt with. However, Goodz's specialty lies in paperwork and greasing palms. Things will go smoother if he leaves the ugly business to one of the other Nightblades.

"That will be nice, though. Being at the bottom of the Nightblades' pecking order is starting to get old. This should give me the leverage I need to obtain a more respectable position."

Despite his appearance, Goodz is still in his thirties. He joined the Thirteen

Nightblades in his late father's stead, but due to his relative youth, the others always force the work they don't want onto him.

There are a lot of mysteries surrounding his father's death. It was written off as an accident, but Goodz hasn't forgotten the stab wound that was in his father's back.

"The truth is lost in the darkness. As is its wont."

At the end of the day, the incident with Eliza and the incident with his father are the same. Goodz knows all too well what happens to those who try to uncover the darkness's secrets.

He steps away from the window and rings the bell on his desk to summon a servant. All he needs to do now is seal up the documents and send them off to Marquis Despoht...

"...Hmm?"

Suddenly, he senses someone's gaze and looks up.

His study appears the same as always. There's no reason for anyone to be there but him.

And yet, he's joined by a clown.

The clown sits on his sofa staring at him. The light from the fireplace reveals that the intruder is drenched in blood.

"Wh-who the hell are you? How long have you been there?!"

Goodz immediately rings the bell again.

"Someone, get in here!! Get rid of this interloper!!"

The bell's tinny ring reverberates through the quiet night.

"Is there no one here?!"

Goodz's roar and the sound of the bell echo out futilely.

The bloody clown doesn't move. It simply sits there watching Goodz panic.

"Why is no one coming, dammit?!"

It doesn't make sense. Plenty of time has passed since he first rang the bell.

His guards should be here by now.

Yet the night is silent.

No...it's *too* silent.

"You didn't..."

The bell slips from Goodz's hand and tumbles to the floor.

The clown slowly rises to its feet. The blood dripping from its hands is fresh, and its footsteps sound strangely squelchy. There are bloody footprints soiling Goodz's expensive rug.

"What did you do to my staff...?"

The bloody clown doesn't answer. It just keeps on staring at Goodz from beneath its crescent-grin mask.

"Eek...!"

Goodz lets out a small scream and inches backward.

The clown closes in on him. *Squelch. Squelch.*

"Wh-who are you? Why are you coming after me? You really think you're going to get away with attacking me?!"

No reply from the clown. It just slowly advances, its sticky footsteps serving to mock Goodz for his false confidence.

Suddenly, Goodz thinks back to the look on his father's dead face.

"No... It can't be... Are you here to eliminate me?! A-after all I've done for the Nightblades, they're just going to throw me by the wayside?!"

Squelch.

The footsteps stop.

The bloody clown smiles beneath its mask.

"So that's what's happening... You're going to kill me just like you killed my father..."

With another set of squelches, the footsteps resume. They're getting faster. Fast enough for the clown to enter grabbing range...

“Eek... Get away, GET AWAYYYYYYYYYYY!!”

Goodz hurls his coffee cup at the clown. It shatters against the clown’s mask, splattering it with dark liquid.

Then Goodz turns around and runs.

He might not look it, but his grades back at the Academy for Dark Knights were stellar. He’s put on some weight and let himself go a bit, but he’s still far faster than the average person. He reaches the room’s door in a blink and throws it open. Now all he needs to do is flee to the Knight Order.

For a moment, he feels hope. He’s going to make it.

“Wha—? AHHHHHHH!”

However, someone on the other side of the door knocks him down.

“Wh-what are you doing?! Get out of the way!”

He desperately flounders his way across the ground.

Then, when he notices he’s getting covered with blood, he realizes what it was he tripped over.

“Wait, you’re...my security team...”

It was the dead bodies of his guards.

They weren’t the nicest men around, but he paid top *zeni* to fill their ranks with outstandingly talented dark knights. Now all those knights have been brutally slaughtered.

“Eek... AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Goodz kicks the bodies aside as he scrambles forward.

The squelching sound comes right up to his ears.

“No...”

He looks up and finds the masked clown staring down at him.

“No, no...”

In its hand, the clown is holding a single playing card.

“Don’t, you can’t—”

With a *thunk*, the playing card impales his forehead.

Goodz’s eyes go wide in stark disbelief as he reaches up to touch the card embedded in his brow.

“No...”

Then he slowly keels over backward.

The clown looks down at the blood pooling on the floor.

“One down...”

Its voice echoes through the still night.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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Enter Jack the Ripper!

The Eminence in Shadow

Volume 6

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Enter Jack the Ripper!

Christina greets the morning from the Hope family's Midgar villa.

She switches between sleeping in the dorms and sleeping at her villa whenever the mood strikes her. As of late, though, she's been staying exclusively at the villa, and her mood has nothing to do with it. For her, it's a matter of self-preservation.

"Is it morning already?"

She looks up in surprise upon seeing the sunlight streaming in through her curtains. There are faint bags under her eyes. It's clear how obsessively she's been collating documents related to the incident.

She sets her pen down on her desk and does a big stretch. Then she picks up the documents and sighs.

"Bringing charges against someone is harder than it looks..."

Her documents list out the full events that transpired and testimony backing it all up, but the way things are going, it looks like Eliza's actions are going to be deemed an accident rather than a crime. The official story is that the whole thing was just a freak tragedy that took place when a bunch of teenage academy students got wrapped up in a terrorist attack and panicked at the stress of having their lives in such danger.

"Earl Shoddi Goodz has been covering up and fabricating evidence. I had no idea the Thirteen Nightblades' influence was so vast."

Not only were they perfectly happy making up stories and suppressing the truth, but they didn't hesitate to kill if the need arose. Christina herself has felt like she's being watched. That's why she started sleeping exclusively at the villa.

"Their corruption is spreading. I can't beat them, not on my own. And as for

the Hope family's strength, well..."

Her father has no interest in getting involved with the case. To use his words: *"How exactly do we benefit from saving some no-name noble girl?"*

The Thirteen Nightblades' power is why their tyranny stands unopposed. Everyone just looks the other way.

"I don't...I don't have that kind of power."

Political power, military power, financial power, institutional power... If you have power, you can get away with anything. That's just a fact of living in Midgar.

"How do we benefit from saving a no-name noble girl, huh?"

They didn't. Doing so wouldn't change the world one bit.

Christina knows that from a noble's perspective, her father is right. However, that's not enough to satisfy her. There are people doing evil, and the fact that she can't punish them makes her feel completely powerless.

Christina has no idea how to reconcile those emotions.

Perhaps if she were stronger, she would be able to stamp out evil. Stamp it out...the way Shadow does.

Christina can picture it in her mind's eye. She can see herself mowing down the Nightblades, vanquishing the wicked, saving the weak, and defending her nation.

She laughs at herself. "Okay, that's enough of that."

All she's doing is making herself feel worse.

She lets out a long exhale and rubs her tired eyes. Then she takes the documents about Eliza and the Nightblades and stores them in her drawer to take her mind off things. Instead, she pulls out another set of files.

"Shadow...and the Shadow Garden..."

The new files contain the investigation Christina's been conducting into the Shadow Garden in her free time.

"It appears as though the Shadow Garden began operating over a year ago,

but I can't track down any details. I assume Shadow's been leading them that whole time...but again, I can't find details. I swear, it's like I can't get confirmation on anything."

She flips through the papers. They're packed full of clippings from wanted posters and newspaper articles.

"The reporting in the north side of the kingdom is atrocious. It's been confirmed that Shadow operates up there sometimes, you know! How is it they barely have any mugshots, and the quality of the ones they do have is so terrible?"

Despite her grumbling, her expression slowly brightens as she looks at the papers.

"The man has a tremendous sense of duty. That's why he walks his bloodstained path, and it's why he can't exist where the light shines. But *he's* out there vanquishing evil. Unlike me..."

She laughs at herself again.

Then there's a knock on her door.

"Come on in."

A middle-aged man steps inside.

Christina uses the full force of her dark knight talents to shove her documents into the drawer at record speed.

"Good morning, Father."

"Have you not been sleeping, Christina?"

"No, no, I was just doing some thinking. Did you need me for something?"

"I assume I don't have to tell you this, but don't do anything that will anger the Thirteen Nightblades. No good would come of getting on their bad side."

"....."

Christina doesn't say a word, and the nod she gives him is brief. It's the most resistance she can muster.

"Things are about to get very chaotic. There's no telling what could happen to

the Hope family if we do anything rash.”

“Chaotic how, Father?”

“Ah, right, I forgot to tell you.” Her father lets out a sigh. “Shoddi Goodz is dead.”

“What?”

“The whole aristocracy is on edge, and the Nightblades are furious. The capital is in turmoil.”

Christina watches her father leave, then hurriedly gets dressed and heads to the scene of the crime.



Alexia walks down the Goodz estate hallway.

“There’s bloody footprints here, too...”

The dark-red stains continue across the rug.

“Please don’t touch anything, Princess Alexia. We’re still collecting evidence.”

Alexia glares at the knight chaperoning her. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“Princess Alexia!!”

On hearing her name, Alexia turns around. “Christina?”

There, she sees Christina, the girl she got to know during the big incident.

“I heard that Earl Shoddi Goodz was dead,” Christina manages as she tries to catch her breath. “What happened?”

“Someone murdered him. The Knight Order is investigating the scene as we speak.”

“Oh, wow...”

“They won’t let me in the actual room yet, so I was checking the hallway.”

“Why the hallway?”

“Take a look at these footprints.” Alexia points at the bloody tracks going

down the hall. “Don’t they seem odd to you?”

“They do seem to stand out more than I would expect.”

“That’s strange, too, but what’s stranger is how little of a hurry the killer was in. They just killed a bunch of people, yet there wasn’t any urgency in their gait.”

Alexia walks alongside the footprints and matches their stride.

“If anything, it looks like they were walking slowly,” Christina agrees.

“Weird, right? Most people would want to get out of there as fast as they could. The killer must have had nerves of steel.”

“It’s like they were confident they wouldn’t get caught or something.”

“You might be more right about that than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was the Thirteen Nightblades who silenced Earl Shoddi Goodz.”

“Seriously?”

“He drew too much attention during the case. It’s no surprise they would want to get rid of him.”

“But even so, why do it now?”

“That’s the one part I can’t figure out...”

Just as they find themselves at a loss, Alexia’s chaperone calls, “They say you can go in now, Princess Alexia.”

Alexia turns to Christina. “Shall we?”

“I’m right there with you.”



The chaperone takes them to the Knight Order member in charge of the scene.

“I’m Gray, chief of the Knight Order’s criminal investigation department,” the

man says. "Please make sure you don't touch the body or move anything in the room."

"Got it," Alexia replies.

"I'm going to get back to work. If you need anything, give me a holler."

"Will do."

The first thing Alexia is greeted with when she steps inside is the overwhelming smell of blood. But of course—the pile of corpses in front of the door has been left untouched, and beyond them, Earl Shoddi Goodz's body is bleeding from the head as it stares upward.

Alexia crouches beside it. "Looks like the cause of death was a single blow to the forehead. But that's no ordinary weapon..."

Throughout the room, members of the Knight Order are rushing around working. Christina, on the other hand, simply stands by the door in a daze.

"What's the matter, Christina?" Alexia asks. "They said we can go in."

"Huh? Oh, right, coming." After snapping back to her senses, Christina hurriedly follows Alexia inside.

"If you're not feeling well, you might want to just leave."

"No, I'm fine. That thing stuck in the head..." Christina stares curiously. "Is that a playing card? What an odd design."

"It's from Mitsugoshi's high-end line. I think it's a limited edition."

"We might be able to narrow down who bought it, then."

"I wouldn't be so sure. With a company as big as Mitsugoshi, even their 'limited edition' products get print runs in the thousands."

"That would take a while to go through..." Christina looks down at Earl Goodz. "The ace of spades, huh?"

The earl died with his eyes wide and a shocked expression. Sure enough, the card lodged in his brow is the ace of spades. It's almost as if the skeleton knight on the card's design is symbolizing the man's death.

"Why use a playing card?" Alexia murmurs. "Earl Goodz's dark knight

academy grades were nothing to sneeze at. This man was a skilled dark knight, yet the killer impaled his forehead with a normal old paper card. That would have taken some serious magic.”

“Paper conducts magic at a rate of less than ten percent. That’s nothing compared with something like mithril, and plus, it would have taken incredibly precise mana control to overcome the paper’s natural resistance. Why did they choose such an obtuse method, I wonder?”

“I have no idea, but it certainly helps pinpoint our perp. We’re looking for a dark knight with huge mana reserves and highly precise mana control.”

“In other words, this isn’t just some random murderer we’re dealing with. If it was, they would never have used a playing card like that.”

“No, they would have been more efficient about it.”

“They were clearly working with some kind of purpose. The card, the footprints, it doesn’t add up. Perhaps it’s some sort of code that only those in the know can decipher.”

“They could have been making an example of him, or satisfying a grudge, or sending some kind of message... You might be onto something.”

The two of them spend some more time standing in thought before the corpse.

Eventually, a male voice breaks the silence. “There are witnesses?! Are you serious?”

It’s Gray, the man in charge of the Knight Order operations there.

“There was, sir,” a knight replies. “Apparently, the servants were merely unconscious. Several of them woke up and are able to describe the culprit.”

“And? What did they look like?”

Alexia and Christina strain their ears.

“According to the staff...it was a clown drenched in blood.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“They say a bloody clown appeared out of nowhere, and a moment later,

everything went black. The next thing they knew, it was morning. They're all reporting the same thing, so I have to imagine they're telling the truth."

"And none of them got a good look at the killer's face?"

"No, sir. It was hidden under a clown mask. They say the killer seemed 'tall,' but that might just have been the costume talking."

"Did you get anything else?"

"No, sir. We're canvassing the area, but so far we haven't found any other witnesses."

"Keep pounding that pavement. If they were dressed like a clown, they must have stood out like a sore thumb. We're dealing with an absolute wacko here." Gray watches his subordinate go, then sighs.

"A clown costume, a playing card... This is a strange case," says Alexia.

Gray frowns. "Why, if it isn't Princess Alexia. Don't you know it's poor manners to eavesdrop?"

"I think the killer was trying to leave some sort of specific message. Do you have any idea what that might be, Chief Gray?"

"You're overthinking things, Princess. This here is an open-and-shut case."

"How so?"

"Our culprit is some rich person who had a bone to pick with Earl Goodz. They used their wealth to hire some hotshot assassin, and it turned out the assassin was a homicidal nutjob. Simple as that. Amateurs tend to assume that mysteries are these complicated affairs, but people's motives are always dead simple. The only killers who go and leave messages are the ones in Ms. Natsume's novels. Are you a fan of her *Churlock Holmes* novels, too, Princess Alexia?"

"No, I just—"

"Aren't they fantastic? I own every one she's put out. But the thing is, they're interesting because they're *fiction*. Reality is far more boring."

"I'm not a *Churlock Holmes* fan! Why would you think I have an ounce of

respect for that woman?!”

“Oh, you mean you prefer the *Case Clawed* series? The one where a drug turns a famous detective into a kitten?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all! I’m just worried there might be more to the case than meets the eye!!”

“Oh, I see. In that case, I can assure you that you have nothing to worry about. As I said, we’ve already narrowed down the culprit’s profile. Someone rich with a grudge against Earl Goodz.” Chief Gray flashes the two girls a smile brimming with confidence. “Someone like, for example, Miss Christina.”

“What? I had nothing to do with this!”

“Why so flustered? By the way, I’m not the only one who suspects you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say you’ve made yourself some enemies in high places.”

“You’re talking about the Nightblades...”

“Now, I must be getting back to work. Gotta collect evidence so we can catch the culprit.” Chief Gray turns to leave and drops a catchphrase. “One truth prevails... Ms. Natsume’s novels really are fantastic. You should check them out.”

With that, and with a hearty chortle, Chief Gray leaves.

“Well, he’s not wrong when he says that you have more reason than most to be happy about Earl Goodz’s death,” Alexia remarks.

“I told you, I didn’t do it!” Christina cries.

“Well, yes, obviously. But that’s not how people are going to see it. I’d watch my back if I were you.”

“It sounds like the Nightblades are coming after me.”

“I do wish I could offer you more help, but...people tend to get testy when royals meddle with judicial proceedings.”

“No, no, I completely understand the position you’re in. That testimony you gave was more than enough.”

“I really am sorry.”

“And also, I would be lying if I said Earl Goodz’s death didn’t help me out. I need to think things over and figure out how I want to play this.”

“This could certainly help the trial turn in your favor.”

Christina nods. “There’s something you should see, Princess Alexia.”

“What is it?”

Christina leads her over to Earl Goodz’s desk. “There are traces of a big coffee spill all over the desk.”

“Sure, and pieces of a broken cup all over the place. It’s no surprise that its contents would have splashed onto this.”

“Look at the shape of the stain, though. It’s a perfect rectangle.”

“You’re right! That means there was something here on the desk. Something shaped like a document...”

“So the coffee spilled on the document, and someone took it. That’s why the coffee stain has that big rectangle in it. It’s the only logical explanation.”

“But nothing’s supposed to have been removed from the crime scene.”

Christina lowers her voice to a hush. “Then it was either the killer who took it, or the Knight Order.”

Alexia’s expression hardens. “It could be dangerous to trust the Knight Order more than we have to. We’ll need to keep an eye on them.”

“Yeah. Be careful out there, Princess Alexia.”

The two of them spend a bit more time surveying the room, then part ways.



Later that day, after school, Christina waits in her Midgar Academy classroom so she can talk to Kanade about the attack. Kanade is the girl who exposed Eliza’s crimes back in the white fog incident. Naturally, doing so earned her the enmity of the Nightblades.

“Th-thanks for waiting, Christina.”

Kanade looks terrified, and she’s constantly checking her surroundings. There’s still a handful of students getting their stuff together before heading home, but there’s no guarantee whatsoever that that would stop the Despohts from taking extreme measures.

“Did you hear about what happened this morning, Kanade?”

“Yeah, of course. I never imagined something like that could happen to the earl...”

“The situation’s changed now. Both for the better and for the worse.”

“For the worse?”

“That’s right. You have a target on your back. I’m sure of it.”

The blood drains from Kanade’s face. “.....?!”

“The only reason the Despohts didn’t attack you earlier was because they were confident they didn’t need to. The way they saw it, there was no need to take that kind of risk. But with Earl Goodz dead, all that’s gone out the window.”

“As in...they’re at a disadvantage now?”

“Exactly. They don’t have the luxury of protecting their image anymore. They’re coming after me, too, of course. I have a suggestion I wanted to run by you—”

Right as Christina is about to elaborate, they’re interrupted.

“AHHHH! Wh-what is this thing?!”

A pathetic-sounding cry echoes through the classroom.

“What’s wrong?” Christina calls over to the male student who yelled. By that point, the only people still there are Christina, Kanade, and the guy who let out the cowardly shriek.

The dark-haired boy turns around in a panic. In his hand, he’s holding something that looks like a document.

“Ch-Christina...,” he stammers.

Christina digs his name up from the depths of her memory. He's not particularly remarkable, but he inexplicably ends up at the center of attention just often enough for her to barely remember him.

"You're Claire Kagenou's brother, um...Cid Kagenou, right?"

"Y-yeah, that's me. Can you take a look at this? It was just lying here."

"What is it?"

The documents are dirty and stained.

The stains come in two colors, black and red. The black stains have a faint coffee odor to it, and the red ones...well, they smell like blood.

"Is that...?"

The moment Christina takes the documents, she freezes. These papers contain the details of the events of the Eliza Despoht incident, the costs associated with the cover-up, and a list of people involved with notes hinting at their motives and interests.

These are the documents that were missing from the scene of Earl Goodz's murder.

Christina hurriedly double-checks to make sure there's nobody else around.

"Where did you find these, Cid?" she asks, taking care to keep her voice level.

"Uh, they were just sticking out of that desk. I figured someone left them here by accident."

The desk he's referring to is one of the ones in the classroom. Each student is assigned a desk, and the one Cid is pointing at is Christina's.

"My desk?!"

"Oh, that's your desk? Sorry, I should've just left them be."

"No, I'm glad you spotted them."

"See, that's what I figured. I'm glad you didn't forget them."

"Did you see what the documents said?"

"Huh? I mean, I kinda got a glimpse..."

“Ah...” Christina’s voice darkens. “So you saw them.”

“Shoot, was there something private in there?”

“Very, very private, yes.”

“Well, I only got a tiny look, so it’s kinda like I didn’t look at them at all. How about we leave it at that, and I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Hold it!”

Cid makes an unexpectedly swift beeline to the door, but Christina grabs him by the back of his collar.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you leave.”

“What?” Cid says, sounding like he can’t be bothered. “C’mon, there’s no need to get violent.”

“I’m saying this for your own sake. You don’t want to wake up with your head cut off, do you?”

“Wait, you’re gonna cut off my head?”

“I’m not going to cut off anything. The problem is, I don’t know if anyone saw you. If they find out you read these, they’ll come after you for sure.”

“Who’s ‘they’? I’m not really following any of this, but I feel like this is your fault for leaving something like that in your desk.”

“I didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t put the documents there.”

“But then, who did?”

“Someone who wanted me to read them.”

The air seems to chill as a quiet, hard-to-describe unease falls over them. There’s someone out there who stole important documents from the scene of a murder and went out of their way to put them in Christina’s desk all the way over in the academy.

In fact, that person might be watching them at that very moment.

Christina certainly stands to benefit from the situation, but it's still unsettling, not knowing what the mystery party hopes to achieve.

Then, out of nowhere, Cid speaks up. "Oh, wow, gosh, there's something written on there."

"What are you talking about?"

From where Cid is standing, all he should be able to see are the documents' backsides.

"The backs of the papers are stained red. Don't you think it kinda looks like letters?"

"You're right!"

Christina turns the papers over, and sure enough, there's a message written in blood. It's a little runny, so the message is hard to make out, but...

"'Jack the Ripper.' Is that a name?"

"Maybe that's the person who left the papers in your desk," Cid offers.

"But who could they be? And why give these to me...?" Christina inhales sharply as she sinks into thought.

"Dunno, but I gotta get going."

"Hold it."

Once again, Cid tries to flee, and once again, Christina catches him.

"Uh, my sister's in a coma, and I've been so worried I can't sleep at night, so I really need to get going so I can look after her..."

"I know about your sister's situation, but I can't let you leave. You're not safe."

"I'm fine. I can protect myself."

"As I recall, your grades are a lot closer to the bottom of the class than the top. I'm telling you this for your own good."

"I mean, you're not wrong about that, but still."

Christina ignores Cid and turns around. "And, Kanade, you can't go home, either."

“Wait, me too?” Kanade asks in surprise.

“That’s right. This is actually what I was trying to suggest earlier, but as of today, the two of you are going to be living at the Hope family villa.”

“Ugh,” Cid grumbles.

“Oh, thank goodness,” says Kanade. “That’s such a relief.”

Two very different responses.

“We don’t have a choice here, not if we want to keep the two of you safe. The Hope villa is well guarded.”

“Ugh.”

“Thank you so much, Christina.”

“Now, let’s collect our stuff so we can head there.”

And just like that, the three of them begin living together.



When I kill people, I have a couple of rules that I kinda sorta vaguely try to obey.

One of those rules is that I generally try to avoid killing people I’d feel sorry for.

Another rule is that if they’re a bad guy, it’s probably okay to give ’em the ax.

“Cool, no problems here.”

I just double-checked, and I’ve been following all my rules today.

“Gotta say, though, I wasn’t expecting things to play out like this.”

As a result, I now find myself in Christina’s reception room.

“Would you like some, Cid? We might never get another chance to drink high-end Mitsugoshi coffee again, so we have to make sure we drink enough to last the rest of our lives!”

Kanade the broke aristocrat happily chugs her coffee. Her timidity from back

in the classroom seems to have gone without a trace. She's a pretty girl with dark eyes and dark bobbed hair.

"You can have mine," I offer.

Gamma sends me more than I'll ever be able to get through.

"Wait, really?! I love you, Cid!"

After receiving an awfully casual declaration of love, I lean back on the sofa and sigh. I never expected to get dragged into staying at Christina's place. I worry that this might not be appropriate background-character behavior...but then I realize Kanade is giving off the biggest background-character energy ever as she downs a lifetime supply of coffee, so maybe this is actually fine.

"Cool, no problems here."

Looks like I'm leading a deeply unproblematic life today.

"Can I have your chocolate, too, Cid?"

"Nah, the chocolate's mine."

"Boo, what a jerk. I hate you, Cid."

I swiftly rescue my share of the chocolate out of Kanade's hand. These are the expensive new matcha truffles Mitsugoshi just released. Gamma sent me a sample package last month. I'm surprised Christina managed to get her hands on any, considering that the preorder backlog is over a year long.

So this is what major aristocrats are capable of, huh...? Once again, I'm jealous as hell.

"The sofa's from Mitsugoshi's fancy furniture brand... And the chandelier, rug, and tableware are from their high-end lines as well...," I mutter.

Man, these people must be die-hard Mitsugoshi fans. That said, just how many pies does Mitsugoshi have its fingers in?

As I pop the matcha truffles in my mouth, I hear a knock on the reception room door.

"I'm coming in."

It's Christina.

Kanade shifts gears at a startling speed and bows her head low. “Thank you so much for having us over!”

“You really don’t have to be so formal about it. The bedroom’s all made up, so let me show you where it is.”

The two of us follow Christina out into the hallway.

Between the gorgeous carpet, the decorations on the walls and ceiling, and the works of art adorning the hall, this place puts the impoverished Baron Kagenou house to shame.

“Seventeen million... Fifty-four million... Nine million... Two hundred million...,” Kanade quietly mumbles as she walks beside me.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“Hyeep?! You heard that?”

“Yep.”

“I was just estimating how much all these works of art cost.”

“Oh, huh.”

I take a good long look at the vase Kanade just valued at two hundred million *zeni* and burn it into my memory.

“This here is the dining room. We’re going to be eating here tonight. And right beside it...”

Christina guides us through the villa with practiced steps. Then, after ascending a spiral staircase, she comes to a stop before a set of double doors. There are two dark knights serving as guards right in front of them.

“Here we are.”

With that, she opens the doors to reveal the spacious bedroom within.

“Oh, wow! It’s like the kind of room a princess would have!” Kanade cheers as she rushes over to the bed.

“Okay, uh...”

“Cid, your bed’s the one on the left.” Christina points to the bed in question.

“Okay, I gotta ask—”



“Can I have this one, Christina?” Kanade inquires.

“It’s all yours,” Christina replies. “That puts me in the middle, then.”

“I gotta ask,” I cut in. “Why are there three beds?”

The question’s been killing me since we first stepped into the room.

“Because there’s three of us,” Christina says, pointing one after another at me, then herself, then Kanade.

“Well, I certainly can’t argue with that math.”

“It’s more efficient to have all the people who need to be guarded in one place.”

“Ah.”

That’s actually pretty reasonable.

“We’ll be sleeping in the same room, but I’ll put a bookcase up between Cid’s bed and ours,” Christina says. “That way, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“Plus, Cid’s grades on practical tests are garbage, and I’m, like, a hundred times stronger than him,” Kanade adds. “If he tries anything funny, I’ll just beat him up. *Fwoosh, fwoosh, fwoosh!*”

In a profound display of disrespect, Kanade hops up and down on her bed and assumes a combat stance.

“I’m not some weirdo.”

I raise my hands in a show of surrender and sit down on my bed. The suitcase I brought from my dorm is waiting for me by the foot of the bed.

In order, we’ve got me closest to the window, then Christina, then Kanade.

“In front of the door and next to the window, huh? If anyone attacks, I’ll be the first to die. The perfect spot for the son of a broke-ass baron,” I mutter.

“You’re the one least likely to get attacked out of all of us, Cid,” Christina tells me.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean that in a snide way.”

To the contrary, I’m looking forward to it.

“We have two guards in front of the door and another three stationed below the window. And they’re all skilled dark knights who’ve made it to the Bushin Festival primary rounds.”

“Gosh.”

“Don’t worry. You’re far safer here than you would have been at your dorm.”

“If you say so. I think I got the gist of the situation on our way over, but can I ask what happened this morning?”

“I suppose that’s only fair.”

“Actually, sorry,” Kanade pipes up. “I need to use your bathroom...”

This is what you get for drinking all that coffee.

“There’s a toilet and a bath in the next room over.”

“Thanks!”

After watching Kanade scamper off, Christina starts explaining.

“Someone killed Earl Shoddi Goodz. People will probably be talking about it at school tomorrow.”

“What?! He got murdered?! That’s so morbid. Now that you mention it, the name on those documents did look like it was written in blood...”

“I suspect those papers were taken from the scene of the crime.”

“Holy cow... Scary! To think that someone would do something as totally messed up as writing a message in blood.”

“The way Earl Goodz was killed wasn’t normal, either. This isn’t just your regular old murder. The culprit is acting with some sort of purpose.”

“I can’t believe that a normal old unremarkable academy student like me is getting wrapped up in an incident this grisly...”

“I can only imagine how hard this is for you, but you have to hang in there. You might be a target, too.”

“Man, I’m gonna be trembling so bad I won’t be able to sleep tonight. After all, someone might be after my life.”

“Oh, Cid...”

Christina rubs my quivering back.

The cold night wind blows in through the cracked window.



After Kanade gets back from the bathroom, the three of us share a late dinner.

The meal is a lavish affair made from adapted versions of recipes from Mitsugoshi’s fine dining cookbook, and what surprises me most of all is when they bring out the sushi made from a fish resembling salmon. I haven’t had sushi since before I died.

“The food was so novel, and it was all so delicious!” Kanade says in elation after we return to the bedroom.

“Mitsugoshi’s cookbooks don’t have a single bad recipe in them,” Christina replies. “You should really think about getting one, Kanade.”

“Hweh?! M-my family can’t afford expensive ingredients, though...”

“Some of their cookbooks focus on affordable dishes. For example, tuna burgers use the parts of the fish that we used to throw away.”

And thus, a fantasy world’s dietary culture gets overwritten.

The three of us continue chatting from our beds for a while. It’s exciting, like we’re out on a school trip.

Some time later, though, Christina gets up amid the hearth’s crackling and begins turning off the room’s lights. “We should really get some sleep. I was having so much fun I lost track of the time.”

“Awww, but I wanna keep chatting!”

It’s already past midnight. Kanade slips under her blanket, grumbling all the while.

“G’night,” I say as I tuck myself into bed.

“Good night, you two.”

Right as Christina is about to do the same, there’s a knock on the door, and a maid comes in.

“Miss Christina, your father is asking for you,” she says.

“...You two, go ahead and go to sleep. I’ll be right back once I’m done.”

“You got it,” I reply.

“Zzzz.”

Kanade is already fast asleep.

“Say, Cid...” Christina turns around in the doorway and gives me an intent stare.

“Huh? What’s up?”

“Have we met somewhere before?”

“In class.”

“That’s not what I mean. I just get this sense that we’ve talked before.”

“Huh. I don’t think we have.”

“Maybe it’s just your energy. I feel like you remind me of someone... Sorry for bothering you.”

With an evasive smile, Christina steps out of the bedroom.



It’s the dead of night, and Christina is in her father’s study.

Her father’s hands tremble as he flips through the documents. “This is serious business.”

“Proof like this can crack the trial wide open. I’ll be able to get Eliza Despoht convicted.”

“You think I don’t see that?!” her father roars, slamming his hands on his desk. “You’ll be turning every Nightblade against you. We wouldn’t be in this

position in the first place if you hadn't chosen to protect that complete nobody!"

"The Nightblades already have their eye on us, Father. We're the ones who benefit the most from Earl Shoddi Goodz's murder."

"And I'm saying, the only reason for that is because you keep sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong!" Then her father gives her a look. All his rage has transformed into fear. "No, don't tell me. You're not actually the one who killed—"

"Of course not! I didn't do anything. It was Jack the Ripper who killed Earl Goodz."

"B-but..."

"We need to help Kanade, Father. When we use this evidence to put Eliza Despoht away, it'll weaken the Nightblades and cause more nobles to flock to our side."

"No, but look at it another way. If we return the documents to the Nightblades, we'll be putting ourselves in their good graces."

"There's no way the Nightblades would just let us go. We know too much."

"Rgh... Wait, hold on. You invited that girl over here, right?"

"I did. Kanade is under our protection now."

"Good going. If we turn her over to the Nightblades as well, they'll know we're acting in good faith!"

"I can't let you do that. I'd stop anyone who tried, even my own father."

"You would dare defy me, Christina? Me, the head of the Hope family?!"

Christina glares at her father as he blusters at her.

Her father is the first to avert his gaze. "For the time being, all decisions on this need to go through me. We don't know who this 'Jack the Ripper' is, and the whole thing might just be a trap. We need to figure out where this evidence is coming from."

