

Backstabbed in a **Backwater Dungeon:**

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill** Me, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

UNLIMITED ∞ **GACHA**

I Got

LVL 9999

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**

on My **Former** Party Members

and the **World**



Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
tef

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“Nobody who’s weaker than me gets to order me around.”

Menace of Mayhem

✦ Khaos ✦

A Level **8888** warrior mage who demonstrates an insubordinate attitude toward Light. Serves as Light’s body double.

“Pied Fiddler, Orka, present.”

Pied Fiddler

✦ Orka ✦

A hugely affable Level **8888** musician who buffs and debuffs friend and foe alike by playing his instrument.

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6
VOL.



"We are going to completely sabotage the plan that these scumbags have come up with."

"I swear on my honor as a maid."

"Blessed Lord Light, I am ready to receive your heavenly decree."

"I will dedicate myself to fulfilling my master's orders."



"You're finished, slime!"

**"Return to the chaos
from whence you came."**

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Prologue

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

Miya, a teenage girl with a scarlet bob, recited the incantation for a spell similar to the one she had used against Kyto, the rogue member of the elven White Knights who had brutally attacked her while her party was questing in a dungeon. But instead of producing three Ice Swords like back then, the spell only brought forth one frozen blade this time, and although Miya was clad in the same mage robe as before, she had quit the adventuring life and returned to her village to train as a healer. Miya had finished up her lessons for the day and had decided to go practice her offensive magic just outside the village. She pointed the single Ice Sword at a group of trees near the main road.

“Attack!” Miya instructed, manipulating the Ice Sword to make it fly toward one of the trees. The Ice Sword struck its target and left a mark, but Miya saw plenty of room for improvement.

“Hmm, I thought I’d infused a lot more mana and power into that Ice Sword,” Miya said, approaching the tree trunk to examine it. “But despite the amount of mana I poured into it, it only caused a smidge more damage than a regular Ice Sword. Is there some way to boost my Ice Swords in a way that will really count?”

Normally, a mage would cast spells in a manner that wouldn’t drain their mana pools too quickly, but they had the option of raising the potency of an attack spell by raising the infusion of mana to its maximum limit. The Ice Sword was Miya’s most powerful attack in her arsenal, and she had set aside time in her day to work on amplifying this particular spell. This effort had been prompted by the series of events that took place in her fateful final quest in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, where Miya and her older brother, Elio, in a party with their childhood friends, Gimra and Wordy, were attacked by Kyto, who had partnered up with the dark elf Yanaaq. The three boys had tried to fight off Kyto in order to protect Miya, but Wordy and Gimra had met their ends on the elf’s

broadsword. Despite also sustaining harrowing injuries themselves, Miya and her brother had managed to escape with their lives, but the gruesome episode had thoroughly put off the siblings from continuing to pursue the adventuring life, prompting them to return home to their quiet, peaceful village. But even though Miya had retired from questing, she continued to hone her magic skills whenever she had a spare moment because of the pledge she had made to Dark—the leader of the elite party of adventurers known as the Black Fools.

“I have to keep grinding so that I can get as close to Dark as I can!” Miya said, her fist clenched. “This time, I’ll pour even *more* mana into my attack!”

She turned and put some distance between her and the trees, so that she could fire another Ice Sword at them. *I wonder what Dark’s up to now*, Miya thought, peering wistfully up at the sky.

And as happenstance would have it, at that very moment, Light was operating up on the surface world under his alias “Dark.”



“According to this map, the forest with the monster for our quest should be straight up this road,” I informed my team.

“Then I suggest we visit this village on the way in order to gather information,” Nemumu said. “Doing that would further our real objective.”

My party, the Black Fools, had gone to a guild and signed up for a quest to defeat a monster, but as Nemumu hinted, our real aim was to build up a track record of achievements and make a name for our party, so that we could gain access to a better quality of intelligence.

“I will remind you, Nemumu, that you must refrain from giving every passing philanderer who approaches you in the village a boff on the head, what?” Gold warned. “If you give in to such impulses, m’girl, our name will end up on folks’ lips for an entirely different reason.”

“Of course I won’t do that!” Nemumu growled at him. “First of all, the only maggots I ever punch are the ones who try to lay their filthy hands on me! I leave everyone else alone!”

“Just goes to show that men can’t control themselves because they find you

so beautiful,” I said to Nemumu.

“Lord Dark...” Nemumu’s sepia-colored cheeks flushed red, and her earlier vindictive expression was replaced by a bashful smile. “I can’t believe you said I was beautiful! You’re so sweet!”

“Nemumu, are you unable to bally well tell when someone is trying to placate you?” Gold said bluntly.

“Gold...” Nemumu seethed. “If you’re spoiling for a fight, just come out and say it. I’ll run you through right here and now as a warm-up before slaying this monster!”

“No, m’girl, I would never dream of fighting you,” Gold said hurriedly. “Do understand that I only say these things out of consideration for you, what what?”

But this only angered Nemumu even further. “It appears you have chosen your final words. Prepare to meet your doom.” And with that, she launched into a series of attacks, which Gold frantically evaded.



Realizing that the spat had taken an unexpectedly extreme turn, I spun around to intervene. “Hey, you two. I’d *really* like to get to this village while the sun’s still up, so we should keep moving.”

“Of course, Lord Dark!” Nemumu called back, halting her melee attacks and running up to me, all smiles. Gold followed along behind her, shrugging his shoulders in exasperation.

“By Jove, to think she doesn’t believe I’m sincere in that...” Gold muttered.

For better or worse, this was basically how my party spent our days questing.

Chapter 1: Inside the Dragonute Empire

“Let’s send the beastfolk up against the tower, shall we?”

The leader of the four human associates who had gathered in a chamber in an undisclosed location somewhere within the Dragonute Empire, Hiro, had offered this bold suggestion as their next move against those who had eliminated their undercover agent. Even though all four men appeared to be low-level humans, they were in fact overpowered Masters with specialized Gifts, and they operated under the patronage of the dragonutes. Hiro—a gracefully tall, Prince Charming figure who wore vestments to match—drew stares of astonishment from the average-looking intelligence chief, Hisomi, and the shirtless, muscular blond bedecked in gold jewelry, Kaizer. The only member of the group who didn’t look taken aback was Hei, who was lurking in Kaizer’s shadow, his demeanor remaining unchanged beneath his all-black garb.

Hiro softly cleared his throat. “I will now go through the reasoning behind my proposal in very fine detail.” He paused for a beat to confirm that he had the silent assent of the others to do so before continuing. “When this ‘Great Tower’ suddenly appeared near the Elven Queendom’s royal capital, the authorities there dispatched the White Knights, their most powerful order of soldiers, to nullify the threat. However, the entire order was eliminated as a result,” Hiro said. “Later, a young human woman leading a horde of dragons identified herself as the ‘Wicked Witch of the Tower’ after descending upon the queendom’s royal palace. This so-called witch strong-armed the elf queen into granting ‘absolute autonomy’ to all the humans in the realm. The Wicked Witch then went on to subjugate the Dark Elf Islands in a similar fashion. These events demonstrated that the Great Tower was—at the very least—too much of a threat to simply ignore, for it was reasonable to suspect that those behind its existence might be followers of C. That was the rationale behind opening our investigation on the Great Tower.”

Around that time, Hisomi had discovered some startling information through the network of intelligence operatives he had spawned: one of those who had

gone on this ill-fated mission to the Great Tower was a female elf named Sasha, who was not a member of the White Knights. This Sasha had previously been part of a party of adventurers sent on a mission to search for a Master, which was subsequently given orders to kill a false Master they had encountered. As a reward for successfully carrying out this assassination, the Elven Queendom had made Sasha the adoptive daughter of a count and arranged for her to wed Mikhael, the vice commander of the White Knights.

This information came hot on the heels of discovering that Sasha's former partymate Garou—who was viewed as the favorite to become the next leader of the Wolf Tribe—had gone missing while exploring the Abyss and was presumed dead. Not long after, a third party member—the dark elf Sionne—mysteriously vanished as well. The laboratory Sionne was in charge of had transformed into a dungeon, trapping her inside. While the dungeon was eventually cleared weeks later by a team of adventurers, to date, no trace of Sionne had been found, not even a strand of hair.

In other words, three people that had been rewarded for assassinating the false Master had been eliminated within quite a short frame of time. Given the strong connection the trio shared, dismissing these disappearances as simply a series of coincidences would stretch credulity past its limits.

“According to our intelligence, the individuals who had disappeared up to that point were ordered to assassinate Light, a boy that was deemed to be a false Master,” Hiro continued. “The dynamics at play here strongly suggested that this Light was a follower of C who had built the Great Tower in order to exact his revenge on his would-be killers while in the guise of the Wicked Witch.”

“Oh, come on now. Everyone who's seen this Wicked Witch says she's an adult woman through and through,” Kaizer said, rolling his eyes. “And this Light is meant to be a boy, right? At least, that's what our intel says. So are you seriously saying he has magic items that can change his sex, height, voice, *and* freakin' speech patterns too? Not to mention, in that scenario, this little kid would have to be capable of taming a hundred dragons and of wielding unfathomably advanced sorcery. Don't you think all of that kinda rules out the idea of this Light character being our culprit?”

Hiro nodded his agreement with this assessment. “It did indeed seem

extremely implausible that Light could have been the force behind the Great Tower and the disappearances of his former partymates, and truthfully, I wasn't willing to fully buy into this theory until we came across more evidence that pointed in that direction. Now, naturally, one of us could have simply infiltrated the Great Tower to find out more, but that would have risked us being exposed, giving our targets the opportunity to cover their tracks and leave us with no leads. It was also possible that the Great Tower was an elaborate trap set up by the Masters of the Demonkin Nation. This was why we went with the safer option of using Naano as bait to capture the false Master."

The dragonutes had welcomed a number of Masters into their nation, including the four present at this gathering. The demonkin also hosted their own group of Masters, who were the ones Kaizer described as "crazies" and likened to a "delusional death cult praying for doomsday." The Masters led by Hiro hadn't known at the time if the Great Tower people were aware of them, but they had all agreed that the tower would most likely make its next move in the Dwarf Kingdom, given the country's military capabilities, so the Masters had sent their agent—the pseudo-Master, Cavour—to establish contact with Naano.

Cavour was the product of the Avatar Project, a failed experiment that had sought to create a magic item that would allow a person to carry out operations from a remote location by transferring their own consciousness to a living marionette. Despite the project ending up a bust, Hisomi had used his Gift, the Kindred Maker, to share his own power level to raise Cavour's to 5000, and the Masters had collectively decided to redeploy him as an intelligence operative, as it would have been a waste to simply destroy him. Cavour had been the one who made initial contact with Naano by selling him the Book of Forbidden Weapons, which outlined how to make powerful weapons with supernatural properties through the wholesale slaughter of humans.

"I thought the Wicked Witch of the Tower would make a move, given her embracing of the absolute autonomy of humans," Hiro said. "But not like this..."

"Although Cavour was an unsuccessful specimen resulting from the Avatar Project, he was still an undercover agent that I spent an inordinate amount of resources on," Hisomi piped up, sounding almost vexed. "However, it is a near certainty that he has been either captured or killed during the course of his

latest mission, since he has yet to translocate back here or even send a telepathic message. This means we have lost a valuable Level 5000 spawn without gaining any useful intel whatsoever.”

Hiro nodded, concurring with this observation. “If Naano has also been similarly erased, he can no longer serve as bait. These developments further my case for the Great Tower and the Wicked Witch being linked to the disappearances, and the two may be connected to C. However, if we personally take action against the tower, we might find ourselves ensnared in a trap...”

Hiro lapsed into silence for a moment. “No, we cannot afford to lose any more people, for it could halt progress on P.A. permanently, and that is our top priority. As such, the best way of gaining intelligence is to send the Beastfolk Federation on the warpath against the Great Tower and the Wicked Witch. We can watch how the battle unfolds without needing to worry about sustaining casualties on our end.”

Kaizer was the first to offer his response. “Uh, you do realize that means we’ll be sending a whole lotta beastmen into the meat grinder, right?”

“If they are able to provide us with useful information, that’s a cost I’m willing to bear. And besides”—Hiro broke out into a grin—“throughout history, it has been either humans or animals that are chosen for ritual sacrifice.”

Kaizer seemed to neither object nor concur with Hiro’s statement, choosing simply to stare at his leader through narrowed eyelids. On the other hand, Hisomi rubbed his temple with his right index finger as if he was nursing an acute headache.

“Your proposal would *severely* damage the intelligence network that I have built up over the years among the beastfolk...” Hisomi began. “But I realize how undeniably imperative it is to use the beastfolk at this crucial stage. Letting this opportunity pass us by just to preserve the intelligence network would not serve our purposes.”

“Indeed,” Hiro agreed. “If the intelligence produced by the conflict shows that the Great Tower is beholden to C, it would solidify our need to destroy the tower anyway.”

“If that happens, I’ll farm out Hei to take care of that,” Kaizer said. “He can

wipe it off the face of the map, no sweat. And I'll make sure to kick his ass into going on the mission if it comes to that."

Positioned just behind Kaizer, Hei remained silent, but his general demeanor suggested he would prefer not to be separated from Kaizer for any reason.

Hiro chuckled. "It would definitely be encouraging if Hei lent a helping hand. But if worse comes to worst, I'll handle the liquidation operation myself."

As soon as Hei heard that he might not have to leave Kaizer's side after all, his general peevishness seemed to instantly dissipate. This sudden change in attitude drew another half-amused smirk from Hiro, as well as from Hisomi.

"So we're all in agreement. We will maneuver the Beastfolk Federation into engaging in combat with the Great Tower," Hiro declared. "I'll inform the other two of our decision too."

"Who gives a hoot what that snot-nosed Cherry Bomber thinks? Anyway, Octopus Head shouldn't have any problem with it," Kaizer said.

"Nevertheless, we can't leave them both in the dark about this," Hiro said with a patient smile. "The foundations of a well-run organization are in how it reports, communicates, and consults, as I'm sure you know."

Kaizer snorted at Hiro's rejoinder but left it at that, deciding instead to throw his full weight behind the Beastfolk Federation's upcoming war with the Great Tower that the soon-to-be attacking nation knew nothing about yet.

Chapter 2: The Conference

The Beastfolk Federation was a narrow strip of land that had a bay that provided a natural barrier with the Dragonute Empire to the east, and the Elven Queendom bordering it to the west. As a country, it was smaller than the Human Kingdom, but unlike that particular pauperized nation, the Beastfolk Federation was at least able to sell the crops it grew to international buyers at market rates.

Although the other nations viewed the beastfolk as a single entity, the federation was actually governed by five ruling tribes, and the chieftains of these tribes often gathered in a manor in the heart of the federal capital to debate and decide upon the national agenda. The majority of the five leaders looked like organized crime lords rather than polished statesmen, and with good reason. The top two vocations in the Beastfolk Federation were questing and mercenary work, so a large chunk of the residents were best described as the rough-and-ready type. Not only did beastfolk possess reasonably heightened physical strength, they tended to be the daredevil sort who survived encounters by dint of their keen senses and superior coordination as a group in battle, and because of these racial traits, many beastmen chose to become adventurers or soldiers of fortune.

The federation had little arable land to speak of due to the many inlets that wormed their way through the territory, but on the upside, the nation had a long coastline with numerous ports dotted along it that welcomed ships from all around the world. These ports offered other avenues of work for the beastmen who would rather be oarsmen or merchants instead of adventurers, and because other races viewed being an oarsman on a ship as an unglamorous occupation requiring backbreaking labor, the brawny beastmen practically monopolized this line of work. On top of that, due to the constant demand for oarsmen, such jobs were actually pretty well paid, so it was a highly sought-after occupation for beastfolk.

Several months before the confab between the Masters in the Dragonute

Empire, the manor at the center of the federal capital hosted a regular meeting between the leaders of the five tribes: the Wolf Tribe, the Tiger Tribe, the Avian Tribe, the Bear Tribe, and the Bovine Tribe. The chieftains all gathered in the manor's main chamber and sat around in a circle on top of cushions that had been placed on the shaggy carpet, a setup that ensured no one would try to fight to be at the head of the proverbial table. The right to chair the discussions was done on a rotation basis, and on this particular occasion, it was the Tiger Tribe's chieftain, Lebad, who was steering the meeting. Despite leading the Tiger Tribe, Lebad was actually a black panther with onyx-colored fur from head to tail, its uniformity only broken by the deep scar across his forehead that started near his right eye. This scar gave Lebad a uniquely sinister visage, and just a hard stare from him would be enough to send a regular human toppling over onto their backsides out of fear.

The Tiger Tribe was one of the most militaristic of the five tribes, with most of its members choosing to become adventurers or mercenaries. Lebad himself was a retired B-rank adventurer, though even as a middle-aged beastman, there wasn't a single youngster within his faction who could best him in a fight. He began the meeting by raising the most pressing issue of the day.

"There's talk that a tower has sprouted out of the ground next door to the Elven Queendom," Lebad said. "The elves are recruiting adventurers to get whatever kind of info they can on that tower, so we could lend some of our men to the cause and extract a favor outta 'em in the future."

"Nice idea in theory, but do you *really* think it'll work out that well?" piped up Gamm, the leader of the Wolf Tribe, his uniquely piercing gaze focused squarely on his peer. Although Gamm exuded an aura of ferocity, the lop-eared wolfman had something of an intellectual air about him, which was unusual among beastmen. If Lebad could be described as resembling a blood-soaked mafia boss, then Gamm presented himself as an erudite yakuza kingpin.

The Wolf Tribe had just as many fighters as the Tiger Tribe, however, and the two sides viewed each other as rivals, which is why Gamm and Lebad took every opportunity to snipe at each other—when they weren't too busy undermining one another behind the scenes, that is. In response to Gamm's comment, Lebad bared his fangs to indicate his annoyance at being second-

guessed when he was sure the complaint had been lodged without any regard for the merits of his proposal. If this kind of barefaced aggression had been directed at a fainthearted human, he or she would have shuddered themselves silly with fright, but Gamm was unperturbed and continued to needle Lebad.

“I’ve heard about the Elven Queendom’s recruitment campaign,” Gamm said. “But don’t you think it would take too long for our troops to get there, even if we sent them now?”

“I happen to agree with Mr. Gamm that it’ll take too long to respond to their call for recruits in a timely fashion,” said Igor, the leader of the Avian Tribe. While Igor had a bald head that resembled a human’s, his arms were more like the feathered wings of a harpy.

“We might manage to make it in time for the quest if we deploy ships, but the costs involved if we took that option would make it an unprofitable venture,” Igor continued. “This is precisely why I’ve constantly pushed for a road to be constructed that cuts through the woods and provides us with a direct path to the Elven Queendom. If such a road existed, sending help to the queendom would be no trouble at all.”

The other chieftains winced at Igor’s opportunistic attempt to shoehorn his pet project into the discussion. He did this every meeting, and it had really started to grate on everyone’s patience. The Avian Tribe was the most mercantile tribe of the five, and in order to trade with the neighboring Elven Queendom, merchants were forced to either take a long route that detoured the forest that formed the border between the two nations, or ship the goods by sea. A road that cut straight through the forest would greatly save on time and costs, but there were other considerations that stood in the way of one being built.

“I’m still against that there road,” muttered Ozo, the leader of the Bear Tribe, breathing out a trail of smoke after taking a drag from a long pipe. “The only things that’s keepin’ all them elves and dragonutes out of our business are that forest we have out to the west and the sea to the east. No need to go stickin’ our heads in the jaws of a dragon, I say.”

Standing at over two meters tall and with a girth that seemed to match, Ozo

the bearman was the biggest of the five chieftains. Naturally, Ozo radiated the same imposing intensity that Lebad and Gamm did, but his looming presence was purely down to his massive size, since he lacked the threatening aura of the other two chieftains. Because most bearmen outsized their counterparts in other tribes, many became adventurers, though equally as many took jobs as carpenters, dockhands, farmers, and other occupations that required physical labor.

“Mr. Igor, we are all well aware of your desire to clear a route through the forest that leads to the Elven Queendom,” spoke up Beny, the leader of the Bovine Tribe. The cow-woman was the lone female among the five chieftains. “But I will once again ask you to please consider what such a project would do to the maritime shippers. A direct land route could very well lead to a reduction in cargo volumes on ships, spelling fewer jobs. Remember, unlike the couriers that travel down highways, it takes a lot of time and effort to train up ships’ crews and oarsmen.”

Compared to the others in the room, Beny appeared to have the least animalistic features. In fact, if anything, she looked like a human woman with two cow horns attached to her head. Only a minority of beastfolk shared this trait of looking closer to a human than an animal, and most of those with this morphology were women. The Bovine Tribe was the largest of the five clans in terms of population size, but despite the members of the tribe being every bit as physically gifted as other beastfolk, most had decidedly unaggressive personalities, meaning few signed up to be adventurers or mercenaries. In fact, most folk from the Bovine Tribe worked in the shipping trade as oarsmen or crewmembers. If direct land routes opened up for trading, it would threaten the shipping industry, which explained why Beny was often at odds with Igor and his profit-seeking Avian Tribe merchants. As such, Beny was on the same page as Ozo when it came to shooting down the idea of building a woodland road, though his exception to one stemmed from national security reasons. Yet despite this opposition, Igor stubbornly stood his ground, continuing to advocate for his coveted infrastructure project at practically every meeting.

Lebad clapped his hands to get the meeting back on track. “The topic right now is whether we should lend our people to the elves with an eye toward

extracting a favor from them later on, so save all the trade talk for the time being. In any case, it doesn't look like we're gonna reach unanimity on my proposal, but maybe we can make participation in the scheme voluntary for each tribe?"

"No objections from me," Ozo said.

"I'm in favor of that idea," Beny agreed.

"I'm in favor as well," Igor said. "And we shall discuss our differences at a later date, Ms. Beny."

"If we're not under any obligation to take part, then it's fine with me too," Gamm said. "Though I still don't think any of our men will make it in time for the quest."

Gamm chuckled after getting in this last dig on his rival, but the Tiger Tribe chieftain was ready with a stinging comeback.

"Oh, I'm not worried about *my* troops," Lebad retorted with a snarling grin. "They're all skilled warriors who know how to hack their way through a forest to yank the elves' rumps outta the frying pan. They ain't like a bunch of pups who keep dying in a dungeon without ever bringing back a single bone to bury."

Gamm had to choke back his rage, because he knew Lebad was referring to Garou, the young wolfman who had been the presumptive successor to take over the Wolf Tribe after Gamm, before vanishing without a trace during a trip to the Abyss. Gamm had subsequently sent other beastmen from his tribe there to search for Garou, but half of them had ended up getting slaughtered, while the surviving half were only able to speak of the horrors they had witnessed when they returned empty-handed, without the remains of Garou. This fiasco had landed Gamm in a bit of hot water, and Lebad had just prodded this particular sore spot with pinpoint precision. The wolfman glared at the pantherman, while the other chieftains silently braced themselves for yet another clash between the two bellicose rivals, but despite sparks practically flying out of Gamm's eyes, Lebad shrugged off the stare, satisfied that he had chewed the wolfman out.

"Now, onto the next topic," Lebad said in a chipper voice. The other chieftains followed his lead, leaving Gamm to stew in his fury.



“That mangy, shit-eating asshole!” Gamm yelled.

“M-Master! Please spare me! Please—gah!” The first thing Gamm did on returning to his quarters was kick the nearest human slave working at the entrance in the midsection out of sheer frustration. The unlucky slave slid and tumbled across the floor like a rag doll, but even so, Gamm rushed over to the slave and kicked him in the abdomen over and over again. The man pleaded desperately for mercy until the volley of blows raining down on him from the Level 400 wolfman snapped his neck, ending his life on the spot. Despite this, Gamm continued kicking the slave for several more minutes as if the lifeless corpse was his rage pillow, and when he was finally done, the wolfman turned to the other slaves who had appeared to find out what all the commotion was about.

“Take this piece of filth away,” Gamm commanded.

“I-Immediately, master,” replied a fearful slave.

The chieftains of the Beastfolk Federation lived in five estates encircling the manor that hosted their top-level conferences. Gamm continued to stomp angrily through his building with an entourage of wolfmen in tow.

“Hey, unc, didn’t we purchase that thing just yesterday?” asked Gims, the head of Gamm’s security detail. “What was the point if you were just gonna kill him straightaway?”

Gamm scoffed loudly at his nephew’s griping. “Their kind can be easily replaced, like a cheap toy bought with a week’s allowance.” Human slaves were naturally too expensive for children to purchase with their allowance, but ironically, beastmen often treated their slaves worse than any kid would treat a plaything.

Gamm finally made it to his office and slumped heavily into an armchair. Gims was the only one who followed the chieftain into the room, while the rest of the entourage dispersed. The dutiful nephew poured liquor into a glass and offered it to his uncle—who grabbed it and downed the contents in one gulp—then sat down in an armchair opposite his tribe’s leader.

“I can’t *believe* I let that chickenshit Lebad rip me a new one in that meeting!” Gamm grumbled. “And speaking of Garou, I personally backed that loser as the next alpha of our tribe, and look what he did! He went and threw mud in my face! I wish I could will him back into the world of the living just so I could rip him apart again with my bare hands! Him and all those whelps we sent after him who weren’t able to find his damn dried-up carcass! They had *one* simple job, and they failed miserably! Those bastard mutts!”

Back in the meeting, Lebad had reminded Gamm of the Wolf Tribe’s recent setbacks, and the wolfman had been unable to formulate a rebuttal of any sort. Gims quickly changed the subject before Gamm’s anger could boil over again.

“But, unc, you *sure* we shouldn’t lend a hand to the elves?” Gims asked. “I mean, I hate Lebad as much as you do, but I spy a good opportunity in this. Even if it ends up costing us money up front, think of the favors we’ll get in return.”

“Gims,” Gamm said gruffly. “You’re smart, and you know how to handle things, but you’re still wet behind the ears, my boy.”

Gims openly grimaced at his uncle’s words, prompting Gamm to half-apologetically fill a glass with liquor and place it in front of his nephew. “Look, you know how I used to be an adventurer back in the day, facing down monsters, clearing out dungeons, and even cutting down the occasional criminal or two, right?”

“Yeah, and you made it all the way to B-rank,” Gims replied robotically, readying himself for yet another long-winded tale from his uncle’s glory days—the ones Gims had heard hundreds of times before.

Gamm poured himself a drink and took a sip. “One time, I was in a town in the Elven Queendom when it was attacked by this huge mob of goblins, led by a goblin king. The guild hired my party and a bunch of other adventurers to go repel these goblins, and I was the one who led this scared ragtag army to the front lines.”

He must be exaggerating that part, thought Gims, but he still listened dutifully.

“We were surrounded by countless goblins, and I had to constantly yell at my

men and berate them so they'd keep fighting," Gamm continued. "But we were being totally overwhelmed, and I knew the town would fall to the goblins. Those disgusting creatures started grinning evilly at us, as if they knew they'd already won. I've never faced a worse predicament in a battle before or since. Then suddenly, backup arrived from the elves, and they completely turned the tables on the goblins."

Gamm's voice grew deeper and solemn, as if it was laden with lead. "There were only three of them, and they called themselves the White Knights, the most powerful soldiers in the whole of the Elven Queendom. Their commander, vice commander, and a shooter completely exterminated the goblin horde."

"Uh, but you must've helped too, right, unc?" Gims said uncertainly. "I mean, there's no way *three* elves could've wiped out that many goblins on their own, surely?"

Gamm shook his head. "The White Knights sent the rest of us to the back lines while they dealt with those goblins all by themselves, taking out each and every one of them." Gamm stopped and reflected on that moment. "The memory of that sight still gives me goose bumps to this day. The shooter seemed to mow down a bunch of goblins just by pointing his right arm in their direction. The vice commander beheaded dozens of goblins with just a single swing of his sword. But their commander, Hardy the Silent... Now, *he* was on a whole other level."

Gims audibly gulped, finding himself totally entranced for once by his uncle's tale from the past.

"I thought the shooter and the vice commander were strong until I witnessed Hardy in action. He ended the battle without any of us realizing. He chopped off the goblin king's head without so much as a scream or a clash of metal. And it didn't look like Hardy had raised an eyebrow or taken a breath. No, he acted like he'd just clipped the head off a dandelion. When I saw Hardy, I thought to myself, 'This must be what the god of death looks like.'"

Gamm drained the rest of his liquor to wet his tongue once more, then twirled the glass around in his paw with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Lebad always took on low-risk quests in safe locations back when he was an

adventurer, 'cause he was a coward then and he's a coward now," the wolf chieftain said. "He never saw enough of the world to encounter the White Knights or see Hardy the Silent in action. He's never been a *real* fighter, so he's now coming up with all these bullshit ideas that are divorced from reality. If a strange tower has appeared in the Elven Queendom, what's stopping them from just sending in the White Knights to take care of it? Why the hell would the elves want *our* help?"

Gamm's piercing stare seemed to penetrate right through Gims forehead, making his nephew's shoulders tremble involuntarily.

"Gims," Gamm said after a pregnant pause. "Whenever you get the chance, go see the world like I did. It's a big wide world out there, filled with monsters you couldn't even begin to imagine. If you don't get enough real-world experience and knowledge under your belt, your ignorance will come back to bite you."

"Of course, unc," Gims said. "I'll certainly take that to heart."

"Well, I've always gotta look out for my nephew, y'know?" Gamm replied.

After arriving back at his estate enraged enough to kill a random slave, the wolf chieftain now seemed totally relaxed and composed, and his nephew looked at him with a renewed respect. Based on Gamm's own experience, he knew the beastmen had nothing to offer the Elven Queendom militarily so long as they had the White Knights to call on. Though when the next meeting rolled around, the latest news stood that assumption on its head. Gamm gawked at his fellow chieftains, his eyes wide as saucers, as he tried to comprehend what he had just heard.

"The White Knights have been *wiped out*?!"

Chapter 3: The Tiger Tribe Chieftain, Lebad

Gamm leaped up from his seat cushion in shock at the news he had just heard. “The White Knights have been *wiped out*?!”

“Yes, though I could hardly believe my ears when I first got the report,” Igor said, sounding exasperated. “Who could ever have imagined that the all-powerful White Knights would be eliminated in such a way?”

This time, it was the Avian Tribe’s leader’s turn to moderate the chieftains’ conference, and he had opened the meeting by sharing this startling update that he had received from one of his connections in the merchant business. Apparently, a human woman calling herself the Wicked Witch of the Tower had annihilated the White Knights, the Elven Queendom’s most elite order. The witch had then attacked the capital with a swarm of dragons and proclaimed that human slavery was to be prohibited across the realm under the banner of “absolute autonomy for all humans.”

Lebad growled under his breath. “This ain’t good. Our nation might end up under that wicked witch’s thumb, just like the elves did. Imagine what’ll happen to us if it comes to that.”

The beastfolk chieftains silently contemplated the prospect of finding themselves on a lower rung of the race ladder than the humans their race had mistreated since time immemorial. In that scenario, the beastfolk would surely be treated like slaves and end up subject to the same kind of abuse and bigotry they had heaped upon the humans. The image of this dark future hung over the five leaders like a thick, murky thundercloud. The first to break the silence was Beny, the cow-woman.

“Mr. Lebad, a-are you quite certain this witch can attack our nation with ease?” the Bovine Tribe chieftain asked hesitantly. “Even though their nation has been conquered, the elves are too prideful to humble themselves to that woman. There’s a forest separating our land from the queendom, and as long as that obstacle exists, this witch shouldn’t be able to get to us. Don’t you

agree?”

Ozo, the eldest of the chieftains, took a long drag on his pipe and breathed out the smoke. “Beny, Igor says the witch beat them elves with a whole mess of dragons, in case yer forgettin’. Unless them dragons lost their ability to fly, no forest’s gonna stop that witch from gettin’ to us.”

Beny went even paler. “Then, this puts us in *unimaginable* danger! W-We need to take action right now!”

“Yes, but what kind of action are we supposed to take?” Igor said, looking around the room in the hope that someone else would take up the baton at this juncture. The birdman was a merchant at heart, so he had no clue about the ins and outs of mounting a military response, but unfortunately, no one was immediately forthcoming with any ideas, and another suffocating pall of silence descended on the meeting chamber.

“A-Anyway, I’m not gonna commit to doing anything until I know what the hell’s going on,” Lebad said finally. “I’ll find out what I can about this Wicked Witch through my network. The rest of you had better get out there and shake down your people for all the info and tips you can get too. Worst case, we hit up the dwarves, the dark elves, the onis, the demons, or even the dragonutes for reinforcements. That should put us in a better spot, I think.”

Lebad secretly doubted that getting extra support from the other races would be sufficient to defend the Beastfolk Federation against an army of dragons, but realistically, the beastfolk were left with little other option than to ask for assistance from the dragonutes, who were a lot more familiar with how to battle dragons. Asking for reinforcements was almost guaranteed to come at a painful cost, but at this point, there didn’t seem to be any better options. Once they had all promised to share whatever info they managed to find, the chieftains brought the meeting to a close.



Lebad and his entourage returned to the estate reserved for the leader of the Tiger Tribe, and as soon as they reached his executive office, the pantherman flopped down in his chair and put his dark-furred feet up on his desk. He lit a cigar and took a long, anxious puff before filling the room with smoke. The

pantherman rubbed his temple, then launched into a tirade.

“Those useless elf pricks,” Lebad grumbled. “How’d they go from lording it over us to getting their cabooses whipped? And by a female inferior, no less! The ‘Wicked Witch of the Tower’? ‘Absolute autonomy’? Buncha bull! Those inferior cockroaches were better off keeping their heads down and staying as slaves or dirt farmers or whatever.”

“But boss,” one of his associates interjected. “If we surrender to the witch and swear loyalty to her now, maybe it’ll actually gain us status in the end.”

Lebad showed what he thought of that suggestion by angrily hurling his heavy ashtray straight into the lackey’s snout. “Is the only reason you wear that battle helmet to protect that soft head of yours, shit-for-brains?!”

The associate whimpered as he crouched down and pressed both paws to his nose, but he couldn’t stop the blood from gushing out between his fingers and onto the carpet. Lebad ignored the luckless lackey and continued his rant.

“Try to get it through your tiny skulls what that absolute autonomy crap is gonna mean for us!” Lebad roared. “That witch and her dragons see us as *foes*! She’s gonna put us on the rung below the inferior mudworms if we let her have her way! Is that what you dopes want? Well, answer me!”

Lebad’s eyes swept over the associates standing around him, but there was only a chastened silence.

“Think for a second what’ll happen if the inferiors rise above us,” Lebad said, his voice a touch calmer. “Ya like taking mudworm brats into the woods and playin’ ‘Hunt the Inferior’? Well, ya can kiss games like that goodbye! Who knows, we might even wake up one mornin’ and find ourselves on the wrong side of the hunt. Is that what’cha want?”

“Hell no! I ain’t standing for that!” said one of his lackeys.

“They’d better not take those hunts from us!” a second underling piped up. “It’s always a riot seeing those kid inferiors begging for their lives when we finally corner ’em.”

“See, what I do is force family members or friends to fight each other in deathmatches,” another beastman told the group. “It’s never *not* funny seeing

'em crying and acting all miserable-like while they're killing each other."

"Ah, c'mon. Nothing beats watching inferiors try to fight us beastmen," another associate argued. "Especially when we're armed to the teeth and the inferiors are in their birthday suits. Never gets old seeing the looks of horror on their faces!"

"Now, what I do to them is..." another beastman started as the discussion about all the "fun" ways to brutalize human slaves got very animated. Lebad's entourage was made up of violent figures with sadistic tendencies who constantly abused those weaker than themselves, and he had made sure that their conversation would zero in on what they loved most. The Tiger Tribe chieftain allowed the discussion to continue for a while until he ordered one of them to retrieve his ashtray so he could tap out his cigar.

"We can't allow those inferior vermin to stand on top of us," Lebad said, summarizing his thoughts on the matter. "Inferiors are worms, and that's how they must stay, as far as I'm concerned. But I don't want no harm coming to our tribe, so we have to gather all the intel we can get." Lebad cast a keen eye over his minions, treating each of them to a glare that looked even more severe due to the scar on his face. "It don't matter how small beans the info is, if it's out there to grab, I want it. Y'see, that bit of knowledge could very well be the difference between life and death. You got that, jerks? Now, get out there and find me some tips!"

The underlings assented in unison and filed out of the office, leaving Lebad slumped wearily in his chair.

Since there was nothing in the way of electronic communications or mechanical means of transport in this world, it took the beastmen months to gather enough intel to inform their next move. And after that rather lengthy span had passed, a human with distinctively squinty eyes visited the Wolf Tribe's estate.



Fayh the trader took a seat across from Gamm, who was reclining on a sofa in his office on the Wolf Tribe's estate. At 170 centimeters tall and with a slim build, Fayh looked like a perfectly average human male, and the only thing that

really set him apart from his peers was his attire, which had the kind of embroidery on it that would usually be seen on clothes worn by ordinary citizens in the Dragonute Empire. Fayh had been shown into Gamm's office without encountering any trouble because he had contacted the Wolf Tribe's chieftain in advance to set up this appointment.

"It has been so long since we last saw each other, Lord Gamm," Fayh said. "My work requires me to travel everywhere by sea, so the opportunity to visit seldom presents itself. I truly regret that I have not been able to come and see you more often, Lord Gamm. Here, take this as a token of my sincerity."

Fayh presented Gamm with liquor that had been brewed in the Dragonute Empire, but Gamm remained silent and glanced over at an associate, who took this as a signal to retrieve the bottle from the merchant and leave the two of them alone.

"This is an important conversation I'm having with this gentleman here," Gamm said as his associate opened the door to leave. "Make sure no one disturbs us until I call for you."

"Understood, sir," the retainer said with a bow, before shutting the door behind him. Gamm waited until the underling had strolled off to tell the others that the office was off-limits before finally addressing Fayh.

"All right, it's just the two of us now," Gamm said. "What ya got for me?"

"I do apologize for taking up your time in this manner." While Fayh spoke in a fawning tone, the manufactured smile on his face didn't do a very good job of convincing his counterpart that he was truly sorry.

Gamm looked away and nearly clicked his tongue in annoyance. Fayh was a simple traveling merchant who eked out a living by dealing in the kinds of goods and services the avianmen wouldn't touch—they favored the more profitable ventures—and this human peddler was afforded so little courtesy, Gamm hadn't even thought to serve him tea. Or at least, that was how it looked on the surface, for Fayh actually worked as an intelligence agent for the Dragonute Empire, as well as a go-between assigned with engaging the leader of the Wolf Tribe. The liquor Fayh had offered to Gamm was a coded sign that he had new material from the dragonutes to offer, and that they needed to be alone to

discuss matters of a sensitive nature. Even though Fayh was human, Gamm always had to make time for the fake merchant if an appointment was sought, due to his connection to the dragonutes. This inevitably led the wolfman to get rather irritated about the fact that he had been all but forced to take time out of his busy schedule to meet with this lowly inferior.

Fayh paid no heed to Gamm's visible displays of annoyance and got straight down to the topic at hand. "I have orders from my superiors to inform you that they desire the Beastfolk Federation to destroy the Great Tower."

"*What?!*" Gamm roared. "Go to hell! You want us to dig our own graves?!"

Gamm rose from his sofa seat and loomed over Fayh. "We know all about the witch that lives in that tower—how she destroyed the White Knights and took over the Elven Queendom with her dragons! We've also heard rumors that the dark elves are under her heel too! And you want us to go to *war* with that freak of nature? Yes, I know our tribe's secretly collaborating with the dragonutes, but we aren't in some ironclad alliance. I don't remember agreeing to commit suicide on their behalf!"

"Please calm yourself, Lord Gamm," Fayh soothed, his voice not betraying a hint of fear as he politely raised both hands to implore the wolfman to regain his composure. Gamm suddenly became rather self-conscious of his undiplomatic conduct, but instead of apologizing, he simply glared at Fayh and slumped back down on the sofa once more.

"My superiors naturally have no intention of sending your people in to die needlessly," Fayh assured him. "They are communicating this request because they believe your nation has a favorable chance of emerging victorious from such a conflict."

"Are you saying we can *win*?" Gamm said incredulously. "Against the witch who wiped out the White Knights?" In his younger days, Gamm had once seen firsthand what the White Knights could do, and he believed in his heart of hearts that any entity strong enough to destroy a squad as mighty as the White Knights would be nigh on impossible to defeat. While Gamm stewed in his doubts, Fayh stretched his phony smile wider into a knowing grin.

"The Wicked Witch of the Tower is only powerful because of her dragons,"

Fayh said. "As such, my superiors will deliver a magic item to you at a later date that will confuse and drive away the dragons. We hope that you will make good use of this magic item."

The dragonutes were the forerunners when it came to dragon research, so Gamm had no reason to doubt that the empire would possess a magic item that could ward off a horde of dragons.

"We are also willing to provide you with other magic items that will serve you well in battle," Fayh continued. "Are you familiar with the Holy Evil Golem, Lord Gamm?"

"Don't patronize me. Of *course* I've heard of it," Gamm said. "It's the weapon the dark lord made to fight those heroes that appear in one of those Church of the Goddess myths. You know, that stupid religion that inferiors like to cling to."

It was generally believed that the Goddess created the world, and the Church of the Goddess was the name of the mainline religion that worshipped this deity. However, the eight nonhuman races viewed the church as secondary to the customs and traditions native to their own species, so the faithful tended to mostly consist of humans, likely because they were a powerless species that constantly found itself the victim of race-based atrocities and other forms of bigotry.

But even though most of the adherents to the Church of the Goddess were human, its headquarters could be found in the Principality of the Nine, where it had been placed so that no nation could use the religion for its own political ends. The church largely preached about the ancient battles that took place between legendary heroes and the dark lord, and the most famous of these myths was "The Magnificent Four and the Dark Lord," which was the oldest tale on record. Another myth saw the dark lord creating the Holy Evil Golem to fight the legendary heroes.

"If I remember correctly, the dark lord used a sacred metal to make the golem," Gamm said, stroking his chin as he recalled the tale. "And since the dark lord was so evil, the golem ended up being both holy and evil enough to withstand both physical and magical attacks. The only way the heroes managed to defeat the golem was by sealing it away. Or at least, that's what the legends

say. Anyway, what about it? If you're here to give me a sermon, you can take that foolishness elsewhere."

"I am a merchant, not a clergyman affiliated with the Church of the Goddess, so I will not be reciting their gospel," Fayh replied. "But if I were to tell you that we were secretly in possession of the Holy Evil Golem, how would you react?"

"What? The dragonutes have a weapon straight out of a fairy tale?" Gamm said dubiously. "If that's supposed to be a joke, I don't find it very funny."

"I do not find it surprising that you doubt me, and in all honesty, if I were in your place, I would likewise be yelling at the other person and telling them not to take me for a fool," Fayh said diplomatically. "But it is true that through sheer coincidence, my superiors have come into possession of the Holy Evil Golem spoken of in legend. Please keep in mind, however, that this information is top secret."

The part Fayh had left out was that it wasn't actually the dragonutes who had come across the Holy Evil Golem; it was Hisomi and the other Masters who had found the magical weapon. However, the Masters saw little value in the golem, since to powerful beings like themselves, the golem was just an annoying obstacle that would take a little bit more time and effort than usual to destroy. But the Masters needed the Beastfolk Federation to test out the true abilities of the Wicked Witch of the Tower, so they had decided to use the Holy Evil Golem as an extra enticement to get the beastfolk to go to war with the tower.

"If you agree to move against the Wicked Witch, my superiors will gladly furnish you with the Holy Evil Golem," Fayh explained. "Just as in the legend, the golem is highly impervious to physical and magical attacks, so I believe it will prove to be a lethal adversary against this sorceress."

Fayh was suggesting a game plan that would involve removing the dragons as a factor by using a magic item, then deploying the Holy Evil Golem crafted by the Dark Lord of myth to slay the Wicked Witch herself. It appeared foolproof at first glance, but Gamm wasn't fully persuaded.

"Well, if what you're saying checks out, we may stand a good chance of killing the witch in a way the Elven Queendom couldn't," Gamm replied. "But we have no way of telling if this witch has other tricks up her sleeve apart from her

dragons and sorcery.” In other words, what had been presented to him still didn’t amount to a guarantee that this campaign against the witch wouldn’t turn out to be nothing more than a suicide mission.

“You are right to say that we do not know the full extent of the Wicked Witch’s capabilities,” Fayh admitted. “In addition to the anti-dragon magic item and the Holy Evil Golem, my superiors have pledged their full support to the Beastfolk Nation in this battle. But if I may be so bold, there is one obvious way to constrain the Wicked Witch from wielding her full might, and that is by using the ‘absolute autonomy for humans’ against her.”

“Oh?” Gamm said skeptically. “And how do you suppose we do that?”

Fayh elaborated further on his suggestion, and Gamm’s hard expression softened as he grew increasingly convinced of the plan being outlined.

“That sounds crazy enough to work,” Gamm decided. “You know, for an inferior, you’re one evil son of a bitch to think up that dirty trick. And without a hint of remorse too.”

“I am just a humble merchant who sails between your nation and the Dragonute Empire in order to trade goods,” Fayh replied. “Though since it would only put me at a disadvantage if the absolute autonomy of humans were to spread beyond the borders of the Elven Queendom, I was more than happy to assist with preemptive action to make sure that such a scenario fails to come to pass.”

“So you’re willing to sell out your own kind just to make a little more cash, huh?” Gamm muttered. “We beastfolk could never wrap our heads around that kind of thinking.” He glared at the human opposite him like he was staring at something foul, but Fayh paid no heed and proceeded with the rest of the briefing.

“My superiors have said they would rather simply crush the Wicked Witch themselves to stop her from bringing more humans into the fold and accumulating more power that way,” Fayh said. “And as you are well aware, the empire has all the weapons it would need at its disposal in order to emerge victorious. However, the sheer distance between the empire and the tower opens up the possibility that the Demonkin Nation may side with the tower as a

way of making the war more complicated. I personally do not believe the demonkin would get involved, but my superiors are less sanguine about the odds of it happening.”

“No ruling out that it might turn into a quagmire, huh?” summed up Gamm, who knew how bitter the rivalry was between the dragonutes and the demonkin. Allying with the Wicked Witch in a war was as good an opportunity as any for the demonkin to gain the upper hand on the dragonutes, so to avoid that potential outcome, the dragonutes had chosen to get the beastfolk to wage a proxy war on their behalf. Or at least, that’s how Gamm understood it.

“If the unimaginable *were* to happen and you found yourself failing to prevail against the Wicked Witch, my superiors have bestowed upon you a rare magic item that will teleport you a long distance away from the fighting,” Fayh said as he took out a small box and placed it in front of Gamm. On opening the box, the wolfman found a dark-red, comma-shaped gem with a hole in the middle for a string to pass through. “This magic item is called the Teleportation Pendant,” Fayh explained. “If you pour mana into the pendant, it will translocate you to the Dragonute Empire, regardless of your present location, the distance you would have to travel, or the presence of any jamming magic.”

“Well, I’ll be damned...” As a former adventurer, Gamm knew full well how rare teleportation items were, and under any other context, this particular object—which basically promised to transport him to the Dragonute Empire under *any* conditions—would have been locked away in a nation’s strongroom. Gamm felt a rush of pride at being the recipient of such a precious item, and when Fayh saw the avaricious glint in the wolfman’s eye, he was urgently reminded to lay out the stipulations for the pendant’s use.

“Please bear in mind that the Teleportation Pendant is only being granted to you as a means of last resort,” Fayh said hurriedly. “My superiors are not bestowing this magic item upon you as a gift, and they will be expecting you to return it following the extermination of the Wicked Witch. If the pendant were to go missing, I feel sure the dragonutes would attempt to avenge its loss, starting with my capture and summary execution.”

A hush fell over the room as this sank in, though it had to be said that Gamm derived a little bit of satisfaction from seeing Fayh squirm, *especially* since the

human peddler had been acting like the dominant party for the entirety of this meeting. But even all of this didn't mean Gamm would readily agree to wage war on the tower witch, so after several seconds of uncomfortable silence, Fayh delivered the finishing blow.

"I have heard that the Wolf Tribe has currently been experiencing an ebb in credibility," Fayh stated. "I believe a Mr. Garou met a cruel end in a dungeon after you endorsed him to be your heir apparent who would one day take over as the leader of your tribe. But even though you have sent some of your best men to retrieve Mr. Garou's remains, none have succeeded, causing several in your tribe to question your leadership, all while the other tribes laugh about you behind your back."

Gamm's face stiffened at Fayh's account.



“Well, naturally, there is no way to change the past, but my superiors would prefer you not to lose any more influence than you already have. We will boost your funds to compensate you for the trouble, and if all goes well, the outcome will be greatly beneficial to the Wolf Tribe, for once the assignment is complete, we will reward you with multiple magic items every bit as powerful as the one you are currently holding.”

Gamm kept his fiercely piercing gaze trained on Fayh without saying a word, but the wolfman was tempted by the idea of regaining his clout among his peers by leading his nation into war against the Great Tower. On top of that, not only would Gamm be paid handsomely for it, the dragonutes would also be greatly indebted to him, as would the elves and dark elves. The idea of scoring a set of powerful magic items was simply the icing on a very enticing cake. Gamm had already concluded that the tools and support being offered by the dragonutes gave the beastfolk a very good chance of defeating the Wicked Witch, so he began to weigh up his options in his head.

I don't like the sense that the dragonutes are making me dance like some cheap marionette, but if I refuse, they'll just hit up the Tiger Tribe with the same deal, thought Gamm. And if the Tiger Tribe does end up leading the charge in what turns out to be a successful war on the tower, my tribe will stay stuck in their shadow for decades on end. I'd never be able to survive the loss of face if that happened.

Plus, if the worst were to happen, he could simply escape with that translocation item and still live a fairly opulent life on the assets he kept offshore. Gamm could also smuggle his family out of the federation to join him in his new life of self-imposed exile, so he wasn't really risking all that much even if he ended up losing to the witch.

Once he'd arrived at his conclusion, Gamm clicked his tongue indignantly. “Fine, you win. I'll lead this war of yours. But you'd better not forget about my payoff for doing this.”

“There is no fear of that happening, I assure you,” Fayh replied. “I will relay your requirements in full to my superiors.”

Fayh and Gamm exchanged a firm handshake to signify the commencement

of their collusion in taking down the Wicked Witch of the Tower.

Chapter 4: Proposing War

The five beastfolk chieftains were holding another top-level meeting in the federal capital, and as chance would have it, the Wolf Tribe's chieftain, Gamm, was the moderator this time around. He began the session with an explosive suggestion.

"I propose we issue a declaration of war against the Great Tower," Gamm announced. "Sitting on our haunches twiddling our thumbs will only lead to our eventual downfall. We need to flatten them before they gather the strength to flatten us first!"

Lebad, Ozo, and Beny looked at Gamm open-mouthed, as if they couldn't believe what they were hearing, but the wolfman calmly continued to state his piece, knowing that he was likely to face a bit of initial resistance.

"I assure you that lives won't be sacrificed needlessly," Gamm told the assembled chieftains. "What I'm putting on the table will give us a very solid chance of winning."

"Do you honestly think we can win?" Beny asked. She and a number of the others in the meeting were thinking Gamm must have gone insane if he believed that was a viable course of action. At the very least, the wolfman must have forgotten the fact that the Wicked Witch had toppled the powerful Elven Queendom by swooping down on the capital with a swarm of dragons. In previous meetings, the chieftains had shared intelligence that strongly suggested the witch had decapitated the power structure in the Dark Elf Islands as well. So given everything they already knew, why in the world would Gamm want to enter into a ruinous conflict with the tower witch? Gamm's rival, Lebad, held his tongue, but it was obvious he was choking back a scornful laugh. His attitude irked Gamm, but he didn't let it sway his focus from the task of convincing the others to join his plot.

"Yes, I *am* well aware that the witch is an extremely powerful enemy," Gamm said. "However, she has a very powerful weakness, which is that she's an

ideologue who believes in the ‘absolute autonomy’ of humans. That means all we have to do to win is use that principle against her.”

This pronouncement drew everybody’s attention, and Gamm looked each of his fellow tribe leaders in the eye with a self-satisfied expression splashed across his face.

“It’s simple, really,” Gamm continued. “This witch sees herself as the protector of humans, meaning she won’t harm anyone from her race, right? So if we mobilize an army of humans against the tower witch, she’ll have no idea how to fight them. We’ve got plenty of human slaves within our borders, and we can buy even more slaves from the Human Kingdom and the other nations and make them fight for our cause. We’ll field a huge army of humans and smash that witch.”

Fayh had been the one to originally suggest fighting the Wicked Witch with humans, but Gamm was pitching the plan to his fellow chieftains as if he had come up with the notion himself. The first one to react was Ozo, who twisted his pipe in his fingers and snorted with laughter.

“That idea musta sounded a lot cleverer when you dreamed it up last night. You know as well as I do that the witch’ll just offer them slave soldiers safe haven and use her passel of dragons to shield ’em all,” Ozo scoffed. “We ain’t got no weapons that’ll shoot down her dragons, and there ain’t no guarantee them slaves will follow our orders on the battlefield. Incidentally, how’re you suggestin’ even gettin’ this huge gaggle of slaves all the way to the tower, anyhow? Gonna break the bank on a whole load of ships?”

“First of all, we don’t actually need to go to the tower, because our declaration of war will designate where the battle will take place,” Gamm said immediately, having come seemingly armed with responses to the apparent drawbacks in his plan. “And we don’t need to worry about humans following orders, because we’re gonna *make* them toe the line. We’ll hold their relatives, lovers, or friends hostage, and tell them we’ll kill their loved ones if they don’t do what we say. The slaves will have no choice but to fight like their lives depend on it. So when we buy humans from overseas slave markets, be sure to purchase as many families, couples, and close friends as possible.”

“Have you gone barking mad?!” Ozo yelled. “How do you think we’ll look doin’ something that *despicable*?! The federation’s reputation’ll never recover from such an outrage!”

“Mr. Ozo, your panic over a potential international scandal smacks of hyperbole,” Igor jumped in, raising a winged hand. “The inferiors held hostage will merely be an insurance policy to ensure we win this war against the tower witch. I, for one, am in favor of Mr. Gamm’s proposal. I will confess that Mr. Gamm spoke to me in advance about his plan, and I’ve already secured passage for the receipt of an anti-dragon magic item from the Dragonute Empire.”

Gamm and Igor had struck a deal prior to the meeting, which would see Igor’s tribe paid handsomely for ferrying the anti-dragon item and a number of other weapons across the sea from the Dragonute Empire, while also gaining relatively effortless prestige for making a vital contribution to the battle. Gamm had also furnished Igor with a generous honorarium up front in exchange for throwing his weight behind his war plan, and as a businessman, the wolfman’s offer was one the birdman couldn’t turn down.

“We’ll have a magic item that will drive off those dragons, and a whole human army that will have no choice but to go to war for us,” Gamm reiterated. “I’ve also managed to secure a secret weapon that will bring that damn witch to her knees. We’ll wipe the Great Tower off the map, and the elves and dark elves will owe us for generations to come. Now, what do you say to that? It’ll be easier than sending a kid to do the grocery shopping.”

“Well, sure, what you’re saying *sorta* makes sense, but how’re we supposed to get together a whole army of inferiors in just a few stinkin’ weeks?” Lebad said, deliberately trying to poke holes in Gamm’s proposal. “If we start moving that many bodies around in such a short space of time, the tower witch is bound to catch on quick.”

Gamm had known ahead of time that Lebad would try to second-guess him. “Putting together an entire army is easier said than done, but it *can* be done, trust me. Besides, we can add to the ranks by kidnapping a bunch of inferiors from their villages or on the highways, and my men are experts in that kind of dirty work. They aren’t like a bunch of scaredy-cats who shy away from taking on one measly little witch.”

Gamm fired shots back at Lebad by using the same rhetorical technique the pantherman had used against him in the past. Lebad's fury was so palpable, it was almost possible to see him turning red even through his black pelt. Gamm treated the pantherman to a long toothy grin, as if silently taunting him for being too craven to join a winnable battle. He knew that if Lebad were to actually back out of going to war—out of spite or otherwise—his reputation would take an irrecoverable hit. The Tiger Tribe was made up of warriors who had far too much pride to go exposing any vulnerabilities to the Wolf Tribe.

"Okay, we're in," Lebad relented. "Can't turn down a chance to have the elves and dark elves owing us big time. My boys will bag a bunch of inferiors too. We won't let you and the rest of the Wolf Tribe down."

"Good to have you with us," Gamm said with a genial smile. "But truth be told, I'm more worried about my boys being able to keep up with the highly reputable Tiger Tribe."

That meathead, Gamm thought mirthfully to himself behind his sunny smile. *All I had to do was bust his chops a little to get him on board.*

"It's still a no for me," Ozo said, his face stern. "A witch with a mess of dragons ain't nothin' to sneeze at. And in any case, we'd be fightin' way too dirty."

"I have to agree with Mr. Ozo on this matter," Beny said. "Even if we do have a strong chance of winning this war, the methods you are seeking to adopt are too barbaric for me to find tolerable. Plus, even assuming we get away with kidnapping humans in neighboring territories, how are we supposed to transport human captives from places farther away without drawing any attention?"

"You need to learn to be more flexible, Beny," Gamm said with an amused shrug of the shoulders. "You know that there's a perfectly easy way to ferry inferiors around without getting caught."

It took Beny a moment to realize what Gamm was referring to. "W-Wait, are you suggesting I lend my *trade ships* to this effort?! I mean, yes, we *could* hide captives among the cargo, but you'll be putting my rowers at risk. I will not participate in a scheme that places my crewmembers in danger!"

“So you’re prepared to sit back and do nothing while those inferiors go about creating a new world order?” Gamm said. “Do you want a future where your children and your children’s children are treated like slaves by that unwashed race?”

“No, th-that wasn’t what I was implying...” Beny said, and she didn’t utter another word for fear of finding herself defending an untenable position.

Gamm allowed an uncomfortable silence to settle stiflingly over the meeting chamber before moving on. “Well, if there’s nothing more to add, let’s take a vote. If my proposal gets a majority, we go to war. If the nays win, it’s back to the drawing board.”

Although this motion appeared fair and democratic, Gamm knew he had the two votes he needed in his pocket, and that this was nothing more than a meaningless formality. Even so, Ozo and Beny voted against the proposal to go to war, while casting bitter looks at Gamm for making them go through this pointless charade.

Chapter 5: A Brand-New Life

In my office in the Abyss, I scanned the document I'd been given by Mei with a satisfied grin on my face. "Well, it looks like we're officially partner nations with the Dwarf Kingdom now. Though that's not something we can really mention elsewhere."

"Indeed, Master Light," Mei said. "And it is all thanks to your leadership during the exploration of those ruins."

"True, but I did have help from you and the others too," I pointed out. "I can't take all the credit."

Mei beamed. "I thank you for the compliment, Master Light. I am sure the others will also be pleased to hear that."

Mei never usually smiled this broadly—in fact, her face very rarely, if ever, betrayed any emotion at all—but my praise for her had broken through her otherwise cool exterior. Though just as Mei had said, we had managed to gain the Dwarf Kingdom's trust by aiding King Dagan in exploring a set of huge underground ruins the dwarves had kept secret for centuries. The Dwarf Kingdom had subsequently signed a document affirming that they would treat me and my allies as a friendly "nation" of equal standing—in secret, naturally. This was certainly a first, since we'd had to strong-arm the Elven Queendom and the Dark Elf Islands into becoming client states to get them to come around to our way of thinking.

I put the document down and sipped the tea Mei had prepared for me. "Speaking of the Dwarf Kingdom, that first dungeon that Nemumu, Gold, and I quested in was located there. That's where we met Miya and Elio. Y'know, it's been quite a while since I saw them last. Unfortunately, they quit being adventurers and returned to their hometown. I hope they're doing okay in their new life."

"Would you like us to send some people out to confirm that they are well?" Mei asked.

“No, we don’t have to go that far,” I said, waving away the suggestion. “I was just reminiscing about the old days, that’s all.”

“Forgive me, Master Light, for speaking out of turn,” Mei replied. Her overly rigid apology made me chuckle awkwardly.

“It’s fine, Mei,” I said, holding my empty teacup out toward her. “Hey, can I get another cup of that tea? Gotta say, I love your brews.”

“Why, certainly, Master Light,” Mei replied, breaking out into a smile again. “On my honor as a maid, I shall refill your cup.”

Since she had been by my side the longest out of all of my summons, Mei knew I was just buttering her up to make her feel better, but she let it slide regardless. Instead of remarking on it, she took my cup in high spirits and poured me out some more tea, which I genuinely found delicious. Seeing her acting so sunny helped to lift my own spirits, and I returned to my task of reviewing the documents in front of me. Neither of us could have foreseen that my decision not to check up on Miya and Elio would come back to haunt me.



Miya awoke with a yawn as the morning sun broke over the horizon, and she sat up in her simple wooden bed before spending roughly the next minute rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, her red hair a mess of pillow-mussed locks. Wearing just a shirt and underwear, Miya finally climbed out of bed and opened the wooden-framed window to let in the cool dawn air, then she patted down her hair and changed into the mage outfit she’d worn in her adventuring days. She had retired from questing to train as a healer, but she figured it made no economic sense to simply toss out her old outfit. Furthermore, this mage garb was made of a stain-resistant material designed specifically for questing in dungeons, so it turned out quite handy for the sometimes-messy task of making drugs.

When Miya had first decided to return to her village, she had thought she would have to scrape by somehow with the support of a distant relative, but on that journey home, spurred on by her party’s deadly encounter with Kyto the elf, she learned how to cast the Lowheal spell. When the village chieftain learned that Miya was proficient in Lowheal, it was recommended that the

young mage be apprenticed to the village's healer. While the old woman had a granddaughter who was in line to take over her apothecary, she was currently attending a school in the Principality of the Nine to develop her skills, and since there was a good possibility that she might end up choosing a life that would take her away from her hometown, the village chieftain convinced the healer to train up Miya as a contingency measure.

During her time as an adventurer, Miya had struggled to heal wounds, to the point where she'd dearly wished she was better versed in medicinal herbs. After all, if she'd had some basic knowledge about them under her belt, she would've been able to cure people without needing to resort to spending money on expensive potions. Though she also had another reason for wanting to learn the ways of the apothecary: *If I know how to make drugs, I might be able to heal Dark's burn scars.*

Even though Dark was younger than Miya, she looked up to him because he was a powerful mage who had saved her from a bush snake, and later, from Kyto. She had learned that Dark had disfiguring scars all over his face after surviving a deadly fire, and she desperately wanted to heal those scars so he wouldn't have to wear a mask all the time.

Once she finished putting on her clothes, she went over to her desk where she had placed a bracelet with care on top of a handkerchief. After hearing about Dark's scars, Miya had given him some homemade burn salve to thank him for helping her party with a quest. Although it was a low-grade ointment, Dark reciprocated by giving Miya a bracelet made of yarn that was a dazzling red color to match her hair. What Miya hadn't known at the time was that Dark—Light's alter ego—had given her an SSR Wish Bracelet, which was able to perform a "minor miracle" if the wearer wished hard enough. Light and his allies had been unable to activate the Wish Bracelet when previously testing it, so he had come to the conclusion that it would be safe to give it to Miya as a simple gift, since he had no use for it anyway. In any case, he had thought the bracelet looked nice, and with a bit of luck, it would even prove useful to Miya later down the line. And as chance would have it, the Wish Bracelet *did* in fact work in Miya's hour of need, whisking her away from Kyto's blade and certain death, and this minor miracle was also instrumental in leading Light's party to

Elio just in time to rescue him from a gruesome fate.

Unfortunately, Miya had lost the original Wish Bracelet when she passed out from her injuries, and ever since, she had tried to find the same bracelet by scouring the wares of every peddler she met. But no one sold a bracelet in the same showy red as the original, so Miya had ended up modifying a similar-looking bracelet with expensive red yarn. It was this bracelet that she picked up from her desk, tied around her wrist, and stroked lovingly.

Since Miya was now an apprentice healer, she and her brother, Elio, had been allotted a plot of land sufficiently large enough to grow enough food for the two of them, meaning they didn't need to rely on any distant relatives for help. As for Elio, due to his experience as a fighter and an adventurer, the village had appointed him the leader of the local militia. So even though they had given up the adventuring life rather abruptly after their harrowing experience in the last dungeon they visited, the two siblings had been able to establish a stable new life in their old village quickly enough.

Now that she was fully outfitted and accessorized, Miya set about her morning chores, starting with taking a bucket down to the well where mothers and young girls had already gathered to retrieve water for their families, though it also served as a place to gather and socialize, and upon getting there, Miya immediately struck up a conversation with a friend of hers.