"But, Father...!"

“The Thirteen Nightblades aren’t just going to sit idly by, not with Earl Goodz dead. They’ll probably put Earl Azukay and Baron Stergang in charge of the situation.”

“The two members of their militant arm.”

“And the youngest members of the Nightblades, yes. We have no idea what it is they’re planning. I’m sorry, but I’m too young to die.”

With that, Christina’s father takes the documents and leaves the room.

Christina gazes into the flickering hearth and lets out a long exhale.

“This nation’s aristocracy is rotten. Rotten to its core.”

She heaves a defeated laugh.

“What a joke we are... My father, too terrified to do anything but curry favor with the Nightblades, and me, powerless to do anything at all...”

The question of the hour is: Why did Jack the Ripper leave those documents in Christina’s desk? She thinks she’s deduced the answer.

“He’s telling me to push forward with the trial. That’s why he gave me that evidence on the Nightblades’ wrongdoings.”

However, there’s nothing Christina can do. She needs power to make the evidence stick, and that’s one thing she doesn’t have. The weak are helpless to do anything but get trampled, regardless of how hard their proof is.

“If I were just stronger...”

She could just imagine how exhilarating it would be to get rid of the parasites infesting her nation in one fell swoop.

Suddenly, the image of Shoddi Goodz’s face rises in her mind—playing card embedded in his forehead, eyes wide in bewilderment.

“Heh-heh...”

Christina laughs.

Back when she first saw him, she’d been so taken with his dead visage that she’d completely forgotten herself until Alexia called out to her.

It's the dead of night, and Christina's quiet laughter echoes through the study.



Earl Azukay and Baron Stergang share a conversation in a dim secret chamber.

"So we still don't know who iced Shoddi Goodz?" Azukay says as he smokes his cigar.

"All the witnesses did was babble about a clown," Stergang grumbles. "Nitwits, the lot of 'em."

"Whoever did it knew their stuff. There's no eyewitness reports outside the Goodz estate, and our top mana tracers couldn't find the guy's trail."

"We're dealing with a professional here."

"Yeah. Goodz had an impressive guard roster, and the killer took them all out in a single hit. This guy's got skills on par with Chief Gray's."

"Could be someone from the Lawless City. They've got that assassin's guild ZERO over there, right?"

"ZERO would make sense skill-wise, but I haven't heard of any clowns working for them."

"Could be a new recruit."

"Sure, maybe. Either way, we don't have to know who the clown is to figure out who hired them." Azukay spreads a series of papers across the desk. "There's a couple possible candidates, but the Hope family's at the top of the list for sure. Still, we don't have any proof."

"Aw, damn, no proof? What a bummer." A sinister grin makes its way to Stergang's face. "Well, guess we'll just have to merc 'em like we always do. Let 'em taste a little pain, and they'll tell us whatever we want."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. What if they didn't do it?"

"Heh, then we can just make up some evidence. Dead men tell no tales, y'know?"

"Yeah, but this is the Hope family we're talking about. Think of what a

headache that would be to clean up.”

“What? We’ve killed plenty of big shot aristocrats.”

“In the past, sure. But you heard about how the Fenrir sect got taken down.”

“The Fenrir sect? Oh, right, those cultists who’ve been backing up the Thirteen Nightblades.”

“Exactly. Now that the Shadow Garden’s stamped them out, it’s a lot harder for the Cult to have our back. We’re in talks with another of their factions right now, but until that’s all wrapped up, we need to watch our backs.”

“Ugh, what a pain in the ass. I don’t get what the big deal is. They’re just one measly little cult.”

“You don’t know anything. You have no idea how powerful the Cult is, or how terrifying they can be...”

Stergang is taken aback at how grave Azukay’s voice is. “I-if that idiot Goodz hadn’t gotten himself killed, we wouldn’t even be in this mess,” he snaps to hide how shaken he is.

“Don’t lose your cool. Until we get new orders, our job is just to keep the Hopes under surveillance.”

“Y’know, Boss, that Christina chick is a bona fide hottie. If we do end up killing the Hope family, you mind if I take her?”

“She’s all yours. Just make sure you don’t slack on the cleanup.”

“You’re the best, Boss!”

A wicked grin spreads across Stergang’s face. “Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Shut up, Stergang.”

“Sorry, Boss.”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.” A disquieting peal of laughter rings through the darkened chamber.

Stergang isn’t smiling now, and Azukay grimly sets down his cigar. “What the hell...? Who’s there?” Azukay growls.

Azukay and Stergang are the only ones in the room. A mere handful of people even know it exists.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

However, the laughter is clearly coming from inside the room.

The two men warily draw their swords.

“You think you can laugh at us?! Show yourself, asshole!” Azukay roars.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

The laughter remains unchanged.

Azukay and Stergang strain their ears to figure out where it’s coming from. It’s not from their left or their right. Not from ahead of or behind them, either.

Then the two of them start to look up.

“Hee-hee!”

That’s when something comes falling down. It’s a dark liquid, and it pours down on their table and stains it red. The smell of blood assaults their noses.

They stare at the ceiling.

There’s a clown drenched in blood clinging to it.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

The clown laughs as it eyes them.

“It’s him!”

“Is that a clown?!”

Azukay and Stergang swiftly swing their swords overhead. People call them the militant arm of the Nightblades, and their moves are well honed. Their swords cleave through the clown, sending blood spraying everywhere.

Splurch.

The bloody clown collapses onto the table.

“Get his ass!!”

The two men grin as they bring their swords down.

Each time the blades find purchase in the clown, more and more blood goes flying. The clown twitches, and the laughter finally fades.

“...Did we finish the job?” Azukay asks as he looks down at the mangled jester.

With a practiced flick of the wrist, Stergang shakes the blood off his sword. “*This* is the guy who took out Goodz? What a total pushover. Or hey, maybe I’m just that strong.”

Azukay smirks as well. He feels like he’s finally gotten his old edge back. “There’s a reason I made a name for myself in the Bushin Festival back in the day. Goodz’s piddly guards don’t have nothing on us. The clown picked the wrong guys to mess with.”

“All right, clowny boy. Let’s see what kinda face you’ve got under there...”

Stergang laughs and reaches to pull off the clown’s mask.

“What the...? Stergang!!”

Stergang looks back, annoyed by the interruption. “What’s the matter, Boss?”

“Y-your head...”

“What about my head?”

“There’s a playing card sticking out of the back...”

“Huh?”

Stergang hurriedly pats the back of his head. Sure enough, there’s a playing card stuck deep in it. He wipes at the blood trickling down his neck in bewilderment.

“B-Boss... By, by, by heab...”

With that, he crumples to the floor.

The card embedded in his head is the two of spades.

Then a figure looks down at Stergang’s convulsing body and slowly rises to its feet.

It’s the bloody clown.

“H-how...? How are you still alive?”

Azukay shudders and draws back. The clown is covered in wounds that should clearly have been fatal, yet it stands there seeming none the worse for wear.

The clown advances. *Splurch.*

“Hold on. What do you want?”

The clown advances. *Splurch, splurch.*

“Is it money? Who’s your client? How much did they pay you?”

Splurch, splurch, splurch.

“L-let’s talk about this! I’ll double their offer! I’ll get you money, women, anything you want!”

Azukay feels a soft *thump* on his back. He’s reached the wall.

Before he knew it, he’d been driven all the way to the edge of the room.

“Stay back! I might not look it, but I’m a master of the Bushin style!”

Splurch, splurch, splurch, splurch.

“You won’t like what happens if you come into my range!”

Azukay gives his sword a mighty swing. This is the range he fights best at, and he can visualize every moment right up to the clown’s head flying off its shoulders.

However, his attack comes up empty.

“What...? You dodged it from this close up?”

All the clown did was take half a step backward, but it’s a movement that defies everything Azukay knows about human capabilities. Nobody’s supposed to be able to react that quickly.

“Just what the hell are you?”

Another *splurch.*

“Hur...gurk...”

There’s a playing card lodged in Azukay’s throat. It’s the three of spades.

Choking up blood, Azukay swings his sword down. His blade grazes the tip of

the clown's nose before slamming into the ground.

“You're...a monster...”

Then Azukay keels over forward, coughs up more blood, and goes still.

The blood-drenched clown scoops up the two corpses and vanishes into the night.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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Assassins at the Sleepover!

The Eminence in Shadow

Volume 6

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Assassins at the Sleepover!

The capital's main street is in an uproar.

"Ch-check out the corpses!"

"What happened?"

"They say two nobles got murdered!"

"Stay back!! We're conducting an investigation!"

There are two corpses strung up from the fountain in the middle of the street, and a crowd is gathering around them.

"Are those playing cards lodged in their heads?"

"I heard that a noble got murdered yesterday, too."

"Oh, I heard that, too. Apparently, it was Earl Shoddi Goodz who got killed. My friend Horako works for him as a maid."

"F-for real?!"

"For real! And she saw the killer, too! She said he was dressed in a clown outfit!"

"I dunno, that sounds like a load of crap..."

"We said stay back! Go on, get out of here!!"

The Knight Order forces back the swarming crowd.

It's an oddly large gathering for the main street that early in the morning, and a beautiful red-haired girl weaves her way through it.

That girl is Christina.

"Please step aside. I need to get through!" she urges.

“Do I know you...?”

“I’m Christina Hope, daughter of Duke Hope. I’m here to see the scene of the crime.”

“Right, you’re from the Hope family. You can go on in.”

A look of disdain crosses the knight’s face as he pushes back the crowd, but he lets Christina pass nonetheless.

“What the...?”

Upon seeing the fountain, Christina gasps.

There’s a pair of men dangling from the fountain’s main column, and Christina recognizes those pallid figures.

“That’s Earl Azukay and Baron Stergang...”

Expressions of fear and shock are plastered across the dead men’s faces.

“Heh.”

Christina’s mouth curls into a smirk. Another two parasites exterminated.

Then she hears a voice from behind her. “Three of the Thirteen Nightblades have been murdered in rapid succession. Hard to imagine that’s a coincidence.”

Christina hides her sneer with her hand and turns around. There, she finds Gray, chief of the Knight Order’s criminal investigation department.

“Chief Gray... What do you mean by that?”

“I was just sharing my honest thoughts, Miss Christina.” Gray grins cheerily, but he has his gaze fixed on her like a hawk. “Three nobles just got murdered in a row, and what’s more, they all belonged to the same group. I find it difficult to write that off as random happenstance.”

“Well, I don’t disagree there.”

“I even hear there’s a noble house that was picking a fight with that group.”

“You sound awfully well informed on the matter.”

“It’s my job to be.”

“Wow, I’m jealous of what a dedicated chief the Knight Order has. I’m sure

you'll round up that killer in no time."

"You'd better believe it. Now, I need to get back to work."

Gray turns to go, then stops in his tracks.

"Was there something else?" Christina asks him.

On hearing the question, Gray turns his pointed gaze back Christina's way. "Just one more thing, Miss Christina. Did you get any good news recently?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, it just looked like you were smiling back there."

"...You must have been imagining things," Christina replies, lowering her hand from her mouth.

"Was I? I guess I must have been."

With that, Gray walks away for real.

Christina lets out a foggy exhale, then looks at the two corpses again.

"Hello there, Christina."

She turns upon hearing her name and sees a familiar face. "Princess Alexia..."

"I just got back from Earl Azukay's house."

"Why his house?"

"This isn't where the murders were committed. The killer snuck into a hidden room in the Azukay estate, killed the two men, and carried their bodies all the way out here. See how the Knight Order is checking out those tracks?"

"You're right..."

Sure enough, the knights are down on all fours and following the set of red footprints leading away from the fountain.

"Azukay's estate is in the same condition as Goodz's was," Alexia says. "All the guards are either dead or hurt too bad to fight, and all the maids just got knocked out and are otherwise fine."

"That couldn't have been easy to do."

“It couldn’t. We’re dealing with an expert here. They keep pulling off one incredibly difficult assassination after another. Earl Azukay and Baron Stergang were no fools. They were cautious enough to stay in a hidden chamber, and it didn’t do them any good.”

Christina takes yet another look at the two bodies on the fountain. One of them has a playing card embedded in his throat; the other has one in the back of his head. As far as she can tell, those are their only injuries.

“They each died of a single blow from a playing card,” she remarks. “It’s the exact same as last time.”

“The earl’s maids say they saw a clown drenched in blood, too,” Alexia replies. “It has to be the same killer.”

“What are they hoping to achieve? The playing cards, the clown outfit, bringing the bodies all the way to this fountain... None of it makes any sense.”

“I don’t know. There aren’t many people who would have the skills to pull something like this off. I imagine they’re going to start investigating all the most powerful people in the capital.”

“I hope that’s enough to find the culprit, but I wouldn’t put money on it...”

“Anyhow, we should leave. We don’t want to be seen lingering here.”

“That’s a good point. Oh, by the way, I had something I wanted to tell you—”

Right as Christina tries to leave, she gets interrupted by a listless voice: “Oh, wow, gosh, that’s weird.”

The speaker is an unassuming boy with dark hair and dark eyes—Cid Kagenou.

“What are you doing here, Cid?” Christina asks. “I told you to wait for me at the villa!”

It’s kind of alarming how fast Alexia responds. “What do you mean, ‘wait for me at the villa’?”

“I, um...” Unsure of how best to answer the question, Christina finds herself tripping over her words. She was planning on filling Alexia in on the Jack the Ripper situation another time. “There have been some developments.”

“Elaborate.”

“Look, I was going to tell you everything, just later.”

“Well, later had better come soon.”

Christina nods, surprised at how oddly tense things have gotten all of a sudden.

“Oh, wow, gosh, that’s weird.” Cid repeats himself, impatiently waiting for a reaction.

“Why’d you come here, Cid?” Christina asks. “It’s dangerous. That’s why I told you to stay behind.”

“Uhh, I was worried about you, so now I’m here,” Cid says as though reading from a script.

Alexia smiles sweetly. “You two seem awfully close. When did that happen, I wonder?”

“What’s so weird, Cid?” Christina asks.

“The playing cards.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong...”

“Anyone with two eyes could tell you the playing cards are weird,” Alexia grumbles from off to the side. “Why are you always like this, Fido?”

“If I remember correctly,” Cid continues, “the first victim was killed with an ace of spades.”

“That’s right, he was.”

“This time, it was a two and three of spades.”

“So you’re saying the numbers are going up?”

“Anyone with eyes could’ve told you that, too,” Alexia snaps.

“It’s not just the numbers,” says Cid. “It’s that they’re all spades. The killer must have chosen spades for a reason.”

“Sure, they’re all spades, but what meaning could that possibly have?”

“Each suit represents different things. Hearts symbolize love, for example,

whereas diamonds symbolize merchants and clubs symbolize knowledge.”

“I never knew that. What about spades, then?”

“Well, the first thing they symbolize is winter.”

“Oh, wow, the killer is using spades because it’s winter right now,” Alexia says in exasperation. “Brilliant deduction there, Fido.”

“But that’s not the only thing spades can mean. There’s others, too. Like night, and blades, and death.”

“Night and blades?!” Christina cries.

“And that, alongside death... It can’t be!” Alexia gasps.

The two girls exchange a look.

“A deck of cards has thirteen spades in it,” Cid says. “That’s exactly enough for thirteen people.”

“So the killer is planning on taking down every member of the Thirteen Nightblades?!”

“That can’t possibly be true...”

If that’s the case, then this isn’t just a taunt aimed at the Nightblades. It’s an out-and-out declaration of war.

“What is this guy thinking?” Alexia wonders aloud. “Only a complete lunatic would go out of his way to warn his victims like that.”

Christina’s thoughts race. “But the fact of the matter is, he *did* kill three of his targets like the cards say. A regular old madman wouldn’t be able to do that.”

“I don’t know what the killer might be thinking, either, but he did leave us one more massive clue.” Cid smiles knowingly.

“What massive clue is that?”

“Where even is it...?”

Alexia and Christina survey the area.

“Over there.”

Gazing in the direction Cid’s pointing sends a stir through the onlookers.

He's observing the two corpses. The Knight Order is lowering them off the fountain, leaving its bloody central pillar exposed.

"Don't you think the blood on the pillar kinda looks like letters?" Cid says.

"What?!"

"No way!"

Realization dawns on Alexia and Christina in unison.

A bit later, the onlookers come to the same conclusion. "Hey, there's something written there in the blood!"

"What does it say? I can't see too good from here. 'Jack...something something'?"

"It says 'Jack the Ripper.'"

Cid's words have an ominous ring to them, and they spread through the crowd in a heartbeat.

"Apparently, it says 'Jack the Ripper'!"

"Is that the killer's name?!"

"It's gotta be! Jack the Ripper is the serial killer!!"

"He's killing aristocrats throughout the capital!! This is him calling them out!!"

The crowd races through the streets, shouting all the while.

Alexia grimaces. "By midday, everyone in the capital will know about what's happened."

"The news was always going to get out eventually," Cid says with a sigh.

"Jack the Ripper...," Christina mutters under her breath.

"What's up, Christina?" Alexia asks. "Did you figure something out?"

Christina frowns. "No, it's just...there's something I need to tell you."



Alexia scowls at the copies of the incriminating documents. "So that's what

you meant. Jack the Ripper already made contact with you...”

There are three people in the unused academy classroom: Alexia, Christina, and Cid.

Christina’s expression is equally grave. “Using this evidence carefully could allow us to really corner the Despohts, but we can’t afford to act rashly, not when we don’t know what Jack the Ripper is hoping to achieve.”

“We have no idea if he’s a friend or a foe,” Alexia agrees. “We know he wants us to use the evidence, but there’s no telling what he stands to get out of it.”

“And we can’t tell anyone where we got the evidence from, either. That limits the ways we can use it.”

“As far as that goes, I actually have an idea. Would you mind letting me hold on to those for a bit?”

“They’re just copies, but you’re welcome to them. What are you thinking?”

“I’m going to ask my father for advice.”

“Oh, that would be a huge help.”

Alexia smiles sadly as she stows the bloodstained documents in her bag. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that...”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. Now, the real question here...is why you and *this* thing were staying together.”

Alexia grabs Cid by the collar and thrusts him in front of Christina.

“Um, for his protection?” Christina says like it’s obvious. “He caught a glimpse of the documents, and I knew things could get ugly if the Despohts found out.”

“It sounded like you were sleeping in the same room.”

“Because it’s more efficient to only have to guard one location, yes.”

“I mean, I guess you’re not wrong...”

“Actually, that reminds me. Didn’t you pretend to be dating Cid that one time, Princess Alexia?”

“Wh-what about it?”

“Oh, I was just worried that you two might be dating for real. If you are, then I apologize for my thoughtlessness.”

“W-we weren’t. We definitely, absolutely weren’t.”

“Yeah, I’d rather die than date Alexia,” Cid chimes in.

“You can just be quiet, Fido!” Alexia violently shakes Cid by the scruff of his neck.

“I see,” Christina says. “Then I guess you weren’t dating after all.”

“Of course not. If I went out with Fido, it’d be a black mark on the Midgar family name.”

“Ah, then there’s no problem.”

“Huh?”

“If the two of you aren’t dating, then I don’t see any problem with the two of us sleeping in the same room.”

“I...I’m just worried about you, Christina. He might try something sketchy.”

“I won’t,” Cid says.

“Worried? About me? I do appreciate the concern, but I assure you, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m a much stronger dark knight than Cid.”

“You have a point, but Fido has these rare moments when his sword work gets incredibly refined. I know it’s unlikely, but you can never be too careful.”

“You’re too kind, Princess Alexia. I had no idea you were so concerned for me. In that case, why not come join us yourself?”

“Huh?” Alexia blinks in bewilderment.

“If you came and stayed over as well, then surely nothing could possibly go wrong,” Christina suggests.

“Please no,” Cid says. “I’m getting chills just *thinking* about having to sleep in the same room as Alexia.”

“Shut up, you.” Alexia clamps her hand over Cid’s mouth. “That might not be

a bad idea.”

“Father will be thrilled.”

“Mmrnf!” says Cid.

“I’ll go ahead and shift my plans around.”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll go ahead and make the preparations.”

“Mmrf! Mrrrnf!!”

“See you later, then.”

With that, Alexia jogs away.

“Oh, geez, how’d things end up with Alexia staying with us?” Cid moans, his expression that of a hero knowing he’s going to die in battle.

“Isn’t it exciting?” says Christina.

“I’m going back to my dorm.”

“That’s not an option.”

“Sorry, but I can’t see this through with you. I have some business I need to —”

“WHAT EXACTLY IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!”

Before Cid can finish his sentence, there’s a feminine scream from out in the hallway.

“I know that voice!” says Christina.

“Huh?”

“That was Eliza just now. Something must have happened.”

Christina and Cid head out to see what’s going on.



Out in the hallway, Eliza and her lackey are kicking up a fuss.

“How dare she. Does she think I’m just going to roll over and take this?”

Eliza gives the onlookers a scathing glare, and they scatter like flies.

Then her gaze lands on Christina.

“Goodness gracious me, Christina. You have a lot of nerve, walking around here after what you did.”

“What I did? What are you talking about, Eliza?”

“I’m talking about *this*! You’re the only person who would ever have given this to me!”

Eliza holds up a piece of paper with a message written in blood: *“Thirteen fat little piggies. The first piggie died fleeing. The second died filled with pathetic contempt. The third died with a fool’s pride. How will the next one die? —Jack the Ripper”*

“Is that...a death threat? Where’d you find that?” Christina asks.

“It was stuffed in my bag. You think you’re real funny, don’t you?” Eliza stares daggers at her. “I take it the ‘thirteen fat little piggies’ are supposed to be my family and our friends?”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly say.”

“Playing dumb, are we? As if Jack the Ripper wasn’t the assassin *you* hired.”

“He really isn’t.”

“And now you go and pull this stunt. If you think I’m going to let you get away with this, you’re dead wrong.”

“Like I said, it wasn’t me.”

A sharp *crack* echoes through the hallway.

Eliza just slapped Christina across the face.

“Enjoy this confidence of yours while it lasts. You’ve managed to enrage my father, and you have no one to blame for what’s coming next but yourself.”



Christina icily returns Eliza's glare.

Then, behind her, Cid goes flying.

"PLAAAARGH!"

Blood spews from nose and mouth as he soars through the air.

"Cid?!"

"Ah-ha-ha, how pathetic!"

Eliza's lackey is the one who punched him.

"How could you?!" Christina cries. "He isn't a part of this!"

"That's hardly my problem. This is what happens when you try to oppose me. Good work there, Dunder Hedd."

Her lackey, Dunder Hedd, wipes the blood off his fist and smirks. "Heh-heh-heh, all I did was give him a little tap."

"You're amazing, Dunder. Even with just a light tap, you sent him flying all the way to the end of the hall."

Somehow that single punch Dunder threw was enough to send Cid careening a full 150 feet.

"I mean, I *am* getting stronger," Dunder says.

Eliza twines her arm around Dunder's and presses her chest against him. "I feel so safe around you. I love me a real manly man."

"Heh-heh, you can count on me."

"Do be careful, though. You might be the next target."

"Ha. If Jack the Ripper tries anything, I'll kill the sucker dead!"

"Tee-hee. If you do, I'll be sure to give you a special reward."

Flashing a coquettish smile, Eliza leaves with her lackey in tow.



Over in the school's infirmary, a sexy doctor gives me first aid.

“There, all finished. Try not to get in any more fights, okay?” she says, then goes back to her other work.

Christina looks at me with concern. “Are you all right, Cid?”

I curl my swollen cheeks into a grin. “That guy threw a nasty punch, but I narrowly managed to survive by spinning away and negating three percent of the damage.”

“You should rest here for the day. I’ll come pick you up once classes are over,” Christina says, then leaves the room.

I lie back on the bed and stretch my arms a little.

“Heya.”

Then a small girl pops out from beneath the bed. It’s Nina.

“Heya,” I reply. I’ve known she was eavesdropping the whole time. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to give you an update on Claire’s situation.”

“Ah, sure.”

“Why don’t we head to her room?”

Nina’s just as tiny as ever. She leads me over to Claire’s room.

The room has changed a bit since the last time I was in here. Now it’s full of medical equipment and weird-looking magic apparatuses. Over on the bed, my sister is lying completely still.

“Sis...”

Bleep. Bleep. Bleep. BleeEEEEEEP.

One of the magic devices buzzes. They had those things in the hospitals of my old world, too.

“Her pulse stopped,” I say when I realize it. “This is as far as she goes...”

I clasp my hands together and close my eyes. I didn’t used to believe in life after death or anything like that, but then I literally got reincarnated. If Claire’s lucky, she’ll probably end up getting reincarnated somewhere, too.

I pray for her not to get reborn as a cockroach or a flea. “At least let her come back as a mouse or something.”

Nina shoots me a reproachful look. “She isn’t dead.”

“But the device thingy just stopped.”

“That’s the sound it makes when it’s done measuring someone’s mana.”

The reply comes not from Nina, but from the sexy doctor. She steps into the room, her presence all but imperceptible.

“Oh, hey...you were in the infirmary, too,” I say.

“That’s right—I was. Nina helped me get hired as both Claire’s physician and the school doctor. My name is Mu.”

Mu gives me a deep bow.

She has dark skin and full, plump lips. There are pointed ears sticking out from her silver hair. She’s a dark elf.

“Wow, you’re really polite. I’m Cid Kagenou. I’m the sleeping girl’s brother.”

“Oh, I know exactly who you are. It’s an honor to meet you, and I hope the work I do lives up to your standards.”

“No, no, the pleasure’s all mine.”

“No, no, I assure you, the pleasure is all *mine*.”

One pleasantry begets another, and we spend a good long while bobbing our heads up and down. Mu’s a doctor, so I wonder why she’s acting so deferential. It’s kind of unusual, but I guess having a dark elf for a doctor is unusual in and of itself.

Once she stops bowing, Mu begins skillfully fiddling with the machine and inspecting Claire’s mana. I’m impressed at how fluid Mu’s mana control is. What’s someone like her doing working as a school doctor? Her skills are the real deal, and the way she hid her presence earlier was fantastic, too. Man, I guess doctors these days can do it all...

I don’t know the first thing about medicine, so I decide to just leave everything to her.

“I had no idea you were friends with such a talented doctor, Nina. You’ve got some mad connections.”

Nina laughs bashfully. “Nya-ha-ha.”

“So how’s my sister looking?”

“Her life isn’t in any danger, and she’ll wake up eventually. To elaborate on the specifics of her condition, her unstable mana reacted with the new crest on her right hand—”

When Mu begins earnestly explaining things, I hold up my hand to cut her off. “Ah, okay, cool. As long as she’s not gonna die, then it’s all good.”

“M-my sincerest apologies for my impertinence.”

“Like I said, it’s all good. The question then is, When’s she gonna wake up?”

If possible, I’d like her to rest for a loooong time.

“If we wait for her to wake up on her own, it should take somewhere from a few weeks to a few months. It all depends on how her mana adapts.”

“Gotcha.”

“We could forcefully induce her to awaken, of course, but that could have lasting effects on her magic circuits—”

“Ooh, hold up, that’s bad. Can’t be doing that, now.”

“I agree. Damage to one’s magic circuits is nothing to make light of. If we want to do what’s best for Claire’s body, we need to...”

As I completely ignore the rest of Mu’s explanation, I steal a glance at my sister as she peacefully dozes away.

“If only we could let her sleep forever,” I murmur. I mean, all she ever does is nag me.

The moment the words leave my mouth, the mood in the room goes ice-cold. Nina’s eyes widen, and Mu inhales sharply.

“If that’s what you truly want...,” Nina says, her voice so grim it’s like she’s announcing the end of the world.

Mu kneels, her gaze resolute. “Your will is great, and you see further than we ever could. I know not where this path of yours leads, but I will follow it until my lungs no longer draw breath.”

“Uh...” The energy in here just got very weird very quickly. Overwhelmed by the strange tension in the air, I hurriedly backpedal. “I—I was just kidding...”

You really can't be taking the things I say that seriously.

“Oh, geez, it was just a joke...?”

“How impish of you. I thought my heart might very well stop.”

Just like that, the two of them are all smiles again. I gotta say, it's odd how relieved Nina sounds.

“A-anyhow, I can see that my sister's in good hands.”

With that, I flee the room. What was up with the mood back there?

I take a brief moment to reflect. Okay, sure, maybe that was a *little* insensitive of me. In my defense, though, Claire's been weirdly tenacious ever since she was a kid. She's got this bizarre ability to bounce back from stuff—bizarre enough that I'm able to laugh off the fact that she's in a coma.



After dinner, Christina, Kanade, and I play some Old Maid in the bedroom.

“Oh no, Miss Eliza sounds really, really mad! I'm gonna die. I'm totally gonna die,” Kanade wails as she takes a card from my hand.

Ooh, she took the Old Maid.

“Don't worry,” Christina reassures her. “The manor is under heavy guard, and if worse comes to worst, you have me to protect you.”

“But...but what about that giant guy Miss Eliza had with her?”

“Oh yeah, that guy,” I remark.

She's probably talking about the man Eliza had working as her bodyguard back in the white fog. The same one who punched me.

“You mean Dunder Hedd?” Christina asks.

“Yeah, yeah, him. I heard that his dad has ties to organized crime, and that they use illegal mercenaries to quietly off people. Apparently, they sell off the organs of the people they kill, turn their flesh into ground meat, and use slimes to melt their bones so there’s no body left to identify... I’m gonna diiiiie.”

“That’s Earl Haushold Hedd you’re talking about. There are definitely some nasty rumors about him, but I doubt he would have the nerve to attack the manor.”

“I’m out,” I announce.

The card I just took from Christina gave me the last pair I needed.

“Cid, you traitor!” Kanade yelps. “If we get attacked, I’m using you as a shield.”

“All right.”

“Oh,” says Christina, “I’m out, too.”

“Whaaat? How do I keep loooosing?”

Because one hundred percent of your thoughts get written all across your face.

Not like I’m gonna tell her that, of course.

“Look, is Old Maid even any fun with three players?” I ask.

“It’s a blast!” Kanade replies without a moment’s hesitation.

“If you say so.” I guess there’s no accounting for taste. “Well, I’m gonna go take my bath now.”

“Whaaat?!”

“We agreed we’d get to take them in the order we won, remember?”

“But I was just about to start my comeback...”

I ignore Kanade’s grumblings and head for the bathroom.

“Kanade, do you want to play, just the two of us?” Christina offers.

“Yeah!”

I don't like the sound of that one bit. Christina's taking her bath next, and that means I'm gonna be stuck alone with Kanade.

Actually, maybe this is fine. Surely even she's gonna realize how stupid two-player Old Maid is.

Shortly thereafter, Kanade and I end up playing two-player Old Maid.



It's the dead of night, and a group of masked figures slink across the quiet grounds of the Hope manor. Their weapons are drawn, and they're waiting for the moment to strike.

"Is it time yet, Father?"

"Don't be hasty, Dunder."

Among them, Dunder Hedd and Haushold Hedd share a quiet exchange.

"But they turned off all the lights already."

"We put Viscount Shinobi in charge of surveillance for a reason. We wait for his signal."

"If you insist, Father," Dunder replies, not sounding convinced in the slightest.

"Don't you worry, Dunder. I intend for you to get all the credit for tonight's raid."

"Really?!"

"I'm past my prime, Son. Not long after you graduate, I plan on stepping down and letting you take my place on the Nightblades."

"Heh, I'm gonna tear that Christina bitch to shreds. That's what she gets for messing with me."

"We've got two targets tonight: Christina and Kanade. Duke Hope is waiting for us with that evidence."

Dunder lets out a mocking laugh. "Poor sap, getting sold out by her own father."

“It was the only smart choice to make. The Hope family’s stood strong for generations. He can’t let it get crushed over the actions of one idiot girl. Remember, we promised that we’d spare the duke in exchange for that evidence. Don’t go killing him by mistake, now.”

“Heh-heh. I know, I know.”

“And be careful. There’s a boy staying in the same room as the targets. If I remember right...his name is Cid Kagenou.”

“The little runt who was hanging out with Christina, you mean? What should I do with him?”

“He doesn’t matter, but we don’t want any witnesses. Might as well kill him while you’re there.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t forget your job, Son. Viscount Shinobi is in charge of surveillance, we Hedds are in charge of the raid, and Marquis Jet is in charge of keeping the manor surrounded.”

“They’ve got nowhere to run, huh?”

“Nope. If anything goes wrong, the surveillance and sieging teams will move in to provide backup. Our attack team even has an assassin from the Lawless City, and the siege team has both a dark knight who made the Bushin Festival primary rounds and the Sword Devil, a master of the White Tiger style who got excommunicated for his wicked deeds. Not even a miracle could save them.”

“Heh-heh. This is what you’re best at, Father. You make sure to win the fight before it even begins. It’s like you always say: The best kind of battles are the ones you can’t lose.”

Haushold Hedd’s mouth curls into a smirk. “Ha-ha, I do say that.”

“There’s the signal from the surveillance team, Father.”

“At last. Let’s do this.”

With that, the figures begin invading the manor.



Christina stares up at the ceiling as she lies in her bed. The room is filled with the sound of Kanade's snoring and Cid's light breathing.

She can't get to sleep.

It has nothing to do with Kanade's snoring and everything to do with what happened that morning. Every time she thinks about those two men strung up on the fountain, it sends a twinge through her heart. The duo used violence to achieve their ends, then got brutally killed when faced with a greater power still.

It's all about power.

Raw power transcends everything. Laws, morality, and influence are helpless before it.

She extends her arm toward the ceiling and chuckles. "Heh-heh..."

When she does, she hears the quiet sound of fabric rustling.

"Is one of you up?" she asks her two roommates.

There's no reply.

"Kanade? Cid?"

Kanade's snoring and Cid's light breathing are the same as ever.

"Was I just imagining things?"

Then she hears the *click* of the door opening.

"...Who's there?"

The door stops halfway. She can hear someone breathing from the other side.

"Did you need something?" Christina asks as she grabs the sword lying by the side of her bed. Any member of the staff would have answered immediately, and it's odd how the guards by the door haven't been reacting.

For the next little while, Kanade's snoring is the only noise in the room.

Then...

“Kill them.”

On that signal, a group of people dressed all in black surge into the room.

“Wake up, you two!!” Christina shouts, then flips Kanade’s mattress over and hurls it at the intruders.

“*SNRRRRRRK...* Hweh?! Wh-wh-what’s going on?!” Kanade stammers.

Christina tosses her a sword. “We’re under attack!”

As she shouts out her answer, she blocks a slash from a brawny assailant.

She tenses her grip a little to test his strength.

He’s strong. This guy knows what he’s doing.

Christina shifts the angle of her sword to fend off his attack.

She knows she can beat him.

Her attacker’s stance is shot, and she thrusts her blade into the tip of his shoulder.

“Rrgh! Now you’re *really* asking for it!!”

His voice is rough and sounds oddly familiar.

Christina tries to press her advantage, but another five attackers cut her off.

“I told you to be careful!! Stand down!!”

“B-but, Father—”

“Not another word out of you!!”

The brawny man’s father shoves him aside and takes up a stance in front of Christina. He appears to be the group’s leader.

“Hwehhhhhhhh?! What?! I’m gonna die?! I’m gonna die here?!” Kanade wails as she narrowly manages to survive her two assailants.

And as for Cid Kagenou...

...he’s trying to quietly slip out the window.

“Ah...”

When he meets Christina’s and Kanade’s gazes, he flashes them an

embarrassed smile— “Well, I’m out!”

—and quickly leaps out the window.

“T-TRAITORRRRRRRRR!!” Kanade shouts. “Curse you!! I’ll come back as a vengeful spirit and haunt you for thiiiiiiiis!!”

“Don’t let him escape! After him!!”

On the group leader’s orders, three of the attackers follow Cid.

“That really helps,” Christina whispers.

Cid manages to draw the attackers away. Now there are only six left, and one of them has a badly injured shoulder. The situation still isn’t *good*, but it’s at least potentially manageable. All Christina needs to do is hold out a little, and her guards should notice the commotion and come to help.

“You probably think you have help coming,” the leader says.

“Is that what I’m thinking, now?”

“There’s no point trying to hide it. I know all about how you spend top *zeni* beefing up your defenses. Bad news, but those guards ain’t coming. There’s another team dealing with them as we speak.”

“Gosh, I appreciate you being so thorough. The Nightblades must really be desperate for this to work.”

He’s probably not lying.

All of a sudden, her odds of surviving look a whole lot worse. Christina didn’t expect the Nightblades to devote so many resources to this.

“Laugh while you can. The Nightblades are unshakable, even now. This here is just a father looking out for his son.”

“That would make you Earl Haushold Hedd, then. I thought I recognized your son’s voice.”

“I don’t have any idea who that is,” Haushold Hedd lies, then gives the order. “Kill them.”

The men in black surge forward.

The one in front slashes at Christina.

“Rgh...”

But she hasn’t given up yet. She dodges the man’s attack, then tries to reposition over to Kanade before she gets surrounded.

However, her plan gets interrupted before it can even get off the ground.

With a *shupp*, the body of one man in black shifts.

“Huh? Wha—? AHHHHHHHH!”

He lets out a scream as his torso slides right off his legs.

“Ahh... H-help...!”

With a feeble moan, he reaches out his hand. He’s already beyond saving, though.

“How did you do that?!” Haushold Hedd glares at Christina. “That man was one of the strongest dark knights in his city-state!”

The men in black warily inch away from her.

“No, no, that wasn’t me.”

The thing is, Christina didn’t do anything. She dodged his attack, but that was all. He’d been cut in half before they even clashed. Christina isn’t nearly powerful enough to cleave a talented dark knight in two without anyone even noticing.

“Then who else could’ve done it?! What are you hiding—?”

Haushold Hedd’s eyes go wide as he trails off mid-sentence.

The two dark knights attacking Kanade have just been bisected in exactly the same manner.

“Wait, huh? Am I awakening? Is my secret true power finally coming into bloom?!”

Kanade sounds a smidge excited about the prospect.

“That’s impossible. How did you...? Wait a minute. Your sword.” Haushold Hedd notices something. His gaze falls on Kanade’s weapon. “Why isn’t there

any blood on your sword?”

“Huh, there isn’t.”

Sure enough, Kanade’s sword is completely clean. It’s obvious to everyone present that she wasn’t the one who did it.

Then they hear the *whoosh* of fabric rustling.

Everyone’s gazes snap toward the source of the noise.

The sound is coming from Cid Kagenou’s bed. However, Cid has long since fled.

Now there’s someone new in his bed.

The figure is lying there with its back to them, lit only by the moonlight.

“A clown drenched in blood...,” someone whispers.

The clown rolls over to face them. His red-stained mask is smiling.

Dunder Hedd shrinks away. “Eek...”

Haushold Hedd, on the other hand, remains calm. “I take it you’re Jack the Ripper,” he says, then gives an order to his men before turning back toward the bloody clown. “The way you showed up, it’s like this was exactly what you were hoping for. I always knew you were an assassin working for the Hopes.”

“H-he isn’t!” Christina cries. “We don’t use assassins!”

However, Haushold has no interest in anything she has to say. “How much are they paying you? Whatever your rate, they’re definitely getting their money’s worth. You’ve cost us a lot of men.” He looks around at the corpses of the brutally slaughtered dark knights. “Each of them was a respected member of the underworld. I find this all a bit hard to believe, but I guess this is where we stand...”

Haushold Hedd lets out a weary sigh.

All the while, the bloody clown just keeps lying on the bed with that same smile plastered on his mask.

“I have to accept the reality of the situation. The way I see it, standing against you would hardly be a wise course of action. Even if we fought you and won, we

would still suffer tremendous losses. And you're in the same boat. Not even you can go up against the Nightblades and walk away unscathed."

The bloody clown's shoulders quiver slightly in laughter.

"It's in both of our interests to strike a deal here. I'll pay you triple. You don't need to fight with us; all I ask is that you walk away. I'll make sure no harm comes to your reputation from this. What do you say?"

The clown's shoulders shake harder.

He's laughing under his breath.

"...What's so funny?"

The shaking comes to a sudden stop.

Then the clown gradually sits up. Slowly but surely, he points his finger at each assailant in turn. It's almost like he's making some kind of choice.

The finger stops on one attacker in particular.

The man in black gives the clown a puzzled look. "What are—?"

The clown snaps his fingers.

A moment later, the attacker's head goes flying.

"How did he do that?!"

Blood gushes up like a fountain as the beheaded attacker falls limp.

Dunder Hedd drops to his hands and knees and begins crawling away. "Eeeeeek! F-Father, I want to go home!"

However, the bloody clown has already started searching for his next target. His finger glides past Dunder and lands on the assailant next to him.

"W-wait, don't!"

Although the dark knight lets out a panicked yell, he's experienced enough to immediately take evasive action as he does. Tragically, though, it's not enough to stop the top half of his head from exploding when the clown snaps his fingers. The mouth still connected to his torso flaps open in an attempt to say something, but all that comes out is a bloody froth.

Next, the bloody clown points his finger at Kanade.

“Huh, me?! But why?! AHHHHHH!”

However, he stops on her for only a brief moment before sliding his finger over to the attacker behind her. Then he snaps his fingers.

“Ah...”

The man’s dumbfounded head flies off.

All that remains now is the father and son, Haushold and Dunder Hedd.

Dunder clings to his father’s legs. “Eeeek... Father, Father, we need to get out of here.”

Haushold Hedd has just witnessed four of his dark knights get massacred in the blink of an eye, and he can’t conceal his shock, either.

“So...no interest in negotiating, then?” he says. “No, perhaps the fact that you intentionally left me alive means you wanted to make a show of force to secure yourself a better bargaining position. Perhaps we can still talk this out.”

The bloody clown offers no reaction.

“First of all, let me apologize. I clearly underestimated your talents. I have no idea how you managed to attain such strength, but it truly is a sight to behold.”

A bead of cold sweat trickles down Haushold’s face.

“But the thing is, I have this manor surrounded, and I just sent the signal to my men. Before long, the team besieging the manor will be here to back me up. That group includes not just the finest of Viscount Shinobi’s and Marquis Jet’s men, but also the Sword Devil, a master of the White Tiger style. You may be talented, but not even you could face such a force and emerge—”

The bloody clown interrupts Haushold’s speech by leaning down and rustling around in its blanket. When it does, it becomes clear that the bed is oddly lumpy and stained a dark shade of red.

Eventually, the clown retrieves a pair of heads.

“Wha—?” Haushold recognizes their faces. “That’s Viscount Shinobi...and Marquis Jet, to boot...”

The two heads have been impaled with a four and five of spades, respectively.

“You’re telling me you took out the entire siege team?! That’s impossible. You’re just a single man!”

That’s enough to push Haushold all the way over the edge.

“What the hell even are you?! What is it you’re after?! What do you want?!”

Spittle flies from his mouth as he yells.

The bloody clown leisurely pulls out a single playing card.

It’s the six of spades.

“Eek... EEEEEEEEEEEK!”

A single glance is enough for Haushold Hedd to realize who that card is meant for. He takes cover behind his cowering son and uses the younger man as a shield.

“A-are you serious, Father?! Let go of me! Let gooooo!!”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!”

As Dunder Hedd tries to shake off his father, the clown draws back his arm to lash out with the six of spades.

Then the sound of glass shattering fills the room as a lanky dark knight leaps in through the window.

“Heh-heh-heh... There you are, Jack the Ripper,” the newcomer says.

His voice is calm, and his presence is intense. When he pulls his *naginata* from its sheath, it glints in the moonlight.

“W-wait, you’re...you’re the Sword Devil!! You’re still alive?!”

Life returns to Haushold’s voice. He pokes his head out from behind Dunder and grins.

“Here I was, thinking I could enjoy a heart-pounding fight to the death for the first time in ages, when all the weaklings around me drop dead and this guy runs off. What a disappointment.”

As the Sword Devil speaks, his gaze doesn’t leave the bloody clown for an

instant. After all, he gets it. That clown's strength is on par with his own...

"Who even is the Sword Devil?"

Christina shudders at how sleek the man's magic is. He must be one of the top dark knights in the world.

"It's little wonder you haven't heard of him," Haushold explains. "He's a martial master from the distant land of Wakoku."

"A martial master?!"

Christina is familiar with the term.

Across the sea, there's a land of carnage called Wakoku where people hone their combat skills. Over there, the people who stand as the pinnacle of strength are called martial masters rather than dark knights. Wakoku is closed to foreigners, so information on the country is scarce, but every so often, a martial master comes to Midgar on a journey to grow stronger, and they're always a force to be reckoned with.

"What's more, he made such a name for himself in one of Wakoku's four great schools that he was slated to become the youngest assistant instructor of the White Tiger style in history. However, he slew nine disciples in his quest for power and got excommunicated."

"Hmph... That's all in the past. Things have been a bit boring since I arrived in this nation, but to think I would get to face off against a martial master as strange as you...," the Sword Devil says as he readies his blade.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha, Jack the Ripper!" Haushold roars. "I bet you're so terrified of the Sword Devil, you want to flee! What happened to all your confidence from before?!"

The Sword Devil lowers his center of gravity. "Here I come."

Kanade gulps audibly.

The clown snaps his fingers.

The moment he does, the Sword Devil's body blurs as he dodges something. A hole explodes in the wall behind him.

“Flicking, huh...?” the Sword Devil mutters in delight. “Impressive that you’re able to muster such strength with so little windup. Against anyone else, that would have ended the fight right there.”

Jack the Ripper seems a little surprised. The Sword Devil fixes his gaze on his opponent like he’s trying to gauge his strength.

“But that won’t work on me. I don’t need to see when your presence tells me everything I need to know...”

With that, the Sword Devil closes his eyes and readies his weapon.

“Come at me, Jack the Ripper. None of your strikes will find purchase on—”

Before he can finish the sentence, an anticlimactic *pop* rings out.

“What...?”

The Sword Devil’s head goes flying.

Now headless, his torso slowly collapses to the ground, and blood gushes out from his neck hole. Meanwhile, his head tumbles across the floor and blinks up at Jack the Ripper in confusion.

“Hah...”

With a small exhale, the clown readies the six of spades.

“Th-that’s impossible...”

Haushold Hedd scuttles backward.

“Eeeeeek! Stop, stop, stop! I-I’ll have you know that we’re being backed by a powerful force. The mighty Cult of Diab—”

The six of spades cuts him off by sinking into his forehead.

“But...why...?”

At long last, Haushold Hedd breathes his last.

After making sure his target is dead, the bloody clown turns his gaze over to Christina and Kanade.

An odd tension permeates the silence.

Kanade trembles like a newborn fawn. “This is the part where he kills us...

Where he gets rid of all the witnesses...”

Contrary to her predictions, however, the bloody clown simply walks away. His footsteps squelch as he goes.

“Wait!!”

Christina calls out to him.

His power is transcendent, nigh divine, and she yearns for it.

“Wh-what are you trying to achieve?! You’re the one who left Shoddi Goodz’s documents for me, aren’t you?!”

The bloody clown stops in his tracks.

“Why me? What is it you want me to do?”

He offers her no answer but turns his mask’s ever-present smile her way.

“Hee-hee-hee...”

A small laugh escapes his mouth.

Then he hurls a card.

Christina instinctively brings her sword up to block it, but the card simply grazes her cheek on its way to impale Kanade in the side of her head.

“HYEEEEEEK!”

“Kanade?!”

Kanade collapses, blood trickling from her wound.

“Hee-hee-hee!”

The clown leaps out the window. However, Christina can’t give chase.

“Are you okay, Kanade?! Talk to me!”

Not when Kanade’s life is in danger.

Kanade is a friend she can speak her mind to without having to worry about family politics. Christina has never had one of those before.

“Kanade! Kanade!”

Kanade has a pulse. She’s still breathing.

I just need to make the bleeding stop...!

“Oh... Christina...”

“Pull yourself together, Kanade!”

Kanade lays her trembling hand on top of Christina’s. “It’s fine... I’m already... too far gone...”

“No you aren’t!”

“I know my own body better than anyone else...”

“No, you don’t know anything. Hang in there. You’re going to be fine!”

“Please...I have a dying message I need you to hear...”

“It’s not going to come to that!”

“Please, Christina.”

Kanade looks at Christina, her gaze dead serious.

“Okay,” Christina says. “It’s not going to come to that, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll hear you out. If the worst comes to pass, I’ll make sure to convey your message to your parents back in your hometown.”

“Thank you, Christina. But I have nothing to say to them.”

“Huh?”

“My dying message is this!” Kanade’s eyes snap wide open. “It’s for that traitor Cid Kagenou! You’re dead freakin’ meat, buddy!! Get ready, ’cause I’m gonna put a deadly curse on you!!”

With that, she gently closes her eyes.

“Kanade! Kanade! You have to wake up!!”

Kanade doesn’t so much as twitch.

“I need to clean up the bodies in here, so you can’t just go to sleep!”

Christina grabs the playing card affixed to Kanade’s head and wrenches it free.

“Ow!” Kanade yelps.

“This blood isn’t yours.”

“Huh...? I’m alive?” Kanade reaches up and touches the side of her head in a daze.

“It’s fine. There isn’t a scratch on you, Kanade.”

“What? But...but the card was stuck right in my head...”

“It was stuck on with blood.”

Kanade leaps to her feet, her face bright red. “D-damn you, Jack the Ripper!”

“Wait, hold on. There’s something written on the card.”

“Huh? Lemme see, lemme see!”

The card Christina’s holding has a poem written on it in blood.

“WELL, HELLO, YOU BOASTFUL NIGHTBLADES

HERE’S TO KILLING ALL THE NAUGHTY BOYS AND GIRLS

I COUNT AND COUNT AND COUNT

THAT’S ALL I EVER DO BUT

EVERY SO OFTEN I LIKE TO PLAY MY LITTLE GAMES”

“I wonder what it means,” says Christina.

“He went out of his way to leave it for us, so there must be some sort of meaning to it...”

Then the door to the room slowly swings open.

“Hey, guys! Glad you survived!”

In comes an unremarkable dark-haired boy sporting an oddly disingenuous smile—Cid Kagenou.

Christina breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness you’re okay.”

Kanade, on the other hand, begins threatening him like a common street thug. “Hey, hey, hey, Ciddy-boy! You’ve got a lotta nerve, waltzin’ in here after that heinous betrayal you pulled!”

“Hey, for the record, I nearly died.”

“Oh, you did, huh? We almost bit the dust ourselves 'cause of the way your coward ass hit the bricks! We'd have been goners if our good buddy Jack the Ripper hadn't come.”

“Oh, wow, Jack the Ripper was here?”

All of a sudden, Kanade sounds like her normal self again. “Yeah! He showed up all heroically like *zip, zing, zoom*! It was mega-awesome!”

“Well, that's good.”

“It totally was! Oh, and then he took out this Wakoku martial master in a single... Freakin' hell, that ain't the point! We're talkin' about your punk ass here, Cid Kagenou.”

“Oh, right.”

“All traitors can eat shit! How dare you make a run for it and abandon me to die!”

“Sorry about that.”

“You think an apology's gonna get you off the hook, asswipe?! Time for you to get...the pummeling punishmeeeeent!”

With that, Kanade tackles Cid's legs, hops astride him, and begins punching him all over.

“How ya like them apples?!”

“Oh nooooo. Please stopppppp.”

The pummeling punishment continues for some time.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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Deciphering the Calling Card!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Deciphering the Calling Card!

The morning sunlight streams into the Hope manor bedroom as the Knight Order conducts their on-site investigation.

“I see, I see. You’re saying that Earl Haushold Hedd, Viscount Shinobi, and Marquis Jet all conspired together to attack the Hope family.”

Gray, chief of the Knight Order’s criminal investigation department, is questioning Christina and the others.

“Then this blood-drenched clown Jack the Ripper shows up. He kills all the attackers but leaves without laying so much as a finger on any of you... How very convenient.” He gives Christina a skeptical look.

“But it’s the truth,” she replies.

“You understand that the most obvious deduction there is that Jack the Ripper is an assassin-slash-bodyguard in the employ of the Hope family.”

“He isn’t! If he was, I wouldn’t make it so obvious.”

“Maybe you made it obvious on purpose to throw off suspicion.”

“Can you please be serious? The important thing here is that Earl Haushold Hedd, Viscount Shinobi, and Marquis Jet all tried to attack us. Isn’t it the Knight Order’s job to follow up on that?”

Gray smiles and narrows his eyes. “Well, at the end of the day, that’s nothing more than the Hope family’s position on the situation.”

“...Meaning?”

“That you lured the three of them here to frame them. It’s another perfectly legitimate way to view things.”

“Excuse me?! That’s absurd. They came armed and wearing masks!”

“These were some clever men, and wary ones at that. They saw through your plan and had their guards wear masks and wait close by. It was a smart decision on their part...though sadly one that didn’t pay off for them.”

“But Earl Hedd was wearing a mask himself! And besides, what proof do you have that the Hope family was planning anything of the sort?!”

“We’re still investigating that. And besides, I merely proposed it as a possibility. Jack the Ripper is the talk of the capital right now. Who he is, what his goals are... And people suspect you, the Hopes, most of all.”

“You’re going to treat us like culprits over a couple of dumb rumors?”

“Oh, perish the thought. I’m just saying that the rumors are out there, that’s all. However, I can’t completely ignore public opinion, either. They’re afraid that Jack the Ripper will turn his violence on them next. Nights in the capital are quiet these days. Stores turn off their lights early, and the streets are empty. Everyone’s too afraid of Jack the Ripper to go outside. If this goes on and the unrest keeps growing, we’re going to have a witch hunt on our hands. That’s what we’re trying to avoid.”

“That’s horrible...”

“I’m not asking you to see things our way, but we’re in an awkward position, too. I spent all of last night getting asked why I didn’t investigate the Hope family sooner and getting shouted at to just lock you all up.” Gray gives her a pained smile. “Now, I have some work to get back to. Kanade and Cid, was it? I might need to talk to you separately at some point to get your testimonies, so I hope I can count on your cooperation. One truth prevails!”

After striking the signature pose from *Case Clawed*, he flashes Kanade and Cid a grin and leaves.

Christina slumps her shoulders, and Kanade goes over to console her. “Christina...”

“At this rate, they’re going to end up treating my family like criminals.”

“That’d be bad,” Cid Kagenou says as he gobbles down his expensive tea cake.

“The Nightblades are definitely going to try to pin the blame on us. I just hope

we can prove the Hope family's innocence..."

"By the way...Jack the Ripper left behind a message, right?"

"Oh, you mean this?"

Christina pulls a note out of her pocket. The Knight Order confiscated the original card as evidence.

"WELL, HELLO, YOU BOASTFUL NIGHTBLADES

HERE'S TO KILLING ALL THE NAUGHTY BOYS AND GIRLS

I COUNT AND COUNT AND COUNT

THAT'S ALL I EVER DO BUT

EVERY SO OFTEN I LIKE TO PLAY MY LITTLE GAMES"

However, she had the forethought to copy it down, and she reads it aloud.

"There's gotta be some meaning to it," says Cid. "Consider how he left it behind and all."

"The 'WELL, HELLO, YOU BOASTFUL NIGHTBLADES' line means that he's definitely targeting the Nightblades," Christina insists.

"And the 'HERE'S TO KILLING ALL THE NAUGHTY BOYS AND GIRLS' line means that Jack is going to kill them all," Kanade says proudly.

Christina shakes her head. "I can't make sense of the last three lines, though."

"Yeah," Kanade agrees. "I don't get what 'I COUNT AND COUNT AND COUNT' means. 'THAT'S ALL I EVER DO BUT'? What is he even counting?"

"That's a good question. Maybe dead bodies?"

When Cid says that, Christina comes to a realization. "Jack the Ripper is using the numbers on the playing cards to count the dead Nightblades!"

"In that case, is he saying that he usually counts the bodies with his playing cards, but 'EVERY SO OFTEN I LIKE TO PLAY MY LITTLE GAMES'? As in, leaving these messages is a game to him?" Kanade asks.

"I think you might have cracked it," Christina says.

Kanade lets out a disappointed sigh. "Well, that's boring. I thought there was

gonna be some sort of super-important hidden message.”

“But it is important. Now we can be sure that Jack the Ripper’s goal is to kill all the Nightblades.”

“Bo-ring.”

As the two of them talk, Cid appears to notice something. He points at the note. “Oh, wow, gosh. The message can be read vertically, too.”

“Huh? Really?!”

“Let me see.”

The other two peer at the message and come to the same realization in unison.

“‘WHITE’?” says Kanada.

“Could he be talking about Earl Korrupt White?” Christina wonders.

“Who’s that?”

“The leader of the Nightblades. He’s the one who owns the White Mansion, that huge manor on the capital’s outskirts.”

“Whoa, that place is so fancy.”

“The point is, Jack the Ripper’s next target is Earl Korrupt White. This card is a calling card. I’m impressed you noticed that, Cid.”

“Oh, you know, we all have our moments.”

“F-for the record, I was halfway toward spotting it myself!” Kanade says, sounding oddly competitive.

“Good for you,” Cid replies. “But that isn’t the only meaning Jack the Ripper left for us in his message.”

“What?! It isn’t?!”

“Jack hid another clue in the card itself. As I recall, it was the ten of spades. Spades can symbolize winter, and the number maps to the week. In other words, that card was pointing us toward the tenth week of winter. And today just so happens to be the ninth day of that tenth week.”

“That makes tomorrow the tenth day of the tenth week of winter,” Christina remarks. “That’s double tens. There’s no way that’s just a coincidence.”

“So, uh, you mean Jack’s going to make his move tomorrow?” Kanade asks.

“To sum it all up, Jack the Ripper is going to attack Earl White in the White Mansion on the tenth day of the tenth week of winter. Now that we know that, we can make some preparations of our own.”

“But why would he tell us that?”

Kanade’s question is a perfectly reasonable one.

“It’s...strange, yes,” Christina agrees.

“Right? Doing that kind of stuff is how you get busted.”

When the two begin giving the matter some serious thought, Cid loudly clears his throat.

“*A-ahem*. I think Jack the Ripper is wiser than we can possibly fathom, and after considering every possible option and outcome from his vantage point on high, he decided that this would be the optimal solution. I doubt normal people like us could ever understand his true goals, no matter how hard we think about it,” he says at top speed.

A serious look crosses Christina’s face. “I think it’s possible...that Jack the Ripper is trying to tell me something.”

“What kind of something?”

“That, I don’t know. It just this odd sense that he is...”

“The important question is, Do we tell the Knight Order and Nightblades about the secret message?” Cid says. “If the Knight Order tells the Nightblades, then they’ll be able to come up with countermeasures. Like, they might gather up all their forces so they can all attack Jack together or something. If Jack the Ripper still shows up, it should clear the Hope family from suspicion.”

“But if we do that, then what’ll become of him?”

“He’ll get killed, probably.”

“Is he really our enemy, though? He could very well be another one of the

Nightblades' victims."

The light of conviction burns bright in Cid's eyes. "Whatever his reasons, what Jack the Ripper is doing is murder. We can't just stand by and condone that!"

"But... No, you're right. We should tell them."

With a dejected look on her face, Christina goes to tell Gray, chief of the Knight Order's criminal investigation department.



Alexia sips her fancy coffee in the Hope estate drawing room.

"So that's why the Knight Order was in such a panic..."

She takes the note with Jack the Ripper's message on it and hands it back to Christina.

"I assume they're going to be joining in on the plan to capture Jack the Ripper?"

Alexia shakes her head. "They're forming a perimeter around the White estate."

"Huh? They're not going inside?"

"The Nightblades have their reputation to uphold. They want to capture Jack the Ripper themselves. Actually, they probably won't be satisfied unless they kill him. They're scrambling to gather up all the forces they can. Tomorrow, the White estate will be full of the best dark knights from both polite society and the underworld."

"This has gotten way bigger than I expected... Is Jack the Ripper actually going to go there, do you think?"

"No one would be stupid enough to attack Earl White, not with the defenses he's mustered. It's possible the message was a bluff, and the Ripper's objective lies somewhere else entirely. It's the obvious move, and the Knight Order is actively taking that possibility into account."

"But Jack the Ripper's strength is on a whole different level," Christina says.

“You did tell me about how he completely overpowered that Wakoku martial master. Without exception, every martial master who’s journeyed here has been strong. If Jack the Ripper was powerful enough to trounce one that thoroughly, he must be supremely confident in his skills. Maybe he will go after all.”

“Oh...”

Christina lets out a small exhale.

“You don’t seem happy about it.”

“I know that Jack the Ripper is a vicious murderer, but is this really the way we want things to go? I just can’t help but wonder if he has some tragic past that made him into the killer he is... I think he’s been trying to tell me something.”

“How about this, Christina? Tomorrow let’s go to the White estate. They won’t let us inside, but we’ll at least be able to watch over things outside with the Knight Order.”

“Can we really?!”

“The Nightblades won’t be happy about it, but being a princess has its perks sometimes. This way, we’ll be able to see things through to the end.”

“Thank you so much.” Christina smiles.

Alexia takes another sip of coffee, then quietly sighs.

“If I may,” Christina begins, “you don’t seem too happy, either, Princess Alexia.”

“Maybe not. I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. And Claire still refuses to wake up.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Her doctor says her life isn’t in any danger, and that she’ll wake up on her own sooner or later. There’s something sketchy about that Mu woman, though.”

“I don’t know. Cid says he trusts her.”

“Yeah, and he’s a terrible judge of character.”

“I think this has been harder on him than we might realize. She’s his only sister. He was so worried about her, he didn’t even want to stay at my house.”

“He really cares about her that much? I never realized...”

“He does. I’m jealous of how close they are.”

“And here I’d written him off as heartless. Perhaps I should buy him some nice sweets from Mitsugoshi.”

“I’m sure he would be delighted.”

“I should certainly hope so. It would be a present from *me*, after all.” As Alexia’s expression softens, she abruptly gets down to business. “I spoke with my father yesterday.”

“With King Midgar?”

“I talked to him about everything that’s happening, and the stuff that happened before... I’d like to share this with you. It’s too much for me to shoulder all on my own.”

Alexia proceeds to tell Christina about her conversation from the day prior.



“How can you do this, Father?!”

Alexia storms into King Midgar’s room.

“Do what, Alexia?” her father replies calmly.

“How can you just let the Nightblades get away with what they do?”

King Midgar sighs. “This again?”

“I’m not giving up until I get an answer, Father. And this isn’t just about the Nightblades! It’s about the group that’s pulling their strings from the shadows!”

“Now, whatever are you talking about?”

“It’s high time you stopped playing dumb, Father. I know it all. About the Cult of Diablos, about everything!”

“Ah...”

King Midgar lets out another big sigh. Then he closes his eyes in thought for a while.

“Father...?”

“Perhaps it’s time.”

He opens his eyes back up.

“Time for what?”

“I was always planning on telling you eventually. About the Cult of Diablos.”

“So you did know about them.”

“The Cult of Diablos rules the darkness of this world. Standing against them would cost our nation dearly.”

There’s steel in Alexia’s voice now. “And that means it’s okay to side with them?”

“It *means* that it’s important to manage our relationship with them carefully.”

“You changed the words, but you said the exact same thing.”

“That’s what governance is all about. If we want to protect our nation, there are more important things than right and wrong.”

“That’s a revolting thought.”

“Governance is about more than simply vanquishing evil. If we’d tried that, our nation would have fallen ages ago.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just get into bed with the Cult!”

“We’re not in bed with them,” King Midgar says firmly.

“What?”

“I said we aren’t in bed with them, Alexia. The Midgar Kingdom has just carefully managed its relationship with the Cult, that’s all.”

“I don’t see the difference.”

“In no way does the Midgar Kingdom condone the Cult’s acts. And we’ve

never assisted them, either.”

“But the Cult is committing acts of evil here in our land! They have moles in our Knight Order!”

“Those are individuals acting of their own volition.”

“It’s the same thing! All you’re doing is willfully ignoring it!”

“The Midgar Kingdom has never assisted the Cult of Diablos. However, we don’t censure their deeds, either. That’s how our nation has continued to survive for as long as it has.”

“And so the Cult can just do whatever they want?”

“They make sure to show themselves in public. They need us to continue serving as cover for them, and they used to know to keep a low profile.”

“Do you not remember what happened at the academy?! Or how they kidnapped me?! You call that keeping a low profile?!”

“They *used* to know. Up until a few years ago.”

“What happened then?”

“The Shadow Garden appeared.”

“And that’s what triggered the change?”

King Midgar rises from his chair and turns toward the window. He lays a hand on its glass as he stares out into the darkness of the night.

“The world has transformed a lot in just a few short years. With Mitsugoshi reshaping things in the public eye and the Shadow Garden reshaping the underworld, society itself is going through an upheaval. Those unable to shift with the times are fighting the tide with all their might. We live in a time of tumult.”

“You mean, the Cult of Diablos is panicking?”

“They never would have taken such brash measures, not before. But the Shadow Garden threatens their very existence. They’re strained, and it’s starting to have side effects.”

Alexia glares at her father. Her voice carries a hint of rage. “You call me

getting kidnapped a *side effect*?!”

“I do,” her father declares.

“And you’re saying I should just be okay with that?”

“As your father, I owe you an apology. You’re absolutely right.”

With that, King Midgar offers her a deep bow.

“Father...”

“But as king, I have nothing to apologize for. And I am this nation’s king before I am your father.”

“Father!”