"Wow, this Dark guy must really be something," Miya's friend said. She had dirty blonde hair, freckles, and the kind of features that pegged her as a typical country girl.

"Yeah, he really is," Miya gushed. "Dark can perform attack magic without reciting chants, and practically no other human in history was capable of doing that. But despite how talented he is, he's really modest and a total gentleman, and he's still striving to become a better mage, and he—"

Although this was supposed to be a two-way conversation, the other girl could hardly get a word in edgewise, so she mostly nodded along and acted like she was following, as she had done plenty of times before. Some distance away, a number of young men were peeking around a building at Miya as she rambled on about Dark. One of the boys growled audibly in frustration at the sight.

“Miya comes home at last, but she’s totally in love with this ‘Dark’ dude!” said one of the other teenagers. “Elio! Who the hell is he, anyway?”

“Miya’s the goddess of our village!” a third boy said. “What happened between the two of them that makes him so special to her?”

The youths were on their way to get some sword-and-shield training from Elio before breakfast. The idea behind these early morning sessions was to get them battle-ready to take on goblins and other monsters that might attack the village, as a way to limit the number of injuries and fatalities. The participants trained with wooden swords and shields, and they were carrying these mock weapons as they angrily approached Elio.

“Like I’ve told you many, *many* times before, Dark saved me and my sister from a killer,” Elio retorted, but his exasperated expression quickly softened and gave way to a far-off look. “He’s a hero through and through.”

If Dark hadn’t been there, Elio and his sister would have met the same fate as their childhood friends, Gimra and Wordy. Prior to that tragic day, Dark and his friends had already helped Elio’s party on several occasions, so Elio had every reason to call Dark a hero. But to these young men who had never set foot outside of their village, Dark was a complete unknown, and they felt Elio was going overboard calling this nobody a “hero.” For his part, Elio could always sense their unbridled incredulity whenever he spoke about Dark’s exploits.

I guess it’s no use just talking about how amazing Dark is, thought Elio. *They need to see him in action with their own eyes.* Elio owed Dark his life, but he had no way of credibly relating how heroic he was to others, and it had even gotten to the point where Dark’s reputation could only sink to new lows if Elio and Miya kept on singing the praises of this unknown young adventurer.

Elio decided to change the subject and adopted a jokey tone. “Anyway, I *still* can’t wrap my head around why you guys are worshipping my kid sister all of a sudden.”

One of the teens sighed. “It figures you wouldn’t notice how cute Miya is, seeing how you’re her brother and all.”

“I’ll admit she didn’t really stand out from the other girls before she left,” another of the boys piped up. “But after coming back from adventuring, she

seems a lot more sunny and sophisticated. She has this glow to her that's totally different from the other girls!"

"Yeah! Like, you don't notice it straightaway, but once you pay attention, you see she's actually pretty cute," said a third young man. "Plus, she hides it under that mage outfit of hers, but she's definitely got killer curves for a girl her age!"

"She's also as gentle and ladylike as can be, especially when she's putting ointment on an injury," a fourth speaker added. "Unlike the other women around here, she actually seems to care that you got hurt, and when you thank her for it, she gives you a real, honest-to-goodness smile! So if she's not a goddess, who is?"

"Uh, I'm flattered you feel that way about my sister, I guess?" Elio said, slapping his free hand to his forehead. "No, on second thought, a lot of what I just heard was awkward on so many levels." He cleared his throat to help clear his mind. "Anyway, I'm not marrying my sister off to a chump who can't even beat me in a swordfight. If you want Miya, you'd better train like your life depends on it!"

"What? We have to win? Against *you*?" one of the young men said incredulously.

"Aw, c'mon. You're *way* too good!" a second teen agreed. "You won a three-on-one battle easily just yesterday, remember? None of us here can take you alone!"

Not only had Elio survived the battle with Kyto, he had also managed to land a clean hit on the Level 1500 elf, thanks to the pointers he had received from Gold, one of Dark's partymates. As a result, Elio's combat skills had shot up to a level where he was all but unbeatable for young fighters who had only just started training, even if they ganged up on him.

"Just keep training, and one day, you'll be as strong as me. Now, come on! Time to start your drills!" Elio replied with a bashful grin.

The young men followed Elio to the training area, where he would coach them on the same fundamentals that Gold had taught Elio's party.



“No signs of insects on the leaves,” Miya said. “No damage to the stems. And no signs of wilting either. I think everything looks A-okay.”

Miya was busy inspecting the herb garden behind the apothecary. As an apprentice, it was Miya’s job to make sure no pests or diseases were affecting the medicinal herbs, because if they were, the crop would be ruined. After checking over the plants, Miya picked some specific herbs and placed them in a basket, and once she had gathered enough, she returned to the healer, who was waiting for her in her workspace.

“Ma’am, I’m done checking the plants, and they all look fine,” Miya said. “I also picked the herbs needed for making the ointments. Please feel free to double-check them.”

“Thank you, sweetie,” the town’s healer said. She was wearing a headscarf that made her look a bit like an elderly witch. “Lessee what we’ve got in here...”

Miya’s trainer took the basket from her and started rifling through the herbs. “Yes, these look good enough for our ointments. Miya, could you prepare some water?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Miya replied. “I’ll get everything ready!” Miya grabbed an empty bucket and placed it on the table, then placed a mortar and pestle, the ingredients, and some other necessities on the tabletop as well. To provide the finishing touch, Miya grabbed the staff that was leaning against the table and recited a spell.

“Magic power, heed my call! Reveal thy shape as a water ball!”

A sphere of water appeared in midair and slowly maneuvered itself above the bucket before proceeding to fill it. It was a simple spell, but a party with a mage capable of pulling off this trick would never lack for water while questing through a dungeon. For that reason, such mages were in high demand among adventuring parties—especially those that regularly spent days exploring dungeons—but in a village, water spells like this one were largely redundant, since there were usually wells around. But the healer had a very good reason for making an exception for her medicine.

“Thank you, Miya,” the old woman said. “Your water always makes my medicine that much more potent.”

“I’m glad I can help!” Miya replied, smiling bashfully. “Though all I did was make water...”

The healer’s granddaughter was studying apothecarial sciences in the Principality of the Nine, and in one of her letters to her grandmother, she had mentioned that, according to a recent scientific paper, water made with mana was more efficacious in herbal medicine than regular water. After receiving the letter, the healer had decided to test out these findings on her own products using Miya’s powers, and it turned out that mana-filled water *did* add more potency to the medication. As such, the healer was able to sell the resulting wares at a higher price.

Meanwhile, Miya continued to study diligently under the elderly healer, with her ultimate goal being to attain enough know-how to make an elixir that could heal Dark’s burn scars. Whenever she wasn’t studying drug-making, Miya would practice her spells, and her assiduousness drew the admiration of her tutor.

“You’re such a good, hardworking child, Miya dear,” the healer said to her. “Now, let’s get started on making these ointments.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Miya replied. “I hope to learn more from you today.”

On this particular day, Miya was making ointments for wounds with the healer, and the two of them working side by side made for a heartwarming intergenerational picture. However, the peace and tranquility of this scene was abruptly disrupted by a knocking on the door.

“Hello. Might we ask your name?” Miya called out.

“Miya, it’s me!” the visitor replied.

“Elio?” Miya said, sounding surprised. Her brother should have been doing farmwork at this hour, and he normally had no reason to visit the apothecary anyway. *Has someone been hurt? Does he need medication?* Miya thought as she rushed over to open the door. Elio stood there in the doorway, but his demeanor suggested it wasn’t an emergency.

“Sorry for coming here unannounced,” Elio said. “But I thought I’d swing by to let you know that the merchant’s arrived.”

“He’s here already?” Miya said. “I didn’t expect him to get here so soon.”

The village had no general merchandise store to speak of, so the community had to rely on a merchant who would stop by once a month to trade goods. Or to be more accurate, *roughly* once a month, since accidents, inclement weather, and monster attacks tended to mean he showed up in the village at somewhat irregular intervals. This month, though, the merchant had arrived noticeably ahead of schedule.

“Thanks for letting us know, brother,” Miya said. “Could you help us carry the medicine to the trader?”

“Sure thing,” Elio replied. “I figured you’d need a hand, so that’s why I came over.” The healer was one of the many villagers who did business with the merchant, and whenever his horse-drawn wagon rolled into town, she would sell her surplus medicine to him. For his part, the merchant never missed an opportunity to purchase drugs from the healer, since her products were highly effective thanks to Miya’s water balls.

“Brother, you can take that box,” Miya instructed.

“You got it, sis,” Elio said, picking up the box with a grunt.

“Thank you, sonny,” the healer said to Elio. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Elio flashed her a smile. “It’s the least I can do. You’re looking after my sister, after all.”

The healer had a bad leg, so in the past, the trader had to come all the way to her shop to buy from her, but now that the old matron had help from Miya and Elio, she was able to spare the merchant an unnecessary trip.

The healer smiled with her eyes at Elio. “You’re a good kid, just like your sister, sweetie.”

Elio laughed dryly. “Thanks, ma’am.” If it were his choice, he would have rather she didn’t call him “sweetie” like she did his sister, but he chose to diplomatically laugh it off instead of making a fuss about it.

“Elio, we have to go,” Miya pressed him. “Ma’am, we’ll sell your medicines for you.”

“Yes, thank you, sweetie,” the healer replied. “I’ll be right here making ointments.”

Miya and Elio made their way to the center of the village, chatting as they went, and when they got to the main square that was their destination, they found a covered one-horse wagon that had seen better days and another horse-drawn carriage behind it. The first wagon was laden with salt, textiles, metalware, nails, and other items that couldn’t be found in the village, and normally by this point, the villagers would have been milling around this wagon, either looking to buy things or simply amusing themselves by taking this rare chance to do a bit of window-shopping. But this time, the trader had brought five escorts with him and they looked like absolute hoodlums. Each one had dark sunglasses on and sported a mohawk-style haircut.

“Hell yeah! We finally made it to civilization, boys!” one of the Mohawks whooped.

“Wahoo! They’ve even got a frickin’ well in this place!” a second Mohawk hollered. “We can drown ourselves in drinkin’ water!”

“Rather drown myself in cold booze and hot meals, y’feel me?” said a third.

“Yo, are we gonna be able to crash on some real beds ’round here?” a fourth Mohawk asked.

The fifth and final Mohawk chuckled disturbingly. “Man, I tell ya, tonight’s gonna be off the wall!”

The Mohawks were making such a spectacle that the villagers were keeping their distance from both carriages. Even Elio and Miya were taken aback by the sight and paused before they got any closer to them.

“B-Brother, who are those guys?” Miya asked.

“I-I’ve never seen them before either,” Elio said. “I just heard the merchant was in town and came over to tell you. I didn’t know he’d brought *this* kind of company with him.”

The merchant in question caught sight of the two siblings and his somber expression instantly evaporated into a smile. “Elio! Miya!” he called over to them.

The plump, middle-aged trader went by the name of Yoerm, and he sprinted over to the pair with a swiftness nobody would have guessed he was capable of.

“I was hoping to see you two!” Yoerm cooed. “Is all of that this month’s drugs? Thanks a bunch, you guys! People are saying this village makes miracle drugs, I tell you what. Ah, I’ll get those for you, thanks. I was also hoping I might be able to have a little chitchat with the two of you. But it’s gotta be hush-hush, if that’s all right with you. Anyway, come along. We need to take this somewhere a little quieter.”

Yoerm spoke breathlessly as he transferred the box of medicines to his covered wagon. Then, once his hands were free, he placed them on Elio’s and Miya’s backs and forcefully propelled them away from prying eyes without giving either teenager the chance to say anything to the contrary. Yoerm told the Mohawks to keep an eye on the goods while he was gone, then pushed and prodded Elio and Miya all the way to the siblings’ new dwelling.

Elio and Miya’s parents had died in an epidemic, and to make sure the disease wouldn’t spread further, the villagers had burned down their old house. On top of that, the family farm was sold off to pay for their parents’ treatment, so with nowhere else to go, Elio and Miya had begun their new lives as adventurers. Gimra and Wordy had joined them because they were the second and third child of their respective families, meaning they had no other viable prospects anyway. When they retired from adventuring, Elio and Miya bought an empty house in the village with the money they had saved up from questing, while Gimra and Wordy’s share of the pot was given to their families, who used the funds to make graves for them. Whenever Elio and Miya had some free time, they would tend to their friends’ graves.

Elio and Miya decided not to protest their seemingly mandatory relocation to their home, since they sensed Yoerm had something pressing to discuss. As soon as he had shut the door behind them, Yoerm turned to the siblings and bowed to apologize.

“Sorry for dragging you two all the way here and barging into your home,” Yoerm said. “It was necessary, ’cause I need to ask you two a favor, but I couldn’t do it back there.”

“You couldn’t ask us in the village square?” Miya said with an adorable tilt of the head.

“Don’t know if you’re aware, but it’s getting more and more perilous traveling on the highways these days,” Yoerm said animatedly. “I’ve heard stories about people getting assaulted on the road, and even whole villages getting attacked and burned down. ’Cause of that, merchants have been hiring adventurers left and right to provide them with some protection, and thanks to this jump in demand, the only bodyguards I could get were those crooked-looking fellas back there.”

Elio and Miya thought back to the adventurers they had seen by the carriages. Not only did they have Mohican-style haircuts and wear sunglasses, they also sported leather jackets with shoulder pads that had metal spikes attached, and that only served to amplify their bad-guy image. And despite being human, the Mohawks all had sturdy physiques, and an intimidating aura radiated from them.

“I’m traveling to a city near the Duchy, but to be quite honest with you, I’m not all that comfortable relying solely on their protection. You two are skilled adventurers, so basically, I’d like you to accompany me on the trip as an extra layer of security. Of course, I’ll even pay you extra for the trouble!”

Yoerm bowed his head after saying his piece, and Elio and Miya now understood why the merchant hadn’t been able to speak to them about it in the square, since they would’ve been within earshot of the Mohawks. Still, they were unsure how to respond to his request.

It’ll take at least ten days to get to that city and back, so I guess the village can manage fine without us for that length of time, thought Elio. But we quit being adventurers, so is it right for us to take this job? Besides, we have next to no experience being bodyguards for merchants...

Elio and Miya had every right to refuse the request, but they also had to factor in the not-insignificant chance that Yoerm might respond by simply refusing to stop by their village again, which would leave the villagers unable to get their hands on hard-to-obtain products, as well as no longer getting the latest news from the outside world. Plus, Elio and Miya felt a sense of kinship

and obligation to Yoerm because the siblings had known the merchant since they were children, and nowadays, he purchased medication from Miya at generous markups. The siblings looked at each other, and Miya nodded slightly, signaling that she was on board with taking on the job. Elio scratched his head before finally giving in.

“All right, we’ll do it,” Elio said. “We’ll take the job.”

“You mean it?” Yoerm cried. “Thank you so much! I owe you the moon!”

“But Miya and I are no longer adventurers,” Elio insisted. “So please treat us as simple travelers who are accompanying you to this city, rather than full-fledged bodyguards.”

Villagers often paid traveling merchants to give them a lift to wherever they wanted to go, except in this arrangement, Elio was essentially telling Yoerm to pay him and Miya to go on this trip. Elio wanted to maintain appearances, not just for him and his sister, but also for the vicious-looking Mohawk adventurers Yoerm had originally hired for security. If it came out that Elio and Miya were escorts too, the Mohawks would suffer a hit to their reputation and market value.

Yoerm wholeheartedly accepted this proposal. “Of course! Anything you ask! I’ll feel so much better with you two beside me!”

“Don’t go expecting too much from us, though,” Elio said. “This is our first real escort job, after all.” Miya nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Even so, the three of us go way back, and I know how skilled you kids are,” Yoerm said. “Just having you two around will put me at ease, trust me. No offense to those Mohawk guys, but they scare me out of my wits.” Yoerm had been spending every waking and nonwaking hour around these adventurers who might very well be violent outlaws, judging by their appearances, and the experience was obviously wearing away at him mentally.

Yoerm, Elio, and Miya then set about hashing out the other details of their arrangement: Yoerm would cover all travel and food costs, but Elio and Miya would pay for any costs they incurred while in the city itself. With the bodyguard fee included, Yoerm was left with a pretty hefty bill, but he was willing to spend that kind of money just for some peace of mind. Once they had

finalized the deal, the three returned to the village square to tell the Mohawks that two new passengers would be joining them on their travels. Yoerm and Elio took the red-haired leader of the escorts to one side to discuss the matter, leaving the other Mohawks to leer at Miya from a distance.

“Yo, check out that chick,” one of the Mohawks whispered.

“She’s one fine-looking babe all right,” a second one murmured, chuckling lasciviously. “Can’t wait till we’re out on the open road where we can *really* get to know her.”

“So we’re stickin’ to the plan? You dudes all in?” whispered a third Mohawk.

“Damn right we are,” the fourth said in a similarly hushed tone. “Gotta do what we gotta do.”

Miya made a show of averting her eyes and ignoring these disgusting comments, but she started running mental simulations on how she would respond if the Mohawks really did try to assault her. As a former adventurer, she had dealt with her fair share of dangerous situations, so she was confident she would be able to fight off the Mohawks if it came to it.

Of course, what Miya was unaware of was that the Mohawks were Light’s summons, and they had recognized Miya and Elio as former acquaintances of their master. Even though their secretive conversation didn’t exactly suggest it, they meant Miya absolutely no harm, and “the plan” they were referring to was to use the Unlimited Gacha cards they had on them to save the siblings if they encountered any real danger. Alas, the Mohawks’ sketchy appearances and unfortunate choice of words meant a misunderstanding from the start was practically inevitable.

Once Elio had finished talking to the Mohawk leader, he and Miya collected the money for the drugs and went off to give the cash to the healer. Yoerm morphed his face into his standard salesman’s smile and started trading with the other villagers, which the Mohawks took as a signal to spread out to positions where they could more easily guard the carriages and where they wouldn’t get in the way of their paymaster’s business. At least in this aspect, the Mohawks were model professionals. The villagers still found them extremely scary-looking, but they weren’t going to be put off from buying the

items they needed, so they timidly approached Yoerm's carriage.

Elio and Miya didn't bother to stop and watch the scene unfolding in the village square, and proceeded directly to the apothecary. When they arrived there, Miya spoke with the old woman to get permission to go off with Yoerm, while Elio went off to inform the militia about his absence and to ask his neighbors to look after his farm for him.

By the end of the day, Elio and Miya had packed what they would need for the following day's journey. Yoerm always spent the night in the village whenever he dropped by, and on this occasion, the Mohawks bedded down at an inn that was available for adventurers who were passing through. The next morning, Elio, Miya, and the Mohawks all assembled at Yoerm's carriage, ready to get underway. The siblings were to take a round trip to the city that would take about ten days in total, or fifteen at the longest. Elio carted along the trusty sword and shield he had wielded back in his adventuring days, plus some other equipment he felt he might need, while Miya brought her staff, deciding that she would approach the trip with the mindset of a mage on a quest rather than an apprentice healer.

"All right, everybody," Yoerm said. "Let's make this trip a good one, shall we?"

The Mohawk leader chuckled. "Ya got nothin' to worry about, pops. From what I hear, these kids know how to handle themselves, and they should be good to go, so long as they follow our instructions."

"Understood, sir," Elio said. "We'll listen to everything you say, and won't inconvenience you at all."

Miya stayed silent and positioned herself behind her brother, partially out of her habitual shyness and partially because she feared the Mohawks. The sunglass-wearing goons, meanwhile, grinned slyly at the two teenagers throughout the gathering. Once Yoerm had told everyone which carriage they would be traveling in, he broke up the meeting and prepared to depart the village.



Elio and Miya sat near the back entrance of Yoerm's covered wagon for hours, watching for danger from the rear, while the Mohawks in the other carriage

acted as the vanguard. If the caravan encountered any trouble up front, Elio and Miya would be informed and they would then make a decision on whether to fight or flee. Before Yoerm had rolled into the village, a couple of the Mohawks had taken up this rear position. On the first stretch of the journey that day, Elio and Miya managed to avoid any trouble with the Mohawks, since they were in separate carriages, but when they stopped for lunch and the two parties finally interacted with each other, Miya was in for a shock.

“What?” Miya said, her voice reverberating off her surroundings. “You guys used to know Dark’s party?”

With the noon sun at its zenith, the caravan had parked beside a riverbank, and the horses had been untethered to allow them to drink some water and eat their feed. The Mohawks were making a stew over a simple stove made out of stones, and Miya had volunteered to help, in part to make sure nothing unusual was added to the food. In the course of making the stew, one of the Mohawks had mentioned Light’s alias.

That same Mohawk laughed. “So you really *are* the mage Lord Dark was goin’ on about, huh? He kept sayin’ he can’t wait to see how powerful Miya’ll turn out to be. We kept wonderin’ if ya really was her, since ya got the same name and the description matched, but I never thought we’d be meetin’ the real Miya in the flesh!”

“I’m just as shocked as you are,” Miya admitted. “I didn’t know you gentlemen fought with Dark, Mr. Gold, and Miss Nemumu.”

Elio and the red-haired Mohawk leader returned from feeding and watering the horses and joined in with the conversation.

“Mr. Gold had good things to say ’bout how ya use that shield of yours, Elio, my man,” the Mohawk leader said. “Mr. Gold saved our hides a bunch of times when we were fightin’ them huge snake-tailed monsters near the Great Tower, so if he says yer good with a shield, we best believe it.”

“Oh, no, I’m still nowhere near Mr. Gold’s level,” Elio replied bashfully. “Still, I can’t believe he’d say that about me...”

Elio broke out into a goofy grin, which he quickly covered with his hand, feeling rather self-conscious. Meanwhile, Miya’s eyes were all aglitter now that

the focus of conversation was her favorite topic of all: Dark.

“Can you tell me more about Dark and his party?” Miya asked the Mohawks.

“Sure thing, kid,” one of the Mohawks replied, letting out a belly laugh. “An’ believe me, there’s a whole lotta stuff to talk about when it comes to them.”

“They really did save our butts during that battle near the Great Tower,” a second Mohawk added. “We’ve made it our mission to spread the legend of Lord Dark and his gang!”

The Mohawks began to describe at length the decoy operation they had participated in at the Elven Queendom, though it should be noted that it wasn’t the presence of a cute girl that motivated the Mohawks to play up their exploits. No, the Mohawks had received express orders from their superiors in the Abyss to spread the word about Light’s party, the Black Fools, so that they would gain more name recognition and their rank in the guilds would be raised. It should also be noted that the decoy operation in question had been a complete ruse—or rather, a superb performance that was engineered by Light’s allies.

The “snake-tailed monsters” were actually Snake Hellhounds native to the Abyss that had been tamed by Aoyuki. Although Gold and Nemumu had indeed taken part in the decoy operation, they had been joined by Light’s body double. The White Knights had ordered this decoy operation so that they could infiltrate the Great Tower in secret, but in reality, it had all been a trap to lure Sasha and the White Knights inside. The diversionary operation had served a double purpose of boosting the reputation of the Black Fools, but the Mohawks didn’t see any need to fill Miya in on the *true* backstory. In fact, they had a bit of fun telling the others the partly embellished tale, while also making sure that Yoerm overheard so that he would also spread the stories on his travels. Miya and Elio’s presence had the added bonus of bringing Dark’s legendary achievements to the forefront naturally.

“Us’n a buncha other adventurers charged into the forest after these huge magical flares lit up the sky to attract the monsters in there, you dig?” one of the Mohawks explained. “Then, before we knew it, these ginormous beasts with living snake tails were towerin’ over us, ready to chomp our freakin’ heads off! Ya shoulda seen ’em! They looked like they were straight outta some ghost story!”

“So anyway, there we were, with these things scaring the livin’ lunch outta us adventurers,” a second Mohawk said, picking up the thread of the story. “But get this. Lord Dark rushes out in front like he’s protectin’ us from the monsters, and then Mr. Gold and Miss Nemumu run up beside ’im too. So Lord Dark’s standing in the shadow of these huge growlin’ beasts, when all of a sudden, he turns around and tells us in this divine voice that rings out for miles...”

Food in hand, Miya and Elio listened to the Mohawks, enraptured by their grandiloquent account of their battle alongside Dark. Before the siblings realized it, lunch was long since over and they needed to hit the road again. But thanks to their shared connection with Dark, Miya and Elio had bonded with the Mohawks, and they now treated the funny-looking men like they were old partymates of theirs.

Chapter 6: Versus the Goblins

The caravan rattled along toward the city near the Principality of the Nine, with the Mohawks as the vanguard and Yoerm, Elio, and Miya in the covered wagon behind. While keeping an eye out for danger from their seats at the back of their wagon, the two siblings chatted about the delightful lunchtime conversation they'd had with their new friends, the Mohawks.

"It's just like Dark to lead such a stirring battle in the Elven Queendom," Miya gushed. "I hope I get to see him again, so we can talk about magic and stuff!"

"I'm looking forward to getting more pointers on sword-and-shield from Gold," Elio remarked. "He only taught us a tiny smidge back in that dungeon, and I *know* I can learn a lot more from him."

The third member of Dark's party, Nemumu, was conspicuously absent from their conversation, but this wasn't because Elio and Miya were purposely avoiding talking about her. The pair simply hadn't spent all that much time getting to know Nemumu back in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, which likely explained why her name hadn't come up in their discussion.

"The Mohawks said Gold and his party were heading for the Dwarf Kingdom capital the last time they ran into them, so I don't think we'll see them for a while," Elio noted. He and Miya resided in the village of their births in the Human Kingdom, and even though the Dwarf Kingdom to the west was the next nation over, their village was located closer to the border of the Elven Queendom than the Dwarf Kingdom. Common sense told them they were too far away from Dark to meet up with him anytime soon.

"But the Mohawks said Dark wanted to see us too," Miya said cheerfully. "The Mohawks also promised they'd tell Dark how much we're missing him when they see him again. So once they tell him, he's *bound* to come visit our village!"

Miya smiled as she recalled the words one of the Mohawks had said to her when the caravan had stopped for lunch.

“We ain’t gonna be pullin’ outta the questing game in this lifetime, kid, so we’ll run into Lord Dark again quicker’n you can catch your breath,” the Mohawk had said. “When we do end up crossin’ paths with Lord Dark, we’ll be sure to tell ’im you two are dyin’ to see ’im again,” he’d added with a barking laugh.

Perched on his seat in the covered wagon, Elio nodded in agreement with his sister. “Yeah, you’re right. Dark’s party will definitely come see us someday.”

“Elio, Miya,” Yoerm interjected from the driver’s seat. “I see that not only have you two hit it off with the Mohawks, you also share a common acquaintance you want to relay a message to. It’s a mighty fine blessing having this Dark fella as a conversation starter, but...” His shoulders drooped. “But now I’m realizing that despite appearances, those Mohawk guys are way more responsible and professional than I took them for. There was really no point hiring you two as extra bodyguards.”

While extolling Dark and his party’s feats at great length, the Mohawks had also dropped in bits about their own exploits as adventurers, as well as the steadfast pride and conviction they had for their profession. It was clear the Mohawks weren’t the sort of band of vagabonds who would simply abandon their employer if they encountered a powerful monster or a group of bandits, and Yoerm knew they were speaking the truth about their dedication to their work, because as a trader, he conversed with plenty of people and had developed an ear for when someone was feeding him a pack of lies. In any case, Miya and Elio had bonded with the Mohawks, and if these two people that he trusted had that much faith in them, that meant the Mohawks weren’t the kind of ne’er-do-wells who would attack Yoerm in his sleep, at the very least. It also meant Yoerm had wasted all that money hiring Miya and Elio as an additional layer of protection when they weren’t really needed, which prompted the traveling salesman to heave yet another sigh.

“This is why they say to never judge a book by its cover,” Yoerm said. “I’ll be taking this lesson to heart, let me tell you. Hey, what’s going on up front?” Yoerm had noticed that the Mohawks’ carriage had stopped in the middle of the road all of a sudden. Four of the Mohawks jumped down while one stayed in the carriage. Another of the Mohawks came running up to Yoerm’s wagon.

“Yo, pops, we got ten goblins lurking in the woods over there,” the messenger Mohawk said. “We could try blowin’ past the toads in our carriages, but we saw two of ’em carrying junky bows, and while they may be cheap, we can’t risk those archers taking out the horses and leavin’ us stranded. So we’re gonna go clear ’em out. You kids keep watch over pops, ya dig?”

Miya thought about this for a few seconds. “Actually, my brother and I should go fight the goblins too. You can keep watch over Mr. Yoerm.”

Assuming that at least one of the Mohawks would stay behind to look after the carriages while Miya and Elio provided protection for Yoerm, that would mean, at best, there would only be four Mohawks versus ten goblins. But if Miya and Elio switched places with this Mohawk, the odds would improve in their favor, as it would then be ten goblins versus five adventurers. Another advantage was that Miya’s magic would provide some ranged aerial cover against the goblin archers, because while goblins were low-level monsters, there was still a good chance that a well-placed arrow could prove fatal and end up turning the tide in the battle. *Given the risks involved, it would be irresponsible to sit out this battle*, Miya thought.

“Ya sure about this?” the Mohawk said. “Though, don’t get me wrong, it’d definitely help us out a lot.”

“Yes, of course we’ll help,” Miya replied. “After all, we’re here to protect the caravan too.”

“What she said,” Elio said. “As adventurers, we should all do whatever we can to make sure everyone stays safe.”

“Thanks, man! We owe ya one,” the Mohawk said. “I’ll guard pops!”

Miya and Elio jumped down from the covered wagon and bounded toward the battle line, where the rest of the Mohawks were staring down the goblins. A quick glance was all it took for the three Mohawks to realize the siblings had come as reinforcements, and as seasoned adventurers, they were able to adapt to the change in the situation on the fly.

“Thanks for comin’, kids,” the Mohawk leader said. “Since we don’t know how the two of ya operate and vice versa, I suggest we do our own thing on this one. Think you can take out the two archers, plus two foot soldiers? We can handle

the other six.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll finish them off,” Elio replied. “Miya, can you handle those goblin archers?”

“Yeah, I’ll get rid of them, brother!” Miya said.

The goblins—who were no bigger than children—charged at the Mohawks and the siblings, yipping and chittering like sniggering hyenas. At first, the goblins had held back and glared at the three Mohawks with an air of vigilance about them, but as soon as Miya and Elio arrived on the scene, the goblin horde decided to attack before any more reinforcements could show up.

“Magic power, heed me twice! Manifest to blades of ice! Ice Swords!” Miya yelled, casting the most powerful spell in her arsenal and summoning two sharp Ice Swords to float beside her.

“Ice Swords! Cut down my foes!” Miya commanded, and the frozen blades darted toward the archers. However, the goblin archers were far enough away to be able to dodge the projectiles easily without lowering their bows, so before they could move a muscle, Miya yelled, “Break!” causing one of the Ice Swords to disintegrate and rain frozen shards down on the two goblins, making them screech in pain. This surprise attack wasn’t enough to kill the goblin archers, but it did cut through their bowstrings and cause them to shut their eyes for a few fateful moments.

With ice shards temporarily blinding the two goblins, the remaining intact Ice Sword sped toward their necks and beheaded them with ease, which wasn’t too surprising given their vision was impaired. When Kyto attacked Miya back in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, she had fought the Level 1500 elf with three Ice Swords, and one of these frozen blades had blocked a blow that would have otherwise cut off her leg. Using the lessons she’d learned in that battle, Miya had researched other ways to wield her Ice Swords, practicing these applications whenever she had any free time. Her newfound ability to execute the Break spell at exactly the right moment was the result of her extracurricular efforts.

Elio, meanwhile, was taking on two goblins who were swinging clubs at him. He dodged the first goblin’s attack, then shoved the second goblin backward

with his shield. The first goblin then attempted to strike the teenager from behind, but he calmly spun on his heel and engaged the charging goblin. Elio could have swung his sword at both goblins at once if he'd wanted to, but all that would have accomplished would be to fatally wound one goblin while leaving the other free to attack Elio. Of course, a high-level warrior would have had no problem cutting down two goblins—or even a hundred—probably while humming a tune, but Elio knew his own strengths and wisely chose not to push his luck. Instead, Elio adopted tactics designed to annoy his opponents, because he knew he wasn't fighting alone.