“Midgar lacks the strength to fight back against the Cult of Diablos. Their Knights of Rounds have lived for over a thousand years, and the Children who make up their combat forces are all enhanced with ancient knowledge. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that battles are won and lost based on the number and strength of dark knights involved. Against those Children, our foot soldiers can’t even serve as human shields.”

“I know that, but...”

Wars revolve around dark knights fighting dark knights, but that isn’t to say that common soldiers are completely worthless. When properly outfitted with anti-magic armor, ten regular soldiers are generally enough to hold off a single dark knight, and if the soldiers are skilled enough, they can even try to exhaust the dark knight’s mana reserves. It’s a standard tactic used on battlefields everywhere.

However, that only works when they’re up against a dark knight of average skill. More powerful dark knights are capable of felling those same ten soldiers in a single blow. Years of training and heaps of expensive anti-magic armor, reduced to nothing in the blink of an eye.

The Cult’s dark knights are capable of pulling that off with ease.

“Nobody could defy the Cult, not with how overwhelmingly powerful their dark knights were. But now, things are different.”

“Different how?”

“The Shadow Garden’s arrival changed everything. There have been organizations that stood up to the Cult before, and naturally, we have our Knight Order. But none of them make it far.”

“Not even our Knight Order...”

Alexia thinks back to a man she met once—the head librarian, formerly of the Knight Order, who bore a machete in each hand and a look of absolute resignation in his eyes.

“Everyone assumed that it wouldn’t be long before the Shadow Garden met the same fate. And the Cult felt the same. But that isn’t what happened. The Shadow Garden didn’t go down. To the contrary, they actually whittled away at the Cult’s strength. Nothing like it had ever happened before. Tales of the Shadow Garden spread through the underworld like wildfire. Everyone has their eyes on them with hearts full of hope.”

“Why hope?”

“The Cult rules this world. They want the Shadow Garden to end that status quo, and its leader is powerful enough to make them believe it’s possible.”

“You mean Shadow...”

Even now, Alexia still remembers the beautiful bluish-purple light Shadow fired off in the capital. It isn’t admiration she feels toward the light. She swore to herself that she would reach those same heights someday.

“It isn’t just Shadow. His lieutenants are formidable as well. As an organization, they certainly have the strength to fight back. They might actually stand a chance of defeating the Cult. The prospect fills us with hope, but at the same time, we remain wary.”

“Of what?”

“Of the Shadow Garden taking over the world once the Cult of Diablos is deposed. Once the Cult is gone, there won’t be anyone left to stand in the Shadow Garden’s way.”

“Oh...”

As the librarian lay dying, he said the exact same thing.

“If that ends up happening, we’ll be right back where we started. That’s why I need to be sure of just what kind of group the Shadow Garden is. That’s why I’m wavering. Unable to choose who to side with...”

“And what do you plan on doing?”

“What, indeed. Perhaps the best outcome of all would be if the Cult of Diablos and the Shadow Garden simply kept fighting each other forever.”

“Father!”

“I’m joking. To be quite honest, I don’t want to choose. But in every battle that marks a turning point in history, the powers that fail to choose a side always end up perishing. Eventually, I’ll be forced to make a decision, my feelings be damned. Siding with either may lead to us losing everything, but the choice has to be made nonetheless. That’s what makes momentous points in history so momentous.”

“And you’re sure that turning point is coming?”

“The Cult is panicking. The drastic moves they’re making these days are a sign of that, as well as their way of putting pressure on us. They want desperately for us to take their side. I had assumed the Shadow Garden would do the same thing, but...”

“They haven’t reached out?”

“Not yet. We’ve tried to make contact with them ourselves, but we can’t even figure out where they are. Now, there’s no guarantee the Shadow Garden actually needs us. That might be what’s happening here. And if that’s the case, then it leaves us with only one option.”

The king gives Alexia a weary smile.

“What about the Oriana Kingdom?” Alexia asks. “They stood up to the Cult.”

“And soon, they’ll get crushed for it. In opposing the Cult, Rose Oriana has gotten herself branded a heretic by the Church. They have little access to trade now. That tiny nation has nothing to its name but its art, and it won’t be long before it succumbs.”

“That’s what I feared. Is there really no saving them?”

When Alexia heard that Rose had taken the throne, she was genuinely overjoyed. The two of them had sworn to fight as allies once. Life had taken the two of them down different paths, but Alexia was glad to hear that Rose was still determined to fight the Cult.

Now, though, the path before Rose is paved with thorns.

“That depends on the Shadow Garden,” the king says.

“I figured they might have been involved.”

He nods. “Who do you think it was that sheltered Rose Oriana after she murdered her father? Our kingdom, the Oriana Kingdom, and the Cult of Diablos all scoured the land, but none of us could find hide nor hair of her.”

“You’re saying the Shadow Garden took her in?”

“It’s the logical conclusion. They likely arranged the events leading to her ascension as well. That was all the Shadow Garden’s...no, Shadow’s doing. Whenever Rose Oriana makes a move, it seems he’s never far behind.”

“That’s true. He was there at the Bushin Festival, too.”

Not just that: He was the one who helped Rose escape.

“We haven’t confirmed it, but there are reports that Shadow showed up right as the Black Rose activated.”

“Then we can assume that she...that Rose Oriana has joined forces with the Shadow Garden.”

“Exactly. Despite being under heavy embargo, the Oriana Kingdom still has food aplenty. Everything makes sense if we assume it’s the Shadow Garden bringing it to them.”

“Oh, so the Oriana Kingdom *is* safe.”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“Huh?”

“The Cult is on the move. They’re planning on encouraging the Church to begin a crusade. The Midgar Kingdom is already being pressured behind closed

doors to deploy our army.”

“That’s horrible!”

“The Velgalta Empire will join in, no doubt. They have a long and storied history of invading the Oriana Kingdom. Yet every time, they always retreat for the flimsiest of reasons.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because the Cult steps in. They’ve worked hard to keep the Oriana Kingdom and Velgalta Empire in balance. This time, though, they’re siding with Velgalta. Between that and the Church giving them an excuse, it’s everything Velgalta could have ever asked for.”

“And what are you going to do, Father? Or rather, what is the Midgar Kingdom going to do?”

Alexia poses her question as the nation’s princess.

“Indeed...”

The king lets out a protracted sigh and lapses into silence.

Outside the window, snow is falling.

“You’re not thinking of supporting the Cult, are you?” Alexia asks.

“...The war will begin when the snow melts.”

“You’re actually thinking of invading?!”

“The Cult is testing us, Alexia. They want to know if we’re siding with them or the Shadow Garden. The decision we make here will determine the kingdom’s fate.”

“I swear, Father, if you invade the Oriana Kingdom, I—”

“I’ll have my answer before the snow melts. My only goal is to take the option that ensures our nation’s survival. Alexia, you’re free to do as you will.”

“...I am?”

“Iris is getting closer with the Cult.”

“I knew it. I knew she was!”

“And she’s doing so by design.”

“That can’t be. She’s being manipulated, that’s all!”

The king shakes his head. “Now, if you manage to build a relationship with the Shadow Garden, then no matter how things play out, the Midgar bloodline will live on.”

Alexia squeezes her fists tight. “So that’s your angle. And what’s to say I’m even going to try?”

“Do as you will,” the king replies with his back to her.



Alexia runs her conversation from yesterday back through her head as she lays everything out.

Once she’s finished, Christina sips her coffee and takes a deep breath. “That’s kind of a lot.”

“That’s where things stand. That’s how I know Father isn’t going to stop me from getting involved in the case. That said, he isn’t going to offer me any help, either.”

“But still, you’re free to do whatever you want.”

“That right. Father can think what he likes of me, but I intend to act on my convictions.”

“I think that’s admirable of you.”

“I’d appreciate it if our conversation didn’t leave this room, by the way.”

“Of course.”

“A-and also, on a completely different note...” All of a sudden, Alexia starts fidgeting.

“What is it?”

“W-we’re, um, going to the White estate tomorrow, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“So, um, there’s loads of prep we’ll need to do.”

“Huh? I mean, I suppose so.”

Alexia puffs up her chest. “Right? So tonight, I’ll be staying at your place!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“L-like I said, we’ve got lots of things we need to plan out, so I’m coming over to spend the night!”

Christina glances at the Mitsugoshi-made wall clock. “We still have plenty of time...”

“But look, the sun’s already begun setting. It sure would be horrible if something happened to me on my way home!”

“I’m happy to prepare a guarded carriage for you. Alternatively, if you got in touch with the royal castle, I’m sure they would—”

“That might have been enough under ordinary circumstances. But with Jack the Ripper running around, it’s dangerous to be outside at night!”

“That’s...actually a good point. I’ll make up a room for you straightaway, Princess Alexia.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that. I’m the one imposing on you, after all!”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“You know, I just happened to remember that Fido...I mean, Cid Kagenou and Kanade are staying over as well, aren’t they?”

“They are, but I’m not sure I follow.”

“I can just sleep in the same room as them. *I’m* the one imposing on you, after all!” Alexia vigorously reminds her.

“The same room? I could never be so discourteous...”

“No, no, it’s fine! *I’m* the one imposing on you, after all!”

“B-but...!”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine! I got Father’s permission and everything!”

Christina is pretty sure the permission King Midgar gave was for something

else entirely, but before she can get too far into that train of thought, Alexia tugs her arm and rises to her feet.

“Now, come on, lead the way! I want to see the bedroom!”



Over in the bedroom, the very first words out of anyone’s mouth come from Cid Kagenou: “Why are *you* here?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer,” Alexia replies. “Why *am* I here? A philosophical quandary, to be sure. It was Natsume Kafka who once said ‘I think, therefore I am.’ The woman gets on my nerves, but that doesn’t make what she said any less true.”

“I think, therefore I am...”

Cid mutters back the quote from Natsume the novelist and grimaces with all his might.

“What, did her words strike a chord? The quote is from a lecture she gave at one of Laugus’s foremost seminars. All the academics raved about her speech, and I’m told that among their philosophy students, it’s the most popular thesis topic of the year.”

“You don’t say.” Cid rubs his temple in resignation. “Well, I’m not asking you on a philosophical level. I’m just saying I can’t help but wonder why someone as noble and lofty as the great Princess Alexia would deign to visit a place such as this.”

Behind Alexia, Christina’s face twitches. ““A place such as this’?”

“Well, would you look at that. You finally learned your place,” Alexia says. “It’s true that to you, I certainly am a divine being descended from the heavens. I just thought it might be nice to see what was going on below the clouds for once.”

“That’s not an answer,” Cid tells her.

“There’s no need for you to know what’s going on up above you. Now, get of my way. I’m taking your bed.”

“Huh? You’re staying the night?! Wait, then where am I supposed to sleep?”

“The ground, I suppose,” Alexia says triumphantly, then takes Cid’s luggage from atop the bed and sweeps it onto the floor.

Christina quietly hands him a blanket. “I’m sorry, Cid. You’ll have to make do with this.”

Cid stares at it blankly. “Can I go home?”

“You’ll get attacked by the Nightblades.”

“I have this feeling that if I do, I’ll be able to miraculously survive by a weird stroke of luck.”

“Don’t,” Alexia says, her voice stern. “I’m serious.”

“Fine.” Cid sighs and takes the blanket.

After sitting down on the bed, Alexia surveys the room. “That said, it sounds like things have been rough here. To think you got attacked last night in this very room. I take it that stain there is blood?”

Her gaze is sharp as she searches for signs of the attack.

“Actually, it was the room next door that got attacked,” Christina replies.

“And for the record, the stain is from when Kanade got carried away just now and spilled her coffee,” Cid adds.

“H-hey!” yelps Kanade, who’s been hiding in the corner and making herself as inconspicuous as possible since Alexia walked in.

Alexia’s cheeks go red. “O-oh. Well, it’s no wonder you’re jumpy, considering what happened last night.”

“Th-that’s right,” Kanade agrees. “I was so scared I couldn’t get a wink of—”

“Kanade was snoring like a log all night long, FYI,” Cid says. “You’d be amazed how resilient she is. Nothing to worry about there.”

“Will you just be quiet? I’m *trying* to be considerate here,” Alexia snaps.

“If you didn’t keep saying stuff that wasn’t true, I wouldn’t have to keep correcting you.”

Alexia and Cid glare daggers at each other.

“L-let’s all just calm down, okay?” Christina says, moving in to intervene.

“Anyhow, we need to take another look at the attack from last night and the moves Jack the Ripper has been making.” Alexia meets the others’ gazes. “There might be something we’ve overlooked!”

“That’s a good idea,” Christina agrees.

“I mean, I guess I don’t have any objections,” says Cid.

“Then is there anything anyone’s noticed?” Alexia asks. “It can be about the attack or about stuff from earlier. There are no wrong answers here.”

“After all this, I really don’t believe Jack the Ripper is our enemy,” Christina offers. “If he was, it would have been so easy for him to just leave us to die last night.”

“The timing does seem awfully convenient,” says Alexia.

“Right? Jack the Ripper must have been tracking the Nightblades all this time. When he saw they were attacking us, I think he came to help.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Cid says, pushing back on Christina’s theory. “Maybe it was just more efficient. He could have figured that rather than fighting the Nightblades solo, it’d be easier to team up with you all.”

“That isn’t it,” Christina replies. “You wouldn’t know because you didn’t see him, but Jack the Ripper’s skills are barely even human. He wiped them out completely on his own. It was like we weren’t even there.”

Alexia doesn’t miss a chance to get a jab in. “Well, obviously, Cid Kagenou wouldn’t know that. Not after he fled midway through the fight.”

“Yeah!” Kanade says, agreeing with all her might. “He wouldn’t know because he’s a traitor who ran away!”

“Y-you know, in a sense, the only reason we were able to withstand the attack is because Cid drew some of the enemies away...,” Christina adds in an attempt to come to Cid’s defense.

“I assure you, that was the furthest thing from his mind. He was just trying to

save his own skin.”

“I’ll never forget that moment. I gazed into his eyes, and all I saw was betrayal.”

Cid gives Alexia and Kanade a weary look. “You two really have it in for me, huh?”

Then Christina speaks up like she’s just remembered something. “You know, there was one thing that baffled me in the report I got just now.”

“What’s that?” Alexia asks.

“Apparently, there’s a vase that went missing from the manor. It was here yesterday afternoon, so it must have been stolen during the attack.”

“Now, that *is* interesting. What kind of vase was it?”

“Are you familiar with works of the potter Da Vinche from three hundred years ago?”

“Hwuh, you mean that two hundred million–*zeni* vase from the hallway?!” Kanade cries. “*That’s* the one that got stolen?!”

“Sadly, yes...”

“Hold on a second, those vases are national treasures!” Alexia says, fully exasperated. “They aren’t the kind of thing you just leave in a hallway!”

“Oh, no, the vase that got stolen was a *replica* of a Da Vinche vase.”

“Huh?” Cid says. “The vase was a replica?”

“That’s right,” Christina replies. “We wouldn’t just leave the real one lying around like that. But that’s what makes it so strange. Why would the culprit go and steal a fake vase?”

“That is odd,” Alexia agrees. “I don’t get why someone would do that.”

“It was a well-made replica, so I suspect it would still sell for ten thousand *zeni* or so, but still.”

“If they were only after money, surely there were other things they could have stolen.”

“Oh, absolutely. The hall was filled with works of art worth millions. I don’t understand why the thief went for the replica, the least valuable item there.”

“Considering the timing, it’s probably safe to assume the culprit is either Jack the Ripper or someone associated with the Nightblades.”

“Maybe they just didn’t realize it was a replica.”

“I find that hard to imagine. No matter how good a copy it might have been, anyone would have been able to tell at a glance that it wasn’t real. You would have to be a complete and utter peasant without a shred of refinement in your body not to realize that.”

“That’s true.”

As Christina and Alexia continue their discussion, Kanade and Cid exchange a glance.

“A complete and utter peasant...”

“Without a shred of refinement in your body...”

Their shoulders slump.

“I can’t make heads or tails of it,” Alexia says. “Maybe there’s another message from Jack the Ripper in all this.”

“It’s certainly a possibility,” agrees Christina. “It might be worthwhile to look into.”

“I really don’t think so.”

“Be quiet, Fido. Lead the way, Christina! We have ourselves a clue, and that’s all we need to crack this mystery wide open!”

“I told you, you’re wasting your time.”

“Come along, Fido.”

The group goes on to investigate the scene of the burglary until well into the night, but in the end, they come up empty-handed.



“The White Mansion is just up ahead.”

“”Kaaay.””

I follow Christina through the capital’s high-end residential area. There isn’t a house in sight that looks like it’s worth less than a billion *zeni*. Christina’s place was probably larger in terms of raw square footage, but Kanade and I both find ourselves gaping vacantly at the raw prestige the neighborhood emanates.

Behind us, Alexia is walking with bags under her eyes and grumbling about her fruitless investigation. “It doesn’t make sense. Jack the Ripper *must* have been leaving us a message. Maybe I was supposed to wait for the sun’s light to strike the mirror in the hallway, then decode the message hidden in the shadows...”

Kanade turns and looks at me. “I—I feel kind of out of place here.”

“You could’ve just waited back at the manor.”

“But it’s safer to stick with the group!”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, ’cause I can use Princess Alexia as a shield and survive for sure.”

Kanade mumbles that final disrespectful remark under her breath, but my ears catch everything. That said, I live a pretty disrespectful life myself, so I silently cheer her on.

“You know, Kanade,” I tell her, “you might end up with your name in the history books.”

And not in a good way.

An unsettling grin spreads across Kanade’s face. “Hwuh? You really think so? Aw, shucks.”

“Huh?”

I always make it a habit to scan the area around me for presences, and right then, I sense a tremendous magical force approaching at top speed. Whoever this is, they’re bad news.

Then I realize it’s Delta.

“...Oh, this *is* bad.”

“Hwuh? What’s wrong?” Kanade asks me.

“I, uh...”

If that force of nature shows up while I’m with these guys, I get the feeling I’m going to stand out way more than a background character ever should.

“I gotta go take a dump.”

But the moment the bullshit excuse leaves my mouth...

“BOSS MAAAAAAN!!”

...a therianthrope girl comes bounding at me at full speed.

“Delta, wait!!”

“Aww! But I hate waiting!”

Delta slows down for the briefest of moments, but that’s the longest she’s able to restrain herself.

However, that one moment is all I need. With as much speed as a background character can muster, I step backward and re-chant my incantation at Delta’s newly accelerating form.

“Wait!”

“Aww!”

She twitches and slows down for a moment.

Then she immediately speeds back up.

“Wait! Wait!”

“Aww! Awwwww!”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!!”

With each twitch, she decelerates a little more until eventually arriving right in front of me.

“Awwwwwwwww...”

On the one hand we have Delta, who looks annoyed at having repeatedly

been told to wait. On the other, we have Alexia, Christina, and Kanade, who look bewildered at the sudden appearance of a strange therianthrope.

I clutch my head, unsure of how I'm going to talk myself out of this.

"Um, Fido, do you know her? Her mana is a bit worrying," Alexia says, backing off a little. Because of the repeated starting and stopping, Delta's mana is brimming like it's about to burst.

"Uhh, I guess you could call her my pet? There, there."

I scritch Delta's head to keep her mana from overflowing. If it exploded here, we'd have a massive catastrophe on our hands.

"She seems like an awfully dangerous pet." Alexia shoots me an accusatory look. "And also, I'm pretty sure they made owning therianthrope slaves illegal."

"Oh, shoot."

By the time I realize what's about to happen, it's too late. Delta's already registered that look of Alexia's as hostility.

"Hey! Don't you talk to Boss man, weakling!"

I scritch Delta's head as hard as I can. "There, there. THERE, THERE!!"

Slowly but surely, her expression softens.

"Did you just call me a weakling? I'm afraid I can't let that stand," Alexia says, throwing oil onto the fire.

"Hey, whoa, just drop it!"

What're you getting all haughty for, Alexia? One flick to the forehead from Delta, and you'd be a smear on the sidewalk.

"Bwuhhhgrrrrrr."

Delta's still ecstatic from the head scratches even as she growls at Alexia. I grab Delta in a headlock and drag her away.

"Super sorry about all the commotion my pet caused, folks."

"Hey!" protests Alexia. "This conversation isn't finished!"

"Yeah, yeah, you can tell me all about it later."

I have to actually put my back into it a bit to keep Delta restrained as I separate her from the group.

“Grrr! That hurts!”

“Ah, right, sorry.”

Once we’re safely hidden behind a wall within the posh residential area, I let her go.

“You’re so strong, Boss man. And you weren’t even using magic!”

“I do train, y’know. But more importantly, remember how you’re supposed to leave me alone when I’m hanging out with normal people?”

“Huh?”

“We’ve been over this. The rule is, you have to leave me alone when I’m hanging out with normal people.”

“Huh?”

Delta tilts her head and gives me a look of absolute puzzlement, at which point I give up.

“Nah, just forget about it. I can see I’m wasting my time here.”

“I hate wasting time, too!”

“Yeah, it sucks. By the way, what’re you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you, Boss man!”

“And that’s why you came?”

“Nope! Hey, Boss man, can I go beat up that girl? She needs to learn her place!”

“No beating her up. She might not look like much, but she’s one of this kingdom’s princesses, so it’d be more of a headache than it’s worth. So what’re you doing here?”

“It’s all good! I’ll beat her up and make her shake her butt at you!”

“No, seriously, what’re you here for? And again, you’re not allowed to beat up Alexia. No way, no how.”

“I can’t?”

“Nope.”

“But she acts all smug even though she’s weak.”

“I know she does, but you still can’t beat her up.”

“Awww... Fine.”

“So what’re you doing here?”

“I, uh...” Delta cocks her head and blinks like she’s trying to remember.
“That’s right! I came to look for Felid!”

“Felid... What, did something happen to Zeta?”

“Alpha told me to look for her! She said something about, uh, status reports? And too many blank spaces? I didn’t really get what she was saying, but all I have to do is beat Felid up and bring her back with me!”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

I guess using Delta’s nose is about the best option there is if you’re trying to track someone down. That said, I find it hard to imagine Zeta actually following any of Delta’s instructions once Delta finds her.

Her nose twitches as she gives me a thorough once-over. “*Sniff, sniff.* You have a bit of her smell on you, Boss man. Just a little, though.”

“Yeah, I haven’t run into her in a while. Not since the incident, I think.”

“This country has a bit of her smell on it, too. But only a little, no matter where I go. She must have already left.”

As she sniffs, her expression gradually grows steelier. That’s the face she makes when she hunts.

Then I sense a faint presence and turn around.

“Miss Deltaaaaaa! Wait for meeeeeee!”

It’s an attractive therianthrope girl who’s completely out of breath. She’s got blue eyes, black-and-white ears, and a tail that matches her ears. She kind of resembles a Siberian husky.

“Wait, Miss Delta, is he...?”

Delta puffs up her chest and introduces me in the most useless way possible.

“Ha-ha! Boss man is Delta’s boss man!”

“Hey, nice to meet you. I’m Cid Kagenou. Are you a friend of Delta’s?”

The Siberian husky girl’s eyes go wide. “Wh-whaaaaat?! For realsies?!”

“So who is this, Delta?”

Delta gives me a smug grin. “My minion!”

Delta has minions now? We’re all doomed.

“Your minion, huh. She got a name?”

“It’s Pi!”

“Pi, huh.”

That’s a Greek letter, which means she must work for Mitsugoshi.

“I-I’m Pi, hi! I-it’s nice to meet you, too.”

With that, she flops onto the ground with her belly facing up.

“Uh, what...?”

Delta nods in satisfaction. “That’s the submission pose!”



“I see.”

I can't even be bothered to come up with a pithy retort, so I decide to nod along, too.

“Ohhh... He despises me... He's looking at me like I'm a bug...,” Pi whines.

“I'm really not.”

Now that I think about it, this seems to happen a lot with therianthropes. I guess Yukime and Zeta are just the exceptions.

“Whyyy? Did I do something wrong? I'll never survive in this pack if the leader hates meee...”

“Do you not think Pi's fit for the pack, Boss man? I know she's not very bright, but I promise she's a good girl!”

“I'm sure she's fine.”

I literally just met the chick.

“Hooray! Boss man accepted Pi!”

“You really, really mean it? I'll work hard for you, Master!”

Pi leaps to her feet and wags her tail to and fro.

“Sniff, sniff.”

Then she rushes over to me and begins picking up my scent.

“I know your smell now, Master!”

“Pi's incredible, Boss man! She's kinda dumb, but her nose is even sharper than mine!”

“Dang, that *is* incredible.”

Incredible that Delta managed to find someone dumber than herself, that is.

“And also, she's pretty strong!”

“Yeah, I know.”

The way she masked her presence when she first showed up was really something else.

“Tee-hee-hee.”

She laughs innocently, but smarts aside, she seems like a force to be reckoned with.

“When are you going to take over the world, Master?” Pi asks me.

“I wasn’t planning on taking it over at all.”

“So not yet? But Miss Delta and I spend every day thinking up plans to build the strongest pack ever so we can rule the world.”

Well, that’s ominous.

In a rare display of alarm, Delta quickly cuts her off. “The plan’s not ready yet, Pi! We still haven’t figured out what we’re gonna do after we have Boss man make ten thousand babies!”

The two of them steal glances at me as they share a covert exchange.

“Whaaat? Is ten thousand not enough to take over the world with?”

“Alpha said we couldn’t! But it’s okay. We can just have him make more and more, like a million. Then Alpha will definitely agree!”

“Whaaat? But that’s so many!”

Delta gesticulates wildly as she explains herself, and Pi gesticulates wildly in surprise.

“That’s why I said we should wait until later to tell Boss man about our perfect plan for world conquest!”

Yeah, that sounds ominous as hell. All I can do is pray that this plan never gets enacted.

“Then we’d better hurry up and finish revising it, huh?!”

“We can’t! We’re in the middle of a mission to catch Felid!”

“Oh yeah, that’s right... But I’m allergic to cats!”

Then I sense Alexia approaching.

“Hello?! How long exactly do you intend to keep us waiting for?!” she demands.

“Ah, sorry. I’ll be right there.”

I shoot Delta and Pi a signal with my eyes, and they quickly make themselves scarce. It’s a shame how dumb they are, but it’s nice how quickly they can pick up what I’m putting down. I guess it’s their dog traits at work.

After I rejoin Alexia and the others, I apologize and come up with a fake explanation for the whole thing.



“Princess Alexia has arrived at the front door, Earl White.”

On hearing the White estate butler address him, Earl White looks up. “What’s Princess Alexia doing here?”

“She insisted on being present during the Jack the Ripper attack.”

“What a pain...” Earl White lets out a sigh. “Don’t allow her onto the property. She can stay, but only if she waits outside the gate with the Knight Order like a good little girl.”

“Are you certain, sir? This is Princess Alexia we’re talking about.”

“That title of hers has no real power behind it. Once we’re through with Jack the Ripper, I’ll invite her to the dinner party to humor her.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The butler bows and takes his leave.

“I swear, it’s just one thing after another these days,” Earl White grumbles, then goes and grabs his seat at the round table.

Counting him, there are already six Nightblades present.

“I do apologize for the wait, and I thank you all for lending me your aid today,” he says, offering the others a small bow.

“Think nothing of it. This is a matter that affects all thirteen of us.”

“The lowlife took out Earl Haushold Hedd, Viscount Shinobi, and Marquis Jet, too. There’s no one left of the Nightblades but us six and Marquis Despoht.”

“This is going to take a toll on our strength. It will probably take a good five... no, ten years to train their successors.”

“That’s a problem for another day. Our top priority right now is putting this Jack the Ripper fellow in the ground.”

“I can’t imagine that will be much of a problem. Not only do we have the Nightblades’ finest gathered here, but we’ve spared no expense in assembling an elite fighting force. That fool of a clown won’t know what hit him.”

Once the rest of the top-ranking Nightblades have chimed in, Earl White inquires about their absent colleague.

“Does anyone know where the esteemed Marquis Despoht is?”

“Still negotiating with the organization, it would appear. There’s no sense counting on the Fenrir sect any longer, but he thinks he can get his discussions with the Loki-sect power players all wrapped up.”

“If the talks go well, I believe they’ll be sending over a powerful ally to help us.”

“This is a single man we’re up against. Surely, this has to be overkill.”

“It’s the greatest crisis the Nightblades have ever faced. A little overkill is exactly what’s in order. After all, we still don’t even know who Jack the Ripper is under that mask.”

“He’s an idiot clown hitman. Do we seriously not have any leads yet?”

With that, the topic of conversation shifts to Jack the Ripper.

Earl White crosses his arms and frowns. “I assumed he was an assassin hired by the Hope family, but the odds of that seem low. They don’t have the pull to land an assassin of his caliber.”

“Hmm, then perhaps he’s from some rival organization. The Shadow Garden, maybe?”

“They would never use such roundabout methods. They aren’t the kind of group that would dress up like a clown, use playing cards as weapons, or leave cryptic messages.”

“Jack the Ripper kills for sport. He might not be part of a group at all but just working alone. Either out of sheer lust for murder, or because he holds some sort of grudge.”

“A lone wolf? He must not think much of the Thirteen Nightblades, if he’s taking us on solo.”

“We need to show this whelp. Show him just what happens when he underestimates us.”

The Nightblades rise from their seats.

“Our dark knights are ready,” says Earl White. “Now, follow me. Tonight this underground arena will be Jack the Ripper’s grave.”

With that, the butler lights the room’s fireplace. The fire flashes blue, coiling into ancient runes and transforming the fireplace into a stairway leading downward.

“No matter how many times I see it, it never fails to impress. Is that an artifact from the ancient land of the elves?”

“You have a keen eye. Elven artifacts, elven books, elven weapons, elven slaves. Elves are a profitable business.”

Earl White takes the lead and heads down the stairs. The stairs are wide and adorned on either side with unsettling display items.

“Ah, I recognize that sword. It belonged to the rabbit therianthrope swordsman, the one who lost a few days ago.”

“That match was a brilliant one. It’s amazing how ferocious therianthropes can get when you take their families hostage.”

“They say that even among therianthropes, the rabbit ones hold their families especially dear. I must say, watching him fight to rescue his loved ones brought a tear to my eye.”

The Nightblades point at the broken, bloodstained sword and the battered set of armor accompanying it as they talk.

“I’m having his body taxidermized. Once it’s finished, I’m planning on hanging it up alongside the sword.”

“Ooh, you’ll have to invite me over again once it’s finished. Out of curiosity, what became of his family?”

“I’m having them stuffed to hang up beside him, of course. Who am I to separate them?”

“Now we’ll be reminded of that glorious bout every time we walk by here. I love it.”

The Nightblades continue chatting as they descend past more and more sets of bloody arms and stuffed bodies, and eventually, they reach the door leading to the arena.

The space beyond the door is shaped like a dome. It’s dim inside, and the circular arena’s perimeter is lined with torches, grisly stains, and the scars of battle. This is no Bushin Festival, and there’s no glory to be found here. Only ugly, rancid death.

“Right this way.” The butler bows and leads Earl White and the others over to the specially installed spectator seats. “This section is protected by a powerful artifact barrier. Even if Jack the Ripper comes, he won’t be able to lay so much as a finger on you.”

The Nightblades begin shuffling into their seats and looking down at the arena.

“Now, the skilled dark knights you’ve gathered from across the land are waiting in the back of the arena. I have the full list here,” the butler says, then begins handing out dossiers on the dark knights to all the Nightblades.

“Excellent.” Earl White flips through the list and gasps. “My goodness... I’m amazed we were able to get this many.”

“Ha-ha-ha. This is what happens when we Nightblades pull out all the stops.”

“A master swordswoman from Velgalta, a demon from the city-states, a living legend from the Lawless City... It’s no wonder we were calling this overkill.”

“Jack the Ripper is just one guy. If we send all of our forces in at once, they’ll vaporize the poor sap.”

“Well, that’s where Earl White comes in. I trust he’ll make sure to show us a

good time.”

When the Nightblades look through the star-studded list, the confidence returns to their faces.

“But of course. I have a system in place for that very reason.” Earl White gestures at the arena’s entrance. “That there is the only way to get into the arena. I’ve sealed all the other ones off, so if Jack the Ripper wants to come after us, he’ll have no choice but to go through there. When he does, I’ll activate the barrier.”

The earl waves his hand, and a glimmering dome materializes over the arena.

“As you can see, if Jack the Ripper wants to escape, he’ll have to defeat every last dark knight we send at him.”

“But there’s no way he’ll ever do that.”

“Precisely, so we can gauge his stamina and choose appropriate opponents for him. We’ll start by sending our forces one at a time, and as things progress, we can gradually turn up the heat. It’ll be a show like no other,” Earl White boasts.

“We get to choose who he fights? Now, that *does* sound like fun.”