The goblin charging toward Elio suddenly screamed as Miya's Ice Sword sank deep into its neck. After beheading the goblin archers, Miya had recalled her Ice Sword and commanded it to provide backup for her brother, all without the now-dead goblin noticing. With only one goblin to worry about now, Elio reengaged the foe he had knocked backward, and using his height advantage to his favor, he swung his shield around and knocked the goblin onto its back. It squealed like a hog as it landed, but Elio wasted no time and thrust his sword through the goblin's neck, snuffing out the creature's life for good.

After making sure his opponent was well and truly dead, Elio turned to his sister. "Thanks for the help, Miya."

"No, thank *you* for always protecting me," Miya shouted back. The two siblings had crawled through enough dungeons by this point to know how to beat goblins with ease.

It wasn't long before the three Mohawks had wrapped up their own battle against the six remaining goblins.

"Wahoo! That's the last of 'em!" said one of the Mohawks after he swung his battle-axe down and dispatched the final goblin. The humans had been outnumbered two to one, but they had prevailed against the goblins without sustaining any injuries.



The city Yoerm's caravan was journeying to was right on the border with the Principality of the Nine, also known as the Duchy. For official purposes, the Dragonute Empire treated the principality as one of its colonies since they

oversaw its running, but in reality, the dominion had been created with investment from all nine races, and due to this huge financial backing, the Duchy was one of the most prosperous realms in the world. Although the city that was Yoerm's destination was technically within the Human Kingdom, the municipality was widely recognized as a satellite city of the Duchy.

Despite the goblin attack and a few other menaces they encountered along the way, Yoerm's traveling party made it to the city safely, and once there, Yoerm and the Mohawks headed directly to the city's guild. The trader wished to hire the Mohawks to escort his carriage on the return trip, but unfortunately, the Mohawks were looking to travel through the Duchy to cross into the Dragonute Empire for a different matter, so they were unable to extend their contract with Yoerm.

This meant the Mohawks would have to part ways with Elio and Miya. Well, eventually, at least. The Mohawks planned to hang around in town for a few more days to rest up and do some intelligence-gathering, so there was plenty of time for Elio and Miya to chat some more about Dark with the Mohawks. Both parties promised they would do plenty of stuff together—for some training or just a bit of fun—before they all went their separate ways. That evening, for instance, they planned to have dinner to celebrate the successful completion of the escort quest.

Once the dinner date had been arranged, Elio and Miya left Yoerm and the others to go find somewhere to stay. Although the trader was covering all expenses incurred while on the road to and from the city, the siblings had to pay their own way in the city itself. Finding an inn was their first priority, since rooms typically filled up quickly, and unlucky stragglers were often forced to camp outdoors.

"Miya, what kind of inn would you like to stay in?" Elio asked as they traipsed the city streets.

"One with a real bath would cost too much," Miya mused. "But I'd rather stay at an inn that has hot water. I need to wash up after camping outdoors the last few days."

"Oh, I don't think you're *that* dirty," Elio said. "Remember that dungeon in

that dwarf town? We didn't wash for two, sometimes even three days, and it made no difference."

"That was only because I had no choice but to put up with it back then. But now I don't have to," Miya replied grumpily. "For the record, you guys reeked, and I could barely stand the smell!"

Miya punctuated her complaint by crossly puffing out her cheeks. Not wanting to anger his sister further, Elio concentrated on finding an inn that offered hot water as part of the deal, and thanks to his efforts, the siblings found a nice-looking inn with reasonably priced rooms. They took a room that ended up being cleaner and more well-furnished than the price would have suggested, and after one of the staff had dropped off a bucket filled with hot water, Miya turned to her brother.

"I'm going to bathe now, so you need to leave," she said curtly.

Elio wasn't happy with this suggestion. "Do I *really* have to stand outside the room? I mean—"

"Leave," Miya said sternly.

"Fine," Elio replied, relenting. Since they were related, he didn't really see any problem with being in the room while his sister was half-naked, but he complied with her wishes all the same. After all, he knew resistance was futile when it came to Miya.

Since he had some time to kill, Elio grabbed a towel and headed to a well around the back of the inn. Once there, he drew up some water, soaked the towel, and started wiping the grime off his body. *I'm not fussy about needing hot water like Miya is*, thought Elio. *In fact, I'm actually more comfortable with regular, cold water, so long as it's not winter.*

Back when his old party used to quest in the Dwarf Kingdom dungeon, Elio and his now-deceased pals, Gimra and Wordy, used to horse around while washing themselves next to the well at the inn they used to stay at. One time, they forgot to bring a change of clothes down with them, so they had to return to their room with just their towels covering their shame. Unfortunately, they then ran into Miya in the room, and she reacted by blushing deeply and yelling at the boys. This embarrassing episode was now a sentimental memory that

Elio found himself recollecting in this moment beside the well, but he soon came to his senses and rinsed himself off.

He gauged how long Miya would need to finish bathing herself, then returned to their room just in time to stop his sister from asking one of the inn staff for more hot water so he could take a bath. He told her that he'd already washed, so they both changed into different outfits, gathered up their valuables, and left the room to have a light lunch in the inn's dining area. Hunger now sated, the siblings decided to go for a stroll around the city to pass the time before their dinner with the Mohawks. Since they hadn't visited a big city for such a long time, the two of them relished the opportunity, like any teenagers would.

"Brother, can we go to a potion shop?" Miya asked.

"Sure thing," Elio replied. "Just so long as we go to a weaponry store later."

Miya wanted to go to one of the large potion shops in the city, since these stores also stocked other types of medicines, as well as cheap magical items. She intended to browse for drugs that might come in useful for her apothecary training, and checking the quality of the latest potions was also on the agenda.

Although Elio had officially retired from questing, he still wanted to browse the wares in a weapon shop, and Miya coincidentally wanted to look at some other implements besides the mage staff she was carrying. In the interests of safety, Elio and Miya decided they would stick together while window-shopping, so they first went to the potion store, then dropped by at a weapons shop. After that, they went to a marketplace, where they stood and took in the sights and sounds of all the food stands, plus the peddlers hawking their wares.

Unlike their own village, which didn't have much to offer by way of entertainment, the city near the Duchy was packed with people and there were all sorts of ways to amuse yourself. If Elio and Miya had been truly fresh off the turnip wagon, they would have been too distracted to watch out for pickpockets and those petty thugs who harass people for money due to some concocted dispute. But since Elio and Miya had already seen the world, so to speak, having visited a number of cities of this size before, they knew how to have fun while still watching their backs. The siblings didn't encounter any pickpockets or muggers, but they *did* attract some unwanted attention.

“Hello, might I speak with you?” a haughty voice said out of the blue. “Yes, I am talking to you two, with the red hair. Are you related, by any chance?”

Elio and Miya spun around and saw that the owner of the voice was a girl around their age. Her hair was golden and twisted into large ostentatious drills, and she was wearing a mage’s cloak. She regarded the siblings with eyes that were condescendingly angular, but even though she appeared quite obviously overbearing, she was still conventionally attractive, and her mannerisms exuded a flamboyant air of confidence. In other words, this girl exhibited all the hallmarks of a pompous heiress, and she had a voice to match.

“I am interested in the bracelet you are wearing, young maiden,” the girl said. “Name your price and I shall purchase it.”

It took Miya less than a second to refuse the offer. “This was given to me by someone very dear to me, so I’m afraid I won’t be selling it for any price. Let’s go, brother.”

“Uh, right,” Elio said. The two attempted to walk away from the blonde girl, but she raised her voice to stop them in their tracks.

“Hold it right there!” the girl said. “I can relate to being attached to a sentimental item, I really can. But do realize that it is my life’s credo to always get what I want!”

The blonde girl made her cloak flutter for no apparent reason and covered one eye with her hand, assuming a pose that probably seemed awe-inspiring in her head. “My birth name is Quornae, but to you, I am the masterly mage known as the Violet Fallen Angel!”

Elio and Miya could only stare at this Quornae girl in dumbfounded silence. In all their travels, they have never met someone with such an extreme case of main character syndrome, and they were unsure how to respond, though to Quornae, the pair were simply overwhelmed by the magnificence of her introduction, and she took it as a sign to expand on her self-plaudits.

“I attend the School of Magic in the Duchy, and I am a Category Four mage,” Quornae explained. “I see you are also a mage, fair maiden, so I propose we place a wager with your bracelet as the prize.”

For the sake of clarification, the School of Magic was the top school for spellcasters the world over, and the institution placed each student in one of five categories according to their skill level, with Category Five being the lowest. Anyone in this category was considered still in training to be a mage. Quornae's tier—Category Four—was for those the school had recognized as full mages capable of conventional skills. Category Three mages were higher-level casters capable of executing attack magic by reciting short incantations, while Category Two mages could cast attack spells without the need for any incantations at all. At the top of the pile, Category One mages were first-rate casters capable of executing tactical-class spells.



Even though Quornae was in the category second from bottom in terms of her ranking, this still meant she was recognized as a mage of good standing at the world's top magic school. That placed her above self-taught mages or mages who had learned their spells at a school out in the provinces.

Quornae moved her hand away from her eye with a theatrical flair, then pointed a finger at Miya. "For our wager, I propose we leave the city limits and see who can hunt down the most monsters with our respective magic. If you happen to beat me, I shall *personally* recommend you to the School of Magic for admission."

"You're right, I am a mage. But I refuse to meet your challenge," Miya said shortly. "Like I said, someone very dear to me gave me this bracelet, and as such, I'm not giving it to anyone for any reason or for any amount of money. Goodbye."

Miya had certainly been unprepared for Quornae's persistence on the matter, but she shot down the blonde mage's proposal without a second thought. Even though it was a replica, Dark's bracelet still meant a lot to Miya, and to be quite frank, she found the thought of putting Dark's bracelet up in a wager to be incredibly insulting. So much so, in fact, that she was unusually icy toward Quornae for even daring to suggest it.

"Y-You can't *leave*! We aren't done talking yet!" Quornae yelled.

"We have nothing to talk about," Miya said simply. "And besides, we're going to eat with some friends, and we're running behind schedule."

It was only midafternoon, which meant dinner with the Mohawks was still hours away, but Miya used it as an excuse anyway in order to get away from Quornae. But the golden-haired mage wasn't about to let Miya go that easily.

"In that case, we shall schedule our challenge for a later date," Quornae declared. "I must confess that I haven't seen the likes of you two around here before. Are you visiting adventurers? Then tell me where you are lodging so that I may come and find you to carry out our contest!"

Miya was starting to get exasperated. "Like I said, there won't be any contests —"

“Yo, Miya! Elio! Fancy bumpin’ into ya!”

The five Mohawks had caught sight of the siblings talking to Quornae, and one of them had hollered over to the pair. The Mohawks had seemingly had the same idea of strolling the city streets to kill a bit of time, and Miya immediately took this golden opportunity to wave at the thuggish-looking group.

“Those are our friends, so we have to go now,” Miya said with a broad smile, before turning toward the Mohawks and calling out, “Guys, let’s go celebrate the completion of our quest—”

“Hey! Come back here!” Quornae cried, grabbing Miya by the arm and preventing her from taking another step. Miya couldn’t break free of Quornae’s grip because the pushy mage was bigger and stronger than her.

“What do you want?” Miya said as she spun around to confront Quornae. “We’re having a party with the Mohawks, so I really must go.”

“A party with those cretins?” Quornae muttered in hushed tones. “What would make you want to spend time with dangerous men like *them*? They’re obviously tricking you, whatever they’ve said. The next thing you know, they’ll be licking their knives and threatening you! Or they’ll slip some sleeping potion into your food so they can sell you into slavery! But before they do sell you, they’ll have a good chuckle about ‘sampling’ you first, as a reward for their trouble! Th-Th-They’ll *definitely* violate a cute girl like you in ways I don’t even want to describe! A girl like you should take better care of herself!”

Quornae’s misplaced warnings made Miya go crimson. “Th-That’s disgusting!” she said. “And besides, the Mohawks are good people, despite how they look!”

“Are you *sure*?” Quornae asked doubtfully, reluctant to let go of her misgivings.

“Of course I’m sure. Trust me,” Miya replied.

The Mohawks watched on as the two girls whispered back and forth.

“Man, Miya’s got herself a gal pal already?” said one of the Mohawks.

“A girl her age can make a buncha friends easily, unlike us mopes,” said a second.

“Damn straight, brother,” a third Mohawk chimed in. “Remember that one slave girl we picked up in the woods? When we sold her off to that merchant, she quickly made friends with all the other slave girls that dude owned. It’s like magic, I tells ya.”

“Oh, sure, I remember her,” a fourth one said. “I hope she and them other slave girls are doin’ all right for themselves.”

“Don’t sweat it, dude,” said the fifth Mohawk. “I hear they got sold to the tower.”

Quornae stiffened as she listened in on the Mohawks’ conversation, her eyes almost bulging out of her skull. She grabbed Miya by the shoulders and tried shaking some sense into the red-haired mage.

“Don’t you see?! They’re after you and your young, adolescent body! If you need money, you can talk to me! If they’re blackmailing you, I can help with that too!”

“No, you’re wrong!” Miya yelled. “There’s actually a very good reason why they picked up that girl in the woods and sold her to a merchant! They’re not the type of guys you think they are!”

Miya defended the Mohawks with such passion and persistence that she at last managed to get through to Quornae—at least partly.

“But if they’re not after you, that means they’re after”—Quornae’s eyes landed on Elio—“your *brother*?!”

“No, they’re *not* after my brother!” Miya protested. “And why did you look kind of excited when you said that?”

Quornae’s cheeks had indeed gone a shade redder, and all Miya could do was clutch her own head in exasperation. It took a lot of time and effort before Quornae could finally be convinced that the Mohawks were, in fact, the good guys.

Chapter 7: Friends

“I wish to apologize on behalf of my daughter.”

Ghett—the owner of one of the biggest trading companies in the city—lowered his head in apology to Elio and Miya, who were sitting on a sofa opposite him.

The previous day, Quornae had wanted to purchase the bracelet Miya was wearing, but after Miya refused, Quornae had persisted until the Mohawks had shown up and greeted Miya and Elio. The Mohawks’ appearances had convinced Quornae that Miya was in danger, so the blonde girl then took it upon herself to stop Miya from going with the men. Miya had been unable to immediately correct this mistaken assumption, and the ensuing back-and-forth had created something of a minor scene at the marketplace they were at.

It just so happened that Yoerm had been in the marketplace at the time too, and he noticed the commotion. At first, he had planned simply to join the burgeoning crowd of onlookers, but when he realized that the people he had hired were arguing with the daughter of a major client of his, he immediately rushed to intervene and helped Miya to set Quornae straight on a few things. The following day, Quornae’s father, Ghett, invited Miya and Elio to his trading firm so he could apologize for the incident, but also to ask for a favor. Now that his head was bowed, the siblings couldn’t help noticing Ghett’s graying hair and slim frame, and while he certainly looked like an accomplished mercantile magnate, he seemed a bit on the old side to have a daughter of Quornae’s age.

Ghett raised his head and apologized once more. “Quornae is our youngest and our only daughter. We had her very late, you see. Her brothers are much older and spoil her rotten. I’m terribly sorry about what happened.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, sir,” Elio said. “Sure, we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, but Quornae’s actions did show that she cared about my sister’s safety.”

“Yes, I can certainly vouch for her there,” Ghett said. “Quornae might be

rather *headstrong*, but she's got a heart of gold."

When Quornae had learned that Miya and Elio were planning to join the Mohawks for a feast the previous day, she had tried to convince the siblings not to go with these rather shady-looking characters, which proved that, although Quornae had quite a snobbish attitude, she did care for other people's well-being.

Ghett glanced at Miya. "While my daughter may truly have taken a liking to your bracelet, deep down, I think she was looking for a reason to talk to you so you might become friends."

"She wants to be my friend?" Miya said.

Ghett nodded. "It's true that she attends the School of Magic in the Duchy. Or at least, she used to. She's on a leave of absence right now. I may be biased because I'm her father, but Quornae is a naturally gifted mage. However, she's only as gifted as a human can be."

Quornae was proficient enough in magic to attain Category Four accreditation at a young age, but ultimately, she was a human with a low power level. The nonhumans in her year group—plus those who had come along after—had all been promoted to Category Three and above, while she remained stuck at Category Four. Basically, while Quornae might have been celebrated as a gifted mage among humans, in the eyes of other races, she was nothing more than mediocre. This was the first real setback Quornae had experienced in life and she found it hard to recover from, so she had taken a leave of absence for "health reasons" and returned to the family home.

"Human mages are few and far between, and that's even more true for mages who are girls around her age," Ghett said. "I'm certain she was delighted to find someone like you, Miya, but she's too awkward to express her feelings honestly, so she hid them behind that aggressive persona of hers. It may be presumptuous of me to ask this of you, given everything that's happened, but I would really appreciate it if you could become her friend."

Quornae wasn't present in the room, as would normally be customary in these situations, because Ghett had asked his daughter to wait outside the guest parlor while he spoke with Miya and Elio. If she had been sitting next to

her dad the moment he asked Miya to become her friend, Quornae would have understandably been mortified and acted accordingly. But left to her own devices, Quornae's pride would never have allowed her to ask to be Miya's friend, so Ghatt had decided to humble himself for the both of them. He had a soft spot for his daughter, but he also knew how she operated. Miya understood where Ghatt was coming from, and she didn't see any reason to turn her back on Quornae.

"Of course I'll be her friend," Miya said. "I'm very lucky to find a girl around my age who I can talk to about magic."

"Thank you," Ghatt said, bowing his head again. "I really can't thank you enough, Miya."

Ghatt called out to Quornae to join them in the parlor so she could apologize in person for pestering Miya for her bracelet. When the blonde girl walked in, she appeared meeker and more reserved than how she had acted yesterday. Her father had probably scolded her severely over the incident.

Quornae lowered her head in contrition. "I apologize for what happened yesterday. I shouldn't have said all those things about your dear friends, the Mohawks."

"It's fine. I've put it behind me," Miya said. "As for the Mohawks, I was afraid of them too when I first met them, so I can't blame you for being protective."

Apart from Ghatt, who had yet to lay eyes on the Mohawks, Miya's words struck a chord with everyone in the room. Not only did the Mohawks have those incredibly bizarre Mohican-style haircuts, they also wore leather jackets with metal spikes, they were taller than most, and they always had fierce expressions on their faces. Anyone who saw the Mohawks would naturally come to the conclusion that they were criminals to be avoided.

Miya guided the conversation to a more pleasant topic. "Anyway, Quornae, now that I've gotten to know you, I wonder if we could be friends. I have a lot I'd like to ask you about the School of Magic, because I'm kind of curious about that place."

"I-If you *insist* on being my friend, then I'd be delighted to oblige!" Quornae replied. "I'm sure I have much to impart that you will find beneficial!" Although

Quornae had reverted to her former verbose speaking pattern, it was obvious that she was thrilled to have made a new friend.

“We can’t relax in this stuffy old guest parlor, so I shall invite you to join me in my private room,” Quornae said.

“Elio, may I go?” Miya asked.

“Sure you can. But don’t stay out too long,” Elio said with a smile. He didn’t have the nerve to refuse a request from his little sister, anyway.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Miya said. “Let’s go, Quornae.”

“I bid you farewell, Elio, father,” Quornae said, bowing to both before grabbing Miya’s hand. “Come, come! My room is this way!”

Ghett and Elio exchanged glances and awkwardly chuckled as they watched the two girls leave the room. Despite Miya’s assurances that they wouldn’t be long, it turned out the two mages found it impossible to run out of things to talk about, so Miya decided to stay the night. Ghett sent a servant to the inn where Elio was lodging to inform him of the change of plans. But Miya’s interactions with Quornae didn’t end there, because the next day, Miya found herself walking to the outskirts of the city with her staff in hand and her new friend beside her.

“When we’re through, you shall see the *true* depths of the powers possessed by the Violet Fallen Angel!” Quornae told her.

Normally, a sleepover would have been more than enough for two girls to get to know each other, but since Miya was Quornae’s first real human friend close in age to her, the young blonde girl was keen on showcasing her talents to Miya, and she wanted to see what kinds of spells her new companion was capable of too. For that purpose, Quornae had suggested to Miya that they both go outside of the city to do some spellcasting.

At first, Miya was taken aback by the invitation, but she was curious to find out how powerful a Category Four mage from the School of Magic was, so she ultimately agreed to go with Quornae. Miya had made sure to go back to the inn first to tell Elio about her plans; then, after getting her brother’s consent, she got her things together for the trip and the two girls headed for a wooded

area near the city, where they could use trees as target practice for their attack spells. Quornae was candidly not entirely on board with this idea and quite outspoken about her grievances.

“I wanted to go deeper into the forest and show you how skillfully I can slay goblins and orcs,” Quornae moaned.

“We can’t wander too far into the woods, where all the monsters are,” Miya told her. “It’d be suicide to go hiking through a forest without any camping equipment.”

Quornae wanted to impress Miya by taking out a few monsters, but the blonde mage had learned nearly all of her magic in a school setting, which meant she was completely ignorant to what kinds of skills were needed to survive in the woods, like the abilities to navigate the terrain, to make camp, and to watch out for foes. Miya, meanwhile, was an experienced adventurer, meaning she was completely aware of the risks of trekking through a forest unprepared, and because she was so resolute in refusing the idea of hunting monsters, Quornae listened to her friend.

The two girls reached the edge of the forest, which had been left unspoiled by the city so that the residents could come here to chop firewood, find medicinal herbs, and hunt game for food. A large river flowed nearby, and a smattering of towns and villages in the Human Kingdom had been built close to the woods. Although there was a scattered presence of civilization nearby, the woods themselves were too thick for low-level people to journey through without the proper equipment needed to survive. There was also quite a high risk of losing your life to monsters, or even just run-of-the-mill wild animals.

So instead of going into the woods proper, the two girls chose an area at the edge of the forest where they would show each other their attack magic. There was a practice arena at the city’s guild, but since Quornae wasn’t a registered adventurer, she couldn’t use the facility. After checking their surroundings to make sure there was no one around who might get hurt, Quornae flicked open her School of Magic-issued cloak with a showy flutter and covered her left eye with her right hand, while her left clutched her scepter tightly.

“You shall now witness the powers of yours truly, the Violet Fallen Angel!”

Quornae proclaimed, pointing the scepter straight up into the sky.

“Good luck, Quornae!” Miya said, clapping in support.

The applause seemed to lift Quornae’s spirits even further, and she started making circles in the air with her scepter in a meaninglessly flamboyant gesture. “Magic power, blazing higher! Flow through me and form my fire! Flame Lance!”

As soon as Quornae finished chanting, four Flame Lances appeared above the mage. As her self-styled pseudonym suggested, the tongues of fire bore a hazy resemblance to the halfwings of fallen angels.

“Strike my enemy and reduce it to ashes!” Quornae yelled, pointing the scepter at a nearby tree trunk, and crossing her right arm over her pointing arm. Neither the extra line nor the extravagant pose made any difference to the spell itself, but regardless, the Flame Lances hurtled toward the tree and struck the trunk square on. The scorched timber hissed as the heat struck it, and if it had been a monster, the spell would have barbecued its insides.

I guess her incantation and execution speed were decent enough, plus the mana load was all right, but there was too much waste, Miya thought. I think she put too much mana into those Flame Lances. But the way she controlled those lances was really amazing...

Mages generally prioritized efficiency in their spellcasting, so if a mage infused an attack like Flame Lance with double the amount of mana than would normally be needed, that went against that very basic concept. There were, of course, exceptions where a mage would find it necessary to raise the mana infusion, but in Quornae’s case, she had consumed the extra amount from her mana pool just to impress Miya. But even if Miya didn’t think all that much about the mana-boosted Flame Lances, she was still extremely impressed by Quornae’s control and accuracy.

Quornae flipped her blonde locks triumphantly and turned to Miya. “So what do you think of my ability?”

“You were absolutely amazing, controlling all four Flame Lances like that,” Miya replied. “Did you really guide them *all* at the same time? I wouldn’t be able to control more than two at once! You’re really incredible!”

Projectile spells like the Ice Sword or the Flame Lance could be manipulated by a mage's thoughts, but it was impossible to be precise when controlling too many objects simultaneously. Due to this limitation, mages usually manifested a whole load of projectiles near to their person before firing them off one at a time. Yet Quornae was able to control four Flame Lances at once and still command them to strike an object with pinpoint accuracy. Miya was able to manifest up to three Ice Swords at the same time, but at this point in time, she could only proficiently control two Ice Swords concurrently. For this reason, Miya was honestly impressed with her new friend's skills.

Quornae puffed out her well-developed chest and basked in the praise. "Well, I *am* an expert in controlling attack spells. I will commend you for being such a worthy opponent and recognizing my forte!"

"Um, since when did I become your 'opponent'?" Miya asked innocently.

"Since this very moment!" Quornae said with mock dramatic flair. Miya breathed a flabbergasted "Huh?" in response, but she smiled all the same, for she knew that this back-and-forth was all in good fun.

"Now it's your turn to reveal your true powers, Miya, my opponent!" Quornae declared. "As your friend and rival, I look forward to seeing the sort of magic you have up your sleeve!"

Miya giggled at this comically overwrought instigation, then gripped her staff tightly. "Magic power, frozen might! Manifest to blade of ice! Ice Sword!"

An Ice Sword suddenly appeared and immediately whistled through the air to hit the same tree trunk Quornae had targeted. The sharp Ice Sword struck the tree hard enough to bury itself halfway into the trunk.

"Oh, not bad," Quornae said, mostly to herself. This little display had surpassed what she had anticipated from Miya.

Miya turned to Quornae. "So what did you think of my magic, hm?"

"I say you have performed well enough to meet my estimation of you as my archrival," Quornae declared. "Your control and mana load, plus the speed of your spellcasting and the execution were all carried out to a fairly high level. Although you concentrated your powers into one Ice Sword, you elevated the

intensity of your attack in a way not many can achieve. Are you sure you haven't attended the School of Magic? I do believe your level of magic surpasses that of a regular student there."

"I'm really glad to hear that," Miya said. "I think a lot of my skills came from learning from my experiences while questing."

Ironically, her best "teacher" in that sense had been her near-fatal encounter with Kyto. By using one of her Ice Swords to deflect one of the Level 1500 elf's attacks, she had come to realize that the most potent spell in her arsenal could be used in a variety of ways to defend herself against a higher-level foe, or equally, to launch a surprise attack, like how she had woven in the Break spell too. And all she'd needed to do to learn this particular lesson was survive Kyto's murderous rampage by the skin of her teeth. Even after quitting being an adventurer to become an apprentice healer, Miya had devoted time to honing her magecraft through trial and error, and while this approach was far less efficient than going through proper training, the effort hadn't all been wasted, since Quornae was heaping effusive and unmitigated praise on this single, power-boosted Ice Sword.

"At my school, we go on field trips to dungeons so that we can learn how to fight monsters with our magic, but I haven't participated in a real quest yet," Quornae said. "Perhaps I should take this opportunity to register down at the guild and build up the sort of real-world experience you have."

"If you really want to do that, I won't stop you," Miya said. "But being an adventurer is really, really hard. You might get attacked and killed by monsters at any moment, and you often have to spend a good two or three days in a dungeon without washing once. Plus, you have to eat dried food all the time, because that's the only thing that keeps, and you have to watch your back constantly for an attack from any kind of creature. Or anybody, for that matter."

Miya paused to reflect on the horrors she had witnessed. "It's really, really hard."

"Miya, you must have been through so much," Quornae said, her voice filled with pity. "It sounds like I might not be cut out for questing." She paused for a

moment, then continued in the same manner as before. “Anyway, there’s still something we must settle before we can continue.”

“What? Did we forget something?” asked Miya.

“We most certainly did,” Quornae declared. “After all, if *I’m* the Violet Fallen Angel, then *you* must have a nom de guerre that’s every bit as distinguished as mine!”

“Uh, why?” Miya didn’t mean to put it so bluntly, but she honestly had no idea why there was any need to decide on a new name that would be just as cringeworthy—or rather, just as *unique*—as her new friend’s sobriquet.

“Why, you ask?” Quornae said, now in full grandstanding mode. “A mage as powerful as you must have a widely known moniker if you wish to play the part. But fret not, my worthy opponent! As your friend and rival, I shall come up with a fitting name for you. Put your mind at ease, for I am quite the savant when it comes to choosing the perfect name.”

Quornae ended her bombastic monologue with a self-assured wink, then crossed her arms to show that she was deep in thought. “Since your magic attack of choice is the Ice Sword, perhaps you should be called ‘The Ice Princess’? Or ‘Aurora’ maybe? ‘Snowfield’? ‘Snow Crystal’?”

Miya groaned plaintively, but since Quornae meant well, Miya decided to let her have her fun. Then, out of nowhere, Miya’s slightly peeved expression hardened as her fight-or-flight response took hold of her. Her head swiveled toward the forest.

“Miya, what’s wrong?” Quornae asked, noticing the sudden marked change in attitude.

“Quornae,” Miya said tensely. “I think we need to head back right now.”

Her head cocked, Quornae looked at Miya quizzically, but the young red-haired mage was an experienced adventurer who had survived many perilous situations in the past, which meant she could sense when she was in trouble, and at that moment, she and her companion were surrounded by potential assailants that she couldn’t identify. All she could tell for sure was that the threatening vibes she was sensing weren’t radiating from monsters. Miya did

her best to keep her composure as she grabbed Quornae by the hand with the intention of leading her back to the city, but it was too late. With a rustling of leaves, five armed wolfmen emerged from the forest in front of the two girls. They were all wearing leather armor, and there were a variety of weapons on show, including knives, a short sword, and a bow, with the overall lightness of their gear hinting at a focus on speed and ease of movement. Of course, the wolfmen *could* just have been adventurers coming back from hunting monsters in the forest, but the glints in their eyes suggested they viewed the girls as prey, and fearing the worst, Miya gripped her staff tightly. The first words out of the lead wolfman's mouth proved her assumption was correct.

"Grab those mages!" ordered the wolfman boss, who was wielding a bow. "Injure 'em if you like, but don't kill 'em! Human mages are a rare breed!"

The four other wolfmen sprinted toward Miya and Quornae, tightening their grips on their bladed weapons as they dashed forward.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" Quornae yelled at the approaching wolfmen.

"Magic power, frozen might! Manifest to blade of ice! Ice Sword!" Miya, the experienced fighter of the two, chanted her spell at max speed and produced an Ice Sword that she immediately fired at the wolfmen.

"What's one stupid Ice Sword gonna do?" one of the beastmen scoffed.

"And that thing's so *slow*, I'm gonna fall asleep waiting for it to reach us!" yelled another.

"Whaddaya expect from an inferior mage?" a third pointed out.

Miya wasn't paying any attention to the jeers being hurled in her direction. Her focus was on getting the timing right for the second part of her spell so she could activate it at precisely the right moment for it to do maximum damage.

"Break!" Miya commanded, causing the Ice Sword to shatter and rain sharp icicle shards down on the wolfmen over a wide area. It was the same trick Miya had used to defeat the goblin archers on their way to the city in Yoerm's caravan. Due to the unexpected nature of the attack, the wolfmen were unable to dodge the shards, which buried themselves into their eyes and legs.

“Gah! My eyes!” one wolfman cried out.

“She got me in the thigh!” yelled a second.

“My legs and the whole of my body is cut up,” a third wolfman groaned.

“Goddammit! That little shitborn bitch!” a fourth would-be assailant wailed in agony.

But Miya knew her Ice Sword attack would only slow the wolfmen down temporarily, and that she and Quornae weren't fast enough to outrun them before they recovered from the initial shock. So instead of running away, Miya made up her mind to cut down the attackers where they stood to ensure the safety of both girls and summoned another Ice Sword, but she was forced to use this new frozen blade to intercept an arrow fired toward her by the wolfman boss. The leader had reacted quickly, distracting Miya with his arrows so she wouldn't be able to use her Ice Sword to lop off the heads of his comrades. The fact that Miya had to focus on defending herself instead of getting a few easy kills irked her, but she had already come up with a backup plan.

“Quornae!” Miya yelled. “I'll take care of these arrows! You take out the other guys!”

“M-Miya? Wait a minute!” said a thoroughly flustered Quornae. “Why are we even fighting these beastmen in the first place? We didn't attack them! There's no reason for them to attack us!”

“I don't know why either, but all that matters right now is that they're fighting us!” Miya told her. “We have to fight back!”

“B-But I...” While Quornae hemmed and hawed about what she should do, the four wounded wolfmen were slowly but steadily recovering from their injuries. Once they were all in a reasonable state again, they rushed at the girls once more, while Miya was still busy warding off arrows sent her way by their leader.

“You just carry on sitting on your thumbs, girlie! We don't mind!” one of the attackers yelled. Finding herself with no other option but to engage with the assailants, Quornae attempted to execute a spell with a quivering voice.

“M-M-Magic power, blazing higher! Flow through me and form my fire! Flame Lance!” Quornae successfully managed to manifest four Flame Lances and sent them toward the wolfmen.

One of the assailants clicked his tongue. “Flame Lances? Screw this!” The four wolfmen diverted from the beeline they were making for Quornae and took evasive maneuvers. It was obvious that Quornae’s next move should be to focus on one of their assailants and kill him with her Flame Lances while Miya provided backup if needed, but yet again, reality had a way of mucking up what should have been a surefire strategy.

“This is too easy!” chuckled one of the wolfmen as he effortlessly dodged the blades made of flame. “Are ya even *trying* to kill us?”

His comrade guffawed as he, too, danced nimbly around the Flame Lances. “This inferior’s obviously a rookie who’s never been in a real fight! Talk about an easy mark!”

The speed and control Quornae had demonstrated when she had sent the Flame Lances spearing into the tree trunk had all but vanished against the wolfmen. Her execution was so sloppy, it almost seemed like Quornae was taking pity on her assailants. While it was true that Quornae was skilled enough to be recognized as a Category Four mage by the School of Magic, she wasn’t prepared to kill anyone, and it was this reluctance that was rendering her magic attacks useless at this critical moment.

The wolfman leader quickly recognized that Quornae was the weak link and directed all of his arrows toward her instead. Miya was able to intercept the arrows with her Ice Sword, but her focus was firmly on the projectiles, leaving the other wolfmen free to take their chances against Quornae. One of the wounded attackers threw his knife at the blonde mage, but the blade merely grazed her leg before burying itself in the earth. However, the pain of the cut was enough to make Quornae shriek and fall backward onto her rear, and her fright at the close call caused Quornae to lose focus and cancel her Flame Lances altogether.

“Quornae!” Miya called out as she attempted to provide cover for her friend, but the wolfmen were one step ahead.

“You’re better than her, so we’re shutting you down!” a wolfman told her. The assailants turned their attention to Miya and started hurling stones at her legs, adding to the duress she was already under from the arrows being fired at them. Because beastmen had superior throwing strength, Miya had to run out of range to avoid getting injured by the rocks, taking her further away from Quornae. She was about to manifest another Ice Sword with the intention of taking on all her foes at once, but a wolfman wielding a short sword beat her to the punch by grabbing Quornae by her hair and pressing his blade to her neck.

Quornae squealed helplessly. “P-Please don’t kill me. I beg you...”

“Shuddup, blondie!” the wolfman snarled. “If ya even think of chanting a spell, this sword goes through your windpipe, got it?” The wolfman turned to address Miya. “Hey, Red! Try anything funny and your girlfriend here gets it in the jugular!”

“M-Miya...” While Quornae had defeated monsters before, she had never once been exposed to any *actual* danger, because on those occasions, she’d either had armed guards protecting her or her School of Magic instructors had been accompanying her when she attacked monsters spawning near the Duchy. This was her first time coming face-to-face with death represented by the cold steel presently pressed against her gullet, and tears started streaming down her face, proving that she really was still just a young teenage girl.

Unwilling to risk the life of her friend, Miya disintegrated her Ice Sword with an air of defeat, then waited for the wolfmen to come and restrain her. One wolfman grabbed the staff out of her hand, while another tied her wrists behind her back.

“Holy shit did this redhead give us trouble,” the latter remarked. “She might’ve even killed a coupla us if she’d just ignored Goldilocks over there and looked out for number one.”

“Yeah, thank the goddess that blonde chick got in her way,” his partner agreed.

“What’s with this ginger, anyway?” said the wolfman behind Miya. “I never knew an inferior could be as good at fighting as this girl is.”

“Well, good enough to cover us in cuts, anyway,” said the wolfman with the

staff. "Hope they won't get pissed at us if we use some healing potion."

"Quit babbling and tie up those girls!" the wolfman leader yelled at them. "We don't wanna be hanging around here forever for people to spot us!"

The wolfmen continued to bind Miya's and Quornae's hands and feet; then they took out a piece of cloth and wetted it with sleeping potion. Quornae was too scared to say or do anything that might incur the wrath of her captors, but Miya glared at the wolfmen.

"What are you planning to do with us?" she asked.

"Can't believe you still have the guts to keep acting all rebellious even while you're tied up," the wolfman leader said, impressed. "If you were a beastwoman instead of an inferior, I'd consider making you my bride."

This comment made Miya's brow crinkle in disgust, but the leader simply snorted through his nose and looked down at her.

"Anyway, we ain't got time to talk here," the boss continued. "Maybe we can chat when you wake up again, kiddo."

The wolfmen covered Quornae's mouth and nose with the drugged cloth to put her to sleep, then subjected Miya to the same treatment. Miya continued to glare at the five wolfmen before the dark shroud of sleep swallowed her vision.

Chapter 8: The Search for Miya and Quornae

“Miya’s been *kidnapped*?!”

I was sitting behind my desk facing my deputies, Mei and Aoyuki, in my office at the bottom of the Abyss, but I nearly leaped out of my chair, repeating the words Mei had just told me. Before my two SUR warriors had entered my office with an “urgent report,” I’d been under the impression that Miya and Elio were living the quiet life back in their home village, so at first, I couldn’t believe Miya had been abducted.

Mei calmly related the particulars of the report, which had been filed by the Mohawks. “Miss Miya traveled to a Human Kingdom city on the border of the Principality of the Nine, and while there, she met a human girl by the name of Quornae. Miss Quornae is a Category Four mage at the School of Magic in the Principality of the Nine, and she and Miss Miya quickly became very well acquainted. According to their last known whereabouts, Miss Miya and Miss Quornae went on an excursion to the edge of the forest on the outskirts of the city in order to demonstrate their magic to each other.”

Elio, the last person to speak to Miya, had grown worried when his sister hadn’t returned home by the appointed time, so he’d gone out alone to search for her at that location near the forest. There, he found the tree that had likely been used as target practice for their magic attacks, but there was no sign of Miya or Quornae. After digging around a bit more, he found signs of a struggle and it quickly became clear that a lot more than two people had been there. With this knowledge, Elio ran back into town and contacted Quornae’s father, the merchant boss. On finding out that Quornae hadn’t returned home either, Elio came to the conclusion that the two girls must have gotten themselves into some kind of trouble.

Quornae’s family took charge of the search in the city and along the roadways, while Elio geared up and searched for the girls in the woods. As luck would have it, Elio and Miya had met the Mohawks while on an escort job, and

my operatives had pitched in with the search after learning of the disappearance of the two girls. The sparrowlike monster the Mohawks used to communicate with Aoyuki was redeployed to investigate the matter, speaking to birds native to the forest to gather eyewitness accounts of what had gone down on that day. All the birds who had seen something said a red-haired girl and a blonde girl fought a group of two-legged animals, who eventually detained the girls and carried them off deep into the woods.

The redhead was Miya, the blonde was Quornae, and the “two-legged animals” were obviously beastmen. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t ready to share that bit of info with Elio. At least, not yet. I didn’t know who Quornae was, but I had a strong bond with Miya and Elio, and the Mohawks were perfectly aware of it. Due to my friendship with the siblings, the Mohawks used one of the gacha cards they carried for emergencies—the SR Telepathy card—to quickly inform Mei that Miya had gone missing.

“The Mohawks and Master Elio are still searching the forest,” Mei said. “They will inform Aoyuki of any leads they find that point to the present whereabouts of the two girls.”

“But based on what we already know, it was clearly a bunch of beastmen who kidnapped Miya and Quornae,” I said. “They didn’t want to kill them, or else they would’ve slit their throats on the spot, which means they must have had some other motive for kidnapping them. But why would they go to all that trouble?”

Human mages were certainly rare, but not valuable enough to abduct. Were the beastmen trying to make a forbidden weapon using human sacrifices, like Naano the dwarf had done? No, I could rule that out straightaway, since beastfolk cared more about being dominant physically than tinkering around with magic weapons.

“It is unclear whether this is related to Miss Miya’s disappearance at all, but lately, there has been a rise in incidents of humans being attacked and abducted on highways,” Mei noted. “In fact, it has become so rampant in the Human Kingdom that adventurers are presently in high demand to provide protection for travelers. Surviving witnesses of these assaults have indicated that their assailants were beastfolk.”

“In that case, Miya’s abduction was no coincidence,” I declared. This meant the beastfolk had been kidnapping humans more generally and Miya had just been unlucky enough to be one of those caught up in the mass abductions.

“But wouldn’t a bunch of beastmen smuggling humans get caught during cargo inspections?” I asked. “Nobody’s getting collared at road checks, are they, Aoyuki?”

“No, they aren’t,” Aoyuki answered coolly. “We’ve gathered plenty of intelligence on beastfolk victimizing humans, but we have no intelligence of these crimes being uncovered at security checkpoints.”

So the beastfolk were kidnapping a whole load of humans, but somehow not getting caught at roadside inspections. Even if the beastfolk were hiding these humans in barrels, at least *some* of the captives would have been discovered by the inspectors stationed at city limits. It was equally inconceivable that Aoyuki and her intelligence network could have completely failed to pick up on an uptick in human smuggling interdictions.

I leaned back in my chair, shut my eyes tight, and racked my brain while poring over real-world maps that I’d unfurled in my mind’s eye. *How the heck can beastfolk be moving so many humans around without being noticed by authorities?* I wondered. Suddenly, a light bulb flicked on in my head. “Of course! The rivers!”

“Yes, now I understand,” Mei said, immediately picking up on my theory. “Maritime transport is one of the trades the beastfolk specialize in.”

The beastfolk were pros in all aspects of shipping, from bulk transport and shipbuilding to just being regular crewmembers. In particular, beastfolk practically monopolized the oarsmen trade, due to their superior brute strength and stamina. Humans were too weak to row on large ships, and the other races deigned that type of work beneath them.

“I bet the beastmen who kidnapped Miya and Quornae hid themselves in the forest before capturing the girls, then took them to a boat that was waiting for them at the nearby river,” I surmised. “From there, the captors must have taken the girls to either the Duchy or the Beastfolk Federation.”

Owning human slaves was presently forbidden in the Elven Queendom, the

Dark Elf Islands, and more recently, in the Dwarf Kingdom too, thanks to the Absolute Autonomy of Humans decree, so using the process of elimination, coupled with the course of the river, this left the Duchy and the beastfolk's home nation as the only likely destinations for the kidnappers.

"Aoyuki, can you send your small clandestine familiars to find out where Miya and her friend have been taken?" I asked. "They should check all the ships that arrived in the Duchy today, plus all the ships that will arrive in the Beastfolk Federation in a few days' time. We should be able to find the two girls if we focus our attention on just these specific vessels. Once you've located the girls, get Nemumu to track them down, since Miya and Nemumu know each other. She's authorized to use a Teleportation card to get them to safety."

"Are you sure we should teleport them, Master Light?" Mei asked. The SSR Teleportation card was mostly used by me and Ellie, who needed the card to shuttle between the Abyss and her other job as the Wicked Witch of the Tower, but translocation items were very rare and valuable up on the surface world, and if people witnessed us using the card to rescue Miya and Quornae, word would spread like wildfire and people would want the cards for themselves. I realized that teleporting the girls might create another fire I'd end up having to put out, but I was determined to use the card all the same.

"Miya helped me and my team out during my first operation up on the surface, so I owe her that much," I said to Mei. "I also want to find out exactly *why* the beastfolk are kidnapping humans. But this search and rescue mission is top priority. Aoyuki, can you handle it?"

"Mrrow!" Aoyuki mewled enthusiastically.

"Then, I'm counting on you," I said. "Also, make sure you take care when you're gathering leads. There's a good chance a Master—or possibly more than one—is behind this whole thing, just like with Cavaur."

Aoyuki answered with another "Mrraah!" and I gave a satisfied nod. I knew deep down we would bring Miya and her friend back home in no time.

A few days later, we did indeed find out where Miya and Quornae were being imprisoned. We also found out exactly why the beastfolk had captured the two girls, as well as a whole multitude of innocent humans. The info hadn't been all

that hard to come by either, since the guards watching Miya, Quornae, and the other captives locked in the warehouse they had been stashed away in were some of the chattiest nimrods we could ever have hoped to eavesdrop on, and they blurted out their whole scheme while shooting the breeze.

“Those beastfolk scumbuckets!” I yelled. I was in my executive office again, and this time, Ellie had joined Mei and Aoyuki to deliver the news. I could see that my palpable rage had caused my three deputies to tremble slightly. I didn’t mean to scare them, but the beastfolk’s plot was so unconscionable and absolutely monstrous, I couldn’t help seeing red.

We had found out that the Beastfolk Federation was going to declare war on the Wicked Witch of the Tower and they were rounding up humans to use as fodder for the battle. More specifically, the beastfolk were purchasing as many human slaves as they could get their hands on, and when that wasn’t enough, they were resorting to kidnapping humans by attacking villages and assaulting random travelers on highways. But not only were the beastfolk forcibly importing an entire army of human slaves, they were also taking their loved ones hostage to make sure their new human soldiers stayed loyal to them. They were blackmailing adventurers and mages of both sexes into fighting the tower witch by threatening the people the unwilling conscripts cared about the most.

The beastfolk were of the belief that the Wicked Witch of the Tower would find it difficult to fight an army of humans, given how she championed absolute autonomy for the human race, and because their loved ones were being held hostage, their human foot soldiers would have no choice but to fight to the death for the beastfolk’s cause. Another nation appeared to be providing material support, so there was a very real possibility that the beastfolk would come armed with weapons that would effectively counter the Wicked Witch and her dragons. In other words, the beastfolk would likely end up suffering next to no casualties in this war of their own making, since they were forcing humans to fight each other. And if the beastfolk should win, whatever costs they had sunk into the campaign would be repaid several times over in the tributes the beastfolk would extract from the elves and dark elves. Then, once the dust had settled, the beastfolk could just sell the remaining human captives into slavery and reap additional treasures that way. The beastfolk could kill so

many birds with just one stone.

Their battle plan was shockingly despicable and required almost no sacrifice on the part of the beastfolk. Instead, they sought to rob us humans of any shred of dignity we had while callously exploiting our emotions, all so we could be used as disposable pawns on a battlefield. The plan was so totally evil, so totally repulsive, I couldn't help being personally upset by it.

It bore repeating that the beastfolk would be making totally blameless humans fight in an unjust war by threatening to kill their family members, lovers, or best friends, all while the beastfolk themselves were left free to watch the slaughter with glee from a safe distance.

I wanted to personally strangle the bastards. My baby sister, Yume, was all the family I had left in this world after I lost my hometown and my parents to a senseless massacre, and for all I knew, my missing older brother could be dead too. The mere thought of the beastfolk holding my sister hostage for their heinous scheme sent my fury soaring past its limits.

"What the *hell* are those beastfolk thinking?!" I roared. "They're making people fight to the death by holding others *hostage*?! Do they have even an ounce of decency in their bodies? Do they think us humans don't deserve any respect whatsoever?! They treat us worse than farm animals, those shitheels!"

I slammed my fists down on my desk to emphasize these last words out of my mouth, and because in my rage, I couldn't control my strength, the blow broke the desk clean down the middle. I could hear my voice still echoing around the hallway beyond the door.

Once I'd gotten my breathing back under control, I called out to my lieutenant. "Aoyuki!"

"My lord!" Aoyuki said, stepping forward and dropping to one knee with her head bowed.

"We are going to completely sabotage the plan that these scumbags have come up with," I said. "And to be able to do that, we will need to know the exact locations of all the hostages being held prisoner, as well as all the human slave soldiers. I don't care if you have to redeploy your entire intelligence network to find them, they *must* be located. Can you handle that?"

“As you have commanded me to do so, I will dedicate myself to fulfilling my master’s orders,” Aoyuki replied.

I nodded my approval. “I feel sorry for Miya and her friend, but they will have to remain captive for a little bit longer while we locate *all* the hostages and slaves. If we extract the two of them prematurely, we might end up tipping our hand to the beastfolk. For now, make sure there’s a pair of eyes watching over them, and make plans to rescue them should their lives be in danger.” I turned to my next lieutenant. “Mei!”

Mei also stepped forward and kneeled before me. “Yes, Master Light.”

“I can foresee us needing to relocate all of the humans we rescue from the beastfolk to the Great Tower,” I said. “You have my authorization to use all the material and labor you need to make sure the operation runs smoothly. Can I count on you to handle the preparations for welcoming our guests?”

“I swear on my honor as a maid that I shall carry out your command to the letter, Master Light,” Mei declared.

“Then I’ll leave it to you,” I replied. “Ellie!”

“Blessed Lord Light, I am ready to receive your heavenly decree,” said Ellie, before also stepping forward and kneeling in front of me.

“You will be responsible for drawing up a plan to get these hostages to safety, and for rescuing the slave soldiers once the beastfolk have declared war on us,” I said. “You will also be in charge of making the beastfolk pay for trying to do away with us through such an underhanded scheme. Any beastfolk who stand on the battlefield must not get away. They must be made to realize, to the fullest extent, how stupid they have been for making us their foe, and for that purpose, we have the perfect mythical-class weapon we can use against them. You have my permission to use it.”

Ellie could hardly believe her ears. “Y-You want me to use *that* weapon?”

At present, there were nine mythical-class weapons in the Abyss, not including the sword that Nazuna wielded. That meant my Unlimited Gacha had produced roughly three mythical-class weapons every year I had been in my underground stronghold. However, these weapons either radiated too much

energy or wielding them came with too high a cost for anyone below a certain power level, so I'd kept them under lock and key. But now that I'd vowed not to let a single one of the beastfolk escape the battlefield alive, I basically had to use one of these weapons. However, Ellie had doubts over the particular weapon I had in mind for the task, mainly because it had a huge drawback.

"Any one of us in this room could easily destroy the beastfolk by ourselves, Your Blessedness," Ellie said. "We were hesitant about using that particular weapon against Mr. Cavaur, so I humbly believe it may be somewhat *excessive* to punish the beastfolk with it..."

"Yes, you're right on that, Ellie," I replied. "Any of us in this room could slaughter thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of beastfolk without breaking a sweat. However, that doesn't rule out the possibility of one of those dirtwads slipping through our fingers, and like I said, every last one of those beastfolk must answer for this crime against humanity."

Ellie's face turned pale and beads of sweat formed across it after hearing this, and the same went for Mei and Aoyuki. It seemed they had a pretty good idea of just how murderously enraged I was at the beastfolk.

"Not one beastfolk who sets foot on that battlefield will escape," I reiterated. "They must pay for what they have done. They must. And we are going to make sure they do with our secret weapon. Ellie, can you do that for me?"

"Of course, Blessed Lord Light," she replied. "I will not let a single one of those miscreants evade your divine wrath. The air will be filled with their cries of sorrow and remorse, which you will lap up to your heart's content, Your Blessedness."

Ellie bowed her head in a way that was both solemn and captivating, almost as if she were offering herself to an *actual* god. I nodded my approval again, then turned my attention to all three maidens.

"We must rescue all of the human hostages and slaves," I reiterated. "And we must make sure that no beastman who steps onto the battlefield leaves to tell the tale. We will make them suffer and scream for what they have done. I know all of you are capable of doing that."

"Yes," Aoyuki replied. "Anything for you, my master."

“On my honor as a maid, I shall carry out your command to the fullest,” Mei stated.

“Your wish is my desire, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said.

Still on bended knee, all three of my warriors raised their heads, their eyes twinkling like diamonds. I nodded with satisfaction, knowing that the fate of the Beastfolk Federation had just been sealed in this very moment.

Chapter 9: And What about Nazuna?

“It was absolutely thrilling seeing Blessed Lord Light so angry!” Ellie said as the three SUR warriors left Light’s office. “He was just so godly and majestic that I could feel myself trembling under my skin. You will forgive my impertinence for saying this, but he got me so hot and bothered, I was all ready for him to have his way with me there and then.”

“Rrow,” Aoyuki said emphatically.

“Leaving aside that last point, the beastfolk are most unfortunate to have incited Master Light’s wrath to such an extent,” Mei reflected.

The trio walked down the hallway, each one off to make their own preparations for carrying out Light’s orders. Ellie’s cheeks were still flushed with ecstasy as she recalled their conversation with the young dungeon master, and the memory made her body shiver.

“I certainly agree with you on that, Mei,” Ellie said. “Those beastfolk must pay dearly for ever considering waging war on Blessed Lord Light. For as long as our highest god and ruler commands it, we must make them rue the day they decided to commit their crimes!”

“Indeed, Ellie,” Aoyuki said, expressing a rare concurrence with the superwitch. “Master’s words are absolute. Whatever he says is always right. No beastman who set foot on the battlefield must escape from our clutches. Master is entirely correct to order that.”

“It is good to see that you are eager to carry out Master Light’s decree, but we must not forget to complete the mission to his exact specifications,” Mei warned. “This is not an opportunity to simply rout the enemy.”

“I’m fully aware of that,” Ellie retorted. “And I’ll never forget Blessed Lord Light’s impassioned speech on the matter either!”

“Mrrow!” Aoyuki added.

Mei didn’t believe her two associates would fail to heed Light’s orders, but

she felt she needed to remind them all the same. They were just about to part ways to attend to their separate tasks when Nazuna happened to spot them chatting away in the hallway. It was a rare sight to see the three other Level 9999s together, so partly driven by curiosity, Nazuna scampered up to her colleagues like a happy puppy wagging an invisible tail. Mei and Ellie were less than thrilled to see Nazuna scurrying toward them, however, and both of their faces stiffened at the awkwardness of the situation. Nazuna, who was still all smiles, naturally failed to notice their reactions.

“Whatcha guys all doing here?” Nazuna asked. “Ya all gonna go eat together or somethin’? Lemme join ya!”

Mei and Ellie racked their brains to try to come up with some way out of this that didn’t involve informing Nazuna that they had just left a pivotal meeting with Light and that she had been kept out of the loop, but before either of them could utter a word, Aoyuki spoke up.

“Master has decreed that we should crush the beastfolk, who are planning to declare war on us,” Aoyuki stated frankly. “We have just left his office.”

“Wha?” Nazuna said.

“A-Aoyuki?!” Ellie spluttered in disbelief. Mei simply shut her eyes and covered her face with the palm of her hand.

Aoyuki held a grudge against Nazuna because the Vampire Knight would always act all buddy-buddy with her every time they bumped into each other, which thoroughly irked Aoyuki, as she was the type who preferred being left alone. For that reason, Aoyuki didn’t really care if this harsh truth got Nazuna all upset. As a result, Nazuna’s sunny disposition disappeared completely and was replaced by an expression that made her look like a puppy lost in the middle of a rainstorm.

“Huh? But why did Master call all of ya but not me?” Nazuna asked. “Did I make him mad? Does this mean he hates me now?”

Aoyuki giggled softly.

“Aoyuki!” Ellie yelled, rebuking her associate, but Aoyuki simply turned her head away and mewled evasively. Aoyuki had so much frustration bottled up

with regards to Nazuna that it was at the point where she thought nothing of being purposely mean toward her happy-go-lucky colleague. Ellie, on the other hand, thought this kind of behavior was going too far.

Ellie cleared her throat. “Our Blessed Lord doesn’t hate you, Nazuna. If you were to ever anger him, he would be magnanimous enough to scold you in person but forgive your transgressions. We don’t know exactly why His Blessedness didn’t call you into the meeting, but we can be sure that it’s for a perfectly well-considered reason that is inscrutable to everyone but himself.”

“But... But I might have made him mad without knowin’ it, and that’s why he didn’t call me in...” Nazuna mumbled.

“Nazuna, it is better not to overthink such matters,” Mei said. “As Ellie has stated, Master Light undoubtedly has his own reasons for not summoning you to the meeting.”

“But...” Nazuna started to protest as tears welled up in her eyes. Mei and Ellie decided to stick around and console Nazuna until she felt better, while an unrepentant Aoyuki used the opportunity to slink away unnoticed.

A few days later, Light heard about what had happened with Nazuna from Mei and immediately called the Vampire Knight to his office to offer an explanation.



“I could never hate you, Nazuna,” I said, stroking her hair as we sat together in my office. “In fact, I feel just awful knowing I made you feel like that.”

Nazuna sobbed. “I’m sorry...”

I can’t deny that I purposely didn’t summon her to that meeting, I thought. Rescuing human captives is a very delicate operation, which means we can’t simply go on a rampage against the beastfolk. Unfortunately, Nazuna isn’t quite capable of that level of restraint.

Obviously, I couldn’t tell Nazuna that, so I kept stroking her hair as I came up with some other excuse. “There’s a very good reason why I didn’t call you here. You’re the one I chose to serve as my dear sister’s bodyguard, remember?”

Actually, Nazuna was more like Yume's playmate than her protector, but they got along really well, which was perhaps down to the fact that they were close in mental age.

"I didn't want Yume knowing about those awful things the beastfolk were doing to humans, and while I *know* you wouldn't tell her about any of those things, there's still a teensy-weensy chance that she could find out from you," I said. "Yume is such an innocent, gentle girl that her knowing about the beastfolk would crush her and make her cry, so I purposely didn't tell you, because if you don't know, there's no way Yume can know either."

"Wow! That's so smart, master!" Nazuna said, perking up. "Like they say, if ya wanna deceive your friends, trick your enemies!"

I laughed. "It's the other way around: to fool your enemies, you must first fool your friends."

Nazuna's reverent sunny expression showed that she had completely bought my excuse. I breathed an internal sigh of relief as I continued stroking Nazuna's platinum blonde locks.

Chapter 10: Prepping for War

The five beastfolk chieftains had gathered again in the federal capital to discuss the upcoming war with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, and as always, they sat in a circle on a shaggy carpet as a way to avoid any altercations over who got to sit where at a table. This time around, the one chairing the discussion was the Tiger Tribe's chieftain, Lebad.

"My boys were able to round up roughly two thousand inferiors who look like they're battle-ready. Of course, a special mention goes to the Wolf and Avian tribes for lending us a hand," Lebad said. "Together with the thousand or so hostages we're holding, we're talking three thousand people nabbed in total, give or take. That said, we had to raid a buncha villages and kidnap a boatload of stray travelers to get to that number, and the rest of the dregs are startin' to figure out they need to watch their backs, so I think now's a good time to wrap up this phase of the operation. Any objections?"

"My tribe is in full agreement with you, Mr. Lebad," Igor replied.

"So is the Wolf Tribe," Gamm added. "I believe the time is ripe to put our war plan into motion."

While Igor and Gamm were quick to favor the gung ho approach, Ozo had spent the whole exchange frowning with his arms crossed and unmoving, aside from the long pipe in his mouth, which bobbed up and down like the tail of a grumpy cat. The Bovine Tribe's chieftain, Beny, looked every bit as cross, her brow crinkling with undisguised disgust. The two detractors remained silent as the attention of the other three shifted to them.

Ozo yanked the pipe from his mouth indignantly. "For the record, I still object. No one in their right mind would go along with a scheme like this."

"I'm with Mr. Ozo," Beny added. "This treatment is simply too cruel, even for humans."

"I will remind the esteemed chieftains that this is a settled matter, so it's too

late to retread old arguments,” Lebad noted. “Besides, we’ve already kidnapped the inferiors and pillaged their villages, so there’s no backing out now.”

Beny looked away with a hint of guilt, but Ozo—who outsized Lebad both in terms of height and girth—steelled his gaze and glared silently at the pantherman. This stare-off continued for another minute or so, creating a potentially explosive atmosphere in the conference chamber that made the two noncombative chieftains, Igor and Beny, go pale. As moderator, Lebad eventually decided to err on the side of professionalism and casually shrugged off the provocation.

“Ozo, Beny, we already took a vote on this, and you lost. The results don’t care about how you feel about the situation,” Lebad argued. “We beastfolk have survived through the centuries by our respective tribes putting our differences aside and deciding things in a democratic way. Turning your back on tradition is never a good look.”

“Yah, I know that,” Ozo grumbled stiffly.

“I will honor tradition as well,” said Beny.

Now that things were smoothed over with his two critics, Lebad decided to move the meeting forward at pace before the mood soured again. “So anyway, now we’ve got enough inferiors to throw at the Wicked Whore or whatever it is she calls herself, I say it’s time we wrote up the declaration of war.”

The five chieftains spent the rest of the session discussing the when and where of the war, as well as the role that each chieftain would play in it. Although Beny and Ozo still harbored grievances about the whole thing, they didn’t let their hang-ups disrupt the discussions.

Once the meeting had concluded, Gamm returned to his manor with his security detail in tow. On reaching his executive office, he dismissed his entire entourage save for one person—Gims—who grabbed a bottle of whiskey from a shelf and poured out a glass for his uncle. Gamm took the tumbler from his nephew in good spirits, supped the alcohol like it was nectar, then let out an appreciative sigh to indicate how refreshing he found it.

“Nothing better than whiskey after a good meeting, my boy!” Gamm raved. “Go on, Gims, have a few fingers yourself!”

“Appreciate it, unc,” Gims said, pouring himself a glass. “Thought the bovine and bear chiefs were gonna put up more of a fight back there, but they rolled over quicker than I expected.” Gims sat down on the sofa opposite his uncle, who immediately launched into one of his lectures.

“And you know *why* they rolled over like they did?” Gamm said. “It’s all thanks to doing the prep work *before* the fact. Listen to me, Gims: always prepare for whatever may come down the pipe. It don’t matter if it’s a major war or a sit-down with your buddies, you do the prep work before you go in. That’s how you win your battles. Don’t be like those dumb mongrels who run into fights without planning ahead. They eventually look for a winning angle, but by that time, it’s too late and they’re already dead. Also, don’t be one of those chickenshits that take so much time preparing that they lose the initiative. Lebad’s the poster boy for that brand of loser.”

Gamm took another sip of his whiskey as he basked in the knowledge that he had outsmarted his rival by proposing to go to war with the tower witch. “You won’t win battles without prep work, and you’ll lose if you prep too much. It takes experience to know where the happy median lies, Gims, so you’d better get out there and get some real-world experience under your belt while you’re still young. Or else, you’ll end up just like Lebad, old and washed-up...”

Gamm stopped midsentence, his own words reminding him of something. The wolf chieftain leaned forward in thought, whiskey tumbler still in hand.

“Hey, something wrong, unc?” Gims said, wondering what had prompted the delay.

“Gims, we’ve got a good number of juveniles among these inferiors we nabbed, don’t we?” Gamm said. “You need to put some of those brats in barrels and hide ’em among the military supplies going to the front lines. It can’t be too many of them. Not more than can be taken care of. Just two or three will do.”

“Sorry, unc, I don’t think I follow,” Gims said, looking at Gamm quizzically. The wolf chieftain snorted haughtily at his clueless nephew.

“Like I said, you gotta do prep work before any battle, and the war with this witch is as big a battle as they come,” Gamm said. “Luckily, we still have time to make some extra preparations before we move out.”

“But unc, I thought we already had that anti-dragon item, that other magic item you have, and this so-called Holy Evil Golem, which may or may not be bogus,” Gims protested. “And that’s all on top of the army of inferiors we got. I think that’s more than enough to beat the witch.”

“I think so too,” Gamm agreed. “The brats are simply extra insurance. All we do is stuff a few of them into barrels, put ’em in a carriage, and then, once we’ve executed the witch, we can kill the kids along with her. They won’t be any trouble.”

“Well, there *is* an infinitesimal chance some of those inferiors will forget about the hostages and join the witch to save their own hides,” Gims postulated. “So I suppose if that happens, we can just bring out the kids and remind ’em what the stakes are.”

“There you are, Gims,” Gamm said. “Always remember to prepare for the worst.”

“Thanks for the advice, unc,” Gims replied. “I won’t forget that, trust me.”

“Like I always say, I look out for my family,” Gamm said. “Giving these life lessons is the least I can do.” He eagerly drank in the look of respect he was receiving from Gims, which cheered the Wolf Tribe chieftain even further, and he reflexively patted the part of his chest where the Teleportation Pendant—the last resort of all last resorts—lay hidden under his clothing. The two wolfmen continued discussing their plans for war, while a tiny monster sat in the corner of the office, listening in on their conversation.