“Ah, so despite being in the audience, we still get to participate. I hear Mitsugoshi’s been popularizing that lately.”

“Damn those Mitsugoshi bastards, meddling with our concessions...”

“There’s a lot we could stand to learn from the way they do business. We should be looking to work with them, not against them. Who should we send in first? The Lawless City legend, perhaps?”

“No, he’s too strong. Just imagine how anticlimactic it would be if Jack the Ripper went down in the first bout.”

The Nightblades delightedly get to work choosing their fighters.

Once they have a loose roster worked out, Earl White offers a few quiet words. “I’m told the sun has already set aboveground. The question now is, Will Jack the Ripper actually show?”

“He’d have to be a monumental fool to stroll in here with all the dark knights we have lying in wait...but I guess if he doesn’t, we’re in for a pretty boring night.”

“Hey, if he doesn’t come, then it means he ran off in fear. Once we’re done spreading rumors about what happened, our reputation will be safe.”

“And his will be in the gutter. I mean, running away after sending a calling card? He’ll be the laughingstock of the capital.”

“No matter which way things go, we don’t stand to lose a thing.”

“Aside from the hefty retainers for those dark knights, that is.”

Their crude laughter echoes through the subterranean arena.



“Are you sure about this, Princess Alexia?”

Alexia, Christina, and Kanade make their way down a dark underground corridor.

“Absolutely. I know the capital’s underground passages like the back of my hand,” Alexia declares confidently as she walks at the group’s head.

“But surely, the story about the White estate having a secret underground section is just a rumor,” Christina says.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“You wouldn’t?”

“Yeah, bad guys’ houses always have underground lairs.”

“...Ah.”

Sounding altogether unconvinced, Christina turns back to look concernedly at Kanade, who’s bringing up the rear.

Kanade mumbles something as she trembles. “It’s fine. I just have to stay near Princess Alexia... If worse comes to worst, I can use her as a shield...”

“Is Cid going to be all right?” Christina asks. “I know we left him with the

Knight Order, but still.”

“I swear, Fido always does this. He wusses out just when things are getting good. That said, his swordplay is mediocre, so what choice did we have? It doesn’t seem like the Nightblades are going after him, so I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“That’s true. All they care about right now is Jack the Ripper. They’ve even stopped surveilling Kanade.”

Kanade’s eyes sparkle. “Hwuh, they have?!”

“Uh-huh. That’s how big of a threat they view Jack the Ripper as. I imagine they want to focus all their strength on him until the case ends.”

A wicked grin spreads across Kanade’s face. “Then let’s hope it goes on forever.”

“Don’t you worry,” Alexia says confidently. “Once we pull off this plan I thought up—the one where we sneak into the White estate while the Nightblades are busy dealing with Jack the Ripper’s attack so we can collect loads of proof on all their misdeeds—it’ll fix everything.”

“But didn’t you only come up with it on the spot when Cid happened to find that sewer entrance?” Christina asks.

“Planning is all about being flexible enough to deal with the situation as it presents itself.”

“Just...” Christina pauses for a moment. “Just who really is Cid?”

“What do you mean? He’s Fido.”

“He’s the one who found the tunnel leading underground, and he’s the one who actually decoded most of the messages Jack the Ripper left. You would think he’d be too scared to do any of that.”

Alexia can’t help but agree. “Y-you, uh...have a point there, actually. Fido *can* be weirdly perceptive.”

“His ability to reach the truth from just the simplest of clues is really worthy of mention.”

“I—I was almost done decoding them, too, for the record,” Kanade mumbles.

“And what’s more, I get this odd feeling like I’ve met him before,” Christina goes on. “Considering the mysterious vibe he gives off, perhaps he’s secretly...”

“A-are you saying Fido’s hiding something?” Alexia says worriedly.

“I think he might secretly be a brilliant detective.”

“I’m sorry, a what?”

“And a skilled veteran, at that. Maybe an evil organization forced him to take a drug that made him young again, like in Natsume Kafka’s *Case Clawed* novels. Now he’s disguising himself as a student to infiltrate our academy.”

“All right, that’s a cute theory and all, but Fido isn’t a detective. He’s as ordinary as they come. Now, look here. It’s the White family crest. Everything’s going exactly according to plan.”

Sure enough, the spot on the tunnel wall that Alexia is pointing at has the White crest emblazoned on it.

“No way,” says Christina. “Another one of Cid’s deductions came true...”

“Well, well, well.” Alexia begins proudly examining the wall. “I said it would all work out, didn’t I?”

“So what do you intend to do here?”

“Well, places like these generally have secret doors hidden somewhere.”

“Maybe, but I can’t imagine it will be easy to find—”

“Found it!”

“Seriously?!”

When Alexia pokes at the crest, a heavy *clunk* follows, and the wall swings open.

“The hidden doors in the castle are built the same way. The rich and powerful basically all think alike.”

Looking quite smug, Alexia heads down the dark, narrow corridor.

“Eugh, there’s cobwebs everywhere. This place probably hasn’t been used in forever,” says Kanade.

“Do be careful, Princess Alexia. It could be dangerous,” Christina cautions.

“I *am* being careful. Compared with Claire, at least.”

“I don’t think that’s a healthy point of reference.”

Christina and Kanade follow her.

After continuing down the corridor for a while, Alexia comes to a stop.

“...It’s a dead end,” she says, feeling the wall. “The wall seems thick, but I can sense people on the other side.”

“Oh, hey, there’s light shining through the crack at the bottom,” Kanade says. She’s right; a faint glow is visible along the ground.

“The material is different there, too. If we just...”

They push and pull on the wall and discover that they can lift it barely enough for a person to pass under it.

“All right, let’s do this,” says Alexia as she immediately begins crawling through the opening.

“*Please* be careful, Princess Alexia.”

“The safest thing here is to go second...,” Kanade mutters. “The third person can get crushed if the wall comes down on them, or a magical beast could come eat their legs...”

“It’s dangerous, Kanade, so you should stay behind me.”

“Hweh?! ”

As Christina crawls forward, Kanade looks at her in horror before frantically shooting a glance back over her shoulder.

“I—I guess I don’t sense any magical beasts, and I don’t think anyone’s following us...”

After double-checking to make sure the wall is safe, she crawls along after Christina.

“Eek! Can you please not push me, Kanade?! That’s my skirt!”

“Nope, nope, nope, nope.”

“What the heck, Christina?! I know my butt is attractive, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to squeeze it.”

“I—I promise I’m not trying to. It’s just that Kanade is shoving me...”

“Faster, faster, faster, faster.”

After getting crowded forward by Kanade all the while, the three of them eventually emerge beyond the wall.

“Finally... What even is this place?”

When they do, they find themselves in a dark, dome-shaped space.

“Princess Alexia, look over there!”

Christina points over at where the Nightblades are gathered. They’re a short distance away, and because of the dim light, the Nightblades haven’t noticed them yet.

“Six Nightblades? What’s going on here?”

Kanade gulps audibly.

The girls mask their presences and duck for cover. After looking around again, they realize they’re in some sort of stadium.

“Is this an arena?” Alexia says. “I could have sworn we were beneath the White estate.”

“There are some nasty rumors floating around about the earl,” Christina replies. “Stories about how he forces slaves to fight so he can gamble on the matches. Could that actually be true?”

Kanade lets out another audible gulp.

As the three of them try to get a read on the situation, a dim glow overtakes the arena.

“Something’s happening...”

With that, they turn their gazes to the light’s center.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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The Monster Becomes a Legend!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The Monster Becomes a Legend!

“Huh. Looks like Jack the Ripper isn’t coming,” one of the Nightblades says impatiently as he sets to work on his dinner.

It’s past midnight, meaning that the date’s already changed.

“Guess he was too scared of us to show.”

“I got my hopes up when I heard he beat that Wakoku martial master, too. What a shame.”

“I say this is a good thing. It’s just proof that when we Nightblades come together, there’s nobody who can stand against us.”

“Maybe we pulled together too many forces. It was just too much for Jack the Ripper to bear.”

A chorus of mocking laughter rises from the Nightblades.

“We’ll start spreading rumors when the sun comes up,” says Earl White. “Soon, everyone will know that Jack the Ripper fled from us and that the Nightblades are going as strong as ever. That should make sure they never doubt us again—”

Before he can finish his sentence, a dim flash appears from the arena. The light gradually grows stronger, almost like it’s reacting to something.

“What’s going on?”

“Perhaps he came after all. The arena is responding to a foreign source of mana.”

Light fills the entire arena as the artifact finishes erecting its dome-shaped barrier.

It’s unclear when, but a bloodstained clown has appeared at its center.

“Is that Jack the Ripper, then?”

“It’s a clown drenched in blood. He matches the reports.”

“Hmph. He doesn’t look all that strong.”

“Looks can be deceiving. If nothing else, though, we can tell he’s an idiot. He’d have to be, to walk into our trap like that.”

“You can say that again. But hey, if he’s happy to help stave off my boredom, then more power to him.”

The Nightblades lean forward in their seats to get a better look at Jack the Ripper.

“Hello and welcome, Jack the Ripper. So glad you could stop by this evening,” Earl White says in a theatrical tone. “But you certainly took your time, didn’t you? Did it really take you that long to work up your nerve?”

Jack the Ripper doesn’t so much as twitch.

“If you have something you’d like to say, the floor is yours. You must have some sort of business with us Nightblades. Go on, tell us all about whatever grudge you might hold. Did we kill your parents? Sell your children off into slavery? Steal away your fortune? Forgive me for not remembering you, but we’ve wronged so many people I simply can’t keep track of them all.”

The Nightblades’ laughter echoes through the arena.

“Too scared to speak up, are you? Well, that’s fine, too. We’ve prepared a very special game for you. The rules are simple. If you defeat all the contenders we’ve arranged for you, the barrier surrounding the arena will go down. Then you might very well get to kill us all like you said you would.”

Earl White’s expression as he looks down at Jack the Ripper is one of utmost confidence.

“And just so you know, the barrier is being generated by a powerful artifact, one that cost me more money than you could earn in a hundred lifetimes. You can try to break through it, but you’d simply be wasting your time. No, there’s a path available to you: defeat all comers!”

The earl spreads his arms out wide and shouts.

“Now, let the game begin! Send in the first killer!”

The arena door opens, revealing a dark knight. It's a man wearing heavy armor and wielding a massive sword. He's a large man, the kind that towers over people. After giving his greatsword a couple of casual swings, he turns around and bows to the Nightblades over in the spectator seats.

“He's a dark knight from the city-state of Spartan!! The Spartan Colosseum is said to be the most brutal in the world, and he racked up two hundred fights there without a single defeat! They call him the Mincemeat Butcher because of how he uses his mighty blade to cleave each and every one of his foes in twain!”

The Butcher lumbers over and looks down at Jack the Ripper. With a smirk, the dark knight slings his greatsword up onto his shoulder. “What the hell? I figured I'd be in for a gnarly fight, considering all the nasty folks they've got lined up in the waiting room, but all I get is some dumb clown?”

“It's time for the first match!”

As soon as the starting signal is given, the Butcher swings his sword down. The arena shakes from the volume and force of the slash.

“Wh-what a mighty blow!”

“That Spartan dark knight is something else. If anything, the rumors sold him short!”

“It doesn't look like his attack landed, though.”

Sure enough, the Butcher's strike didn't find its mark.

However, it isn't because Jack the Ripper dodged it. He wasn't even in the swing's initial arc.

“I missed that one on purpose. How's the audience supposed to enjoy themselves if I end the fight on the first hit? Dark gladiators who only care about winning, they're second-rate. The best ones make sure to give the crowd a show,” the Butcher says smugly as he hoists his greatsword back onto his shoulder. “Come at me, clown boy. I have your measure. If you couldn't react to that attack, then you'll never beat me no matter how hard you try. But don't

you worry. Making bouts against third-rate fighters look good is what they pay us dark gladiators to *durrrrrgh?!"*

The Butcher goes shooting straight up. Blood sprays from his face as his body splatters against the top of the barrier. Droplets *drip, drip* down and paint the clown red.

The clown slowly lowers the leg he just kicked with.

"...W-winner: Jack the Ripper," Earl White stammers.

A stir runs through the Nightblades.

"Wh-what just happened?!"

"That was a kick. An unbelievably fast kick!"

"You saw it, Earl Battler?"

"Barely, but yes. I might not look it, but it was my strength that got me this far in life. And that fight sure was something..."

"Ah, that's right. You're a pretty accomplished dark knight, aren't you?"

"Ridiculous. You're telling me Jack the Ripper ended the fight with a single kick?"

"Look, we chose someone we thought he could beat on purpose for the first fight. We're still well within expectations."

"I think we might want to change up our second combatant. Wouldn't you agree, Earl Battler?"

"I would..."

Not a single person speaks up in dissent.

Earl White drinks some wine and calls in the second fighter. "Now, without further ado, I present you your second challenge!"

It's not one dark knight that appears this time, but three.

"It's the captains of the legendary White Wolf mercenary group that made their name in the Velgaltan civil war!! When their client Perv Asshat died in battle in Oriana, the group fell on hard times. It's not every day you get

seasoned fighters like them to agree to participate in a match like this, but each and every one of them could put the Butcher to shame! Behold the teamwork they've honed on the fields of battle, and behold the nerves of steel they've honed by operating in the red!"

The three dark knights are in their thirties and forties. They wield a sword, an ax, and a spear, respectively. All of them look calm and composed, and they give Jack the Ripper a steely set of looks.

"What do you think?" the swordsman asks.

"I don't know. I can't get a read on his strength at all. But that's weird in and of itself," replies the mercenary with the ax.

"And here I was, thinking we were in for an easy payday. Don't blame us for coming at you three on one, guy," says the spearman, and the three of them ready their weapons.

"Now, let the second match begin!!"

The moment the starting signal is given, the three mercenaries spread out to fence Jack the Ripper in. From there, they gingerly try to gauge his range.

Meanwhile, Jack the Ripper doesn't move an inch.

Slowly but surely, the White Wolf captains circle him. Once around, then twice, then thrice...

Nothing is changing, and it doesn't make for a particularly interesting fight.

"All they're doing is walking in circles," says one of the Nightblades.

A chorus of disgruntled agreements follows.

The White Wolves can certainly hear them, yet even so, they stick to their paths and continue circling Jack the Ripper.

Nothing is happening.

That's what it looks like from the outside, at least, but tiny changes start coming over the White Wolves. Sweat begins dripping from their foreheads in oddly large droplets, their breathing gradually grows heavy, and their eyes turn bloodshot from their intense focus.

An odd sense of tension falls over the arena, and eventually, the complaints die down. Everything is dead silent.

Then Jack the Ripper makes his move.

He takes a single step forward.

It's just a regular, casual old step. There's nothing dangerous or threatening about it.

However, the White Wolves react in the strangest way. In the blink of an eye, they leap to the far ends of the arena. Their breathing is ragged, and their expressions are strained. The clattering of their quivering weapons speaks volumes about their mental states. They're terrified like they've never been terrified before.

All they're staring at is a bizarre clown, yet to see the look in those seasoned mercenaries' eyes, you would think they were gazing upon the end of the world.

One of the mercenaries lowers his sword. The ax wielder and spearman follow suit.

"I'm out. It ain't worth it...," the swordsman says, his voice trembling.

"You're...out? You mean you're abandoning the fight?! That's a breach of contract!"

"We're mercenaries," replies the spearman. "We're willing to die on the battlefield if we have to, but I'll be damned if I go down in some musty basement."

"Cut the crap already! Have you forgotten how much the penalty for a contract breach is?! As soon as word gets out that their captains fled from a fight, the White Wolves' reputation will be in the gutter!"

"A hundred million, two hundred million—we'll pay it. And you can spread whatever rumors you want," the ax wielder says with a laugh.

"Wh-what's so funny, you wretch?!"

"The fact that you people think you're gonna live to see tomorrow."

With that, the three mercenaries turn away and depart the arena.

Jack the Ripper makes no move to follow them. He just lets out a small chuckle from beneath his mask.

“Grr... Those uncivilized mercenary swine!” Earl White roars, his face flushed.

“Well, *they* certainly didn’t live up to the hype.”

“We need to make sure those idiot mercenaries get what’s coming to them. Let’s put together a posse to hunt them down.”

“With captains that cowardly, White Wolf is done for. Hmm? What is it, Earl Battler?”

Earl Battler’s face is pallid.

“What’s wrong, Earl? You coming down with something?”

“We might need to send in everything we’ve got.”

“What are you talking about, Earl Battler?”

“...I didn’t understand any of that fight we just watched,” Earl Battler replies.

“That’s because all they did was walk around in circles. There’s nothing there to understand.”

“The thing is, I know how strong White Wolf and their captains are. Without a doubt, they’re the strongest mercenary outfit on the continent.”

The other Nightblades laugh mockingly. “Pretty pathetic, if that’s the best our continent has to offer.”

“They ran away without even trying to fight,” Earl Battler goes on. “They fled their foe, knowing the damage it would do to the White Wolves’ reputation. They must have had a reason.”

“What kind of reason?”

“I think perhaps Jack the Ripper is a greater monster than any of them anticipated.”

“Don’t be absurd. Why, I think you’re just trying to scare us for a laugh.”

“Still, perhaps we should heed Earl Battler’s warning and make sure our next

fighter is up to the task. What do we think about sending in that Velgaltan master swordswoman?”

“Yeah, I like that. Hey, we’re changing up the roster.”

When they tell the butler about their swap-out, he frowns. “About that, sirs... I believe the Velgaltan swordswoman just left.”

“What? She *left*?!”

“She did. She said, ‘I have a bad feeling about this, boing,’ and took off.”

“And you just let her go?!”

“I-I’m afraid so. She returned her payment in full, and, well, she vanished like the wind, too fast for anyone to follow.”

“This is outrageous... These bastards think they can walk all over us!” Earl White’s voice trembles with rage. “Oh, forget it. Send in the demon from the city-states and the Lawless City legend!”

“Y-yes, sir. At once, sir!”

The butler hurriedly rushes off.

“I swear, this boils my blood.”

“Come on, Earl, it could be worse. The rabbit didn’t even look that strong in the first place.”

“She was good-looking, and it’s not often you see a rabbit swordswoman. That’s probably why her reputation got so inflated. Dark knights whose fame outclasses their talents are a *zeni* a dozen.”

“Yeah, we would’ve just embarrassed ourselves if we’d sent out a weakling like her. The city-state demon and Lawless City legend are all we need.”

“I can’t believe we’re sending out our best fighters when we still have so many in reserve. And two of them at once, no less.”

“Well, this is fine. Drawing this out too long would kill the fun in and of itself. I take it you’re on board with this, Earl Battler?”

“Yeah...”

The earl nods, his face still pale.

It isn't long before the city-state demon and Lawless City legend take their spots in the arena.



When Jack the Ripper fights the city-state demon and the Lawless City legend at the same time, he drives them both back without breaking a sweat.

Alexia gasps as she watches the bloody clown fight. “So that’s what Jack the Ripper is capable of...”

The battle is completely one-sided. Jack the Ripper’s foes are both expert fighters, but the clown is dancing circles around them. When the city-state demon and Lawless City legend turn to flee, he shreds them to ribbons. All that remains of them is the blood staining the arena.

“It’s like he’s not even using his full strength.”

That’s the part that shocks Alexia more than anything. By all accounts, the city-state demon and Lawless City legend were formidable dark knights, and they had the skills to back up their reputations. The raw skill required to slaughter them like that was beyond comprehension. There is only one person on Alexia’s mind who could have pulled off a feat like that.

“Shadow...”

Jack the Ripper’s talent might well be on par with Shadow’s. It’s hard to believe, but it’s the sole conclusion she can draw.

What catches her eye most of all, though, is the way Jack the Ripper carries himself—it so vividly reminds her of Shadow.

“The way he’s moving... No, it can’t be.”

The way he fights and the quality of his magic are completely different from Shadow’s.

At this point, Alexia finds herself remembering how the War Goddess once said that all the strongest fighters move in fundamentally similar ways.

“What should we do, Princess Alexia?” Christina asks in a hush.

“We should hold tight.”

“But isn’t this our best opportunity now that everyone’s distracted by Jack the Ripper?”

“No, we’ll have an easier time getting around afterward.”

“Afterward?”

“Yeah. Once it’s all over.”

With that, Alexia continues staring at Jack the Ripper over in the arena. She’s so intent on catching every last move he makes, she forgets to even blink.

The next set of opponents has arrived in the arena, and this time, there are a full hundred of them.

“What a joke. They’re burning their force little by little. It’s right out of the dying nation-state playbook.”

“Will Jack the Ripper actually be able to beat that many opponents?”

Every one of the dark knights closing in on Jack the Ripper is an elite fighter. The Nightblades spared no expense gathering them, and Alexia can tell they’re more talented than members of the royal Knight Order.

“I’ve slowly started being able to pick up on things lately. Things like what strength really is. Things like how big the gap is between me and the strong.”

“And what do you make of Jack the Ripper, Princess Alexia?”

“I would say...”

She sinks into silence for a moment to find the right words.

“...he’s in a league all of his own,” she eventually manages.

“You would really go that far?”

Kanade audibly swallows. Then...

“Go forth, my vassal,” Kanade mutters. “Go forth, Jack the Ripper. Kill them. Kill those idiot Nightblades dead.”

A moment later, over a hundred dark knights descend on Jack the Ripper.



“What’s going on here?” Earl White gasps.

The rest of the Nightblades in the spectator seats have all been struck into silence, unable to utter a word.

Losing the city-state demon and Lawless City legend was what first brought down their moods.

The city-state demon chipped Jack the Ripper’s mask.

The Lawless City legend hacked a chunk off Jack the Ripper’s outfit.

However, that was the sum total of what they managed to accomplish. Jack the Ripper had promptly seen through their moves and slaughtered them.

A question rises up from the onlookers.

“Did we have anyone stronger than them?”

Nobody answers. The city-state demon and Lawless City legend were the mightiest combatants on the Nightblades’ roster.

Terror spreads in a flash. The smug confidence is gone from their faces now, and they abandon all pretenses and throw every dark knight they have at their foe.

The battle is still ongoing, but the writing is on the wall.

Once all the dark knights are dead, Jack the Ripper stands at the bloodstained arena’s center and fixes his gaze on the spectator seats.

“Sorry, but I’m getting out of here! This whole mess is your fault, Earl White. Figure out how to clean it up!”

As soon as the first Nightblade rises from their seat, the dam breaks, and the others follow suit.

Earl White clings to his fleeing compatriots. “W-wait, hold on! I can still—”

That’s when a deep, dignified voice booms out.

“Where are you going, gentlemen? There’s no need to be in such a rush.”

There's a new figure in the spectator seats now, a regal man in the prime of his life.

"M-Marquis Despoht! I didn't see you come in!"

"You people are worthless, so I thought I might intercede on your behalf."

Several of the Nightblades grimace at Despoht's condescending tone, but none of them say a word.

"With the way things have gone, is there anything that *can* be done?"

"Hmph. Just for you all, I went and got a very special helper from the Cult."

With that, Despoht gestures over at the arena. There's a person in a hood standing there. Actually, *are* they even a person?

"A helper from the Cult? What is that thing?"

The silhouette the long hood casts is crooked. Whatever creature is under there, they certainly don't look human.

"Heh-heh-heh. Through their human experiments, the Cult has managed to create the ultimate weaponized life-form. Go on, show them your glorious form!"

On Despoht's command, the creature removes its hood and reveals its hideousness.

"Wh-what the—?"

Beneath, there's a horrible mass of stitched-together flesh. It's hard to even tell what gender it is. Is it a man? No, probably a woman. It has a vaguely feminine aura, but at the end of the day, what meaning does gender even have to a mass of flesh such as that? The creature is a monster, barely maintaining its human form.

"They call her Experiment No. 227 Millia."

"Her? So it is a woman?"

"She's one of the Fenrir sect's old test subjects. They abandoned her when she lost to the Shadow Garden, but the Loki-sect researchers recovered and restored her."

“She lost to the Shadow Garden?”

A series of disappointed sighs rise from the Nightblades.

“Worry not. When the Loki-sect researchers took the Fenrir-sect test subject, they improved her, taking techniques that were never meant to be used together and building her into the ultimate bioweapon. They assured me she’s over ten times stronger than she was before.”

Despoht strides up to the front row, speaking loudly to raise morale.

“Now go, Experiment No. 227 Millia! Heed my command and put Jack the Ripper in the ground!!”

The battle begins.

The horrific test subject, Millia, bounds forward like a feral beast. She circles behind Jack the Ripper, moving so fast her body is a mere blur.

Then she lashes out with her mighty right arm.

“Whoa?!”

A torrential surge of magic rages through the arena. The barrier is supposed to be unbreakable, yet it begins creaking under the strain.

“S-such power!”

The waves of magical aftershock gouge deep chunks out of the arena’s floor.

“Where...? Where’d he go?”

After taking a full swing with her arm, Millia is the only one left in the arena. Jack the Ripper is nowhere to be seen, and it dawns on the Nightblades that he’s been obliterated without a trace.

“Now that it’s over, it feels like it went by too fast,” Earl White says from the now-quiet spectator seats.

Looks of relief creep across the other Nightblades’ faces as they begin chatting about their thoughts.

“I guess that’s the Cult’s ultimate bioweapon for you. I was afraid she was going to break the barrier.”

“Ha-ha-ha. The barrier is impenetrable. Though I’ll admit, I did have my doubts for a moment. The Cult is nothing to be trifled with.”

“We should consider deepening our ties with them even further than we already have.”

“Indeed,” Despoht says. “We lost a lot during these recent incidents, but the bond we forged with the Loki sect is a great boon we’ve won.”

He’s greeted by a round of applause from who-knows-where.

“Everything I do, I do for the Nightblades.”

Despoht looks around. However, he doesn’t see anyone clapping. Everyone’s just looking at each other as the crisp applause echoes through the spectator section.

One person is trembling, his face as white as a sheet.

It’s Earl Battler.

He points a quivering finger at one of the empty seats.

Despoht gives him a quizzical look. “What’s the matter, Earl Battler?”

“O-over there...”

There isn’t anyone there.

There isn’t *supposed* to be, at least.

Unbeknownst to everyone, however, a bloody clown has taken the seat.

“Jack the Ripper?! H-how are you over here?!”

The Nightblades scatter like flies as they flee from him.

“Wh-what happened to the barrier?! What’s going on?!”

As long as the barrier holds, there shouldn’t be any way for Jack the Ripper to reach the stands.

“But how...?”

Jack the Ripper stops clapping and slowly rises to his feet.

In his hand, he’s holding the seven of spades.

He gives it a lazy toss.



It's as though the world has stopped, as though Jack the Ripper is the only one moving. Nobody can stop his languid move.

Shunk.

There's a small noise as the playing card lodges itself deep in one of the Nightblades' heads.

"A-agh..."

The Nightblade crumples forward and twitches on the ground.

Nobody moves a muscle. The stands are deathly silent as they stare at the spreading bloodstain.

Their lives are in this clown's hands. They can all feel it. He'll kill them if they move. He'll kill them if they scream. He'll kill them if they do nothing at all.

Tension rules the air as Jack the Ripper leisurely—so leisurely—pulls out one card after another.

The eight of spades.

The nine of spades.

The ten of spades.

The jack of spades.

The queen of spades.

The king of spades.

There are precisely six of them. It's the same number of cards as there are Nightblades, and Jack the Ripper splays them out in his hand before drawing the eight of spades.

He slowly readies it.

The selected Nightblade's eyes go wide as he shakes his head. "E-eek... Help..."

As if in response to his cry, magic surges up from the arena.

It's Experiment No. 227 Millia. She closes the gap in a flash, then slams her engorged right arm into Jack the Ripper.

A violent crash thunders out. *Wham, wham, wham*, it goes, again and again and again.

However, Jack the Ripper hasn't so much as moved. The only thing Experiment No. 227 Millia has been hitting is the glowing wall of light separating the two of them.

"Th-the barrier..." someone stammers.

The barrier is still up and running, and it's obstructing Experiment No. 227 Millia's way.

How, then, is Jack the Ripper outside it?

Nobody understands.

As the *wham, wham, whams* continue shaking the very air, Jack the Ripper throws the eight of clubs.

A man dies.

He throws the nine.

Another man dies.

He throws the ten.

One more death.

Experiment No. 227 Millia continues slamming on the barrier. *Wham, wham, wham*.

"Th-this is why I said we needed to crush him...with everything we had... The man is a monster in—"

Before Earl Battler can finish his speech, the jack of spades buries itself in his heart. He clutches at his chest with a look of despair on his face before keeling over.

"I—I know, the barrier... If we can just lower the barrier... Someone, hurry up and lower it!" Earl White shouts.

However, there's no one left to answer his cry.

"Someone! Anyone! Anyone! Anyone! Anyone! Anyone! Anyone! Anyone!"

he hollers like a man gone mad.

Actually, there's no "like" about it. The light of reason is completely gone from his eyes.

"Anyone! Anyone! Anyone! Any—"

The queen of spades sinks into his throat, and he sputters as he dies.

Now only Despoht remains.

Despoht remains glued to his chair. He's too petrified to move.

Jack the Ripper holds up the king of spades and spins it around in his hand, toying with it like he's toying with Despoht himself.

"What even are you? What's a monster like you doing in a place like this?"

The frailty in Despoht's voice is wholly unbecoming the leader of the Thirteen Nightblades.

"Spare me. I'll do anything. I can pay you off."

Jack the Ripper deftly flips the king around between his fingers.

"If you want apologies, I'll give you as many as you want. Please, all I ask for is my life..."

Despoht bows so low his forehead scrapes against the ground.

"Spare me. Just spare me..."

As he does, the king of spades sinks into the back of his head.

The Thirteen Nightblades have been completely eliminated.

The way Despoht dies, it looks like he's apologizing to everything in the whole entire world.

All the while, Millia's fruitless strikes ring out hollow against the barrier. *Wham, wham, wham.*

Jack the Ripper sweeps his gaze across the bodies in the spectator seats, then turns back to Millia.

Millia just continues hitting.

As she does, Jack the Ripper begins striding unhurriedly toward the barrier.

Then his arm brushes it. Bluish-purple magic spreads out like smoke, and a moment later, Jack the Ripper is inside again.

Millia wastes no time in attacking him.

“GRORRRR!!” she bellows in delight.

Jack the Ripper is defenseless, and with a sweep of her right arm, she sends him flying. He smashes into the wall at an unthinkable speed.

A moment later, though, he springs back up and fixes his gaze on Millia.

“GROHHHHHHHHH!!”

She charges at him like a wild animal.

The Cult has outdone itself. Her massive frame, physical prowess, and magical abilities are working together in perfect harmony. She’s an overpowering force of sheer devastation, and she smashes up the arena and causes the sturdy barrier to shake.

Jack the Ripper’s body goes flying like a pinball, tumbling across the arena again and again.

However, he doesn’t go down.

Millia’s strikes are landing, but he’s carefully rolling with the impacts to avoid taking any lethal hits.

His gaze is fixed squarely on Millia.

“GRAHHHHHHHHH!!” she roars.

Reddish-black fluid sprays everywhere as her flesh begins shifting. Thin tendrils, too many of them to count, sprout from her back, her chest, and even her face. The tendrils are sinister in shape and in hue, and they spread outward in every direction and fill the arena to bursting.

There’s well over a thousand of them surrounding Jack the Ripper.

All at once, they impale him.

There are so many tendrils running him through that, in a flash, they have him

completely engulfed. All that remains of him is a mass of writhing tendrils.



It's like a pile of sludge worms, Christina thinks.

There are too many tendrils stabbing Jack the Ripper to see him anymore. When she sees the unsettling, twitching mass that has replaced him, all she can think of are sludge worms.

"Is he dead...?" Alexia asks from beside her. She sounds like she can hardly believe it.

"I don't know. I don't understand how he could have gone down that easily."

"Yeah, he didn't even try to fight back."

"Exactly..."

Not once did Jack the Ripper show signs of attacking.

The Thirteen Nightblades are dead, just like he wanted. It was almost anticlimactic, how easily the longtime rulers of the Midgar Kingdom's underworld went down. They were so powerful, yet they folded like a bunch of chumps.

Christina realizes she's about to break into a grin, and she hurriedly covers her mouth.

In any case, with the Thirteen Nightblades dead, Jack the Ripper has done what he set out to do. For him, this battle with Millia has nothing to do with his goals.

"He might just be satisfied, now that he's done what he came for..."

When Christina says it aloud, it feels like it makes sense.

Alexia grimaces. "I can't imagine how someone would survive in the middle of all those tendrils."

Not only are the tendrils strong, but they're imbued with powerful magic, and now Millia's producing more of them by the minute. Alexia's doubts are perfectly logical.

Then a ray of bluish-purple light peeks out from amid the tendrils.