The Beastfolk Federation chieftains had at last finalized the declaration of war to send to the Great Tower, spelling out the time and place that they would engage in combat. Hisomi learned the news from the spy-clone he had assigned to Gamm and relayed developments to his leader, Hiro.

“So the beastfolk have finally decided on the time and date of their war, have they?” Hiro said, a concerned look on his face. “They’re moving much faster than I expected. Will that be an issue?”

“My clone has told me he does not see any flaws in the way things are moving

forward,” Hisomi said with an insincere smile. “Although the beastfolk possess no remarkable abilities aside from their physical attributes, they appear to be taking this war seriously.”

Hiro didn’t respond to Hisomi’s assurances, which suggested that he still saw the beastfolk as little more than two-legged animals who were less than intelligent.

“I can imagine what concerns you may have, Lord Hiro, but as you are aware, I have made sure to provide them with a feasible battle strategy, as well as certain magical items,” Hisomi said. “Even if they do not emerge victorious, the beastfolk will be useful for uncovering information. The Holy Evil Golem and the Twinblood Pendants we have provided them with are part and parcel of that objective.”

“I hope you are right,” Hiro muttered. “We must find out who is in control of the Great Tower, what their relationship to C is, and the full extent of their military might. I don’t care one bit if the entirety of the beastfolk race is eradicated in the process, just so long as we are able to find out more about these secrets.”

The Masters residing in the Dragonute Empire were so desperate to find out who was behind the appearance of the Great Tower, they refused to draw the line at genocide.

“Incidentally, will there be anyone other than me monitoring the Great Tower when this war does finally break out?” Hisomi asked.

“Hmm, to be frank, I doubt it,” Hiro said. “I’m unavailable due to ongoing negotiations and other matters regarding coordinating affairs, and everyone else is busy with P. A.”

“What about Hei?” Hisomi asked.

“He is, let’s say, *committed* to being Kaizer’s bodyguard,” Hiro replied.

“While Kaizer does play a central role in P. A., and it is true that he is busy with refurbishing and design work related to that project, I fail to see what Hei does other than shadow Kaizer,” Hisomi said. “I am in desperate need of manpower, so I believe it would be a better use of resources if he were to assist

me.”

“And I apologize once again, and I do wish we could lessen your workload, for what it’s worth,” Hiro said. “Unfortunately, even the remaining two members of our team are unavailable, since they’re occupied with their work on P. A. at the bottom of the sea.”

“There is no need for you to apologize, Lord Hiro,” Hisomi said. “You are constantly employed as a coordinator between several parties to make sure our projects run smoothly.” He sighed. “I suppose what happened before explains why Hei remains so attached to Kaizer. I still wish he would show a modicum of flexibility, though. After all, you and he are the strongest among us, so the fact that he is all but inactive makes me feel like we have been sold a bill of goods.”

After firing off this string of complaints, Hisomi reaffixed a smile on his face and turned to Hiro. “In any case, I shall visit the battlefield myself and monitor the situation on the ground. For that to fit into my schedule, I will have to ask you to take over some of my tasks for that day, Lord Hiro.”

“Of course. All you need to do is ask,” Hiro said. “I will expect you to bring back some quality intelligence in return.”

“I will certainly do everything in my power to do just that,” Hisomi assured him.

Chapter 11: War Approaches

“You need more fighters?” I said to Ellie, responding to her query in my office in the Abyss.

“Yes, Blessed Lord,” the superwitch replied. “This fight with the beastfolk will make the Wicked Witch of the Tower known throughout the realms whether we like it or not, so our best option is to make the Great Tower as notorious as possible to attract all attention away from the Abyss. To that end, I will need fighters who are nearly as powerful as me.”

We were getting ready to fight the beastfolk, who we knew were on the verge of waging war on the Great Tower. Or more accurately, we were going to take on an army of human slaves who were being forced to fight because the beastfolk were keeping their loved ones as hostages to make sure they stayed loyal. I planned to rescue all of the humans involved, as well as punish the beastfolk who were carrying out this vomit-inducing war plan. Ellie was in charge of coming up with strategies that would fulfill both of these objectives, which was why she had come forward with this proposal to add more fighters to her own fighting force.

“More specifically, I would like to recruit two fighters who will work directly under me, with one matching your physique,” Ellie said. “During our operation against the White Knights, we used one of your Double Shadow clones to take your place on a decoy mission, but as you know, those clones are much less powerful than you are, Your Blessedness. However, future circumstances may call for a body double that is convincingly similar to you in both appearance and ability.”

“Right...” I said. “I think I get the picture.”

The elaborate revenge plot against Sasha the elf had involved me acting the part of my alter ego, the adventurer named Dark, and as luck would have it, my party had been chosen to go and fight the Snake Hellhounds near the Great Tower as a diversion for the White Knights. But because I needed to be in the

tower in order to exact my revenge on Sasha, I'd made my Double Shadow clone join Nemumu and Gold for the decoy mission.

Ellie wanted me to summon powerful new fighters who would serve under her at the Great Tower and boost the landmark's notoriety, and furthermore, one of these fighters needed to look similar enough to me to adequately serve as my body double if a situation called for it. *We may very well end up needing to repeat the same body double trick that fooled the White Knights*, I thought. *And it'd be better to have a standin who can take care of powerful opponents if needed.*

I nodded. "That's actually a great idea, Ellie. The Wicked Witch definitely should have two more fighters serving under her. Do you already have a good idea of which cards I should release to make it happen?"

"As it happens, I do, Your Blessedness," Ellie replied. "Annelia has already helped me to retrieve the cards I had in mind, although the process took a little more time than I would've liked."

"Yeah, I can imagine," I said.

"Oh, no, Annelia is a very *capable* administrator," Ellie said generously, then sighed. "I just wish she could keep that bad habit of hers under control..."

Annelia was the chief administrator of the Card Repository, who thought of herself as everybody's big sister and always acted according to those impulses, even if the other person was older or higher-ranking. If I were to hazard a guess, Ellie had spent more time being treated as Annelia's unwilling "kiddo" than actually retrieving the gacha cards during their encounter. Ellie laid both cards on my desk for me, and after picking them up and inspecting them, I got up from my seat and took up a position in front of my desk.

"UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka! UR Level 8888, Menace of Mayhem, Khaos! Release!" After voicing the names on them, the cards disintegrated into particles and summoned two magic seals made of blinding light. Once the glow had subsided, two males were standing before me.

"UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka, present." With a gallant air and a fiddle hanging at his hip, Orka dropped to one knee. He looked to be around 175 centimeters tall, with soft features that could easily be mistaken for a woman's.

The most striking thing about him was that he had hair tied in a long braid colored black on one side and white on the other. This black-and-white color scheme extended to his clothes, and from top to toe, his outfit was so stylishly designed, it looked like he was attending a ball.

The second summon—Khaos—was more or less the same height as me. He wore the armor of a knight and wielded a scythe that was taller than either of us. A hood covered his platinum-blond hair that was borderline white, and his eyes had the kind of piercing glare that made him look anything but approachable. To sum up, Orka looked every bit as friendly as all of my other summons, while the attitude exhibited by Khaos was so frigid, it bordered on open hostility, and of course, he didn't bother kneeling to me. This was the first time I had experienced this kind of reception from a summon, and I could sense Ellie was irritated enough to say something about it.

I raised my hand to stop her before she could open her mouth. "Ellie, please tell these two why I have brought them here." I didn't care if every summon worshipped the ground I walked on or not. As long as they didn't get in the way of my vendetta, and so long as they didn't threaten the safety of the rest of my allies, they could adopt whatever attitude they wanted, as far as I was concerned.

"Understood, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said after a pregnant pause. "Orka, you may rise and listen to me speak."

Orka straightened up with a pleasant smile splashed across his face. Ellie promptly cleared her throat and told the two summons about the present situation, as well as what she expected of them. Her briefing was to the point, with no digressions, but she made sure not to leave out any potentially relevant details either.

"Yes, that all makes perfect sense to me," Orka said once Ellie had finished. "Our lord and master must have been born under a tragically complicated star. From the sound of his heartbeat, I can tell he's a man of noble spirit, of pure soul, and no less a strength of will. Yet it is these qualities that have played a part in his calamity. Or rather, it is destiny that has brought him to where he is. But just as fate accompanies the tragedy in our lives, it also brings forth blessings we pray to realize. For I am blessed by fate to serve my lord, and I will

stay to hear him forever more.”

It seems that Orka was a gifted enough musician to be able to hear my heartbeat and judge my lofty character from the sound of it alone. I wasn’t quite sure how to respond to his flowery oration, so I just smiled and let out a vague chuckle.

“So you’re here to take revenge, are you?” Khaos said coolly, almost mockingly. “Well, I won’t tell you how to live your life, and I can play your body double with ease, but let me make one thing clear: nobody who’s weaker than me gets to order me around.” Khaos’s penetrating gaze remained trained on me as he pointed his scythe in my direction. “Unlike all of your other summons, I won’t swear fealty to you unconditionally. The laws of nature are absolute, and the strong rule the weak. If you want me to be your follower, you’ll have to *make* me follow you.”

“My goodness, it seems I have made a mistake,” Ellie tutted, barely able to contain her fury. “I *thought* I had selected someone who would be a superior asset to us, but it appears we have summoned an absolute brute. The blame for it lies with me, so I will be responsible for correcting this error.”

Ellie manifested her phantasma-class weapon, The Vier, which was the name of the four spellbooks that were floating around her. The sudden appearance of it meant she was out for blood.

“I believe you said the laws of nature are absolute, yes?” Ellie said to Khaos. “Then you won’t mind at all if the stronger animal eliminates the weak!”

I held up my hand to get the Forbidden Witch to stand down. “Relax, Ellie. Khaos just wants to test my strength. Nobody’s calling for a deathmatch here.”

I grabbed my Gungnir staff and stood in front of Khaos. “That *is* what you want, right? You’re free to test me anytime, anywhere.”

“I’m glad you’re not the type of coward who lets others fight for you,” Khaos said, his stony expression unflinching. “Otherwise, there would be no point in battling you. I commend you for your bravery.”

After receiving this implicit agreement to challenge me, I ordered Ellie to prepare the battleground for us.



The arrangements were made for Khaos and I to duke it out in one of the training grounds at the bottom of the Abyss, with Ellie providing a force field around the arena so that two high-level battlers could cut loose without doing any damage to the dungeon. Ellie had also added in one more hack to doubly ensure our safety.

“I’ve finished establishing the mana link, Blessed Lord,” Ellie announced. “My mana will absorb any injuries sustained during the battle, so neither of you can die, so long as my mana pool doesn’t run out.”

“Thanks, Ellie,” I said. “Now I have no reason to hold back.”

This word of gratitude from her master made Ellie beam. “It’s the least I could do for you, Blessed Lord Light.”

Ellie had discovered some kind of immortality spell while researching the dungeon core, and by combining her mana with this spell, she was able to convert any potentially fatal damage into mana loss. I couldn’t tell you the specifics of the spell, but it had been instrumental in us taking out the White Knights in the Great Tower without anyone—either friend or foe—dying. Because we managed to capture the White Knights alive, we were able to extract valuable intelligence through probing their memories. In all honesty, I didn’t know what I would have done without that spell.

Now I was asking Ellie to cast that same spell over the practice arena to eliminate the possibility—however slight—of this fight turning into a real deathmatch. After thanking Ellie for her efforts, and with my Gungnir in hand, I strolled over to Khaos, who was standing ready in the middle of the grounds.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said. “We’ve finished all the groundwork now, so we can begin.”

“If you’re prepared to lose because you see this contest as a mock battle, you may as well quit now,” Khaos said. “I intend to slay you where you stand, but I will not stand for a quick, easy victory due to a lack of commitment on your part.”

“Well, you can relax, because I’m not pulling any punches either,” I said. “I

also hope you won't disappoint me by going down early. Not after the way you've talked yourself up."

"I guess you talk a good game at least," Khaos admitted. "But talk is cheap without the skills to back it up." He raised his scythe, and I brought my staff forward.

"Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie called out from the sideline. "Good luck in your fight!"

"Khaos, as a fellow colleague, I will root for you," Orka said in a raised voice. "I also pray that our lord and master will fight bravely."

Was I the only one who thought having separate cheering sections somewhat undermined the seriousness of the battle? In any case, Khaos decided he would make the first move.

"Let's start with a little warm-up!" he said, tossing his scythe at me like a boomerang. He didn't hurl the weapon so much as just flick it without much effort, yet even so, the scythe whirled toward me at lightning speed. It just went to show that a Level 8888's throwing arm was nothing to sneeze at.

"That head-on attack isn't gonna hit me!" I retorted. "SSSR Storm Wall—release!" The triple-S rare card created a barrier made of a windstorm that was designed to protect me from all incoming weapons. If I were facing a normal opponent, the Storm Wall would've blown the weapon back, damaging it in the process, and if I were lucky, the strong wind might even have thrown Khaos off-balance too.

"What?!" I yelled incredulously. "The scythe's not losing any of its speed?"

The scythe cut through the windy barrier as though it were nothing more than a light mist, and continued hurtling straight for me without slowing at all. I was forced to leap aside at the last moment to avoid it. *I should've guessed that a Level 8888 fighter wouldn't be wielding a normal scythe, I reflected. That thing's probably a magic weapon powerful enough to be immune from Storm Wall's effect.*

I couldn't afford to let myself get distracted by the magic scythe forever, though, because Khaos suddenly appeared right beside me to take a swing at

my head. While the scythe was still airborne, Khaos had concealed his presence and closed the gap between us. I reacted just in time and swatted his fist away with my staff.

“I thought I’d made myself invisible to your senses,” Khaos said.

“Yeah, you completely vanished all right,” I replied. “But your sudden disappearance was a dead giveaway that you were trying a sneak attack.”

“You’re more experienced in combat than you look,” Khaos remarked.

“And you’re too direct with your attacks,” I retorted. “SSSR Earth Lancers—release!”

As soon as Khaos’s foot touched the ground, large stalagmite-like spikes sprouted up out of the floor of the dungeon, forcing my opponent to leap into the air again. While avoiding being impaled in midair by the constantly forming Earth Lancers, Khaos caught his scythe—which had boomeranged back to him—and started using the weapon to hack away at the rocklike spikes beneath him to clear a path for his attack magic.

“Highborn Flame Fairies!” This spell produced ten fiery beings that looked like fairies, but whose little bodies looked hot enough to vaporize steel. But I wasn’t going to let these fairies touch me.

“SSSR High Magic Counter—release!” This card formed a glowing wall that blocked all magical attacks below a certain class, and not only were the Flame Fairies unable to get through it, but they were also repelled back to Khaos, bathing him and his surroundings in white-hot fire. The flames melted the Earth Lancers and turned them into molten rock, which proceeded to swallow up Khaos entirely.

“Well done, Blessed Lord!” Ellie yelled out. “You’ve completely outmatched him! Now end his life for good for being so snotty with you!”

“Um, Ms. Ellie?” Orka said. “Have you forgotten that this battle is to compare their strengths?”

Ellie was completely absorbed in the fight, her eyes glittering with admiration, but also envy that she wasn’t the one delivering the beatdown to Khaos. Meanwhile, Orka could only chuckle with a mixture of politeness and

awkwardness at Ellie's bloodlust.

Before I could respond, a gust of wind suddenly cleared away the molten rock and any lingering heat to reveal Khaos standing before me with a good deal of soot on his clothes, but with no injuries of note. Khaos used the back of his hand to wipe some soot off his cheek.

"You're a better summoner than I took you for," Khaos remarked.

"If that's what you think, can we end this match now?" I suggested.

"No way," Khaos replied. "I can't allow you to claim victory. Not now that I know I'm free to fight you with both gloves off!"

I guess he was done with the "warm-up" part of the battle and had decided it was time to go for broke. He tossed his scythe at me again, but this time, he recited a short incantation for good measure.

"Chaos Scythe! Full power!"

His words made the scythe splinter into several hundred copies of itself, each one aimed straight at my forehead. The sight shocked me, but I managed to remain cool enough to activate another card. "SSSR High Magic Counter—Release!"

Another wall of light formed between me and the Chaos Scythes—a gambit that would serve as a test to see if a magical barrier could block the scythes where the Storm Wall had failed, since it was designed to work against physical attacks.

"Oh, so the scythes *can* pass through that after all," I said, not all that surprised by this outcome. Since the Chaos Scythes were physical weapons, the High Magic Counter wasn't going to block them, but I'd decided to test the card, just to make sure. *So both physical and magical barriers are useless against the Chaos Scythe*, I thought. *But now I think I know what makes that weapon tick.*

I dodged the first few Chaos Scythes so they wouldn't touch me, then swung my staff at one of the other incoming scythes, hitting it away without any problems. In other words, the Storm Wall hadn't been able to repel the scythe, but my Gungnir could.

“There we go!” I said. “I just need to counter the Chaos Scythe with a weapon that’s more powerful!”

“Oh? I wasn’t expecting you to be smart enough to find that out so fast,” Khaos said, maintaining his cool exterior.

On the contrary, my wits had very little to do with it. Back when I was leveling up, I noticed that I’d developed a near-insurmountable resistance to attacks that were below my level. I figured a weapon wielded by the Level 8888 Khaos would work on the same principle, especially since the scythe was powerful enough to attack a target independently from all directions without Khaos even needing to touch it. *That scythe would completely overwhelm any normal opponent*, I thought, mentally placing Khaos physical capabilities higher than his power level suggested.

As he observed me batting away his Chaos Scythe copies, Khaos addressed me with outstretched arms. “You may have proven yourself clever enough to uncover the abilities of the Chaos Scythes, but this display suggests you’re only able to defend yourself against them. If that really is the case, then I’ve already won this battle! Highborn Flame Fairies! Highborn Ice Fairies! Highborn Thunder Fairies!”

Khaos summoned about ten fairies from each class until a total of thirty or so fairies were hovering around him. The elemental fairies then proceeded to dive toward me, joining the Chaos Scythe copies that were already swooping toward me. *So the High Magic Counter can stop the fairies, but not the scythes*, I thought. *And if I concentrate on batting away these scythes, the fairies might reach me. This is a pretty standard approach for confusing opponents. Not that I’m a fan of it.*

Khaos was unleashing his entire arsenal at me, and I grinned at this despite myself. Whenever I engaged in mock battles with my allies, I always had to pull my punches one way or another, but now that I knew Khaos was going to do whatever it took to win this contest, I found my mood buoyed by it.

“This still isn’t enough to defeat me!” I yelled. “UR Dimensional Blast—release!”

A dimension shrank in an instant with me at the epicenter, then expanded

again just as quickly, unleashing an energy blast that tore through the entire training arena, blowing away the scythe clones and the Highborn Fairies, as well as engulfing Ellie and Orka. The Dimensional Blast was powerful enough to beat back the Chaos Scythe, but the one drawback of this card was that the burst of energy affected friend and foe alike. If lower-level allies had been watching the fight, the blast would have severely wounded them, but I knew Ellie and Orka would have the resistance stats needed to withstand the blowback. As such, I was also fully expecting Khaos to have withstood the Dimensional Blast, and I was preparing to deliver a follow-up attack, when I discovered that Khaos was already one step ahead.

“Chaos Left, absorb all!” Khaos stood his ground, thrust his left arm out in front of him, and sucked up all the energy from the Dimensional Blast in a flash. In the same breath, Khaos rushed toward me and swung his right fist at me, shouting, “Genesis Right, unleash all!”

All the energy that Khaos had soaked up with his left arm came out in the form of a large concentrated beam from his right. There was no time to dodge it, so I hunkered down into a defensive crouch and took the full force of the blast. The torrent of energy was powerful enough to knock me backward, and I actually grunted in pain.

“B-Blessed Lord Light?!” Ellie screeched.

I ended up taking some damage, but not to the point where I couldn’t move my body, thanks to my shielding maneuver. There was no denying, though, that Khaos’s power move had managed to pierce through my Level 9999 defensive stats.

Now I get it, I thought. He unleashed his Chaos Scythes and Highborn Fairies to get me to counter with a massive magical attack, which he could then absorb and blast straight back at me.

I would never have known if my own attacks would have a harmful effect on me, so Khaos purposely drew me into a trap where one of my most powerful attacks completely backfired. That little trick had inflicted a considerable amount of damage to me, and if I were in his shoes, I’d be taking this chance to come over and punch my lights out. Lo and behold, Khaos quickly closed the

gap and raised a closed fist, the smug look of victory splashed across his face. He was obviously trying to put me in a coma. *I could activate some healing magic while concentrating on evading his attacks*, I thought. But I knew I couldn't do that. Focusing on recovery might have been a sound plan on the tactical level, but on the strategic level, it would never win the war. *Khaos challenged me to test out my qualifications to be his master*, I thought. *If I run from him here and now, he might never accept me as his leader, even if I do end up beating him.*

There was only one way I could answer. I tossed aside my staff, balled up my fist, and charged toward Khaos. His face flinched with shock, as if he'd never imagined that I would try to match him blow for blow. This momentary astonishment caused his right hook to be just hesitant enough for me to duck under it, while my own counter connected with his face. Though, to be fair to him, Khaos's punch would have landed perfectly and blasted me to kingdom come if my power level had been any lower.

My punch sent Khaos sliding backward with enough force for his heels to cut grooves in the ground, and it took him a moment or two before his backslide came to a complete halt and he dropped to one knee.

"I never imagined you would get up and hit me back after taking that energy blast," Khaos said. "I guess only a summoner would be capable of that."

"Does this mean you accept me as your master?" I asked.

"All you did was surprise me enough to hit me with a successful counterattack," Khaos replied. "Our challenge has only just begun."

Khaos stood up and used his sleeve to wipe away the blood that was dribbling from one corner of his mouth. "My Genesis of Chaos can absorb and throw back at you almost any magical attack you can fire at me. So far, I know that you're a mage with an arsenal of magic cards. My powers are near-omnipotent against fighters of your type, whether you use ranged attacks or fight at close quarters. Even if you're at a higher power level than me, my Genesis of Chaos puts me at the very top."

I had to admit that Khaos was right: the ability to absorb and repurpose attacks gave him a real advantage against higher-level mages. Or rather, against

normal mages with higher power levels.

“You think *that* skill is enough to defeat me, your master?” I taunted him, a fearless grin on my face. “Sorry to break it to you, but you’ll need to bring a lot more to this battle than that if you want to take me down, because in case you haven’t noticed, I’m an unlimited card mage, and unlike a regular mage, my powers are endless!”

Khaos might have been packing this so-called Genesis of Chaos that was able to absorb magic, but he could only do it with his left arm. If I unleashed multiple potentially lethal attack magic spells, that arm wouldn’t be able to absorb everything. But I purposely discarded that option and chose to face Khaos with my bare fists instead, just so that he would have no excuses to reject me as his master.

“SSR Thought Accelerator!” I shouted. “SSR Sixth Sense Boost! SSSR Accelerated Speed Boost! SSSR Defense Build Enhancement! SSSR Ability Boost! —” I continued to release cards one after another that would complement my close-combat melee skills. Unlike other mages, I had a whole library of gacha cards to choose from that went beyond attack magic, and on top of that, I had a trove of cards that would buff me physically. Khaos’s cool expression once again turned into one of surprise as I kept activating card after card. Once I’d finished, I assumed a battle stance.

“I’m taking you on at your own game, Khaos,” I said. “This way, I’ll *make* you accept me as your master.”

“You would dare to put yourself at a disadvantage like this?” Khaos said. “Well, I admire your spirit, at the very least!”

Khaos dashed toward me to begin the slugfest, while I stood my ground and returned his punches. Neither of us used our respective weapons; we simply whaled on each other like two kids in a schoolyard fight. It wasn’t a deathmatch by any stretch of the imagination, but more importantly, I found myself having fun throwing fists in this all-out brawl, and I couldn’t stop myself from grinning. Khaos started off by unironically praising my “spirit,” and I sensed that he was also having a blast from us just beating each other’s brains out.

In the middle of it all, I recalled a conversation I’d overheard in a bar back

when I was a rookie adventurer. *So this is what they mean when they say guys make friends with their fists, huh?* I thought to myself as I continued trading blows with Khaos.



“Looks like I have you beat,” I said. “Now will you treat me as your master?”

Khaos had put up a good fight, but when all was said and done, he hadn’t been able to overcome the gulf in our respective power levels, nor my buffs. He lay spread-eagle on the floor, battered and bruised all over.

“Yes, I admit defeat,” Khaos said in a calm and even tone despite being winded. “I’ll submit to you.” He readily grabbed my outstretched hand and allowed me to pull him up.





But still gripping my hand, Khaos gave me a word of warning. “However, if you ever grow weak or lose your will to fight, I *will* make you bow to me, summoner. I will force you to obey the laws of nature, which state that the strong always rule over the weak. If you don’t wish for that to happen, you’d better watch your back.”

I laughed. “Sure thing. Better stay on my toes, I guess.”

“Then, consider yourself warned,” Khaos said, squeezing my hand to emphasize that he wasn’t kidding. “Don’t even *think* about slipping up.”

Khaos turned his back on me, but all I could do was chuckle mirthfully. At that moment, Ellie and Orka came rushing up to me.

“You were amazing, Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie gushed. “I always knew you’d win out in the end!”

“Thanks, Ellie,” I said. “But I only won because Khaos decided to hold back. Not to mention, I had the level advantage and all those cards on my side. I can’t really boast about it too much.”

“I see you’re inclined to humble yourself, as I would expect of my lord and master,” Orka noted. “Indeed, Khaos put on a great showing, so you have earned the bragging rights for winning the duel.”

“Thanks, Orka,” I replied. “Since we’re here, you may also fight me to test if I’m qualified to lead you.”

Orka smiled softly. “That is entirely unnecessary, for you are the true lord and master in my eyes. Khaos merely chose to play the villain and fight you for supremacy so that you wouldn’t get hurt in any future battles. Alas, I could never play such a fiend, and I’m quite sure you wouldn’t wish me to either.”

“I will ask you not to try to psychoanalyze my motives,” Khaos said, glaring pointedly at him, but Orka simply smiled back.

“You often say that the strong must rule over the weak,” Orka continued. “But I perceive that what you *truly* believe is that the strong must *protect* the weak. Or to phrase it a different way: the weak should seek protection from the strong, rather than place themselves in harm’s way. But you are a man of few

words, with an attitude just as petty, so misunderstandings are rife where you are concerned. But I am ready, eager, and willing to call you my loyal brother-in-arms, so I hope that you will try to fix your temperament.”

“I thought I just told you *not* to try to put your own interpretation on my motives,” Khaos huffed. “Is this your way of trying to provoke me into battling you too? If so, then just challenge me directly, without beating around the bush.”

Orka responded with a gentle lilting laugh. “I think I will decline the offer.” He placed a hand lovingly on his fiddle. “I would rather play this instrument of mine than engage in senseless fisticuffs.”

If I were to believe Orka’s assessment, then Khaos had actually been looking out for me when he issued that challenge, I thought. Is this hostile act he’s putting on all because he’s too shy to admit it? If so, that’s a real shame about his personality.

As these thoughts tumbled around my mind, Ellie got everyone’s attention by clapping her hands. “I believe one match is more than enough for today. In case you two have forgotten, you will be assuming the guise of sidekicks to the Wicked Witch of the Tower. That will require you to play a very active role up on the surface world.” Ellie paused momentarily. “Also, the backstory I had in mind was that Orka would be Khaos’s older brother.”

“Now wait just a minute,” Khaos said, his face contorted with disgust. “I’m willing to obey Light because I lost to him, but I don’t see why I have to be *his* younger brother.”

“It’s because you are the same height as Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie said, ever ready with an explanation. “His Blessedness operates up on the surface world under his alter ego, ‘Dark,’ but there may be times when we need you to assume the identity of the Blessed Lord Dark for the benefit of Blessed Lord Light. For this substitution to prove effective, we must arrange for you to have a surface world persona that is entirely different from that of the Blessed Lord Dark. In his disguise, His Blessedness has no siblings, which means your character must have an older brother.”

Khaos would wear the Fool’s Mask whenever he had to act as my standin, and

not only did the mask have the power to prevent people from recognizing him, it could also change his voice and turn his hair black. If he donned a black hood in conjunction with the mask, nobody would be able to tell the two of us apart. Then, whenever he wasn't acting as my standin, the fact that Khaos would be viewed by all around him as Orka's younger brother would be so dissimilar from what people knew about Dark that there was no chance of anyone figuring out that he was my body double. Ellie's proposition was so airtight that even Khaos had to grudgingly admit it was a good idea.

"I suppose the decision makes sense," Khaos said. "Since Light defeated me, I will submit to his orders, because the strong always command the weak. Whenever I'm up on the surface—though *only* when I'm on the surface—I will obediently refer to Orka as my elder brother."

"You should address me as your big brother when we are down in the Abyss as well," Orka suggested. "That way, you won't slip up at inopportune moments."

Khaos gave Orka a dirty, wordless look, but despite the open antipathy, the fiddler was unfazed, his gentle smile unwavering. Khaos soon yielded in the face of Orka's warmth and he turned his back on his new fake relative.

"If you wish me to address you as my elder brother at all times, you must first make me submit to you as the laws of nature require. That is, if a mere musician is even capable of beating anyone."

Orka laughed again and shrugged. "I will admit that it might indeed be challenging."

It looked as if we had finally completed the task of bringing Khaos and Orka on board as our new allies in the Abyss, when all of a sudden, an unexpected interloper showed up.

"Ah! Master!" called out Nazuna, who just happened to be strolling past the practice arena at that moment. "What're ya doin' here?"

Nazuna scampered up to me like a pet greeting their owner, and I reacted accordingly, stroking the top of her head while I explained the situation. "I released two new allies from their cards, and I came down here to test out their strength."

“Oh! We got some new people?” Nazuna said happily, before turning to Khaos and Orka. “I’m the SUR Level 9999, Ancestral Vampire Knight, Nazuna. Good to meet’cha!”

“It is most certainly a pleasure to meet a kind and spirited maiden like yourself,” Orka replied. “I’m the UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka. I am most honored to make your acquaintance.”

Khaos hesitated pretentiously. “I’m the UR Level 8888, Menace of Mayhem, Khaos.”

“Right! Nice to see ya too!” Nazuna said, responding as cheerfully as ever despite the rather curt reply from Khaos. But this was one of the things I’d always liked about her. Ellie, meanwhile, wasn’t about to pass up this golden opportunity to get some greatly desired payback.

“Nazuna, it might interest you to know that Blessed Lord Light has just had a mock fight with Khaos,” Ellie said, an evil glint in her eye. “Since you’re here now, would you mind showing our two new arrivals how strong you are, as the strongest warrior in the Abyss? Aside from His Blessedness, of course.”

“Huh? How’m I supposed to do that?” Nazuna asked innocently.

“Oh, I’m not asking you to do anything complicated,” Ellie said. “You can simply spar with these gentlemen in a mock fight.”

“Oh, okay! That’s easy!” Nazuna replied excitedly. “I’m always rarin’ to go! Ya can both take me on at the same time if ya want!”

While Khaos had proven that he was a jerk with a heart of gold, the fact that he’d been a jerk to *me* was something Ellie just couldn’t let slide, so she was deliberately egging on Nazuna to get her to pulverize Khaos into a paste.

“Ellie, no!” I protested. “I understand why you’re doing this, but Khaos isn’t a bad guy! You don’t have to make him fight Nazuna—”

“I don’t mind,” Khaos interrupted. “I’m curious to see how well the strongest warrior in the Abyss would fare in a battle.”

I hadn’t known Khaos for all that long, but I could safely say that he was combative to a fault, because only someone who would want to challenge

the strongest all-around fighter (by far) in the dungeon—and after being beaten by me, no less. Khaos glanced at Orka to see if he was going to join in too.

“I will respectfully withdraw from the arena, thank you,” Orka said. “As I have said before, music is my passion, not unwinnable battles.”

“Then I shall fight for the both of us,” Khaos replied plainly.

“Ya got it!” Nazuna chirped happily. “Let’s make this fight a fun one!”

Nazuna unsheathed her Prometheus sword and practically skipped to the center of the practice area.

“Nazuna! There’s no need to hold back!” Ellie yelled over to her. “You can go wild!”

“Ellie, jeez...” I groaned, facepalming at the disaster that was about to unfold.

“Don’t worry about me,” Khaos said, Chaos Scythe now in hand. “In our fight, I exhausted myself trying to overcome the disparity in our power levels, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t stand a chance against you. You’ll see that as you observe my abilities from the sidelines as a neutral spectator. In any case, if she only thinks she’s the strongest due to the endless flattery you shower her with, then this fight will be a good corrective to bring her back to reality.”