It starts out small and faint, but it soon begins leaking out from more and more places and dyeing the whole arena in its radiance.

“I-is that magic?!”

It is, and unimaginably powerful at that.

The magic swells and blasts the tendrils away.

“GYAHHHHHHHHH!!” Millia screams. She tears out her shredded tendrils, shrieking in pain all the while.

Slowly but surely, the bluish-purple light dies down.

Standing in its place is a man dressed in a jet-black longcoat.

“No way... It can’t be!”

The man’s boots click against the ground as he strides forward.

“My name is Shadow,” he says, his voice echoing like it’s coming from the depths of the abyss. “I lurk in the darkness and hunt down shadows...”

Alexia stares at him in shock. “What...? What’s Shadow doing here?”

Christina is bewildered as well. However, she believes there’s a meaning to the fact that he showed himself to her.

He must have some reason.

After all, he once said he had a duty he had to carry out, even if it meant shouldering all the sins of the world. Christina is determined to bear witness to the bloodstained path he walks.

“GUH...AHHHHHHH!”

Christina and Alexia aren’t the only ones who are confused.

When Shadow makes his sudden appearance, Millia freezes as well.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

She shifts from confusion to hate.

“SHAAAAAAAAADOOOOOOOOOOH!!”

For the first time, her voice sounds almost human.

It's almost as though she's shouting "Shadow!"

"SHAAAAAAAAADOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOW!!"

Her skin creaks as another set of tendrils burst forth from her flesh.

Millia takes those tendrils and her mighty right arm and attacks Shadow. It's a veritable tempest of blows. Countless tendrils bear down on him, and the arm comes sweeping in with tremendous force.

Faced her with ceaseless onslaught, Shadow begins his dance. Floating as lightly as a flower petal tossed by the wind, he slices away the tendrils and dodges the arm by the slimmest of margins.

As he elegantly whirls, he takes every opening he can to stab forward with his tiny thorns. Arcs of bluish-purple magic carve into Millia's body. Her blood goes flying, and the magic adheres to her wounds.

As time goes on, more and more of Millia's body is overtaken by the bluish-purple marks.

"Why...? Why isn't he beating her?" Alexia says. "The monster is strong, but Shadow has the situation well under control. It's like he's tormenting her."

Christina is of the same opinion. Why doesn't he just kill her on the spot? She knows full well that he's strong enough to do so.



“He must have some reason.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has a duty he’s carrying out. Let’s just bear witness to his bloodstained path...”

“What?”

Right as Alexia looks at Christina in confusion, her attention is demanded elsewhere.

“SHADOWWWWWWWWW!!”

Millia’s scream splits the air.

This time, they hear it clearly. She definitely just called out Shadow’s name.

“Is she...getting her voice back?”

Millia is starting to sound like a human girl.

She continues attacking without letting up, and with every opening she leaves, more bluish-purple twinkles flash through the air. It keeps on clinging to her, and before long, she’s covered from head to toe.

“L-look at that!”

Millia’s body has grown noticeably smaller. Chunks of her engorged, monstrous flesh have been shaved off, leaving patches of pale girlish flesh visible.

She’s turning back into a human from a monster.

“The bluish-purple magic is curing her...”

Christina just noticed that in the places the magic is densest, Millia’s body is healing.

Now her soft white skin, hideous monster flesh, and stringlike tendrils are all mixed together.

Millia lets out a cry of sorrow. “Shadowwwwww!!”

At this point, they realize she’s sobbing.

Half of her face has returned to being a young girl's, and there are tears of blood streaming from her human eye.

"ShadowwwwWWWWWWWW!"

She's crying.

As she wails, she takes her half-human, half-monster body and sets her tendrils and right arm into motion. Her movements gradually shift from the bold, tremendous gestures of a monster to the keen, nimble actions of a human.

Tendrils burst from her fair skin, so many they fill the entire arena.

"Sha...dowwww...!!"

An anguished cry.

Agonizing trickles of blood spill forth from the spots the tendrils grew out of.

Using those tendrils, Millia finally manages to bind Shadow's limbs. She brings her right arm crashing down.

However, Shadow slices through the tendrils, then lops off the incoming arm as well. The severed monstrous appendage goes flying through the air.

In the end, it never does end up turning human again.

That said, Millia is still left with a human left arm, and in her hand, she's holding a dagger.

Where could she have been keeping that?

All this time, she's only ever used her right arm to attack. She must have been hiding the dagger in her left hand all the while.

She clutches the dagger like it's precious to her.

"SHADOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!"

She thrusts with the dagger in an attempt to pierce Shadow's heart.

"Excellent work," says Shadow.

As he speaks, he engulfs Millia in a torrent of bluish-purple magic.

Her dagger stops just short of his heart.

“Ahhh... Ah...”

The light of reason returns to Millia’s eyes.

The tendrils vanish.

The dagger clatters to the floor. It’s inlaid with a red jewel, and it has the words *To Millia, my beloved daughter* engraved on its handle.

“P-Papa...,” she mutters, then collapses.

It’s unclear if it was Shadow who stopped her blade, or if it was Millia herself.

Shadow catches Millia as she faints, then waves his arm.

When he does, a group of women dressed in black bodysuits appear around him. Where could they have been hiding? Nobody so much as noticed them.

They kneel and await their master’s orders.

“Take care of the cleanup.”

Shadow hands Millia over to the person who looks to be the group’s leader, then vanishes.

Upon confirming that Shadow has left, the women spread out and get to work.

After collecting Millia, her right arm, and her knife, the leader turns and looks over at the girls’ hiding spot. She gestures with her chin over to the exit. The look on her face makes her message perfectly clear: *We’re willing to let you go, but you need to leave.*

Alexia breaks out into a cold sweat. “G-guess we’re busted...”

“Ah-ah-ahhh!” Kanade stammers, terrified out of her mind.

“What do we do?” Christina asks.

“We should at least make it look like we’re leaving,” Alexia replies with a sigh. She heads out through the secret passageway. “It’s fine. I’m sure they’ll be gone before long.”

Kanade scurries after her, but Christina takes one last look back over her shoulder. “This is the choice you’ve made, then?”

The man said he was going to walk a path stained with blood, yet he chose to save that monster. Just as he once rescued Christina herself from peril, she has no doubt that he's given salvation to countless people in the course of his duty.

To her, that bloodstained path of his shines with radiance.



After shaking the capital to its core and killing the Thirteen Nightblades, Jack the Ripper vanishes.

People have all sorts of theories about who he is. They speculate that he's everything from a Velgaltan assassin to a legendary dark knight who returned from the grave as a vengeful spirit, and rumors without a shred of truth to them spread like wildfire. There are some who even say that Jack the Ripper is Shadow, but the Knight Order denies that as a possibility.

In the end, Jack the Ripper's identity remains a mystery. However, the story about his killing seven of the Thirteen Nightblades in a single night after they fortified their defenses with scores of knights both dark and otherwise quickly attains legendary status, and the popular conclusion is that given Jack the Ripper's unnatural strength, he must have been some manner of demon or ghost.

I bet that in a hundred years or so, they'll make a movie called *The Shocking Truth Behind Jack the Ripper!* or something and broadcast it across the world.

In any case, that basically couldn't have gone better. I accomplished everything I set out to, and Jack the Ripper will be remembered by history as a legend.

"Did something good happen to you?" asks the man sitting across from me.

If I'm remembering right—which I definitely might not be—he's Gray, chief of the Knight Order's criminal investigation department. At the moment, I'm currently being questioned in their interrogation room as a person of interest.

"Oh, I was just thinking about how with people as skilled as you on the Knight Order, Jack the Ripper's gonna get caught in no time," I reply, lying through my teeth.

“You can count on that, son. You’ve got a good eye for someone your age.” Gray nods a couple of times in satisfaction. “Now, one last thing before we’re done. You didn’t go into the White estate, did you?”

“Oh, of course not. That’d be trespassing. I was too scared to even go near it.”

“Princess Alexia is going to be the death of me, I swear. The fact that she went in there without permission calls all her testimony into question.”

“A-and, um, what do you think the rumors about Jack the Ripper secretly being Shadow?”

“Oh, that stuff’s all bunk. Shadow’s been running roughshod over the capital, and people just want to smear the Knight Order’s name by saying Shadow got the better of us again.”

“B-but Princess Alexia says she saw him...”

“It was dark, so she probably just mistook what she saw. She was the only witness, and she’s getting to be that age where she wants to be the center of attention.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really. Now, I’d say that’s about it for us. Thanks for being so cooperative. I doubt we’ll need to bring you in for questioning again.”

“I-I’m glad to hear it.”

“Take care.”

I bow to Gray and step out of the windowless room. The guy’s deductive abilities are garbage, but his skills as a dark knight aren’t half bad. I feel like they’d be way better served by having him go out and fight people instead of running investigations.

I idly wonder if Kanade is the next person they’re gonna question. They did call her in at the same time as me.

I walk down the hallway and head for the waiting room.

As I do, a man I pass catches my interest.

“Hmm?” I stop and take a look at him.

“Yes?” He stops and takes a look at me. He’s a tall man with thin, narrow eyes. He gives me a mild smile.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“I see. Are you...? No, it’s nothing.”

He starts to say something but stops himself midway through. After giving me another smile, he walks off.

I walk off as well, feeling out his presence behind me as I do.

The man heads into Gray’s interrogation room.

“He seemed pretty strong,” I say under my breath.



A man steps into the interrogation room and takes the seat across from Gray’s.

Gray hurriedly offers him a bow. “I—I didn’t know you were here, sir!”

“You were slow,” the man says with a sigh.

“Slow how?”

“To notice me.”

“I—I’m terribly sorry. You muted your presence, so I didn’t notice you until you were right before my eyes...”

“The boy noticed me.”

“What boy? You mean Cid Kagenou?”

“I don’t know his name. He was a boy with dark hair. I passed him in the hallway just now.”

“He is a dark knight, but his grades are middling. Could it have just been a coincidence?”

“Perhaps that’s what it was. Coincidence can happen at the strangest times in the strangest places,” the man replies with a smile.

To him, this is nothing more than idle small talk, and he'll likely have forgotten all about the boy by the time tomorrow rolls around. It was a minor oddity, nothing more.

"I'm not happy about losing the Thirteen Nightblades," the man continues.

"My apologies, sir. We did what we could, but we have so few forces we can freely deploy here in the Midgar Kingdom."

"It is what it is. Thanks to that idiot Fenrir, our influence in Midgar has plummeted. The Shadow Garden saw that opening and took full advantage of it."

"...Will this affect the plan?"

"No, we're all right on that front. The Shadowhunting Jaw *will* succeed."

"Shadow was stronger than we anticipated. According to what I've heard, Experiment No. 227 Millia was completely helpless against him."

"That's within expectations. Everything is just fine." The man chuckles. "With the Thirteen Nightblades dead, we have even fewer pawns to use in Midgar. I might need to put you into play directly, so make sure you're ready for that."

"As you wish, Master Loki."

"Don't let me down."

The man vanishes, leaving Gray alone in the windowless room.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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Following in the Monster's Footsteps!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Auxiliary Chapter

Auxiliary Chapter

Following in the Monster's Footsteps!

For Eliza, the past week has been like one long nightmare. Not only did the Thirteen Nightblades get slain one by one, but in the end, even her father joined the ranks of the fallen. From there, the Despoht family assets and property got seized bit by bit until, ultimately, she was driven from her home. Now she can feel people and money distancing themselves from her with every passing day.

“This is an outright travesty!!” she bellows from her temporary lodging.

She hurls her half-empty cup at the wall with her face contorted in indignation.

“Oh, sure, *now* you people don't want to curry favor with me anymore!”

Why is all of this happening to her? At this rate, she's liable to be found guilty in her trial. Countless nobles have already broken ties with the Despoht family.

“I'm not finished. Not yet...”

However, that isn't to say that all of them have. The Nightblade families are all in the same boat, and the bonds they share aren't so easily cut. Surely, they're all in dire straits with their family heads dead and investigations knocking at their doorsteps. However, that's precisely what's going to bring them solidarity.

“It's high time I got all Nightblade successors together. I won't let things end like this. I refuse to!!”

Things are going to be fine. She still has blackmail material on the Knight Order and the judge. If the next generation of Nightblades bands together and lays on the pressure, they can turn the situation around in a snap. Eliza is certain of it.

“I’m summoning the Nightblades and holding a meeting! Gather them up at once!!” she shouts over to her subordinate, who’s staying in the next room.

No matter how long she waits, though, nobody comes over.

“Hello?! Is anyone there?”

She opens the door to the adjoining room with a look of puzzlement on her face.

Inside, the room is empty. Its window is open wide, and the cold night air flows in freely.

“Perhaps they went to the bathroom or something... I’ll have to punish them for that later, won’t I?”

A cruel smile spreads across her face.

Then she hears a strangely squishy set of footsteps coming from behind her.

“Well, there you are. Where in the world did you get off—?”

When Eliza turns around, she freezes.

Standing there is a clown drenched in blood.

“Y-you’re...J-Jack...the Ripper...”

She shrinks back in shock.

The bloody clown’s feet *squelch* as it closes in on her.

“Eeek... S-stay back!”

She takes everything she can get her hands on and throws them largely at random. However, none of it is enough to stop the bloody clown’s advance, and soon, Eliza finds herself forced all the way back to the wall.

“L-look, I’m sorry... What’ll it take for you to forgive me?” She gives the clown a twitchy smile as she tries to fawn over it. “Tell me, what is it you want? I’ll do *anything*...”

She’s making puppy-dog eyes, and her voice is downright saccharine. She nonchalantly lets her negligee slip a little to reveal her fair skin.

Jack the Ripper stares at her.

Seeing the clown's reaction, Eliza lets her negligee slip a little further.

"Tee-hee..."

She turns her gaze to her own naked chest.

There's a knife planted in it.

"Wha—?"

Red droplets of blood roll down her lily-white skin.

"AaaaaahhhHHHHHHH!! How *dare* you?!"

Eliza punches Jack the Ripper with all her might, then falls to the floor and clutches at her chest wound.

"How dare you. How dare you..."

Eliza coughs up blood and glares resentfully at Jack the Ripper.

Then she gasps.

"I-it's you... Why?"

Jack the Ripper's mask is off. Eliza's punch dislodged it, and it has fallen on the floor nearby.

"Why is it *you*...?!"

Jack the Ripper's face is that of a student Eliza knows all too well.

"Answer me, Christina!!"

There before her stands Christina Hope.

Christina looks down at Eliza with ice in her eyes.

Eliza's expression is one of shock. "*Kaff*... I—I can't believe you were Jack the Ripper all along..."

The blood spilling from her chest pools on the floor, swallowing up the mask.

"I wasn't," Christina says as she leans down to pick the mask up.

"What do you mean, you weren't?"

"I'm just following in his footsteps."

“His...footsteps...?”

“That’s right. He chose to appear before me, and now I finally understand why.”

“What?”

“He wanted to teach me about his duty. To show me his bloodstained path.”

“What...are you talking about...?”

“This country is rotting. The blades of the just run dull. If we want to vanquish evil, we need an even greater evil on our side. He was asking me if I had the conviction to become that.”

With a twisted smile, Christina places the clown mask back over her face.

“This is exactly what I’ve been waiting for.”

She grabs the knife embedded in Eliza’s bosom.

“D-don’t—”

These prove to be Eliza’s final moments.

Christina twists the knife, then wrenches it free. Blood gushes everywhere.

“Gack... Kaff...”

Eliza’s body goes cold, and Christina gazes down at her and pulls out a playing card.

She takes the card and shoves it into Eliza’s chest wound.

“My name is Jack the Ripper. With an evil blade, I vanquish the wicked.”

On the card’s face, there’s a joker.



I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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The Grassland Vow

The Eminence in Shadow

Volume 6

Side Story

Side Story

The Grassland Vow

Delta is in a great mood. She got to hunt loads of bandits with Shadow today.

Might makes right.

That's the law of the jungle.

Hunting isn't just a way to get sustenance; it's an opportunity to prove one's strength.

"How was my hunting today, Boss man?!"

"Huh? I mean, I guess it was pretty good," Shadow replies as he goes around in his black longcoat collecting the bandits' purses.

"Hooray!! Boss man acknowledged me!"

For Delta, hunting with Shadow is the greatest stage there is. Being recognized by one's superiors is both a great source of pride for therianthropes and an important way of solidifying one's position within the pack. Such things are core to a therianthrope's values.

Shadow points at a therianthrope corpse. "By the way, what do you wanna do with the body?"

"Who's that?"

"Your brother. Did you forget already?"

Delta cocks her head and thinks back. Sure enough, she vaguely remembers an unpleasant conversation with some weakling.

"Should we at least bury him or something? I dunno how therianthropes handle these things."

"Don't worry about it!"

“I mean, if you say so,” Shadows says, then goes back to rummaging through coin purses.

“Hrmm.”

For some reason, looking at the therianthrope corpse dredges up an unhappy memory for Delta. It’s a recollection from long ago, back when she still went by Sara.

“What’s up?” Shadow asks her.

“It’s nothing!!”

And she was in such a good mood, too.

Delta leaps onto Shadow’s back and starts marking him with her scent.

“Hey, get off!”

“I don’t wanna!”

“Also, cut it out! I don’t want to stink of dog!”

“I’m not stinky!”

When she covers herself in Shadow’s smell, the old memories slowly grow fainter. It feels like they do, at least.



Sara was inside a dark, cramped hut.

“Sara... Are you awake?”

Upon hearing her mother call for her, Sara leaped up. “I’m here!”

Her mother was over in the back of the hut, laid low by illness. “*Kaff*... Would you go draw me some water?” she asked between pained coughs.

“Got it! I’ll go get some!!”

Sara rushed out of the hut and headed to fetch water for her mom.

The grassland outside stretched all the way to the horizon, and the morning sun in the sky was dazzling. By the time Sara got to the watering hole, her legs

were damp from the morning dew.

The water there was clear and sparkling.

Sara crouched down to scoop it up, then realized something. "Shoot! I forgot the bucket!"

She rushed back to retrieve it.

When she did, someone swept her legs out from under her.

"Ack!"

She tumbled across the ground.

"If it isn't Sara the moron. Why'd you go and fall like that?!"

"Ha-ha-ha, you forget your bucket again?"

Standing there were a pair of boys a little bit older than her.

Sara's ears slumped. "Big brothers Ral and Ren..."

"You're so useless. Can you seriously not even do chores right?"

"If you can't do that, and you can't even hunt, then I don't get what point your life even has."

"S-someone has to take care of Mom! That's why I can't go hunting!"

"Don't you talk back to us!!"

Ral's fist smashed into Sara's cheek.

Young as he was, it was still a punch from a therianthrope. Sara got sent bouncing across the plain.

"Ow... Oww..."

A trickle of blood rolled down from the corner of her mouth.

As she slowly rose to her feet, looks of surprise crossed her two brothers' faces.

"That's weird. I really put my weight behind that punch."

"Maybe it just didn't land right?"

The pair walked over to Sara.

“All right, Sara, you need to listen up. Taking care of that woman is a waste of time. She can’t hunt anymore, and she only managed to have three kids. She’s a letdown.”

“She’s a burden on the pack. That’s why Dad abandoned her.”

“How...how could you say something so horrible?!” Sara cried, trembling as she gritted her teeth through the pain. “She’s the only mom we’ve got!”

“You really are a moron, huh?”

All she got back was coldness.

“Weaklings are worthless. That’s one of the pack’s rules, remember?”

“Just because they’re weak...? That’s one of the rules?”

“You actually forgot? For real? I can’t believe she’s really our sister.”

“But she’s our mom!”

“She’s not *our* mom anymore.”

“Huh?”

“What, did we forget to mention? We got adopted into the third-strongest family in the pack out of respect for our skills.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Now we’re the great Ral from the Pit family and the mighty Ren from the Pit family.”

“What? But she’s our mom...”

“Why should we care about that weak old woman?”

“If you call us your brothers next time you run into us, we’ll kill you dead. Make sure you get *that* through your skull.”

The two of them snickered as they left.

Sara stood there shocked for a good long while.

“That’s right... The bucket...”

After wiping away her tears, she plodded back to the hut.



Sara opened the hut's door with a smile. "Hey, Mom! I forgot the bucket!"

Her mother was waiting for her with a warm smile of her own. "Oh dear. What are we going to do with you?"

"Tee-hee!"

"Well, it's right over there, honey."

"Got it!"

Sara went and grabbed the water bucket from the back of the hut.

"Sara... What happened to your face?"

"Huh?"

Sara's face was still red and swollen from getting punched.

"I, uh... I tripped! Oopsie!"

She grinned in an attempt to play it off, but her mother took a long, hard stare at her wound.

"Did Ral and Ren do that?"

"Urk... Nope!"

"They did, didn't they? Those two, I swear..."

"No, no! They didn't!"

"You're such a kind girl, Sara. Come on over here."

Sara's went over to her mother's bed with a slumped tail, and her mother patted her head.

"Aww... You're so smart, Mom. You always see through my lies."

"That's because you're not a very good liar."

"I'm so dumb. Everyone calls me Sara the moron. How can I become smart like you, Mom?"

"Hmm, that's a tricky one. You take after your father more."

"I wish I took after you, Mom."

"You mustn't say that," her mother cautioned sternly. "Don't *ever* let anyone hear you say that."

"...Okay."

"Good girl." Her mother gave her head another gentle pat. "You know, it might help if you talked more courteously."

"What do you mean?"

"If you talk more courteously, it'll make you seem smarter. Well, it might."

"I'll get smarter?!"

"You *might* end up *seeming* smarter."

"Got it! How do I do that?!"

"Like I said, you just have to be courteous. You know, like remembering your *pleases* and *thank yous*."

"You mean, please, like this, thank you?"

"U-um, not quite..."

"You mean like this, please?"

"S-sure. I suppose that'll have to do."

"And it'll make me seem smarter, please?!"

"Well... More than before, at least... Honestly, I'm not even sure."

"From now on, I'm gonna talk politely like you, Mom! Thank you!!"

"Come on over here, Sara." Sara's mother wrapped her head in a big hug. "You're a beautiful girl. You're my beautiful, beautiful baby girl."

"Mom...?"

"And I don't want you to have to suffer because of me."

"I'm not suffering, please!"

Her mother shook her head and stroked Sara's red, inflamed cheek. Her mother's fingers were so terribly thin.

“Sara, I want you to listen to me calmly. What do you say to getting adopted?”

“A-adopted?”

“I’ve already talked things over with the Dober family. You’re a girl, so the Pit family won’t take you in like they did Ral and Ren, but the Dober family is still pretty respectable.”

“Huh? You mean, you were the one who sent Ral and Ren off?”

“I did it in secret. It would hurt their feelings if they found out I was the one who made it possible.”

“But why...?”

“The Pit and Dober families owed me a favor. Your mom used to be impressive back in the day,” her mother said with a proud smile.

“That’s not what I meant, thank you! We’re...we’re supposed to be a family! We’re supposed to stay together!!”

“Sara...”

“Ral and Ren are horrible, too, please!! They said nasty things about you!! They won’t come home, even though you’re sick and hurting!!” Sara shouted through her sobs.

“Sara, you need to listen to me. We don’t have a choice.”

“We do, please!!”

“The pack has rules. I can’t go out hunting anymore, and the three of you are still children. If you went on hunts, you’d just end up getting in the way.”

“But what about Dad?”

“He’s the chief of the whole entire pack, and he has loads and loads of other families he needs to look after. If I could still bear children, I’m sure he would look after me. However, I’m past that point now... That means we don’t have anyone left in this household who can hunt. We’re getting by off charity from the other families for the time being, but there’s no guarantee that will last forever.”

“But...but I’m your daughter, please.”

“No matter what happens, you’ll always be my daughter. Just...just give it some thought.”

“I don’t wanna...”

“Sara...”

Sara hugged her mother tight.

“I’m your daughter, Mom. Ral and Ren are awful.”

“Thank you for saying that, Sara. But please don’t bad-mouth the two of them.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re my beautiful baby boys, too.”

“More beautiful than me?”

Her mother giggled. “No, you’re the most beautiful of them all.”

“Hooray, thank you!”

“Ral and Ren are still young, and they’re in an awkward position in the pack. For them, having a mother as weak as me is a mark of disgrace.”

“And that’s why they said those mean things about you?”

“They’re trying their absolute hardest. And besides, they’re already stronger than I am.”

“And being strong is all that matters, please?”

“That’s how it works in our pack.”

“Oh, wow...”

“So please, Sara. Don’t bad-mouth Ral and Ren. There’s nothing that makes me happier than seeing you all happy and getting along.”

“Getting along... Got it, thank you.”

“That’s right. You’re a good girl, Sara.”

With that, her mother took a withered finger and wiped a tear off Sara’s face.

“Mom...what do I do, please?”

“What do you mean?”

“How can I make us all live together like before?”

“Oh, honey...”

“How can I get them to stop making fun of me? How can I make it so you don’t have to be sad anymore?”

“Sara...I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing, please?”

“I...I’m not certain, myself. But I want you and Ral and Ren to grow up so you can hunt prey all on your own.”

“I just have to learn how to hunt prey?”

“That’s right. That, and you have to become really, really strong.”

“Gotta be strong, thank you. And that’ll make Ral and Ren come back?”

Her mother’s voice grew quieter. “Well...that’d sure be nice...”

“And your sickness will get better?”

“You know...it just might.”

Her mother gave her a sad smile.

“Got it! I’ll get strong, and I’ll learn how to hunt!”

“Don’t go getting ahead of yourself. You have to grow up first—*kaff, koff...*”

“M-Mom?!”

“I-I’m fine!”

Her mother lapsed into a fit of coughing, and Sara patted her back with all her might.

Seeing how visible her mother’s ribs were made Sara’s heart skip a beat.

“I have to hurry...,” she said.

“Sara?”

“I-it’s nothing! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine now. Thank you.”

“Thank goodness, please! I gotta get going, then.”

Sara turned around and dashed off.

“Sara, wait!” her mother called after her before she could leave the hut.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Where exactly are you going?”

Sara’s ears drooped, and she looked at the ground. “I-I’m going to draw some water, please.”

“Well, you forgot your bucket.”

“O-oops, silly me!” Sara hurriedly grabbed the bucket. “A-anyway, I’m gonna go get that water now.”

“Be careful out there.”

With a worried look, Sara’s mother watched her go.



Nighttime came.

After waiting for her mother to fall asleep, Sara quietly snuck out of the hut.

The grassland was supposed to stretch all the way to the horizon, but now the whole thing was painted over with an inky black. Even so, Sara’s eyes could reach far off into the distance.

“They’re over there, thank you.”

Her nose sniffed.

“And there, too.”

Her ears twitched.

“And there, too. Loads of them.”

Sara had the sharpest eyes, the sharpest nose, and the sharpest ears in all her

family.

“I just have to learn how to hunt.”

However, she was too young for anyone to take her out hunting with them. It didn't help that she was a girl, as girls generally weren't invited to hunt until well after boys were.

The problem was, she couldn't afford to wait.

Sara took a step out onto the darkened grassland.

Her legs were trembling. The fear she felt when her brothers hit her was nothing compared with this. Ral and Ren had already started training in how to hunt, but Sara hadn't even gotten that far yet. She didn't know the first thing about hunting.

“I'm gonna become strong...”

She strode across the plain, her legs quivering ceaselessly.

After a little while, she came to a stop and used her eyes and nose and ears to take in her surroundings. Then she did it again. Advance, then search. She repeated that process until she was a long ways away from the pack's settlement. A group of magical beasts went right by her, but she held her breath and waited for them to pass.

“I'm the best at hide-and-seek.”

None of the other kids in the pack had ever found her, and even the adults had a hard time tracking her down. Those same skills worked against the magical beasts.

Her legs stopped trembling.

There was no one in that grassland who could find her. Realizing that gave her confidence.

“Places with lots of them are no good.”

She used her eyes and her nose and her ears to select her prey.

She focused her eyes to fix her gaze far off into the darkness. She sniffed with her nose to catch the faintest scents traveling on the wind. She strained her

ears to listen for their footsteps and even the sound of their breathing.

It all made sense to her. She didn't know why, but it did.

"That one, please."

There was a huge leopard hiding in the grass.

Leopards were one of the strongest things on the plains, and going after them was usually too dangerous to be worth it. However, Sara could tell that it was feeble. That it was weak.

She slowly approached it from downwind. The closer she got, the stronger the putrid scent of death grew. She was right.

The leopard smelled exactly like her mother.

In that moment, Sara's concentration completely broke. When she processed the thought that had just gone through her head, she was struck aghast.

"N-no, that's wrong!"

It wasn't.

Her mother's death and the leopard's death overlapped in her head, and she had looked down on both of them as weak.

"No!!" she cried, completely forgetting where she was and what she was doing.

"Grrrrr..."

Before she knew it, the huge leopard was right in front of her.

"Ah..."

Its sharp fangs and gaping maw bore down on Sara.

"Ahhhh..."

Realization dawned on her.

What a weakling.



It was just before daybreak when she came to her senses, and she was still standing on the grassland plains. The morning sun's hues were creeping into the distant sky, and the leopard lay dead at her feet.

"Snff..."

Sara cried.

Her body was covered in blood, and she let out a quiet sob.

There wasn't a single wound on her.

None of the blood was hers.

"Wahhhhh..."

She understood.

It was so clear to her now.

There on the grassland, being weak was the greatest sin there was.



Sara sneakily carried the dead leopard back home. After stowing it in front of the hut where no one would find it, she quietly snuck into her mother's bed. Her mother was still sleeping.

Sara loved her mother's warmth.

She decided to keep it a secret that she was the one who'd killed the leopard. The pack's rules forbade someone as young as Sara from going out and hunting, and she didn't want her mother to worry about her. However, that wasn't her real reason.

It was because she understood now.

She knew that being weak was a sin on the grassland.

The weak were stolen from. The weak were tormented. The weak died.

"Mom isn't weak..."

She was scared of becoming stronger than her mother.

As long as she stayed weaker, she felt like she could keep wrapping herself up in her mother's warmth forever.

It didn't take long for her to fall asleep herself.



Sara woke up to the sound of her mother all in a tizzy.

"Goodness me... It's so large, I won't even be able to dress it..."

Sara rubbed her eyes and headed over. "What's going on, Mom?"

"When I woke up, I found this huge leopard in front of the hut."

"G-gosh, wow. It's so big, thank you."

She did her best to sell her surprise as authentic. She was pretty sure she pulled it off.

"I wonder who it could be from. Do you know something about this, Sara?"

"N-nope, please!"

"What to do, what to do...? *Kaff*."

Her mother had been resting her weight against a post, and she broke out into a coughing fit.

"Are you okay?!"

"I-I'm fine."

"You should lie down, Mom. Don't worry. I'll dress the leopard, please! Then you can eat lots of meat, and your sickness will go away!!"

Sara took her mother's shoulder and helped her back to bed.

"I appreciate it, Sara... But are you sure you know how?"

"I, uh... I'll do my best! You can just take it easy!"

With that, Sara took the leopard and a knife and headed for the watering hole.



For all her big talk, Sara had never actually dressed an animal before. She'd watched her mother do it, but her memory sadly wasn't the greatest, and she barely remembered any of the steps.

"Uhh... Hmm."

She started out by cooling the carcass by the watering hole.

She knew that the next step was to drain its blood and remove its organs, but her hand froze as she held her knife.

"I have to start from the top...or was it the bottom, please?"

She couldn't recall how she was supposed to insert the knife. How far in could she put it before it damaged the innards? If she punctured the bowels or the bladder, it could spoil the meat.

Then she detected something approaching her from behind.

Her senses had been honed to a point ever since she killed the leopard the night prior, and she immediately shifted her body to the side.

Right after she did, a rock the size of a fist flew by right where she'd been standing.

"Tch, it missed!"

"What's the big idea, Ral?!"

"Oh, shut up, my aim was just a little off! Hey, Sara! What're you doing, standing there like a dumbass?"

A pair of therianthropes approached her.

"Big brothers Ral and Ren..."

Sara's ears drooped.

"Whoa, check out the size of that leopard!"

"Holy shit, I've never seen one that big! Who hunted it?"

Without so much as asking for permission, the two of them began poking and

prodding at it.

“Hey... Me and Mom hunted that, thank you!” Sara said.

“Sorry, what? Did you just say that you and that waste of space took it down?”

“Don’t be stupid! Even in the Pit family, only the family head’s strong enough to kill leopards like those!”

“Then, uh...someone left it in front of our hut...,” Sara replied.

“Sorry, what? They must’ve dropped it off by mistake.”

“Why would someone give you guys a leopard?”

“I-it’s true, though!” she insisted.

“Well, not like it really matters.”

The two of them ignored Sara and hoisted the leopard up.

“You losers don’t deserve prey this good! The two of us are confiscating it!”

“Why waste it on a bunch of losers when the Pit family could split it among ourselves?! Those are the pack’s rules!”

“But that’s so mean, please!” Sara cried.

“What, you got a problem with that? We’re part of the Pit family.”

“Do you need us to teach you what happens if you try to defy a stronger family?”

When Sara went to try to grab the leopard back, Ral and Ren glared at her.

“*Snff*... So if you’re strong, you can do whatever you want, please?”

Her ears sagged, and she tucked her tail between her legs as she yielded the path to the two leopard thieves.

“Hey, why are you talking like that?”

“Yeah, why do you keep saying *please*? What’re you, dumb?”

Sara squeezed her fists tight. “That’s...that’s because Mom said it’d make me seem smarter, thank you.”

“Ha-ha-ha, she said saying *please* would make you seem smarter?! There’s no way!”

“That’s sounds like the exact kind of idiotic idea she’d come up with! Like mother, like daughter!”

“Don’t make fun of Mom, thank you...,” Sara said in a low growl in the back of her throat.

Her voice was too quiet for the other two to hear her. However, that was a stroke of good fortune for them. If they’d heard her, she probably would have hit the point of no return.

“You say something, Sara?”

“Don’t you give us that look, you little shit.”

The two of them hit Sara and sent her flying.

Sara didn’t fight back. She simply tumbled across the plains.

“Ugh, what a creepy kid.”

“We’re part of the Pit family now. I hope no one tries to lump us in with that little dumbass.”

The two of them walked off, grumbling as they went.

Sara gazed at the blue sky overhead.

The spot where they hit her didn’t hurt. They could have hit her a hundred times, and she was pretty sure she’d have been just fine.

What did hurt, though, was her heart.

“But Mom said...I’m supposed to seem smarter, please...”

She gritted her teeth.

“She said families have to get along... So that’s what we’re gonna do.”

She clenched her fists a little too tight and tried to convince herself.

They’d stolen the leopard.

However, that was fine. She could always just go out hunting again.

“It’s all right, thank you. I’m good at hunting.”

With her usual grin, she headed back to the hut where her mother was waiting for her.



From that day forth, Sara began sneaking out and hunting on the plains from time to time.

She made sure to only go for small prey so as not to draw attention to herself and to make sure her mother could dress them. Her brothers stole some of what she killed, but she didn’t care. She’d gotten to the point where she could hunt whenever she wanted to.

Her mother taught her how to dress her kills. Sara was clumsy at first, but she worked hard to learn the steps. She had little choice. It wasn’t long before her mother lost the strength to dress even the smallest of game.

Over time, her mother started smelling more and more strongly of death. Sara could tell in her bones that her mother didn’t have long left to live.

“Mom...”

As her mother lay on the floor, Sara grasped her withered arm.

“Sara... You’re such a kind girl...,” her mother rasped.

“Mom, I hate this, please. We’re supposed to be together forever and ever.”

“Sara... You’re the kindest girl there is. I’m so proud to have given birth to you.”

“Snff... Snff...”

Tears rolled down Sara’s cheeks as she buried her face in her mother’s chest.

“You’re such a kind, kind girl.”

“You ate all that meat, but it didn’t make your sickness go away.”

“It’s fine. I’ve lived a full life. Thank you for everything, Sara.”

Her mother ran her hand through Sara’s hair.

Sara stayed motionless and basked in her mother's warmth. For the next little while, they simply stayed like that, together.

Her mother's breathing gradually grew shallower.

Eventually, with one final pained gasp, her mother spoke.

"The meat you brought me was delicious, Sara... Thank you."

With that, she breathed her last.

Sara spent the rest of the night sobbing in her mother's arms, then buried her in the plains when the morning came.

She didn't tell anyone else where.

It was a grave just for her mother, and just for her.



"Hey, Sara, why're you covered in mud?"

"Ha-ha-ha, she's crying!"

On her way back from burying her mother, Ral and Ren blocked her path.

Sara hung her head. "Mom's dead, thank you."

Her brothers laughed with glee.

"Oh, nice, she finally kicked the bucket!"

"Death to the weak! That's the law of the savannah!"

"Don't make fun of Mom."

It all happened in an instant.

"Huh...?"

Sara's claw strike went right through Ren's chest.

"Hurk... Why...?"

As Ren coughed up blood, Sara stared down at him with a look of pure disdain.

“Mom will never smile again. She’ll never be sad again. Now I don’t have to hold back anymore.”

She stomped down on Ren.

The cracking, splitting sound of bones breaking and viscera tearing followed.

“Wh...wh-wh-wh-what the hell are you doing?! What’d you do that to Ren for?!”

“It’s his fault for being weak, please.”

“Wh-what?! D-Dad’ll never let you get away with this!”

Ral inched backward, his face twitching with fear.

“The weak get stolen from. The weak get tormented. The weak die. Those are the rules.”

Sara had hunted countless prey, and she knew the rules of the grassland by heart.

“But if you’re strong, you can get away with anything. That’s a rule, too.”

With that, she effortlessly tore through Ral’s throat.

“Y-you little... Gluh...”

“I’m gonna become stronger than anyone else in the savannah. Only then, only once I do...”

Blood sprayed back at her, and she smiled.

As she did, small black bruises rose up on her neck.



I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.

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Welcome to the
Shadow Garden!

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Welcome to the Shadow Garden!

Akane Nishino awakens in a completely white room and looks around.

“What is this place...?”

The good news is that she isn’t tied up.

When she gets out of bed, the floor is cold against her bare feet. Someone has dressed her in something resembling a thin white hospital gown.

“It all looks so familiar, but it isn’t.”

The floor seems like marble, but that’s not quite what it is. The same is true of the gown. Although its design gives her a sense of déjà vu, it’s made of not synthetic fiber but rather something closer to silk.

“Have I been taken overseas? I’ve never seen writing like that before.”

Akane looks at the pieces of text dotted here and there around the room, but they don’t correspond to any language she’s ever heard of.

She needs to figure out what’s going on, and quickly.

“I have to imagine this is a research facility of some sort. That means I probably got abducted by some group that wants to use my power for themselves...but then, why would they not tie me up?”

If they know how strong she is, they should be keeping her tied up, especially now that she’s regained her memories and the power of the Original Knight alongside them.

Whoever her kidnappers are, their plan seems shoddy at best.

“Looks like they underestimated me.”

Akane walks over to the door.

She can sense two people standing outside it. Her captors at least have the sense to station guards outside her room. Akane's newfound power means she could annihilate them with her eyes closed, but there's no guarantee they're actually bad people. The odds are low, but there's a chance this group rescued her out of the goodness of their hearts.

"Hmm..."

As she stands there pondering things, she senses the presences move away.

"Perfect."

Akane makes a snap call. She punches the door with all her might, deciding that she can deal with the consequences later.

A loud *thunk* echoes.

"O-owww!"

Akane drops to her knees and clutches her hand. The door she just punched looks none the worse for wear.

"B-but how?! I poured magic into that punch and everything!"

Some of her black hair has just turned gold.

"What is this door even *made* of?"

When Akane looks up, she notices something.

All the writing on the walls and door is faintly glowing.

"That light... Is that...magic?"

Now that she's paying attention, she can definitely sense magic coming from it.

"Did they seriously manage to keep magic usable after it has left the human body? But Akira always said that was impossible."

Researchers across the globe have poured tons of hours into studying the practical applications of magic. The idea of removing magic from a human body and using it as a new energy source is an obvious one, but everyone who's ever tried has had their attempts met with failure.

“This can’t be real...”

If these people have devised a way of pulling that off, then the fact that they didn’t bother restraining her suddenly makes a whole lot more sense. With the technology this group has, they didn’t need to.

“L-let’s not go jumping to any conclusions just yet, though.”

Maybe that failed punch was just a freak accident.

Akane packs her fist full of magic again and makes sure to take a full swing this time.

Then the door abruptly swings open.

“Oh no.”

She can’t stop her fist in time. It goes hurtling straight toward the silver-haired girl on the other side of the frame.

With a crisp *smack*, her hand comes to a stop.

“Huh?”

Akane blinks in shock.

Without even breaking a sweat, the silver-haired girl caught Akane’s full-force punch with just a single hand. Akane can’t believe her eyes.

“The door isn’t was locked. Would have opened at any time if just asking.”

Akane recognizes that girl talking in broken Japanese. “W-wait, you’re Natsume. What are you doing here?”

Natsume is Minoru’s little sister. She’s supposed to be back in Akira’s lab.

“All is good,” Natsume says.

Akane isn’t sure what exactly is supposed to be good, but the silver-haired girl declares it to be so.

“Uh...”

“You sitting now.”

Akane does as instructed and takes a seat on the room’s chair. Now that she’s met someone she knows, she decides to at least hear her out.

“I didn’t know you could talk, Natsume. Who exactly are you? What is this place?”

The silver-haired girl tilts her head and sinks into thought. “Correct. Me not am Natsume. Beta, me are Beta.”

Akane suspects she’s not quite getting through to the other girl. “Um, so you’re saying your name isn’t really Natsume, it’s actually Beta?”

“Me am looking after you. No worrying.”

“I see...”

Akane finds herself more worried than ever.

“Me am Beta of Shadow Garden. Did taking you back with me.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re Beta, you’re with a group called the Shadow Garden, and you kidnapped me.”

“Is correct!”

The criminal admits her crime with a big old smile on her face.

“I take it you’re a spy who used the false name ‘Natsume’ to infiltrate Messiah, then.”

“Not am spy, am researcher. Was researching otherworld life-forms.”

“Otherworld life-forms?”

Akane gives Beta a look of utter confusion.

“Otherworld life-forms,” Beta says, pointing at Akane.

“Wait, you’re saying *I’m* an otherworld life-form?”

“Is correct!”

Akane has no idea what Beta is talking about.

“Me am showing you.”

With that, Beta takes Akane’s hand and leads her away.



“Wh-what’s up with this place?”

Akane gawks as Beta leads her through the facility.

There’s a strange imbalance between its magitech, which is leagues ahead of anything Japan has, and its scientific tech, which is downright archaic.

Then there’s the matter of the women there. All of them are talking in a language Akane’s never heard before, and the vast majority of them have strikingly distinctive ears. According to Beta, those aren’t after-effects from awakening, but rather inherent traits of races called elves and therianthropes.

What surprises Akane most of all, though, is how outlandishly powerful everyone there is. As Beta gives her the grand tour, Akane shudders at how strong they all are.

Beta crosses her arms with pride. “Are you want to trying?”

Much to Akane’s shock, Beta appears to hold a position of some prestige in the facility. Everyone they come across treats Beta with courtesy and respect.

“You mean, do I want to try fighting someone?”

Akane is merely asking for clarification, but Beta takes it as an affirmation. There are definitely some things being lost in translation.

“Bring on out the weakest sunnuvabitch ya got!” Beta shouts with a big smirk.

That would appear to be a phrase she picked up in Japan that she’s been saving for a special occasion. The problem is, nobody understands her. After all, she is talking in Japanese.

“She says she desperately wants to fight someone, so let’s match her up against the weakest person we have. We wouldn’t want her getting hurt,” Beta says, sounding a bit embarrassed. However, she’s speaking a language from another world, so Akane has no idea what she’s saying.

A short while later, a one-eyed dark elf shows up with a young girl in tow.

The girl is about thirteen. She’s cute, with hair as white as fresh-driven snow. There’s something almost heartwarming about how she’s trying to make her big, adorable eyes look intimidating.

“You’ll be her opponent, Number 711. I trust you understand what will happen if you dare bring dishonor on the Shadow Garden’s name.”

When the dark elf speaks to the girl, the girl’s already-nervous face stiffens even more. She glares at Akane.

“Um, it’s nice to meet you.”

Not fighting doesn’t seem to be an option, so Akane offers the girl a handshake as a show of sportsmanship.

“I’m not gonna lose to the likes of you. I can’t afford to fail, not now.”

The girl’s glare intensifies, and she swats Akane’s hand away.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Apparently, shaking hands is a faux pas in this world. Akane tucks that information away in her head.

The two of them each take a practice sword and head to the center of the training area.



Beta and Lambda station themselves by the side of the training area and wait for the match to start.

“Might I ask who you think will win?” asks the dark-skinned elf Lambda. She’s in charge of training the Shadow Garden’s new recruits.

Beta narrows her blue eyes and offers Lambda an ambiguous laugh. “I’m afraid I don’t know enough about Number 711 to say.”

“She’s been here for half a month. She’s still our weakest member, but in terms of raw talent, she might well be the best we have.”

“That’s rare praise, coming from you.”

“The girl is a prodigy. That said, she has a rebellious streak...”

“She’s still a child. Once you train her up, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“Who do *you* think is going to win, Lambda?”

“My knowledge about the black-haired girl is similarly lacking, but...there’s something different about her magic. I take it she’s the one you brought back with you?”

“That’s right. Her name is Akane Nishino...although I’m certain Master Shadow called her Akane Nishimura.”

“Then surely she must be Akane Nishimura. If our lord says it, it must be so.”

“You’re right. Her name must be Akane Nishimura.”

“Well, Akane Nishimura’s magic is fascinating...but I believe Number 711 will be the victor.”

Beta immediately concurs. “I agree.”

Over in the middle, Akane and Number 711 are squaring off with their swords at the ready. The moment Lambda gives the signal, the battle will begin.

Suddenly, the door to the training area swings open to reveal a petite elf girl wearing a tattered lab coat. She rubs her sleepy eyes as she comes Beta and Lambda’s way.

“What do you want, Eta?” Beta asks with a hint of wariness in her voice.

The short elf is Eta, the seventh member of the Seven Shadows. Her main job is researching Shadow Wisdom.

“I came...to check in on the test subject,” Eta says sleepily. She has terrible bed head; her long dark hair is sticking out in every direction.

“You mean Akane Nishimura? Did you get permission from Alpha?”

Eta averts her gaze. “...Of course.”

“I’m going to confirm that with Alpha once we’re done here. I don’t want you laying one finger on her until I do.”

“You don’t need to do that. You’d just be wasting your time.”

“Not one finger, you hear me?” Beta says, repeating herself to stress the point.

“Hmph,” Eta pouts. “We need to be researching her irregular magic as fast as we can.”

“May I begin the fight?” Lambda asks them. Beta and Eta nod. “Then you may commence!”

On Lambda’s signal, Akane and Number 711 swing their swords.



“Whoa... She’s good.”

Akane shudders as she blocks Number 711’s initial strike. It’s a far harder and more pointed blow than Akane ever would have imagined given her opponent’s build, and it sends tingles down her arm.

“I’m not going to lose. I’m through with losing!”

Rather than fall back, Number 711 pours in more magic and uses the sheer force to send Akane flying.

“Ack!”

Akane has spent a long time at the top of the Japanese pecking order, so this is a new experience for her. At no point has she ever imagined herself losing in a contest of raw magic.

She narrowly manages to land on her feet, then readies her sword again.

She was completely underestimating her opponent. Who would’ve thought that someone so young could be harboring such strength?

At this rate, she’s actually going to lose.

“This is bad...”

Akane’s black hair slowly begins turning gold.

This isn’t a fight she needs to win. As a matter of fact, it might not even be a fight she needed to have. However, Akane feels like she needs to demonstrate her strength here.

She needs to prove her worth.

Akane suspects that this little girl is one of the stronger people in the organization. She likely isn't the strongest, though. The three people watching the fight from over by the wall appear to rank higher than her, and they probably have other heavy hitters, too. That means it's going to be incredibly difficult for Akane to break out of here on strength alone. Plus, she needs to stay with them so she can find a way to get home to Japan. That means her best option is to use this opportunity to prove her worth and increase her standing with the group. She'll find a chance to escape sooner or later.

Having made her decision, Akane unleashes her magic.

Her black hair takes on a beautiful shade of gold.

"Sorry, but I'm going all out."

Akane holds her sword at the ready as she patiently inches toward her foe.

"Hmph."

Number 711 is on guard, and she eyes the situation with a sullen expression.

The space between them continues to shrink.

The moment Akane steps into range, she makes her move, lashing out with her golden magic at a terrifying speed.

"Wha—?"

Number 711's eyes go wide at the raw intensity of the attack. On pure reflex, she brings up her sword to block. Her sword creaks when she does, and her arm goes numb.

Realizing she's going to lose the exchange, Number 711 leaps backward to blunt the blow. However, she isn't able to deflect the force entirely.

"Rgh..."

Her face contorts as pain shoots through her right arm. That must have really hurt.

But then Number 711 quickly deadens her expression and resumes her stance. Her quiet gaze is fixed squarely on Akane.

At this point, she's finally regained her composure. The pressure Lambda and

Beta are putting on her is far from her mind, and she's giving Akane her full, undivided attention.

"Whew..."

She lets out a small exhale to steady her magic, and her aura turns as clear as flowing water. She's been studying the blade for a while, but it's only been a few weeks since she learned how to use magic.

This here—this is Number 711's true strength. This is why Lambda calls her a prodigy.

"I'm not going to lose," Number 711 says, as much to herself as anything.

"Who even is she?" Akane asks, trembling.

This little girl is carrying herself like a seasoned master.

That should have been the perfect time for Akane to launch a follow-up attack. Number 711 got hurt in the initial exchange, and Akane knew it. If Akane had immediately chased her down, that might very well have ended the fight there and then.

And yet, Akane couldn't do it.

Number 711's eyes seem to see through everything. People with eyes like that are dangerous.

"I can't afford to lose, either."

Akane can't understand Number 711's words, but she can tell that Number 711 is carrying some sort of burden into their fight. However, Akane's in the same boat. She's determined to see him again.

"Hrahhhhhhhhhh!"

"Hyah!"

Their battle cries overlap as their swords meet.

Once they clash, then twice, then thrice...

At first, Akane's sword presses Number 711's sword back. At this rate, the battle's going to be determined by who has more mana.

They clash a sixth time, then a seventh, then an eighth...

As the fight goes on, though, Number 711's strikes grow crisper. No, that's not quite it—she's skillfully deflecting Akane's magic.

Number 711's blade begins grazing Akane's body more and more frequently.

"Kageno, give me strength!"

As the number of clashes crosses twenty, Akane presses in dangerously close.

She knows that if things go on like this, she's going to lose.

"Hah!"

However, that's precisely what Number 711 is waiting for.

She's been baiting Akane this whole time. Luring her into taking that extra step.

The thing is, Number 711 is the one who's going to lose at this rate.

Number 711 chooses the perfect moment to swing her sword.

As soon as she does, a snapping sound comes from her right arm. Her bones have chosen that precise second to shatter.

"Ah..."

Number 711's sword slows by the slimmest of margins.

Her blow coincides with Akane's.

"Kageno..."

"Father..."

With that, the fight is decided.



"I can't believe we had a double knockout..."

"It would seem we were both wrong."

Beta and Lambda look down at the two collapsed fighters in the center of the training area.

“It’s just as you said,” Beta adds. “Number 711 is a prodigy. I do have to dock her points for her impatience at the start of the fight, though.”

“As her teacher, the failure is mine. I’ll make sure to train that out of her.”

“In terms of raw strength, Number 711 was the stronger of the two. Akane Nishimura’s magic must really be unusual to let her take the fight to a draw like that. It’s not just that she has a lot of it. It’s almost like it’s a variant or something.”

“Do you think it’s because it comes from another world? Or is there something special about her in particular?”

“I don’t know. Either way, I have a mountain of questions for her once she gets settled in, and we’ll need to look into— Hey!”

Beta stops mid-sentence to grab Eta by the collar.

“Irregular magic... Highly intriguing.”

That’s because Eta is trying to scuttle over to the Akane like a little cockroach.

“Dammit, Eta! You’re not allowed to get near her until you get Alpha’s permission!”

“But if I have to wait that long, she might die.”

“I promise you, she won’t!”

“Time is money. I have an obligation to prevent opportunity costs caused by stupid decisions.”

“I don’t care what you say—I’m not giving you the go-ahead.”

“Hmph... I think I’ll have *you* be my next test subject.”

“Ack! If you do that, I’m definitely reporting you to Alpha!”

“Hmm... My budget would get cut... But if I give in to the threats, my research into Shadow Wisdom will stall...,” Eta mutters to herself as she sinks into thought.

Beta turns to Lambda. “While we have a moment, could you take the two of them to the infirmary? When they wake up, I’ll explain my plans for them.”

“And how would you have me proceed going forward?”

“I’m leaving Akane Nishimura in your hands until she gets settled in. Once she does, I’m planning on having her make herself useful.”

“As you wish, ma’am.”

Lambda gives an order to her subordinates, and Akane and Number 711 get carted off to the infirmary.



“Unh... Where am I?”

When Akane awakens, she finds herself lying on a fluffy white bed. It looks like she’s in some sort of sick bay.

“Did I...lose? No, I felt my sword land...”

In the final moments of their fight, Akane’s opponent read her surprise attack like a book. By all rights, Akane should have lost. However, something dulled the incoming strike, and the two attacks landed at almost exactly the same time. That’s the last thing Akane remembers.

She sits up and looks around the room. When she does, she spots the white-haired girl sleeping in the bed beside her own.

“I guess we both knocked each other out.”

On seeing that the girl isn’t visibly wounded, Akane breathes a sigh of relief.

She looks so adorable, sleeping like that. So innocent.

However, that tiny girl’s skills are well beyond Akane’s. Now that she’s fought her, Akane knows painfully well that if they spar again, Akane is certain to lose.

The white-haired girl scrunches up her face. “*Dad... Mom...*,” she mumbles.

“Are you okay? Are you having a nightmare?”

Akane goes over to her and pats her head.

“*Hn, hnn...*”

“There, there. It’s okay.”

The girl is so young, yet she has no choice but to fight. Perhaps this other world is just as brutal an environment as Japan has become.

As Akane gently strokes her head, the girl's expression gradually softens. Then she slowly opens her eyes and looks at Akane.

"Hey, you're up. Are you all right?"

"Mom...?"

Still half-asleep, the white-haired girl gives Akane a warm smile.

"Hey, Mom... Where's Dad...?"

With an angelic smile, she reaches for Akane before snapping to her senses.

"Y-YOU?!"

She leaps up with a start and distances herself from Akane.

"C-calm down!"

"S-stay back! I can't believe it!"

"You shouldn't jump around like that. It's dangerous."

"I can't believe I lost...to the likes of you? I...I lost?"

The girl looks around as the situation dawns on her.

"I promise it's going to be okay."

"I lost... But I can't afford to lose..."

Tears begin welling up in her eyes.

"What's wrong? Did something sad happen to you?"



When Akane offers her a hand, the girl swats it away.

Apparently, everything related to hands is a faux pas in this world. Akane tucks that information away in her head.

“D-don’t touch me... Snff... I promised I wouldn’t cry anymore...”

The white-haired girl wipes at the tears running down her cheeks and hops off the bed.

“Snff... Snff...”

She then runs off, choking back sobs all the while.

“Is she going to be okay?” Akane wonders, looking on in concern.

Without being able to speak the girl’s language, though, there isn’t much Akane can do for her.

“You am up now.”

Then the silver-haired elf Beta comes in.

“Um, the other girl just ran off crying...,” says Akane.

“All is a-okay.”

Akane doesn’t quite understand what’s supposed to be a-okay, but Beta assures her that it is. Akane quickly realizes that pursuing this line of conversation is likely to be fruitless.

“So what’s going to happen to me?” she asks instead. “What’s your group’s objective? Am I going to be able to go back to Japan?”

“I understanding. I understanding very well.”

Beta squeezes Akane’s hands and offers her the sketchiest smile imaginable.

“Well, that’s good.”

“Me, on your side. Someday, return you to Japan.”

“I can go home, then?”

“You probably can going home. But if you don’t help us, no going home.”

“Wait, are you threatening me?”

“No, not like that. Is incredibly hard technical problem.”

“Oh, I see.”

“So please helping us.”

“I mean, if it’s within my power, sure.”

Akane doesn’t trust these people as far as she can throw them, but she realizes that complaining will get her nowhere. The way things stand, learning more about this organization is her only path toward getting back to Japan, and that’s going to be easier to do if they think of her as cooperative rather than defiant.

“Thank you muchly. Akane are good person. Me am on your side.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“For now, you become member of this group. Group is called Shadow Garden.”

“You’re saying I’m going to become a member of the Shadow Garden. What kind of group is it?”

“We lurking in darkness and hunting down shadows.”

“Well, that sounds cool.”

The description doesn’t tell Akane a thing about what the group actually does, but it certainly sounds fantastical.

Come to think of it, it’s the exact kind of cool-sounding thing *he* used to love. A nostalgic smile spreads across her face.

“Now, you are becoming number. Am Number 712 now. Not Akane Nishimura anymore.”

“Okay, so I’m going to start going by a number... Wait, huh? Akane Nishimura?”

Hearing that name completely interrupts Akane’s train of thought.

“You am Akane Nishimura. Is wrong?”

“Akane Nishimura... Why did you call me that?”

There's only one person who's ever referred to Akane that way.

"Akane Nishimura is wrong?"

"No, no, that's right. I was just curious why you knew my name, that's all."

"Ah, making sense. Me asked someone."

"Oh, and they told you?"

If it's just a coincidence, then that's all well and good. But if it isn't...

Akane feels her heartbeat quicken.

She needs to calm down. She can't let them know she knows.

"Is right. What about it?" says Beta.

"Oh, I'm just surprised there's anyone here who knows me. Is it someone from Japan?" Akane asks, taking great care to avoid arousing suspicion by making it sound like she's just making small talk.

"Hee-hee, that is secret. But everyone in that base was knowing Akane's name. Should not be surprising."

Beta's right. Everyone back in Messiah knew Akane *Nishino's* name. But only one person called her Akane Nishimura.

If he's here, then she needs to dramatically shift her priorities.

"Oh, of course," she says. "That makes complete sense."

Akane scratches her cheek in embarrassment, and Beta smiles before giving her a stare. "From now on, you are Number 712. Will living with Shadow Garden."

"Number 712. Got it."

"I showing you where you stay, Number 712. Follow me."

With that, Beta takes Akane by the hand and leads her out of the infirmary.



The hallway outside is made of stone, with gorgeous masonry, a tall, arched

ceiling, and gentle indirect lighting. It's exactly the kind of hallway you'd expect to see in a fantastical foreign world, Akane muses, but if that's the case, then what was up with that room she first woke up in? For whatever reason, it reminded her of modern-day Japan, as if Japanese technology had been re-created there in the fantasy world.

"Did something catching your eye, Number 712?" Beta asks as she walks in front.

"No, I was thinking about how different everything is here. I guess it really is another world."

"Well, that's good. That last room was infirmary. If getting hurt, will take you there. This here is the can."

"You mean the bathroom?"

"Is the can."

"Okay, sure, the can."

Beta seems oddly taken with the turn of phrase.

When Akane peeks inside, she finds a private room with big tiles on the floor. It's got a big mirror, a sink, and surprisingly, a flush toilet.

"You have flush toilets here?" Akane asks.

"Is newest technology," Beta says proudly.

Akane's suspicions deepen. That toilet wouldn't look a smidge out of place in any bathroom in Japan.

"Who built it?"

"Building it were Eta."

"Eta?"

"The short white-coat elf. Was watching fight with me."

"Ah, her."

Akane does remember seeing an elf wearing a lab coat come in right before the fight started.

“But original knowledge not coming from Eta. Is from someone else.”

“Who?”

Beta gives her a meaningful smile. “Is secret.”

There’s that “someone” again.

That someone clearly brought Japanese technology into this world. However, Akane still can’t be certain it’s the person she’s thinking of yet.

“This here is cafeteria.”

Next, Beta brings her to a wide, open atrium. Mealtime is over, and the space is deserted, but it’s large enough to comfortably seat a few hundred people at once.

“Wow...”

Akane finds herself awed at the huge space and the decorations on its walls and ceiling.

“Are hungry?”

“A little bit, yeah...”

“I’ll go grabbing something.”

Beta shows Akane to a seat, then goes off to get some food.

The table Akane’s sitting at and its chairs are all of incredibly high quality. The table is a single glossy slab over thirty feet long, and the chairs are intricately engraved and pleasant to sit in.

Wait— isn’t this design the same as that famous interior designer’s...?

“The similarities are striking.”

The renowned chairs Akane is familiar with don’t have that engraving, but the shape is a perfect match.

Armed with this newfound knowledge, she turns a skeptical eye to the rest of the room’s design. Could there be something in the lighting? In the plates? Everywhere she looks, she searches for his shadow.

“I have to stop.”

She's taking in only the information that suits her hypothesis. She forces herself to calm down. There's only so many ways to build furniture for person-shaped beings, and there's a good chance the similarities are just happenstance.

"What am you looking around for?"

"Oh, it's all just so novel, I couldn't help myself."

When Akane looks back, she discovers that Beta has returned and is sitting in the seat across from her. An elf and a therianthrope who appear to be her subordinates lay food down in front of them.

"Wh-what's going on?" Akane stammers.

"What is matter?"

Everything in the meal she's just been given is unmistakably Japanese food.

"Why do you have Japanese food here?"

"I eating same food back in Japan."

"O-oh, of course."

That's right. Beta lived in Japan under the name Natsume for a while. It makes perfect sense that she would try to re-create the cuisine she found there. But at the same time...

"There's miso... And even soy sauce..."

Is she implying she managed to reproduce Japan's seasonings so quickly? Akane supposes there's a chance that Beta simply brought them back from Japan with her.

"This is tasty."

The miso soup tastes of fancy skipjack dashi.

"I'm glad you liking it."

Beta deftly handles her chopsticks as she eats her food. Akane quickly cleans her plate as well so as not to draw suspicion.

"Meal was tasty."

As they finish eating and sip on some post-meal coffee, a familiar-looking girl pops up behind Beta.

"I got permission from Alpha."

As Akane recalls, the girl's name is Eta. She's got sleepy eyes and a white lab coat, and she approaches Beta and starts talking in this world's language.

"Did you reeeally, now?"

Beta gives Eta a dubious look, and Eta hands her a document.

"Well, this is certainly a permission letter from Alpha. It says you're to be given full authority over matters relating to Akane Nishimura."

Akane's ears twitch when she hears the name Akane Nishimura.

"And there you have it."

Eta dips under the table and swiftly moves to retrieve Akane.

"Hold it right there! That's certainly what the letter says, but there's two things I find suspicious about it."

Beta grabs Eta by the collar, and Eta's gaze darts around. *"L-like what?"*

"Even if Alpha did sign off on something like this, there's no way she'd give you unilateral authority. I'm absolutely positive she would assign someone to supervise you."

"Uh... This just goes to show how much trust I've built with her through my deeds and actions."

"Then there's the other thing. The handwriting doesn't have any flow to it. It's almost as though somebody wrote this by painstakingly copying something Alpha actually wrote."

"I—I have no idea what you're talking about..."

Eta breaks out into a cold sweat.

"Eta, we both know you forged this."

Beta glares at Eta, and Eta gives her a twitchy smile.

"I hope you're ready to face the consequences. I'm going straight to Alpha,

and—”

“Oh, forget this,” Eta says, coldly cutting Beta off. “It’s time I used force.”

The next thing Akane knows, her field of vision is doing a one-eighty.

“Wha—? AHHHHHHHHHHHHH?!”

There’s black slime binding her and hanging her upside down in the air. She struggles with all her might, but the slime is tough and doesn’t so much as budge.

Akane tries to summon her magic, but it feels as though it’s being sucked away.

“What do you think you’re doing, Eta?!”

Beta and her subordinates are bound in the exact same manner.

“Resorting to force. Trying to reason with laypeople is a waste of time,” Eta says bluntly as she begins making off with Akane’s inverted body.

“Get back here this instant!!”

Beta tears off the slime, then manifests a jet-black sword and surges toward Eta.

“Hmph.”

Eta narrows her eyes a little and manipulates her slime into the shape of a massive shield.

Beta’s sword and Eta’s shield clash.

A low, dull *crack* reverberates.

“Wh-what’s the deal with this shield?!” Beta cries.

Beta’s sword has failed to inflict so much as a scratch on it. To the contrary, the shield is sucking the sword in.

Beta hurriedly wrenches her blade free and backs off.

“It’s my new tech. It reacts to magic by absorbing it,” says Eta.

“Why is this the first I’m hearing about this?! You’re supposed to report all useful inventions immediately!”

When a sword and a shield are both strengthened with magic, the sword wins out. It's a basic matter of area. For a sword, all you have to strengthen is the edge, whereas with a shield you have to strengthen its entire surface. Empowering a shield takes over twice as much mana as empowering a sword to the same degree. That's why there are so few dark knights who even carry shields.

"Uh... I've haven't put it through safety testing yet, so I figured I'd write my report afterward."

"You were never planning on doing that testing, were you?!"