So Khaos wanted to teach Nazuna a lesson on humility, huh? Despite appearances, he must have *really* been looking out for his allies. Unfortunately for him, Nazuna didn’t just think she was the strongest, she *was* the strongest, and Khaos wasn’t about to put Nazuna in her place. At least, not in this lifetime. *It’s too bad he’s exactly the type of person who can only learn things the hard way*, I thought, knowing that all I could do was pray that this fight wouldn’t leave him traumatized.

With Nazuna and Khaos staring each other down, it fell to Ellie to gleefully get the fight started. “Are you both ready? Then, let the mock battle begin!”

“Prometheus! Bend my reality!” Nazuna yelled, and the mythical-class weapon immediately split her into five identical clones.

“What?” Khaos gasped, frozen in place and gawking at the sight of them. The Nazuna quintuplets all started talking over each other.

“If you’re Level 8888, ya must be pretty tough!” one said.

“I’m gonna impress Master!” shouted another.

“No, *I’m* gonna impress ‘im first!”

“No, me!”

“Sure glad I’m able to go all out!”

If Khaos thought he’d had a tough time against me, he didn’t stand a chance against five crazily overpowered Nazunas. After a predictably decisive loss, Khaos showed signs of emotion for the first time.

“The laws of nature just don’t apply to her,” Khaos complained. “She’s not strong *or* weak. She’s simply the embodiment of insanity itself.”

I could only chuckle ruefully in agreement with his assessment.

Chapter 12: Preparations Complete

In a port town in the Beastfolk Federation where every warehouse was stuffed to the gills with dozens of human hostages, one such makeshift prison housing mostly women and children was filled with the sound of tender-aged captives sniffing and sobbing at their predicament, which all blended together into a soft din.

“Mommy...” one kid whimpered.

“I’m hungry,” another toddler whined.

Windows up near the ceiling allowed in a little sunlight, but even so, the warehouse was still a dimly lit crucible of misery. The only things serving as toilets were a few buckets lined up along the walls, and since there was no ventilation in the place, a foul-smelling miasma hung over the masses. Not only were they forced to deal with these unsanitary conditions, but they also had to do it without receiving much food, and as the days went by, many found themselves simply wasting away.

Because most of the hostages in the warehouse were women and children, they didn’t have the option of escaping by banding together and overpowering the beastmen guards at the entrance. And besides, even if they could somehow get past the guards, they would find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings with swarms of beastmen in all directions. This meant that even if all the captives had been males of fighting age, there was no way to escape. Another thing that kept them in place was the fact they were separated from their loved ones, whom the beastmen had threatened to kill to dissuade others from getting any ideas. Nobody had the will to run from the warehouse to start with, so all they could do was sit in one place and despair. All except for one scarlet-haired mage, whose eyes still flickered with unyielding defiance.

“Magic power, heed my call! Reveal thy shape as a water ball!” Miya recited, performing her water spell because the beastfolk weren’t giving the captives enough water. The water ball was largely shared among the younger children.

“Thank you, ma’am,” one of the youngsters said gratefully as she filled a chipped, wooden cup up with water.

“You’re welcome,” Miya replied. “When you’re done, give the cup to someone else so they can have a drink too.”

Clean water was a precious resource in these wretched conditions, and the children drank from the cup as if they were gulping down the sweetest thing they had ever tasted in their whole lives, and Miya watched on with an endearing smile on her face. Earlier, the young mage had used her Lowheal spell to patch up the injured captives, and although she wasn’t aware of it, her efforts were making life here marginally better than it was in the other warehouses.

Quornae—the mage who was abducted at the same time as Miya—sat dejectedly in one corner of the warehouse, her knees hugged to her chest. Miya filled a wooden cup with water and sat down next to her friend.

“Here, Quornae. Have some water,” she said.

“I’m not thirsty,” her friend replied. “You can drink it.”

“I think you need this way more than I do,” Miya said. “I haven’t seen you drink very much at all since we arrived. Going without water is bad for your health.”

Miya wasn’t urging Quornae to drink it out of simple generosity. Like the others around her, Miya hadn’t had much to eat while held captive, but thanks to her experience as an adventurer, she knew she still had enough stamina to function for a little while longer. On the other hand, Quornae looked weak and feeble. As an heiress who had been coddled all of her life, getting assaulted, kidnapped, and imprisoned was a completely disconcerting experience, and this shocking turn of events had quite clearly taken a major mental and physical toll on Quornae.

“Miya, why did you allow yourself to be captured?” Quornae said, her head pressed against her knees. “You could’ve easily saved yourself and left me behind.”

“Quornae...” Miya said, a note of pity in her voice.

“I was able to fight and beat monsters with my magic before,” Quornae said. “But when those wolfmen attacked us, I was so terrified, my mind just went totally blank. I couldn’t do anything at all. I’m the Violet Fallen Angel, a Category Four mage, but all I did was get in your way. You had every right to abandon me back there.”

The tips of Quornae’s fingers dug even deeper into the arms that were wrapped around her knees. Miya gently stroked her back.

“You *know* I could never leave you behind,” she said with a smile. “I mean, we’re best friends, aren’t we? Best friends never abandon each other.”

“Miya...” Quornae sniffed. “I’m so sorry. I really believed those wolfmen were going to kill me. The thought of dying scared me so much, I just blanked out and couldn’t do anything! And now you’re in this mess because of me...”

“Anyone would be scared of dying,” Miya said, sounding like a mother consoling her child. “Besides, I don’t think I would’ve gotten too far if I’d tried to ditch you and run from the wolfmen. Thankfully, we’re still alive, so we still have a chance of getting out of this, along with the rest of the prisoners.”

Quornae raised her head and leaned against Miya as pent-up tears streamed down her cheeks, before finally wrapping her arms around her friend and bawling her eyes out. The emotions that had built up inside her due to the initial fright of the wolfmen’s unprovoked attack, the guilt of undermining Miya’s counteroffensive, and the shock of being forced to endure the wretched conditions inside this warehouse all came flooding out. Throughout it all, Miya exhibited the kind of unconditional kindness and acceptance that was generally only found in saints, never once thinking about pushing Quornae away because she felt inconvenienced by her display of emotion. By the time Quornae had finally finished crying her eyes out, night had fallen, and moonlight had replaced the sun’s rays and shone through the narrow window slits. Quornae ended up drifting off to sleep in Miya’s arms, but the red-haired mage remained alert, and she suddenly picked up on a certain scent that wafted through the ever-pungent air.

It looks like the beastmen are making their move, Miya thought. I can smell them coming.

It was the same murderous odor Kyto had exuded when he slaughtered half of Miya's former adventuring party, and her suspicions would soon turn out to be correct.



The door of the warehouse was flung open and several beastmen strolled in, with the guards quickly blocking the exit again once they were all inside. The only times the beastmen captors showed up were on the woefully few occasions when they brought food and water, or whenever they brought in new captives to detain. However, they didn't seem to be there for either of those purposes this time around, and instead appeared to be scanning the crowd for specific people.

"Pee-yew!" one of the beastmen said mockingly. "These inferiors smell as nasty as they look!"

"Yeah, you said it," said his partner. "Let's get this over with so we can get outta this stinkhole."

"Right. Good thing it's mostly hostages in this warehouse. This shouldn't take long," the first beastman commented.

The same beastman flipped through some of the documents he was carrying, then zeroed in on a few captives of interest. Although the interior of the warehouse was unlit, beastfolk were able to see just fine in the darkness.

"Take those two, and that one in the back. They all used to be adventurers," the beastman said. "We also got two mages in here. Take one and leave the other behind as the hostage."

Quornae—who had woken up by this point—flinched on hearing that last line, and as she feared, the beastmen were looking straight at her and Miya. The unwanted attention made Quornae too scared to make any noise, and all she could do was tremble.

"I'm the mage you want," Miya said matter-of-factly. "I'm the one you're going to take."

"M-Miya!" Quornae gasped. She was shocked that her friend would volunteer to be taken away, but Quornae didn't have the courage to take her place. Miya

turned to her friend and smiled at her in a way that showed she felt no hint of resentment toward her, and that everything was going to be all right. As for the beastmen, they were simply looking for a mage who could be of some use on the battlefield, and when their options were either Quornae, who was still trembling with fear, or Miya, who was willing to volunteer herself in her friend's stead, the choice of which one to take was obvious.

"C'mere. And don't try nothin' funny," one of the beastman said. "Ya don't want us to put down yer girlfriend, do ya?"

The beastman grabbed Miya by the hand and dragged her toward the exit. She didn't fight back, but the indignant glint in her eye remained unchanged.

"All right, we got our mage now, but they told us to bring two or three brats too," the beastman muttered. "Grab whichever ones you like the look of and let's beat it."

"Yeah, sure thing," said his partner, who was already busy scouring the crowd for good candidates.

They need to be just the right size to stuff into barrels, the beastman thought, recalling the order from his superiors. Can't be too big, but can't be too small neither, since they'll either cry our ears off or go dyin' on us when we ain't lookin'...

He spotted a mother holding twin girls who looked to be around ten years old. They appeared to be small enough to fit inside normal-size barrels, but old enough to listen to threats and sit quietly.

"These runts'll do," the beastman said, grabbing each girl by the arm.

"M-Mommy!" one of the twins said in a panic.

"No, I-let me go!" said the other.

Their mother knew there was no way she could beat the beastman in a struggle, so instead, she grabbed onto one of his ankles and started wailing. "Please, I beg you! Don't take my babies! Take me instead! I'll do anything you want, I mean it!"

"Shuddup!" the beastman growled. "I want the kids, not you, woman!" The

beastman brutally kicked the mother away from him, and while the blow wasn't enough to kill her, it still left enough of a mark that the mother curled up in pain.

"Mommy!" the twins screamed in unison.

"Ya don't gotta worry about yer kids being killed or nothin'," the beastman said with an air of irritation. "They're just gonna do a bit of work for us, that's all. It don't even have to be these girls. I can just croak 'em right here and now as a warning to the others, and pick any other two piglets to replace 'em."

After hearing this very specific threat, the mother chose not to say another word. The other hostages also let their heads drop and looked down, because they knew there was nothing they could do to resist the beastmen either.

The beastman clucked his tongue in irritation. "Ya inferiors always gotta waste our time, don't ya? C'mon, move it!" He dragged the twins out of the warehouse as their mother watched on helplessly. All she could do was choke down her silent sobs, fearing that another sound might spell a death sentence for her girls. None of the other humans in the warehouse could lift a finger to help either. Even the twins' father—who was being held at a separate location—wouldn't have been able to rescue his girls if he were present.

Once they were all done, the beastmen slammed the warehouse door behind them and turned the key in the lock. The guards stayed behind, while the other beastmen prepared to relocate the selected captives.

"Don't you dare make trouble for us now that yer outta there," one of the beastmen said. "You do that, and we'll massacre every last one of your pals in that warehouse. Just do as we say, and nobody gets hurt. Ya got that?"

None of the humans said anything in response, but the beastmen knew they had gotten the message, so they formed a circle around the captives and marched them to their new location. However, unbeknownst to anyone, a small creature was watching the whole transfer take place from beginning to end.



I was sitting in my executive office in the Abyss opposite Mei, Aoyuki, Ellie, and Mera. "So it looks like the Beastfolk Federation have finally sent their

official declaration of war to us, Ellie,” I said.

“Yes, Your Blessedness,” Ellie replied. “And the text is shockingly condescending. *Especially* considering how far beneath us those utter brutes are.”

“Condescending” wasn’t the half of it. The notice read: “To the witch who’s too dumb to know her place like the other lowly inferiors do: We, the proud beastfolk, are waging war on you, and we’re gonna tear ya a new one! You’ll fight on *our* terms, and we’re gonna tell you the time and place. If you even *think* about showing up with your little dragon army, we’ll kill every single inferior we’re holdin’ in our nation. Since you believe in the ‘absolute autonomy’ of your filthy race, we know you won’t risk letting your own people die in a bloodbath, Your Royal Witchiness!”

In other words, it was less a declaration of war and more a message you might get from the neighborhood bully, and one who was certain he would emerge victorious, to say the least.

I leaned back in my chair. “Well, now that we know when and where we’ll be fighting the beastfolk, have you located all of the hostages, Aoyuki?”

“Yes. We know where they all are,” Aoyuki said. “We also know which of the fools are involved in this war.”

I turned to my next lieutenant. “Mei, are we ready to host the hostages?” I asked.

“I have finished preparing the manual concerning the intake of the new charges,” Mei stated. “I have also finished handing out the requisite assignments to the fairy maids, as well as laid the groundwork for supply logistics and emergency responses.”

“Ellie, have you finalized our approach for rescuing the hostages and punishing the beastfolk?” I asked her.

“Everything’s in place, Blessed Lord,” Ellie replied. “We’ll use Orka’s powers and the SSR Teleportation cards for the rescue. Of course, this operation will consume a large quantity of Teleportation cards, but with the pace that your team of Double Shadow clones is producing replacement cards, I don’t believe

we will suffer an extended shortage. As for the beastmen, the mythical-class weapon you provided is expected to ensnare every last one of those cretins that dares to show up.”

“That’s awesome.” I spread my arms wide toward my lieutenants. “You’re all so *awesome*! What would I do without you Mei, Aoyuki, and Ellie? I’m the luckiest guy in the world to have you and all of my allies in the Abyss alongside me.” I was completely bowled over by how my deputies had wrapped up their monumental tasks in a very timely fashion.

“I do everything for you in accordance with my code as a maid,” Mei stated. “I do not feel worthy of your praise, but I thank you humbly for your kind words, Master Light.”

“Mrrow!” Aoyuki purred.

“I would drink all the lava beneath the world’s surface if you commanded me to, Blessed Lord!” Ellie piped up. “My only wish is that I may give up my life, body, and every drop of my blood in service of your divine mission!”

Next, I turned to Mera. “I’ve also heard that this scumbag of a wolfman chieftain is planning something extra. Mera, your job is to torpedo those plans and find out if there are any beastfolk who are unwilling participants in this war. Can you do that for me?”

I wanted to punish the beastfolk for their heinous war plans, but at the same time, I couldn’t rule out the possibility that there were some beastfolk who had reservations about participating in this war. I needed Mera’s powers to make sure I wasn’t going to end up punishing people who at least held on to the bare minimum of a moral code.

Once I’d briefed Mera on the particulars of her responsibilities, the chimera let out her trademark cackle. “Keh heh heh heh! What a brilliant plan, master. And it’s just like you to be merciful enough to give those beastfolk an opportunity for redemption!”

“Thank you, Mera,” I replied. “So do you think you can carry out your part of the plan?”

“Of course I can!” Mera confirmed. “In fact, this is the perfect job for a

chimera like me, so you must let me handle it!”

“Then, I’ll be counting on you,” I said.

Mera chuckled again. “I’ll complete this job or my name isn’t Mera!”

Mera joined my three deputies as they all dropped to one knee before me and bowed their heads. Like the others, Mera seemed extremely happy to receive an order from me, and I could almost see the joy radiating from her. Seeing all four of them so elated also put a smile on my own face.

“Once we rescue the humans, we’ll give the beastfolk who show up on the battlefield a choice,” I said. “Those who are happy to torment humans and slaughter us will pay the price for their evil. Any moron who thinks they can kill us by using innocent people as human shields will not escape my retribution!”

For everyone in the room, my declaration sounded about as mundane as reciting a shopping list, but for the beastfolk, their fates were sealed right in that very moment.

Chapter 13: The Battlegrounds

The Wicked Witch of the Tower arrived at the location that had been specified in the declaration of war, which turned out to be a bunch of open fields with no obstacles at a site due north of the Beastfolk Federation ports. Facing her was an army composed of two thousand beastmen, with most of the warriors coming from the Wolf and Tiger tribes, while intermixed with the troops were avianmen doing business and performing logistics work. The Avian Tribe's chieftain, Igor, was sitting in the wings in a nearby city so that he would avoid the one-in-a-million chance that he might be killed in battle.

Lined up some distance away from the beastmen was the army of human slaves that was also two thousand strong. They were all poorly armed and wearing stained clothes, and an air of melancholy blanketed the troops. Among their number, there were full-grown men, males barely past the age of majority, and even some juvenile boys. There were also a handful of young women who were experienced adventurers, plus some mages.

Although humans, for the most part, couldn't hold a candle to beastmen when it came to their respective fighting abilities, this army was large enough to present a reasonable threat to them. But not a single human soldier dared to make a move toward the beastfolk—or alternatively, to desert the battlefield altogether—for fear that this would put their loved ones in danger. The beastfolk had the ability to quickly send messengers to where the hostages were being held, and order their would-be victims to undergo torture worse than death prior to what would end up being a mercy killing.

In total, the beastfolk had an army of four thousand soldiers on the field, and they were facing the Wicked Witch, who had a dragon she had ridden in on, along with two males, who appeared to be her subordinates. The witch Ellie wore the SSR Faceveil Hood that completely obscured her face from prying eyes, but the faces of the two deputies were in full view. It went without saying that the two males were Orka and Khaos, and like the good subordinates they were, they had taken up positions behind Ellie.

Incidentally, the location of the battlefield was located far to the east of the Great Tower, following a line that traversed the Elven Queendom as well as the near-impenetrable forest that bordered the Beastfolk Federation. The shortest conventional route to the battleground without any air transport would require taking a ship from the Elven Queendom port, landing in the Beastfolk Federation, then marching the rest of the way. A completely overland route would require taking a monthslong detour through the Elven Queendom and the Human Kingdom before reaching the beastfolk's territory.

Gamm and Lebad were serving as the frontline generals of the combined army, and the two chieftains walked leisurely toward Ellie the tower witch until they were within shouting distance of their foe. They wanted to make a show of leading the battle, so that after their victory, they would assume higher ranks among the beastfolk tribes.

"Sure glad you made it all the way out here, witch!" Lebad yelled, his voice ebullient. "Dunno why you're sticking your neck out for a bunch of useless inferiors, but ya came out, and here you are in the flesh! Ya must really believe in that 'absolute autonomy' crapola, huh? I mean, no one in their right mind would show up otherwise, because this is basically suicide. Unless it's because being a worthless mud animal is so unbearable to you, you'd rather piss your life away rather than live another second? Am I right, fellas?"

As he'd approached the end of his spiel, Lebad had turned around to address his beastmen soldiers, who had all roared with laughter in response. Both the Tiger Tribe and the Wolf Tribe—who usually didn't get along—had managed to cast aside their past enmity by mocking the Wicked Witch to her face. Ellie, whose face was inscrutable beneath her hood, let the taunts and laughter pass without comment.

"Now, now, Chief Lebad, you mustn't go discouraging this woman with the awful truth," Gamm said in a seemingly scripted riposte. "You see? Her feelings are too hurt to say anything in response! Gentlemen like ourselves must strive to be courteous to all ladies, even the ones who happen to be inferior human swine."

"How right you are, Chief Gamm. Where *are* my manners?" Lebad said sarcastically. "I wasn't actin' like the proud beastman that I am. Beg your

pardon, little lady. Hell, I'll even make amends by grantin' you a favor. So surrender now, bitch!"

All the levity Lebad had displayed suddenly evaporated, replaced by a bloodthirsty, mafia-like demeanor.

"Least you had the gonads to show up without a swarm of dragons, like we said, I'll give you that," Lebad said generously. "Guess you didn't wanna see any of your precious little inferiors die, didja? Then, get your ass over here and surrender now! Tear off all your clothes, lick our feet, and swear you'll be our slave for the rest of your shitty little life! Tell us you're sorry for believin' in the absolute autonomy for an entire race of slaves and vermin! Bury your face into the goddamn ground and beg for forgiveness!"

"This is what you deserve for championing the laughable idea that you and the rest of you savages are entitled to any sort of autonomy!" Gamm proclaimed. "As punishment, we will torture and execute a number of inferiors right before your eyes and make you cannibalize them for all your meals for months on end. But you don't need to worry about your dainty little head, because we'll allow you to live in the end. This treatment is necessary to beat into your thick skull that you primitives are no higher than two-legged cattle that just happen to speak our language! Your only choice is to surrender, witch! Do it now while we're still in a charitable mood!"

The Wicked Witch—along with Orka and Khaos—maintained their absolute silence while Lebad and Gamm ordered them to surrender in some of the most humiliating and lurid terms one could contemplate. Sensing that the three humans were ignoring his words, Lebad grew enraged enough to make his forehead veins visible through his jet-black pelt. Gamm, on the other hand, was starting to grow alarmed, suspecting that the tower witch must have arrived with an effective counterplan if she was this unresponsive to threats.

"Are ya deaf, ya stinkin' whore?" Lebad yelled at her. "We toldja to get naked, so get down here and crawl around on your goddamn knees and surrender! You two schmucks behind her, quit jerkin' around and make that dumb bitch listen to reason! You people really got a death wish or somethin'? Well? Do ya?"

Lebad's voice was approaching an animalistic roar that made people in his

own tribe quiver with fear, yet the human trio still didn't flinch at all. This complete absence of any visible reaction sent Gamm's sinking premonition into overdrive. The wolfman chieftain grabbed Lebad's arm, since it seemed like the pantherman was ready to rush at the Wicked Witch himself out of blind rage.

"It appears she's unwilling to accept the terms of surrender," Gamm said. "In that case, it's time we showed the Wicked Witch that reality can be a *cruel* mistress."

Gamm returned to the troops with Lebad—the wolfman attempting to pacify the pantherman who was still livid about the Wicked Witch seemingly ignoring the overwhelming forces that stood on the battlefield—ready to take her down. *I don't know what kind of trick this witch is trying to pull*, Gamm thought to himself. *But she's only brought two lackeys and a dragon with her, so we can always get her to reveal whatever gambit she's planning by throwing wave after wave of inferiors at her. Thinking about it, I should start using these human shields in battles from now on. They're turning out to be quite handy.*

The human soldiers were entirely expendable, and these pawns could be used for other applications too. While Gamm was busy thinking up other ways he could use human hostages to his benefit, Lebad turned to yell at the slave soldiers.

"Listen up, you cockroaches!" Lebad shouted. "I want that bitch's head removed from her shoulders, and I want it done *now*! Whoever kills that broad and her two side pieces will get their hostage freed first! And if you even *think* about bein' a shit-eating coward, our troops'll fill ya full of arrows before ya can think twice! Plus, we'll slaughter the person closest to ya to boot! So you all better fight like you're willin' to die for it! Ya wanna keep on livin', you'd better bring me that two-bit skank's head back on a pike! If ya wanna be with your kin, you'd better see off that wench and the rest of her pals!"

After a few fits and starts, the human army let out a war cry in unison and charged toward the Wicked Witch of the Tower, with beastmen archers training arrows at their backs, ready to take out any potential deserters. A number of the two-thousand-strong horde wept as they ran headlong toward their assigned foes, but they had no say in the matter, for while the witch had a dragon by her side who could easily breathe fire over them, if anyone decided

to turn tail and run away, they would be cut down by arrows. Ellie regarded the human army rampaging toward her in silence, then turned her attention to the beastfolk who were watching the scene unfold from the relative safety of the back lines.

“I can hardly believe those ignorant brutes would go through with this evil plan,” Ellie uttered to her two deputies. “In my opinion, not a single one of those beastmen deserves to live.”

“I will confess, I must agree with you there, most noble Witch of the Tower,” Orka replied. “Their wretched personalities surpass all imagination. Who knew there was such evil in the world?”

“Your point is well taken, elder brother, though I hate to admit that you’re right,” Khaos remarked. “Here, the strong are refusing to protect the weak to such an extreme that they make the weak fight their battles. It’s plain to see who the real savages are here.”

Ellie continued to gaze at the oncoming mob of humans with pity. “I feel ashamed that we weren’t able to rescue these poor captives sooner, but we needed time to formulate our rescue plan. Thankfully, though, their cruel torment ends here. Orka, if you please.”

“Leave everything to me, Most Honorable Witch of the Tower,” Orka said as he brandished his fiddle with the flourish of someone ready to make his big debut. He softly placed the bow in his right hand on the strings. “I will free your mind of all that ails you—your fears, your grief, your frenzy—for if we fail to becalm you, we cannot transfer you anywhere. I call this piece: ‘The Silent Riverside.’”

Orka closed his eyes and started to play. The tune was a melancholic one, but nobody listening thought to shed a tear, for the melody was perfect for relaxing both body and soul in the same way as taking a leisurely afternoon stroll beside a quiet brook. The pace at which the human slaves charged toward the Wicked Witch steadily slowed until they all eventually came to a stop. The fear of dying and losing their loved ones at the hands of the beastfolk had completely disappeared, while Orka’s music had also washed away any doubts or worries about defying their captors.

None of this was a coincidence, of course. This sudden turn of events owed itself to the Pied Fiddler's powers to buff and debuff friends and foes alike by playing his instrument. This time around, Orka had chosen to play a song that would calm the nerves of the human soldiers, and because he was a Level 8888 spellcaster, his buff had effectively sedated the whole army. Once she was sure all of the humans were sufficiently becalmed, Ellie raised her hand to stop Orka's playing. The fiddler smirked as if to say he was just about to get to the good bit, but he obediently lowered his instrument.

"We have already finished freeing all of the hostages and safely relocated them to my Great Tower," Ellie announced, her voice amplified by magic. "There is no more reason for you to obey the beastfolk. My associates and I will translocate you all to the Great Tower so that you may reunite with your families and your friends, and see for yourselves that they are safe."

The human soldiers who had just been pacified by Orka's music looked at one another in confusion. But if what the Wicked Witch of the Tower was saying was true, that meant it was no longer necessary for them to follow the beastmen's orders, and there was hope the warriors would be saved too. The beastmen could hear Ellie's words too, and Gamm quickly interjected to prevent the situation from going south fast.

"She's lying! She's obviously just trying to stall you all!" Gamm yelled. "There's no witch alive who has the number of translocation items she'd need to pull that off! Use your brains! If she's saved anyone, it'll only be a few people at *most*, while the rest of them will still be locked up in our warehouses! Are you really going to let your loved ones die miserably because of some cheap bluff?!"

"Now, why would I debase myself by uttering falsehoods?" Ellie said. "In any case, I am offering to teleport each and every one of you to the Great Tower, so you will be able to see for yourself whether I'm lying or not."

The Wicked Witch spoke with such conviction that it lifted the spirits of all the humans who heard her words. The enslaved soldiers naturally placed more hope in the witch's proclamations than felt fear from Gamm's threats. The humans were willing to risk it all to find out if their loved ones had truly been rescued unharmed instead of continuing to be used as fodder by the beastmen.

“I believe her!” one of the humans shouted out. “I wanna see my family again!”

“Me too!” yelled another soldier. “I’m going to live so I can hold my daughter again!”

“I’m with you!” a third man called out.

Similar words of affirmation swept through the ranks like wildfire, until all the humans were ready to abandon the battlefield so that they could be reunited with family, friends, and lovers at the Great Tower. Ellie nodded with satisfaction at the scene and addressed the human army once more.

“My associate Orka will proceed to translocate everyone present,” Ellie announced. “I will ask you not to move for the time being. Orka, if you please.”

“Why, certainly, Most Honorable Witch,” Orka replied. “Though, please bear with me, for it will take me quite some time to teleport an army of this size.”

Ellie and Orka were acting like they were two characters narrating a scene in a stage play, but they were doing it like this because they needed a way to caution the audience that it would take Orka quite a bit of time to translocate such a large crowd, even at his elevated power level. Orka placed his fiddle under his chin once more and started playing the tune that would activate the teleportation spell.

“Damn it all to hell! This inferior witch is taking us for fools!” Gamm roared. “Let loose your arrows on those craven deserters! Kill them and show everyone what happens if you cross the beastfolk!”

“U-Understood, chief!” said the leader of the Wolf Tribe’s archers, before directing his men to fire at the humans. The Tiger Tribe’s warriors took their orders from a different commander, so their archers kept their bows by their sides, but the beastmen still loosed hundreds of arrows at the unprotected backs of the human soldiers, and while a number of the humans had some experience as adventurers, most of the army was made up of peasant farmers, meaning that although the majority were males of fighting age, only a handful knew the best way to protect themselves from the cluster of incoming arrows. As such, the number of fatalities would have been sizable if it wasn’t for the actions of a certain mage the beastmen had forcibly conscripted at the last

minute.

“Magic power, heed me thrice! Manifest to blades of ice! Ice Swords!” Miya didn’t hesitate to use the most powerful spell in her arsenal, directing the three Ice Swords that she had summoned toward the incoming arrows. But she was well aware that three Ice Swords would never be enough to intercept all of the arrows.

“Break!” Miya commanded, and with a snap of her fingers, the Ice Swords disintegrated into countless shards that burst over a wide area. The fragments managed to deflect the trajectory of most of the arrows, while the adventurers in the human army quickly maneuvered themselves into positions where they could shield people from the arrows that made it through the icy curtain. Gamm sucked his teeth loudly at this less-than-satisfactory outcome and turned to Lebad, who was having trouble following what was going on.

“Lebad! We can’t do much of anything back here in the peanut gallery!” Gamm yelled. “We have to go in and take care of those inferiors ourselves!”

“Oh, uh, right!” Lebad said hesitantly. “Listen up, you dopes! Get in there and massacre those inferiors!”

On Gamm and Lebad’s prompting, the beastmen warriors rushed toward the humans, letting out a single deafening roar.

“Magic power, heed me thrice! Manifest to blades of ice! Ice Swords!” Miya once again launched three Ice Swords into the air before disintegrating them into shards in order to stop the beastmen’s charge, but unfortunately, she was facing a horde of seasoned warriors with elevated power levels this time.

“She thinks this little hailstorm will stop us?” one beastman yelled, snorting with laughter.

“She’s just a bottom breed mage!” called out another. “All she can do is block a few arrows! She’s no match for us!”

The only silver lining was that the archers hadn’t loosed any arrows this time, probably out of fear of hitting their own warriors. But Miya’s powers wouldn’t be enough to stop an army of beastmen, and it was taking quite a bit of time to teleport the human army away from the battlefield. Miya’s insides started to

ache with desperation at how utterly powerless she was to protect this vulnerable crowd. *If only Dark were here, she thought. He could easily stop these beastmen in their tracks!*

Miya had spared no effort when it came to improving her magical abilities so that she could get nearer to the level Dark was on, but no matter how much she tried, she could still feel the huge gulf between her and the boy mage she looked up to. Even so, Miya kept on striving to become a more powerful mage.

No, Dark wouldn't give up if he were here right now, she thought. I need to do everything I can to be like him! After rousing herself out of her momentary lapse into despair, Miya stared down the charging beastmen, ready to unleash another attack at them, but all of a sudden, a familiar voice rang out.

“Firewall!”

A massive barrier of flames erupted upward in front of the beastmen, and those in the vanguard who failed to stop in time screamed as hellish fire enveloped them.

“Why am I on fire?!” yelled a beastman.

“Help! Somebody! Anybody!” another beastman soldier cried out. Many of the ones on fire rolled around on the ground in a desperate attempt to put out their flaming fur, while their unharmed comrades rushed to pour dirt over them or beat out the flames with bits of cloth.

Light—or rather, Dark—had activated his SR Firewall card then watched the scene that unfolded. He turned to Miya and called out to her in a tender voice. “Miya, I’ve come to help you.”

“D-Dark...” Miya looked over at the boy, his black hair sweeping across the fool’s mask that covered his face. A black cloak hung from his shoulders, and he was holding a plain-looking staff. This was the exact same outfit Dark had been wearing the first time she met him. At first, Miya was too shocked to say anything, and as soon as Dark spoke, her face flushed crimson and she felt a pain in her chest like her heart was about to burst clean out of it. Miya was so busy desperately trying to calm her out-of-control pulse, she wasn’t able to say anything aside from breathing his name. All she could do was stare, dazed at Dark’s totally unexpected appearance. When she finally regained her senses,

she trotted over to the young mage.

“D-Dark?” Miya stuttered. “Is that really you, Dark? What are you *doing* here?”

“Relax, Miya. Yes, it’s me,” Dark assured her. “Me and the Wicked Witch got to know each other in the Elven Queendom, and she asked me to help her rescue the human hostages. I saw your name on the list of hostages, so I came to find you as fast as I could. I’m glad I was able to make it in time.”

“D-Dark...”