All through their conversation, Beta continues throwing shockingly elegant strikes at Eta. Akane is bowled over. She can barely even follow Beta's movements.

"Sh-she's incredible..."

Now Akane understands why people in this organization hold someone as sketchy as Beta in such high respect. Even Number 711's moves seem downright infantile in comparison to hers.

"Stop getting in my way."

Her opponent, Eta, possesses unimaginable talent as well. She manipulates her slime freely, forming it into shields and swords and spears to intercept Beta's blows with. Her moves aren't exactly those of a martial artist, but they're the moves of someone who's honed their technique in a whole different way. Her fine control over magic and her ability to hold multiple thoughts in parallel are next-level.

The two combatants seem just about evenly matched...but it's hard to tell, considering that neither of them is using their full strength yet. They're straddling the razor's edge of making sure not to hurt each other. Also, Akane's gut is telling her they both have trump cards they're keeping hidden.

"Enough already!"

"Hrgh..."

Beta's attack sends Eta flying.

As Eta maneuvers her shield into position to protect herself, she deftly manipulates her slime in midair to catch herself. However, she nonetheless breaks into a grimace. Beta's subordinates have just moved in with weapons in hand to surround her.

"Really, now?" Eta says.

"It's time for you to face the music," Beta announces triumphantly.

"Forgive us for our impertinence, Eta, ma'am, but we're going to be detaining you now."

Nu, Lambda, Chi, Omega, and several of the Numbers are all gathered there.

That's enough to darken even Eta's expression. *"Hmph."*

Beta inches toward her and lays on the pressure. *"If you throw down your weapons, surrender, and offer us a sincere apology, I'm prepared to lighten your punishment."*

"I heard a big commotion. What's going on in here?"

Then a beautiful girl with hair the color of a still lake shows up.

It's Epsilon the Faithful, fifth member of the Seven Shadows.

"Two of the Seven Shadows and a bunch of extra backup," Eta mutters. *"This could be bad."*

Several people frown at having been referred to as just "extra backup," and it's hard to blame them. Everyone there, without exception, is an absolute powerhouse. They've all assumed combat stances with their weapons at the ready and their mana primed, so it's easy to tell just how strong they are. To Akane's great shock, every last one of them is far stronger than she is. These are people with pride in their skills and confidence in their training. It's no wonder they take umbrage at being reduced to a mere afterthought.

Despite their displeasure, though, not a single one of them speaks up in protest. They all know that at the end of the day, it's true.

"Perfect timing, Epsilon. Come help us put this idiot in her place."

"Fine. But you owe me one, Beta."

The two of them are quick to reach an understanding. Epsilon is well aware that whatever's going on, it's almost certainly Eta's fault.

Beta and Epsilon pincer Eta from the sides, and the extra backup covers their flanks.

"All right, all right. I get it." Eta raises her hands in defeat.

"You're surrendering?" Beta asks. Nobody there is stupid enough to let their guard down. Eta still hasn't relinquished her weapons, and they know her too well to believe she'd really give up that easily.

Eta's next words are all but unthinkable, coming from someone who's completely surrounded and has her hands in the air. *"To all the fine people trying to persecute me, you get one warning. Stand down now, or you'll regret it."*

"Do you seriously think I'm going to surrender?" Epsilon asks Eta, approaching her with extreme caution.

"Yeah. Is no one backing down?"

Eta looks around to check. Everyone's on high alert, but none of them are giving up.

"I see. Looks like negotiations have failed," says Eta.

"Negotiations have failed, all right," Beta agrees. *"All forces, secure Eta by any means necessary!"*

Everyone bursts into action at once.

A moment later, everything melts.

"What—?!"

The girls' magic goes haywire, and their clothes and weapons begin to dissolve.

"What the hell's going onnnnnnnnnnnnn?!"

Beta narrowly manages to keep her equipment intact, but the extra backup is left half-naked and hardly in any state to continue fighting.

"This is the Field That Disrupts Magic (Except Mine) that I made using Shadow

Wisdom jamming waves,” Eta explains.

“This is the exact kind of thing you’re supposed to report once you invent it!!”
Beta hollers.

“The setup conditions are strict, so it can only be used in limited circumstances —”

“Oh, forget it!! It’s up to the two of us to deal with her, Epsilon!” Beta calls over to her trusty teammate.

However, Epsilon is nowhere to be seen. All that remains of her is a hastily jotted note sitting on the table.

“I just remembered I have an important mission to get to, so I have to head out. —Epsilon”

“E-EPSILOOOOOOOOOOON!!” Beta howls.

“You’re wide open.”

Beta’s outburst leaves her vulnerable, and when Eta takes that opportunity to strike, Beta passes out and abruptly keels over.

With that, Eta carts Akane away.



“Hnng... Where am I?”

When Akane opens her eyes, she finds herself in a gloomy basement. There’s a mass of black slime pinning her to a bed, and she’s surrounded by tools for conducting experiments and other unidentifiable junk.

Akane lets out a small sigh. It feels like she’s been getting kidnapped a lot lately.

She wriggles to try to get free, but her restraints hold strong. It’s amazing how resilient this black slime stuff is.

“Is anyone there?” she asks.

She can’t see much between the dim lighting and the mountains of

miscellanea, but she can sense the presence of someone moving around.

“...Hmm?”

The presence turns toward her, and a face pops out of the mountain of junk. It's Eta, the girl in the lab coat.

“Your name's Eta, right? What are you planning on doing to me?”

“You're awake. Your tolerance is surprisingly impressive. Maybe I should have used a stronger sedative,” Eta says in that otherworld language.

Akane can't understand a word she's saying, but one look at Eta's eyes sends a shiver down her spine. Those aren't the eyes of someone looking at a fellow sentient being. They're the cold, inhuman eyes of someone looking at a test subject. No, of someone looking at mere data.

That girl doesn't perceive Akane as human.

Eta walks over to the bed and looks down at Akane. Her stare is just as emotionless as ever.

“Breathing steady, heart rate slightly elevated, in a minor state of tension,” she says as she pokes and prods at Akane to check her vitals. *“Everything working normally. No changes to the plan necessary.”*

Her tone is detached, like everything she's doing is routine.

“What are you saying? What's going to happen to me?”

Despite Akane's attempts to talk to her, all Eta does is robotically return her gaze. *“The presence or lack of consciousness has no impact on the plan. However, her vocal cords may prove an impediment. They're distracting. Should I consider surgically removing them? No, maybe I should just apply sedative... But I'll be dissecting her either way, so I suppose it could make sense to remove the vocal cords for further study. No, confirmation of ability to hold otherworld conversation needs to come first.”*

She seems to just be talking to herself so she can get her thoughts in order. It looks like she's talking to Akane, but Eta isn't paying her a bit of heed.

“Again, what are you saying?”

When Akane poses the question, Eta looks at her properly for the first time. “A, A, A, B C D E F G,” she says calmly. “Is my pronunciation fine?”

“Y-you can talk?”

“All languages spoken by intelligent life follow certain rules. He said it himself, and lo and behold, it is true.”

Akane is amazed at how fluent Eta’s Japanese is. Her pronunciation and command of the language are leagues better than Beta’s.

“What are you trying to accomplish? What are you planning on doing to me?”

“Experiments. To satisfy my intellectual curiosity.”

“Wh-what kind of experiments?”

“First, conversation. I’ll learn the patterns of your thoughts and the logic behind how you communicate. Then, I’ll run tests on your body, run tests on your magic, and extract knowledge from your brain.”

“What exactly do you mean, ‘extract’?”

“Information from your world is valuable. But if I try to draw it out through conversation, there will be lies and nonsense mixed in. It’s a waste of time. But if I use this, it’s just a *beep, beep, beep* away.”

Eta points to a gigantic piece of junk. It’s a device resembling a coffin all wound up in pipes and cords. Every so often, it shudders and lets out a big huff of steam. It’s obvious just from looking at it how sketchy it is.

“Wh-what even is that thing?”

“The Brain Slurper Mk. 23. It’s my masterpiece, capable of extracting every last bit of knowledge from someone’s brain. After a long series of failures, I’ve finally perfected it...I think.”

“You think?”

“I based it off ‘The Relationship Between Magic and the Brain: The Destructive and Potentially Healing Properties Magical Interference Can Have on the Mind and the Practical Applications Thereof,’ a paper written by Professor Sherry Barnett from the college town of Laugus. It’s her fault if it

doesn't work, but I'm sure it'll be fine. I always thought there was nothing in Laugus but obstinate old men, but there's a small number of scholars doing good work there. She's one of them. Actually, she's giving a lecture in Laugus next week. I wonder if I can make it..."

The things coming out of Eta's mouth are irresponsible, egotistical, and inspire zero confidence.

"What are you *talking* about? What even am I to you?"

"A relatively valuable test subject. The most valuable one after the one after the one after the one after the one after him."

"I'm sorry, I'm a *what*? And also, who's 'him'?"

"He is him. A much more valuable life-form than you. It was thanks to him I was able to learn the foundations of your language."

"Someone who helped you learn Japanese... It can't be!"

A nasty feeling rises up in Akane's gut.

What if the person who taught Japanese to Eta is who Akane is thinking of? What if he's been captured by this heartless, uncaring monster?

"Has he caught your interest? He helped me test out the Brain Slurper Mk. 19 and survived, so Mk. 23 is probably fine as well."

"What...? You used that deranged machine on him?! Did he consent to that?!"

"Consent? That wasn't necessary. I just tricked him a little and shoved him in. It's fine; he's sturdy."

"So you forced him? You forced him to be your lab rat?!"

Akane knows she needs to settle down. There's no guarantee this guy is even the person she's imagining.

She takes a deep breath to quell her anger.

"I wouldn't call him a lab rat. I just tested out my dragon-killing poison on him and tried to dissect his brain tissue and remove his magic circuits. It was nothing serious," Eta replies coolly.

Akane grinds her molars. "Tell me," she says, her voice trembling with rage.

“Who exactly is this person?”

“He is who he is. Hmm, describing people is difficult. Oh, he’s the person who wrote this.”

Eta produces a note written in Japanese and shows it to Akane.

The note itself isn’t anything special, but Akane recognizes the handwriting. “It can’t be. But that handwriting... Oh, Kageno...”

Tears spill from her eyes.

That handwriting is Minoru Kageno’s. She’s certain of it.

In that moment, everything finally clicks into place for her.

Minoru Kageno is here in this world. The truck accident whisked him across dimensions, and this girl Eta’s been using him as a test subject and stealing his knowledge about Japan. That means the body at the scene was a fake. In fact, there’s a chance that the whole accident was a hoax carried out by fantasy-world technology.

When Akane thinks about the way he was wrenched from his home and his family and his friends, dragged into an unfamiliar world, and forced to endure this grueling environment, her body shudders with rage.

“How could you? How dare you! Is he all right?!”

“He’s fine...for now.”

“What does *that* mean? What are you planning on doing to him?”

“Experiments and dissections.”

“That’s horrible! Where is he?!”

“Who can say? Now, that should do it for conversing. I have the data I need.”

Eta seems uninterested in answering any more of Akane’s questions. She turns her back on Akane and begins setting up some sort of device.

“Answer me! Where...where is he?!”

Akane struggles frantically against her restraints, but the slime doesn’t budge. All it does is squeeze down harder on Akane’s bones.

“Preparations complete.”

Eta is holding a collar. For whatever reason, it stinks to high heaven and is dripping with viscous liquid.

“Wh-what is that?!”

“The Vocal Cord Extractor Mk. 1. It was collecting dust in a storeroom because of how limited its use cases are, but I’m sure it’s still fine.”

“G-get it away from me!”

Eta attaches the weird collar to Akane’s neck. “Don’t worry, this won’t hurt. Now, three, two, one...”

She goes to flip the collar’s switch.

“Oh no you don’t.”

A dull *gong* echoes, and Eta’s head rattles.

“M-my cranium...,” she moans, crouching down and clutching at her skull.

“No more of this nonsense. Today’s the day I put a stop to it.”

There’s a beautiful blond elf standing before her. In the elf’s hand, she’s holding a hammer made of slime.

That hammer is what just struck Eta.

Eta gives the newcomer a death glare. *“H-how could you...? When brain cells get damaged, they never heal. My precious intellect...”*

“Don’t you give me that look.”

“Anyone who pulls a stunt like that is toast. Even you, Alpha.”

“Oh?”

“Taste the power of my Field That Disrupts Magic (Except Mine)!”

Nothing happens.

“What? But how?”

“I’m told that your Field That Disrupts Magic uses jamming waves.”

“It can’t be...”

"I hate to break it to you, but I've cut them off."

Alpha strips off her clothes to reveal the shiny silver slime suit beneath them.

"T-tinfoil..."

"As I'm sure you're aware, there's a Shadow Wisdom legend that says tinfoil has the power to block radio waves."

"You mean, the legend is actually true?"

"See for yourself."

Alpha swings the hammer down at Eta's head again. Eta is so shocked by the previous revelation she can't even dodge.

"Hyeeek!"

With a quiet shriek, Eta falls unconscious.

"Take her away. She's earned herself a suspension from her duties and a major reduction in research funds until she's done reflecting on her behavior. Even then, she'll be doing the research I assign her and nothing else for the foreseeable future."

"A-at once, ma'am."

A group of girls come out from behind Alpha and retrieve Eta's unconscious body.

Alpha turns to Akane and undoes her restraints. *"I'm sorry about all that."*

Akane is too awestruck by the elf to do anything but stammer, "Wh-who are you?"

"I don't speak your language. Beta can handle the rest."

With that, she leaves.

She's preposterously strong. That, and beautiful. Akane can tell in her bones that she just encountered the organization's heaviest hitter.

"Are you okaying?"

Soon after, the silver-haired girl shows up and rescues Akane.



“This will be your room, Number 712.”

Beta leads her to an unadorned door.

“This one here?”

“That’s right. Had to explain many lots of things. Did you understand it all?”

“Most of it, I think.”

“Then here is language textbook. Make sure you’re learning quickly.”

The book Beta hands her is titled *This World’s Language for Otherworld Life-Form Dummies*.

“Um, do I get a teacher or anything?”

“Immersion is only way. I am busier person than you are looking. Now, bye-bye.”

Beta turns away and briskly walks off.

“...Well, I guess this is fine.”

Things are most definitely not fine, but Akane’s had a long day, and she’s exhausted.

She lets out a sigh and opens the door.

“It’s nicer than I expected...”

There are three beds in the room, one of which already has a girl sleeping in it.

The girl senses Akane’s presence and sits up. It’s the small white-haired girl Akane fought earlier.

“I-it’s you!”

“I-it’s you!”

Akane and the girl cry out all but in unison.

“Y-you mean, you’re the new recruit they told me about?”

“L-looks like we’re going to be roommates, huh?”

Akane is quick to pull herself together, and she offers the girl a smile.

“Rgh... A-as if I’d ever stay in the same room as you! I’m sleeping outside!”

The girl jumps off her bed, shoots Akane a glare, and runs away.

“Oh...”

Akane doesn’t know what the girl just said, but it obviously wasn’t anything friendly. She heaves another sigh as she watches the girl go.

She’s got more problems than she can count. She’s stuck in a foreign world, she doesn’t know the local language, everyone in this organization is freakishly strong, her roommate hates her, and she doesn’t have a single real ally.

However, she has one ray of hope.

“This time, I’m going to save you, Kageno!”

Determination wells up in her heart, and she clenches her fists tight.

I honestly can't remember what catalyzed this desire.
All I know is I've admired shadowbrokers for as long as I can remember.

Was it a certain anime? Or was it a manga—or a movie?
Eh, I guess it doesn't matter. I was all in for anything that featured a mastermind, or an eminence in shadow, as I like to call them. These characters were never the protagonists or final bosses but were relegated to a role

behind the scenes where they flaunted their powers and meddled in the affairs of others. I've always looked up to the men in the shadows. I wanted to be one of them.

Think of children who worship their favorite superheroes.
That was me but with master puppeteers.

The Eminence in Shadow

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That Nostalgic Smell

The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Epilogue

Epilogue

That Nostalgic Smell

It smells of trees.

As the leaf-filtered sunlight streams in through the window, Alpha looks up from the documents she's organizing. She stands up and heads over to the windowsill. There are trees next to the road outside, with the buildings of the capital spread out beyond them.

Fall is coming to an end, and the wind carries with it the scent of the trees all decked out in their resplendent autumn hues.

Back then, that mellow, woody aroma was their constant companion.

Alpha closes her eyes and reminisces about the past.

She thinks back to when they all used to live together—back to that nostalgic smell.



Back when the Shadow Garden was just Shadow and Alpha, Alpha lived in the forest, spending her days alone in the cabin he built for her.

The cabin always smelled of wood. He chopped down trees and constructed the cabin from the ground up. That was how Alpha learned about the “two-by-four” method of building.

At first, all she could do was watch him, but eventually she started helping out, and she put nearly all the finishing touches on by herself. The two of them built it together, and for her, the cabin was full of memories. It was a simple building, and honestly kind of shabby, but Alpha loved that cabin and its wooden smell with all her heart.

He was only able to come visit her during the night, and every day, Alpha waited in excitement for night to fall. During the daytime, she practiced her magic and her swordplay and went out to harvest edible plants and hunt small animals with snares. At night, he would bring bread and meat, and she would cook it. Then, while they shared a dinner for two, he would regale her with all sorts of stories.

“You know, steam has the power to move massive pieces of metal,” he said one day while he was eating the stew Alpha made. Alpha took a good, long look at the steam rising from her bowl.

She found it hard to imagine something so weak harboring such hidden strength.

However, every bit of knowledge he’d shared with her previously, no matter how outlandish, had all turned out to be true. Alpha had been incredulous when he insisted the world was a sphere rather than flat and when he said the world revolved around the sun rather than the other way around, but in the end, he was right about it all. Because of that, Alpha was sure that steam must have had amazing power just hiding away.

“How do you draw that power out?” she asked Shadow.

As Alpha gobbled up her stew, he sank into silence for a bit. He always took great care in figuring out which things he was and wasn’t supposed to share.

“When you heat up water, it becomes steam. That creates a massive source of power. Here’s a hint: It has to do with, uh...pistons and turbines, I think.”

His smile was laden with significance.

He never told her everything. He always gave her hints and made her figure out the rest for herself.

“That’s not enough to tell me anything,” Alpha says.

That one was a lot harder than usual. She was planning on getting started researching steam tomorrow, but it would take her too long to find the answer if that was all she had to work off.

“If you take that steam power and apply it, you can move vast metal cars and

ships made of iron.”

What he gave her next wasn't a hint, though, but rather some examples of use cases.

If steam could really do that, then that would be huge. And if he said it could, then it had to be true.

“In other words, you're saying that mastering steam power is worth the time investment it will take...”

All he did was give her another cryptic smile. He always wanted her to work for it. That was the way he passed on his wisdom and trained her ability to think and solve problems. That had developed her talents by leaps and bounds, and she had several times more knowledge than back when she was in her nation's gifted education program.

The ability to fight was a powerful skill. However, knowledge was even more powerful still.

Alpha always thought of herself as a smart child. None of the other kids in her hometown could keep up with her. Yet here *he* was, the same age as her yet so much wiser. No matter how good you were, there was always somebody better.

Alpha looked over and gazed at him with reverence.

“Huh? What's up?” he asked.

“...Don't worry about it.”

After they ate their stew, Alpha had him give her some coaching on her swordsmanship and magic, then saw him off right before the sun rose.

Every day, she kept on waving until he was fully out of sight.

For her, those days were bliss.



The season's passing marked the end of their time alone together. That was when Beta, a silver-haired girl with a mole under her eye, joined their ranks.

Beta was shy, and she was so scared of Shadow that she always hid herself behind Alpha. Alpha had known Beta and vice versa since their time in the homeland. They hadn't been friends or anything, and their interactions had been limited to exchanging pleasantries at social events, but having the same circumstances thrust upon them did wonders to break the ice.

It wasn't long after that that Gamma and Delta joined, and the lonesome, empty cabin became rather bustling.

Using the skills he taught them, the girls expanded the cabin into a proper house. It was a happy house, one that always smelled of the woods.

Then, one day, he wrapped up Delta and Gamma's lessons early and gathered everyone together. Delta looked down on Gamma with pride, and Gamma glared back at her with tears welling in her eyes. It was a commonplace sight there.

"I'm stronger!" Delta crowed.

"I-I'm older than you, you know... And I've been here longer... *Snff...*"

"Yeah, but you're still Gamma."

"Hey, s-stop it..."

Delta pushed Gamma down and leaped on her back. That, too, was a commonplace sight.

Apparently, sitting on people was how dogs liked to establish hierarchies.

"All right, all right, break it up," Alpha said as she separated them.

Delta did exactly as instructed. For better or for worse, she was loyal to the pecking order. That was why it bothered her so much that Gamma had more authority than her despite being weaker. And Gamma, for her part, couldn't stand how much of a meathead Delta was. The two of them were constantly at each other's throats.

"There are other strengths than just physical," Shadow said. "It's those with knowledge who end up ruling the world of man."

"Boss man?"

“Master Shadow...”

Delta and Gamma gazed up at him—Delta in bewilderment, and Gamma seeking salvation in his words.

The wind carried with it the smell of the trees.

“Let me tell you knowledge can make a single gold coin multiply countless times over. A technique that allows you to manipulate money and control the world economy...”

From there, he went on to explain the sensational concepts of banking and credit creation.

“Whoa...”

The cry of amazement that spilled from Alpha’s lips was that of a small child basking in wonderment. She shuddered at the sheer scale of the concept, and at how wise he was for thinking of it.

Behind her, Beta shuddered in fear of Shadow.

Delta shuddered in her sleep from the cold night air.

And Gamma shuddered with passion.

Her eyes had been feeble and gloomy, but now strength returned to them.

“Master Shadow, I...I’ve found the path I need to walk.”

All he did was nod.

That day marked a change in Gamma. She greedily sought his knowledge, even going so far as to sacrifice sleep so she could study more. Alpha and Gamma began talking a lot more, and once Beta got involved, the three of them sketched out their vision for what the organization would eventually become.

Eventually, Epsilon joined them as well, as did Zeta, and finally Eta.

Epsilon was self-assured and determined, and she had the skills to back her confidence up.

“I’m going to be the best in no time!”

She started out aggressively competitive, but it didn’t take her long to mellow

out and fit in with the others. She still got competitive with Beta to this day, but Alpha decided that was fine.

Zeta was a therianthrope with little in the way of cheer. She didn't talk much, and she kept the others at arm's length. However, Alpha knew Zeta's history, so she made sure to give Zeta little pushes and help her build relationships with the group. It was slow work, but Zeta slowly started opening up. She was still on bad terms with Delta, but apparently, that was just how therianthropes were. There were times when all it took them was a single look at someone to know they were never going to get along.

Meanwhile, Eta was an oddball from day one. She was constantly doing the weirdest things and causing problems, but the quality of her inventions more than made up for it. She had little ability to function on a basic level, but Epsilon took care of her, Beta and Gamma ended up somehow serving as her test subjects, and Delta and Zeta would play tag with her. Before the girls knew it, they'd become a precious family to each other.

They were happy, there in that house surrounded by the smell of the woods.



Ever since that day, Alpha's been running. She's lived a life too hectic to stop and smell the trees.

The sunlight filtering through the leaves casts the room in a gorgeous shade of red.

"It's time, Alpha."

She hears a knock on the door, and Gamma comes in.

"Do you remember? The way we used to talk, surrounded by the smell of trees?" Alpha asks her.

"The smell of trees?" Gamma walks over to Alpha's side and takes a look at the large roadside trees. When the wind carries in their scent, Gamma inhales deeply and squints fondly. "I haven't thought about that in ages."

"The dream we talked about back then is becoming a reality. But we aren't

there yet.”

“We’re on our way, though.”

“We’ve chosen a path we believe in, and now we just have to keep running. We can’t show mercy to anyone who gets in our way. Now, let’s get going.”

“Right behind you!”

Alpha’s time alone with him may have dwindled. However, the scent of those trees will remain within her forevermore.



The Eminence in Shadow
Volume 6

Appendix

“What a
joke we
are... My
father,
too terrified
to do anything
but curry
favor with the
Nightblades,
and me,
powerless
to do
anything
at all...”

HOPE CHRISTINA

Name: Christina Hope

Gender: Female

Age: 16

= Christina Hope



Cid's classmate and the daughter of a marquis. An attractive girl with red hair, she's a distant relative of Suzuki Hope, who died during the terrorist attack. She's kind and earnest, but sometimes she takes herself so seriously she gets tunnel vision. Is secretly a great admirer of Shadow's strength and conviction.

Kanade

“It’s fine.
I just
have to
stay near
Princess
Alexia... If
worse
comes to
worst, I
can use
her as a
shield...”



= Kanade

Name: Kanade

Gender: Female

Age: 16

A student from the same year as Cid but in a different class. Gets average grades and has dark hair and eyes. Acts meek but is petty; presents herself as plain but is decently cute. She’s quick to abase herself before those who outrank her and equally as quick to look down on those who don’t. That’s just who she is.

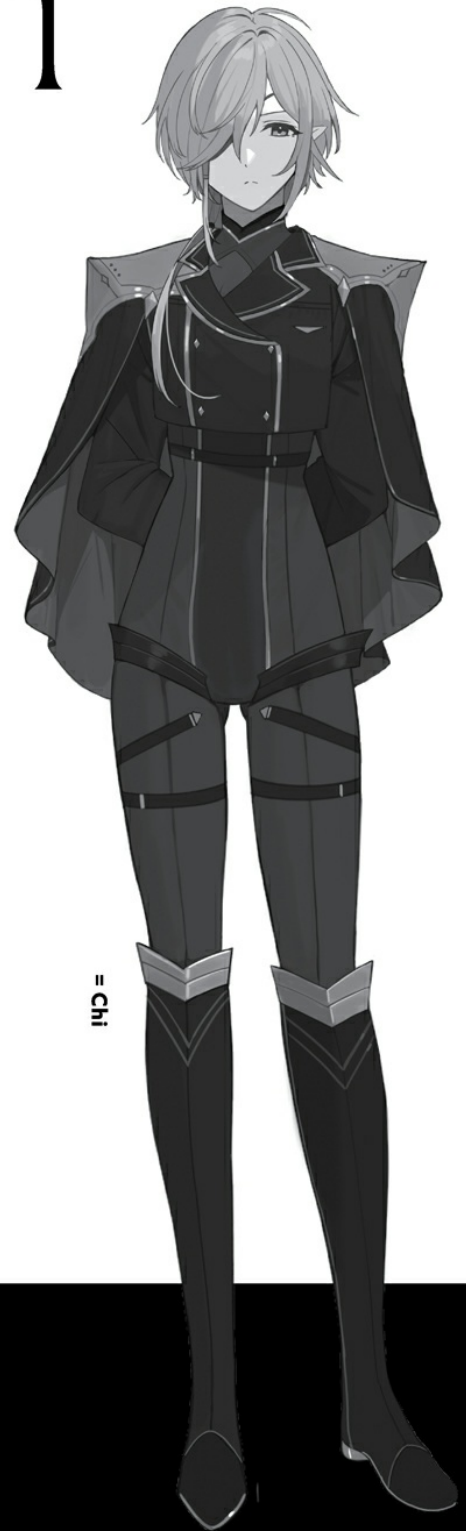
Chi

“Thank
you for
waiting.
Here’s
your
vodka
martini.”

Name: Chi

Gender: Female

Age: 23



A beautiful blond woman who wears male clothing. She’s serious and stubborn by nature but is also surprisingly shy and hates how prone she is to blushing. She and Omega work together as members of the Shadow Garden’s Numbers.

Omega

“I’m honored that you remember me. My name is Omega.”

Name: Omega

Gender: Female

Age: 24



=Omega

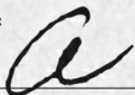
A pretty half-elf with one gold eye and one silver eye. Acts like a cool and collected agent but hates how quick she is to laugh at stupid jokes. She and Chi work together as members of the Shadow Garden's Numbers.

Alpha's

Organizational
Management Journal



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6

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[ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT JOURNAL]

It's been forever since I last wrote in this journal.

I've been so busy recently that it completely slipped my mind. He told me once that consistently keeping a journal helps promote emotional well-being.

He said it, so I'm sure it must be true.

Starting today, I'm going to make a habit of it. Let's just hope I can keep it up this time...

The big reason I've been so busy is the situation in the Oriana Kingdom.


Eliminating Perv Asshat and Mordred put us on the path toward eliminating the Cult of Diablos's presence in the nation, and we should be finished mopping up the stragglers within the year. However, the roots of corruption run deep in Oriana. The Cult has been meddling here for many years, and it'll take time for us to reform all the crooked politicians and organizations.

We're working together with Number 666—or rather, Queen Rose Oriana—but despite the progress we're making, there's no end in sight.

At the moment, our biggest problem is figuring out how we're going to break the scorn toward dark knights that's so deep-seated in the nation's culture.

Epsilon is putting on a new play called *Pretty Dark Knight Sailor Sun* that she based off one of his ideas, and it's having a bigger impact on the arts-loving people of the nation than we expected. It's an action play about a group of new Shadow Garden recruits who turn their slime bodysuits into sailor uniforms with a lot of big, flashy fight scenes. Personally, I prefer Shadow Mask over the Sailor Guardians.

I hope the play serves as the spark that changes the Oriana people's outlook, but only time will

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[ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT JOURNAL]
tell. That outlook of theirs is the biggest obstacle our reforms face.
Gamma and Eta are spearheading a project to build a large-scale Shadow Garden base in the
Oriana Kingdom, and everything there is proceeding apace. Thanks to Gamma's planning and
Eta's research, it looks like we're actually going to finish faster than projected. We're learning a lot
about using a high-output digging machine to build the massive underground facility, and
we'll be able to apply that knowledge when setting up similar bases in the future.
We're planning on moving parts of our manufacturing base underground as well. That'll mean
we don't have to be as worried about information leaks, and we'll even cut down on guard expenses
while we're at it. That will free up more of our budget to provide support to the Oriana Kingdom.
Oh, that reminds me. I sent Delta out to look for Zeta, and when I did, I got my first report
back from Zeta in ages. Getting chased around by Delta like that must have tuckered her out.
It would be nice if she learned her lesson from this and started diligently sending in her reports
like she's supposed to.
According to Zeta's report, the Velgalt Empire is making some suspicious moves. We might
very well have a war on our hands once the snow melts. I can only hope that's enough time for the
Oriana Kingdom to get their preparations in order— Oh, who might that be?

Memo:

[ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT JOURNAL]

I wasn't expecting anyone this late.

Whatever this is, it must be urgent.

Things have gotten completely out of hand.

An insurrection has broken out in the elven lands.

I've had the Numbers over there investigating for a while,
but I never expected that it would come to this...

There's a high-ranking member of the Rounds there,
and the Numbers won't be able to handle things on their own.
I need to dispatch the Seven Shadows soon...and send word
to him as well.

Of course, knowing him, he's probably gotten his hands
on accurate information more quickly than any of us.

Actually, if he does decide to make a move, this will be
the first time in ages the two of us have gotten a chance to
fight side by side...

Afterword

Thank you all for reading Volume 6 of *The Eminence in Shadow*.

It's been about ten months since the last book came out, and I apologize for making you all wait so long. A lot's happened over that time.

For one, the first season of the anime adaptation finished airing.

The staff and everyone else involved were excellent, and in my opinion, the final product was absolutely fantastic. Thank you so very much! If anyone hasn't seen it yet, then by all means, check it out!

Also, the second season is airing as I write this, and the show is still just as top-notch!

I've been involved a lot in my capacity as the original creator, and there's going to be some *Eminence* content that isn't available anywhere besides the anime. I hope you all look forward to it!

Then there's the mobile game adaptation, *Master of Garden*, which has been getting rave reviews ever since it launched! The game's popularity has exceeded our wildest initial expectations, and I'm touched by the passion the fans have been showing.

Between the Seven Shadows Chronicles showcasing the Seven Shadows' childhoods and the game-exclusive stories written to complement the original narrative, it's packed full of stuff! I've been carefully supervising all the narrative content and even written some of the side stories myself, so I encourage everyone who hasn't played it yet to give it a try!

There are also plans in the works for a manga adaptation of the Seven Shadows Chronicles, so that's something exciting to look forward to as well.

On top of all that, the main series has reached over five million books in

circulation!

We never could have gotten this far without your support. Thank you to all the readers from the bottom of my heart.

We're getting to the end, so I have a few more people I'd like to thank.

There's my editor, who's been helping me throughout the entire publication process. There's Touzai, whose illustrations are amazing. There's Araki from BALCOLONY., whose wonderful designs adorn this book. There's everyone working on the anime and mobile games. And finally, there's you readers who've given me so much support. Once again, I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to every one of you.

With that, I'll see you again in Volume 7!

Daisuke Aizawa

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