On hearing that Dark had come all this way just to save her, Miya pressed her hand to her chest, her cheeks growing even redder. Of course, almost none of what Dark—aka Light—had just said was actually true, though it was an undeniable fact that Miya was the reason he had ordered the liberation of the hostages in the first place. While Light didn't *need* to personally participate in the rescue operation, it had ultimately been decided that he would appear in the guise of Dark, so that his adventuring alter ego could gain more fame, but since there was no need for Miya to know the real story, Light purposely kept her in the dark. Ellie followed up with an explanation of her own that was designed to answer any lingering questions Miya might have.

"I knew Orka's translocation spell would take an inordinate amount of time due to the number of people involved, so I recruited some highly acclaimed adventurers to assist us with the operation," Ellie said. "I gave them teleportation items beforehand so that they would appear as soon as I gave the signal. Still, I can hardly believe how extraordinary adventurers are these days! Who would have thought that a mere boy would be able to stop an army of beastmen in its tracks with a Firewall? I'm so glad I encountered such a remarkable person!"

Ellie's sincere-sounding adulation for Dark was part of their overall strategy to spread the fame of the Black Fools, with the added bonus that it advertised their link to the Wicked Witch of the Tower. Along with the Black Fools, Ellie had also summoned the Mohawks and a few other adventurers who resided in the Abyss. The dungeon-dwelling assistants who were brought to the surface were too few in number to fight off the beastfolk line, so they had instead been assigned to protect the human army. Some healed injured individuals with potions, while others directed the human soldiers to stay where they were so they could be translocated.

Just as Ellie was finishing up extolling Dark and the Black Fools, Orka wrapped up the medley he was playing. "My original translocation song: 'The Caged Birds' Journey Toward Salvation,'" Orka said. As he spoke, runes appeared underneath the humans and the two-thousand-strong army instantly disappeared. The only people who weren't transported away were the Wicked Witch of the Tower and her two deputies. Even the dragon they had arrived at

the battlefield on had vanished with the other humans.

Lebad ground his teeth at what had just occurred, and his anger was so intense, even his black fur seemed to glow red. “Ya gotta be shittin’ me! How the *hell* did we just lose an entire army of stinkin’ inferiors?!”

Gamm, meanwhile, glared coolly at the Wicked Witch. “Calm down, Chief Lebad. That witch may have snatched the inferiors out from under us, but our men are still ready and willing to fight. What’s more, the moron decided to stick around without even keeping her dragon here to protect her!”

“Yeah...” Lebad said slowly. “Yeah! We still get a chance to tan her hide!” But although Lebad acted brave outwardly, he couldn’t help wondering why the tower witch hadn’t just escaped with the others. It would have been all fine and dandy if the witch had simply forgotten to whisk herself away, but it seemed more likely that she had an ace up her sleeve.

Is she gonna summon her army of dragons and pulverize us like she did to the elves? Lebad mused. *If that’s her plan, that anti-dragon item we got had better work. Better yet, let’s end her life here and now, before any dragons show up.*

Lebad touched the spot under his armor where another magical item was dangling on his chest. Next to the pantherman, Gamm was thinking exactly the same thing: send their horde of beastmen to finish off the witch before she had a chance to call her dragons or attempt anything else.

But before the beastmen could act, Ellie unsheathed a knife with a golden handle and runes carved all over both sides of the blade. The knife looked more ornamental and too short to be of any use on a battlefield, but the Wicked Witch wasted no time in thrusting the knife into the soil in front of her, burying the blade all the way to the hilt. A moment later, the hilt glowed and emanated rays of light that swept the surroundings.

“What’s with the light show?” one beastman remarked.

“Whoa!” another shouted.

“A light beam just went right through me!” a third cried out.

Some of the light beams shot through the feet of the beastmen, but seemingly did no harm. However, emitting light rays wasn’t the only thing the

knife was capable of.

“Wh-What the...” a beastman gasped. “Why’s the sky all red?”

Not only had the sky turned crimson, but what had once been a bright afternoon sun had transformed into a dark orb, as if there was a total eclipse, causing all visible light to take on a blackish hue, and all plant life on the grassy plains to wither and die, leaving behind a dried-up wasteland. Even though none of the beastmen had attempted to leave the battlefield, each one felt like they were suddenly on an entirely different planet.

“What *is* this?!” a beastman cried out. “What the hell is going on here?!”

“Don’t ask me!” a nearby beastman retorted.

“What’s happening?” a third soldier screeched. “What’s gonna happen to us?!”

While the beastfolk army howled in confusion, Gamm and Lebad—who were every bit as shocked—did what they could to try to calm their men down, but to no avail. The only thing that caused a hush to descend over the crowd was Ellie’s crystal clear, assertive voice.

“Welcome to the Walled-In World,” Ellie said. “I’ve just used a rare mythical-class weapon to create a separate universe completely isolated from the rest of the world. All of you callous barbarians have entered it, but none may leave.”

All eyes turned to Ellie, who proceeded to pull back her hood, since there seemed little need to hide her true identity now that she was in her own private dimension. The witch’s visage was the epitome of crazed vindictiveness.

“Now, let’s commence your obliteration, shall we?”

Chapter 14: Freedom

A few hours before the war was set to commence between the beastfolk and the Wicked Witch of the Tower, two young wolfmen whose power levels were around the 150 mark stood watch at the doors of a port warehouse where dozens of human hostages were being held.

“Man, this is the pits,” one of the guards sighed. “Can’t believe they’ve left us behind to do this stupid job. Talk about gettin’ the short end of the stick.”

Most of the prisoners were women and children, so a skeleton crew of guards had been left behind to watch over the prisoners. All the other young beastmen had shipped off to fight the Wicked Witch, and the fact that he wasn’t getting to join the battle was eating away at this wolfman guard.

“If they’d let me join ‘em, I woulda chopped off the head of that snooty inferior sorceress before anyone else,” the sentry moaned. “Yet here I am, playin’ babysitter for these sorry creatures. I don’t believe this crap.”

“Sure, I hear ya, but you gotta stay sharp,” his partner warned him. “If even one of these hostages gets away, Chief Gamm will flay us for making him look bad. Might even kill us where we stand.”

The second wolfman wasn’t saying this as a straitlaced Goody Two-shoes, but because he was deathly afraid of Gamm, since by most accounts, this wolfman was one of the most timid in the tribe. His grouchy partner for guard duty shrugged in response.

“You really think any of those bedbugs are gonna try and make a run for it?” the first wolfman said. “Ain’t gonna happen. All we got in there are female and youngling inferiors who wouldn’t be able to fight their way out of an open sack. None of them would dream of trying to escape from this warehouse. And if they did somehow manage to break out of here, a gaggle of inferiors trying to sneak around town would attract way too much attention. Then, even if they made it past city limits, do you have any idea how far they are from their home nation? We’d be able to sniff ‘em out and track ‘em down faster than they could run.”

“Uh, well, sure, I guess,” the timid guard admitted. Not only were the hostages human, their clothes were so dirty, any beastman would be able to tell they were formerly detained if they did manage to escape. On top of that, the port was located at the southernmost tip of the mainland, and since the Beastfolk Federation was a long strip of a nation, that meant the fugitives would need to traverse the entire length of what was hostile territory before reaching the Human Kingdom border. Besides, the women and children being held captive didn’t possess the kind of physical capabilities needed to overpower the guards. Or at least, no *run-of-the-mill* woman did.

“Hell, I almost wish one of those bottom-feeders *would* try to escape,” the first guard said. “At least then this job wouldn’t be so desperately boring. Hey, how about we let one escape? Y’know, just for shits and giggles.”

“Don’t tempt fate, even as a joke,” the second guard scowled. “I’m totally against the idea, for the record.”

The first guard waved his paws. “Relax, will ya? All I’m suggestin’ is we let one of the inferiors out, then hunt it for some sport. No one’ll know, if we keep it confined to the warehouse district. Besides, we’re gonna be slaughterin’ the leftovers once this war’s over and done with. It’s not like we can have living proof of illegal kidnappings and whatnot just walkin’ around. The bosses won’t give a crap if we have some fun with one or two of the hostages beforehand.”

“I’m actually coming around to the idea,” the other guard confessed. “I’m definitely a fan of firing a few arrows into the backs of women and children inferiors after letting them run loose for a bit. There’s nothing like making your prey suffer a little first, especially if they can’t fight back.”

“Now we’re talkin’,” the first sentry said, latching on to his partner’s change in attitude. “We ain’t got nothin’ better to do, so let’s start off with one and see how it goes.”

The second guard didn’t respond to this suggestion. Curious about the meaning of this prolonged pause, the first guard glanced across at his partner and saw that he was standing to attention and staring straight ahead. At first glance, the timid guard simply looked like he was doing his job, but a closer look revealed that his pupils were dilated and vacant of any sign of life. Before the

first sentry could yelp in surprise at this discovery, a knife pierced his heart from behind, killing him instantly. In the same second, a magic spell was cast to keep his body upright in a way that would make it appear to unsuspecting onlookers that he was still standing guard at the warehouse. The killer of the two guards—the UR Level 5000, Assassin’s Blade, Nemumu—resheathed the murder weapon.

The two other members of the Black Fools, Light and Gold, had left for the front lines to assist with teleporting Miya and the rest of the human army away from the battlefield. On the other hand, Nemumu had been assigned the task of rescuing the hostages in this warehouse due to her skills as a clandestine operative. Nemumu was happy enough to go on a solo mission on the surface without Light, since it was the young dungeon master who had ordered it, so if she seemed upset at all, it was due to the barbaric conversation she had just overheard between the two guards.

Honestly, why would those maggots talk about something so disgusting? Nemumu thought as she unlocked the warehouse door. How could they possibly find hunting helpless women and children entertaining? Ghouls like them make me sick to my stomach.

Nemumu opened the door a crack and slipped inside, but because she was a Level 5000 assassin, none of the hostages noticed her presence. Nemumu clapped her hands loudly to get all eyes on her, and the appearance of a stunningly beautiful woman seemingly showing up out of nowhere caused some in the room to raise their voices in surprise.

Nemumu shushed them before things could escalate into an uproar. “I need you all to calm down. The highest lord of all has sent me here to rescue you. I am your ally.”

“E-Excuse me, miss,” piped up a woman who was sitting close to Nemumu. “They’re holding my child somewhere else. Is there any way you can rescue her too?”

This plea triggered a wave of similar entreaties from the hostages, and many shuffled nearer to Nemumu to make their voices heard. The beastmen had made sure to separate the captives from their loved ones in order to more

easily control the prisoners by threatening death to those they most cared about. Nemumu had been given orders to make sure that one “high priority” detainee was rescued before any harm could befall her, and as luck would have it, the golden-haired girl in question had rushed over to the assassin with her own plea.

“Th-They separated me from my best friend and took her somewhere!” Quornae said frantically. “I was the one they were supposed to take, but they took her instead! You need to find my friend and save her! I’ll even pay you to do so! My father’s the head of a famous trading company and he will pay you handsomely if you complete this task, so please—”

“You have nothing to worry about,” Nemumu said, interrupting her. “I can assure you that Miya is safe and sound, for the highest lord of all is personally watching over her.”

“What?” Quornae uttered in surprise. “I-I didn’t even mention a name. How did you know who I was talking about?”

“I’ll answer all your questions later,” Nemumu said. “Others in my team have been sent to rescue the hostages from the other warehouses. They may already have completed teleporting the captives to safety as we speak. So I need all of you to please relax.”

With the knowledge that their loved ones were in the process of being rescued as well, the clamor among the prisoners dissipated in a wave of relief. After making sure that the hostages were sufficiently composed again, Nemumu produced a card.

“I will now translocate all of you to a safe location,” Nemumu announced. “I implore everyone to take care, and above all, don’t panic. Are you all ready? Group Teleportation, Great Tower—release!”

Nemumu activated the SSSR Group Teleportation card and instantly transported all of the hostages to the first floor of the Great Tower. The experience elicited cries of shock from the crowd.

“Please settle down,” Nemumu said. “I simply used a magic item to teleport you all from the beastfolk’s warehouse to the Great Tower in the forest in the Elven Queendom. I assure you that you will be safe here, so I must ask all of you

to please calm down.”

Although the nature of the trip they had just taken defied all logic, Nemumu’s explanation was convincing enough to quell the rescued hostages. Nemumu breathed a sigh of relief, then continued. “Fairy maids will come to provide you with food, clothing, and other necessities. These will all be given to you free of charge, so there is no need to worry about incurring debt of any kind.”

Practically as soon as Nemumu finished speaking, there was a flash of light next to the hostages, which eventually subsided to reveal the two-thousand-strong army of human soldiers that Orka had teleported away from the battlefield. The hostages from the warehouse immediately recognized their loved ones in the throngs of fighters.

“Honey! I’m right here, and I’m okay!” one woman called out.

“Ah! Are our kids okay too?” her husband shouted back.

“Yes, and it’s all thanks to the witch and her maids,” the wife replied.

“You’re alive? Thank the heavens!” another man piped up.

“I’m so sorry I got us into this mess,” his wife said. “Thank goodness we’re safe and back together again.”

More beams of light brought hostages from other warehouses to the tower, and the walls echoed with the sounds of loved ones joyously reuniting with plenty of hugs and tears—a scene that repeated itself several times over.

“Miya!” Quornae spotted the red-headed mage who was around the same age as her among the soldiers, and she ran over to her friend as fast as her weak legs would allow. Miya ran toward Quornae too, and both girls embraced with tears streaming down their cheeks. Light—who had teleported along with Miya—charitably stayed quiet and kept his distance while observing the two girls.

“I’m so glad you’re all right!” Quornae said, weeping. “I’m so glad you got here safe, Miya!”

“Thank you, Quornae, for worrying so much about me,” Miya said, holding her friend and stroking her hair as if she were the golden-haired girl’s mother.

Miya's show of compassion caused yet more elated tears to gush from Quornae.

"I don't deserve your thanks," Quornae muttered. "I was a pathetic little scaredy-cat who constantly put you in danger. I couldn't do anything for you. I don't deserve to be your friend."

"Don't say that. You *are* my friend," Miya reminded her. "I was able to keep fighting because I knew you were there for me. I can't thank you enough, Quornae."

Despite her tears, Quornae chuckled. "You're too kind to me, Miya."

Miya chuckled as well, but out of mild embarrassment instead. "Um, I think this is normal."

"No, you're really, *really* sweet..." Quornae said. "It's thanks to your kindness that everyone in the warehouse, including me, was saved. If the Great Witch of the Tower is a goddess who saved us humans, then you must be the saintly maiden who grants comfort to her flock!"

"Uh, what? Huh?" Miya's gentle smile suddenly went stiff as she realized that, thanks to her consoling embrace, Quornae had regained her old spirits and seamlessly transitioned from feeble self-flagellating to the kind of bombastic exhortation that placed Miya on top of another cringeworthy pedestal. Quornae pulled her face away from Miya's chest and continued with the rest of her piece in an operatic voice that rang all around the first floor of the tower.

"Miya personally sacrificed herself to protect me from certain death at the hands of those beastmen! She could have easily saved herself and left me to perish, but she chose to become a hostage so she could watch over me! Then, while we were imprisoned, Miya used her magic to treat the injured and provide us all with life-giving water. She even shared what little food she had with the hungry children around her! And when I had sunk to the lowest point in my life, weak and terrified, Miya once again protected me by going to the battlefield in my place! If that is not the very definition of a saint, then I can only ask who *else* lives up to the title?"

"Q-Quornae," Miya stammered timidly, her face beet red. "Could you please settle down now? Just a smidge?" Despite making things visibly awkward for

Miya, Quornae continued to pour her whole heart into her spiel, and she soon drew a crowd of people who agreed with her words.

“Yes, I remember her. She healed the wound I suffered when the beastmen took me captive,” a woman said. “She used one of her spells on me without asking for anything in return.”

“She gave me some of her bread to eat!” a little boy piped up.

“She gave me lots of water!” added a girl.

Others added their own grateful testimonies, including those who might otherwise have been killed by the beastmen’s arrows on the battlefield if it hadn’t been for Miya’s quick thinking. This spectacle soon grew loud enough to attract the attention of all the other rescued humans in the tower, and when there was a slight pause in the affirmations, Quornae started on another round of plaudits for Miya.

“I proclaim once again that while the witch is a goddess who has saved us humans, Miya is a saint who brought mercy and salvation to us,” Quornae declared loudly. “She is a true saint! Saint Miya is the human race’s beacon of hope!”

“A saint...” whispered one of the former hostages.

“Saint Miya?” another said.

“Is it because of Saint Miya that we’re all still alive?” a third voice wondered.

“Saint Miya saved us from the arrows!” a person in the crowd shouted out.

“Saint Miya...” someone whispered.

“Saint Miya sheltered us from the beastmen!” a joyous former captive cried out.

“Saint Miya!” another echoed.

“All hail the Great Witch of the Tower and Saint Miya!” another voice decreed.

Quornae had set off a wave of people declaring Miya a saint while also extolling the Wicked Witch of the Tower. While all this was going on, Miya could

only blush, turning the same shade of red as when she saw Dark on the battlefield.

“What?” Miya uttered helplessly, before crouching down in embarrassment, but unfortunately for her, Quornae wasn’t done singing her praises.

“I now realize that my purpose in life isn’t to master the art of magic after all!” Quornae declared in front of Miya. “And I began my journey of redemption the moment I first laid eyes on Miya! I have now been blessed with salvation by the Great Witch of the Tower, and I have lived to see the birth of a true saint who walks among us! From this day forward, my purpose in life will be to spread news of Saint Miya’s miracles, as well as her divine mercy! I know in my heart of hearts that my encounter with Saint Miya was preordained by fate!”

“No, Quornae...” Miya groaned, weeping. “That’s not what happened at *all*!”



Neither Quornae nor the people hailing Miya as their “saint” heard the protestations of the young mage, whose face now matched the color of her hair. With stinging tears of embarrassment welling up in her eyes, Miya turned to Dark, who she believed to be her last glimmer of hope in getting out of this predicament. The fairy maids on the scene had also turned to the masked adventurer for instructions—if he had any—on how to deal with this minor uproar, though in the case of the fairy maids, they were wondering if it was permissible to allow humans to praise a teenage mage when it was really their lord and master, Light himself, who they should be thanking.

“D-Dark...” Miya whispered, but the younger boy didn’t answer immediately.

Miya may not like it, but I think it’ll be nice to have another hero taking some credit for their rescue besides the Wicked Witch, Light thought. If that hero turns out to be a saint who has come into being in their ranks, she will end up serving as a pillar of emotional support for the people. A gentle saint who provides comfort for all would pair well with a powerful witch who rains down destruction. Plus, having a saint who’s also my good friend will do wonders for maintaining the rule of law in the settlement around the tower. Not to mention, she’d be a huge asset whenever we end up running into potential rifts in relations among humans. And besides, at least from what I’ve heard she has done, it was pretty much a given that people would see her as a saint. Sure, she might be mortified by all the attention she’s getting, but she’s the shy, humble type, in any case. That self-effacing modesty and the fact that she’s just plain adorable would prompt anyone to call her a saint.

Light finally said something. “Well, I for one am happy for you. ‘Saint Miya’ definitely has a nice ring to it.”

“What?” Miya cried out. “Not you too, Dark. Ah, this is so humiliating...”

Light ended up endorsing Miya’s sainthood, partly to reward her for her meritorious efforts, and partly due to the benefits such a moniker would have for his grand scheme. By this time, rounds of applause and hurrahs had spread around the people in the tower, and the whole of the first floor had erupted in exaltation for both Miya and the tower witch. Even the fairy maids joined in the cheering, as they had seen Light giving his approval of the adulation and they

would never question their dungeon master, even if he said up was down and black was white.

“All hail Saint Miya and the Most Honorable Witch!” the fairy maids called out, and the sight of them doing this inspired the minority of humans who hadn’t said anything up to this point to finally join in with the repeated shouted praises for Miya and the tower witch.

For her part, Miya grabbed hold of her head and groaned loudly in the knowledge that there was no way out of this shameful ordeal. All Light could do was grin contritely at Miya’s predicament.

“Master Dark the Adventurer, may we have a word?” a fairy maid asked.

“Sorry, Miya, gotta run,” Light said. “It looks like they need me for something.”

Light rushed over to the fairy maid who had called him, which had actually just been a ruse in order to get the dungeon lord away from the crowd so that he could return to Ellie and her battle with the beastfolk. When Light reached a spot where Miya and the rest of the evacuees couldn’t see him, he contacted his people using a Telepathy card, then activated a Teleportation card with the battlefield set as its destination.

Chapter 15: Walled-In World

The Walled-In World was one of the nine mythical-class weapons that Light's Unlimited Gacha had spat out, and its unique power was that it could create a huge closed-off space measuring three kilometers in circumference and four kilometers in height. Anyone caught within this area would be unable to leave, no matter how hard they tried, and no one outside of it could even see inside, let alone do anything to manipulate the space. The Walled-In World was impervious to all weapons—even genesis-class ones—meaning not even Light himself could hack his way out with his God Requiem Gungnir fully unsealed.

However, the Walled-In World had one major drawback: it could only be used once. Basically, the item was so powerful against other weapons and magic, the only way to offset this massive imbalance was for it to be single-use.

Ellie huffily tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Honestly, I was very much against wasting the Walled-In World on you cretins. It’s like casting pearls before goblins.”

All emotion drained from her voice as she continued. “Unfortunately for you simpletons, you have incited the red-hot anger of the most exalted being, the Blessed Lord Light. As such, he has decided the Walled-In World will be used in this battle, so that every single one of you foul creatures can answer for your transgressions. Call it fate, if you like, or a curse of your own making. Your only choice is to forfeit your lives and satisfy the Blessed Lord.”

Not one beastman said anything in response to Ellie’s bone-chilling words, but the superwitch ignored the startled silence and continued her dark sermon.

“I follow whatever the Blessed Lord Light says, for whatever the Blessed Lord says is true and just,” Ellie stated. “Since he has proclaimed it, the only path left for each one of you in front of me is your collective demise. You have abducted people whose only crime was being human, separated them from their loved ones, and attempted to send these forced conscripts to fight to their deaths for the sake of your mindless war. You will pay dearly for these incalculable crimes

with your complete and utter destruction. The Blessed Lord will not be satisfied until he has seen each and every one of you ruing the day you were born as you take your final breath. He will not accept surrender. He wants to see you suffer miserably and die. The only fate that awaits you is death, and the only question left to answer is how long you can last before you meet your inevitable end.”

A few seconds of total silence passed before utter bedlam broke out. As one, the beastmen cursed out Ellie, angry neck veins bulging through their pelts.

“Go to hell, witch!” one yelled. “Y’think three inferiors are gonna wipe *us* out? Go piss up a rope!”

“The only one here who’s gonna suffer and breathe their last is *you*!” another soldier barked. “You’ll be *beggin’* us to put you outta your misery by the time we’re through wit’cha!”

“You never shoulda locked us in here with you!” another beastman shouted out. “You don’t even have a dragon to protect your ass, ya dumb broad!”

“We’re gonna split ya wide open and force ya to see what yer organs look and taste like, woman!” yet another soldier cried out. “And I bet after we’re all done killin’ ya, we’ll be able to skedaddle right outta this creepy-lookin’ place.”

The beastmen were showing absolutely no signs of backing down, and since Ellie hadn’t revealed her true strength yet, they felt confident of their chances against her. In fact, they all believed Ellie had made a huge mistake of locking herself in with them instead of simply escaping with the human soldiers, because although the beastmen had lost their human shields, they still had the anti-dragon magic items given to them by the Dragonute Empire, as well as the Beast Orbs that contained high-level monsters. From the perspective of the beastmen, Ellie was a sitting duck who had prepared a trap and walked into it herself. But even though Ellie, Khaos, and Orka were facing an army of two thousand beastmen, the trio didn’t seem the least bit alarmed about being vastly outnumbered. It was at this point in proceedings that Gamm decided to pull out his trump card.

“You should’ve run away when you had the chance, you stupid witch!” Gamm spat. “We don’t actually give a damn what happened to all those inferiors you made disappear. They were merely pawns of ours that didn’t amount to much

anyway. It would've been better for you if you'd let those lowlives kill you instead of what we're about to throw at you now!"

Gamm produced a Beast Orb from his pocket and slammed it into the ground to shatter it, releasing a stoutly built, fifteen-meter-tall golem made of ash-colored metal, with arms and legs as thick as pillars. This creature was the Holy Evil Golem the Masters in the Dragonute Empire had sent to Gamm, and the beastmen soldiers, who already knew they had this powerful weapon in their arsenal, broke out into cheers at the sight of it.

"Whoa! Is that *the* Holy Evil Golem? The one created by the dark lord himself?" a Tiger Tribe beastman remarked.

"It don't look like anything can beat it..." said another warrior from the same tribe.

"Gotta hand it to our chief!" a wolfman piped up. "Who else would have a monster like *that* in his pocket?" He and the wolfmen gazed upon their chieftain with respect in their eyes, further emboldening him.

"This is no ordinary golem, witch!" Gamm barked. "This is the very golem crafted by the dark lord to destroy the heroes that show up in all those religious fairy tales you inferiors believe in! Because the very embodiment of evil forged this golem out of holy metal, this thing is impervious to any and all physical or magical attacks, and the only way the heroes could defeat this living weapon was by sealing it away. But it lives again under our command!"

Another wave of awe rippled through the assembled beastmen, but the Wicked Witch of the Tower remained eerily unperturbed.

"They *say* this golem was made by some dark lord or other, but my Appraisal places its power level at 5000," Khaos remarked. "Though, for what it's worth, its resistance to physical and magical attacks is higher than an ordinary golem."

"That power level is high for a golem, indeed," a grinning Orka admitted. Both deputies seemed similarly unfazed by the beastfolk celebrating what they thought was an assured victory for them. Ellie tossed in a remark of her own, complete with a sarcastic smirk.

"Well, goodness! What a *fascinating* toy you've just pulled out," she said.

“Though, I do have to wonder why a full-grown man would be foolish enough—no, unspeakably *childish* enough to bring a toy onto a battlefield.”

“Hah! We all know you’re bluffing, you dirty witch!” Gamm scoffed. “Even your legendary heroes couldn’t destroy this golem, so a bullshit artist like you could never *hope* to beat it with your little magic tricks! If you think that effeminate fiddler and the brat you’ve got behind you are going to best the Holy Evil Golem, think again! The only thing they’ll be good for is leaving stains on its fists!”

The rest of the beastmen laughed along with Gamm’s provocation, and the wolfman had to wait for the guffaws to subside before he could continue.

“This is your last chance to surrender, woman!” Gamm warned. “After all, I don’t believe you or your boys want to get turned into mincemeat, am I right? But before you surrender, return all those inferiors you took from us, so we can execute them for the high crime of desertion!”

Gamm thought about this for a second, then backtracked. “No, first off, we should make them sit and watch as all the hostages are slain, then stuff their throats with the entrails of their loved ones before torturing each and every one of those damn deserters for defying their beastmen masters! Their agony will prove to them that a backward race like theirs can never rise above the beastmen, and only *then* will we put an end to their worthless lives! Now surrender, witch, and bring back those dirtbrain inferiors so they can get what’s coming to them!”

Ellie sighed. “You brutes are obscene to the point of being outrageous. There is no hint of moral fiber among any of you.” Ellie grabbed the book that was hanging at her hip, while using her other hand to beckon them toward her. “You really believe you can defeat me with that little marionette of yours? Give it a try if you feel you must, but I will grind that belief into the dust, along with your puppet!”

“You’re an inferior through and through, even if you *did* manage to defeat the elves and dark elves,” Gamm sneered. “Only a member of the lowest species would think to commit suicide knowing the odds that are stacked against her! Well, in that case, we’ll grant your death wish! We’ll turn you into ground beef

without further ado, witch! Holy Evil Golem, pound those three into paste!”

The golem wailed an eerie dirge before galloping toward Ellie with a speed that belied its lumbering size. The way the creature was rapidly closing in on Ellie and her allies was proof that it was no ordinary golem, but the trio didn’t even flinch as the behemoth bore down on them.

“It appears to be resistant to magic, but I would still like to dispose of it,” Khaos said.

“There’s no need for you to get involved, Khaos,” Ellie replied. “As far as I’m concerned, this thing has no magical resistance that’s worth mentioning, and since we’re inside an impregnable force field, this presents a great opportunity for me to unleash a few spells I almost never get to use.”

Ellie gleefully flipped through her spell book until she landed on the passage she was looking for. Then, pointing at the Holy Evil Golem with her right hand, she cast a chantless spell.

“Dimensional Severance!” Ellie yelled.

The Holy Evil Golem suddenly broke up into innumerable cleanly sliced chunks, drawing a collective gasp of shock from the beastmen. The strategic-class spell, Dimensional Severance, could traverse different planes to ultimately slice an enemy target into fragments, and was able to impart damage on a target no matter how high their defensive stats were. The supposedly all-powerful Holy Evil Golem had been chopped up so quickly, Gamm and the rest of the beastmen could only stare open-mouthed in despair. Unfortunately for them, however, Ellie wasn’t finished just yet.

“Gravity World!” Ellie yelled. This strategic-class spell formed a globular black hole that sucked up the pieces of the Holy Evil Golem—plus some chunks of the ground—and sent the creature to the great beyond. After witnessing his powerful trump card simply vanish from the face of the world, it was perhaps unsurprising that Gamm’s voice quavered when he spoke again.

“Th-This is insanity...” he stammered. “The Holy Evil Golem’s supposed to be *immune* to magic attacks. Even the legendary heroes were only able to seal it away, yet you diced it up in an instant. Am I dreaming?”

“Oh, there was nothing complicated about it, really,” Ellie said. “All I had to do was cast a magic spell that exceeded its so-called ‘superior’ defensive capabilities.” She suddenly realized what she had done and brought a hand up to her cheek in embarrassment. “Oh, silly me. I promised to grind your puppet into the dust, didn’t I? But instead, I completely expunged it. I unthinkingly went overboard with my magic instead of sticking to my word.”

“I don’t believe you’re at fault, Miss Ellie,” Orka piped up. “Slicing that golem into tiny pieces was close enough in my book.”

“And in mine, nitpicking a victory is nonsensical,” Khaos remarked.

“Thank you both for the vote of confidence, but I really need to learn to control myself,” Ellie said. “It only goes to show that I still have a lot to learn.”

While Ellie was busy scolding herself, the beastmen gazed at the trio agog, still unable to recover from the shock of their ace in the hole that they’d thought would assure them victory turning out to be a dud. A deathly hush fell over the troops as they finally started to realize they were dealing with a vastly powerful foe who could crush them like bugs. When Ellie turned to face the beastfolk again, they all flinched under her gaze, and the entire army took one step backward out of fear.

“It seems you thugs have no other weapons left to use against me,” Ellie surmised. “In that case, it’s about time I exterminated you, like I said I would at the very start. Plasma Sundown!”

Ellie raised one hand above her head and produced a ball of plasma that hung in the air like the sun itself. This mass of superheated energy created by the strategic-class spell would instantly vaporize all two thousand beastmen on contact, and since the beastmen were trapped inside the Walled-In World, they couldn’t rely on their superior running speed to whisk them to safety, nor were their power levels high enough to resist the heat the Plasma Sundown was exuding. Faced with this imminent lethal threat, Gamm decided to play one of the last cards he still had left in his deck.

“H-Hey, you. Bring them out here now!” Gamm yelled to his underlings. “Quickly! Before it’s too late!”

“Y-Yessir!” a handful of the wolfmen replied before scampering off to the

avianmen, who were manning the supplies. Gamm tried to buy his men some time.

“Not so fast, witch!” he yelled. “In case you didn’t know, we still have hostages!”

“What’s that? Hostages?” Ellie paused quizzically, stalling just long enough for the wolfmen to open up two of the barrels and pull out the twin girls they had brought from one of the warehouses. One of the wolfmen eyed the girls suspiciously.

“Huh? Were these the girls we stuffed into the barrels?” the wolfman said uncertainly.

“Who cares what the inferior brats look like, dumbass!” his partner retorted. “We need to take ’em to the chief straightaway!”

Since their lives were on the line, the wolfmen didn’t waste another second wondering if they had the right hostages or not and dragged the girls along roughly by their arms.

“Kee hee hee! You’re scary, mister!” one of the twins said.

“Kee hee hee! What are you gonna do to us?” asked the other girl.

Both twins seemed to be around ten years old, and one had a ponytail on the side of her head, while the other had her hair arranged in two pigtails. Both girls were small and dainty enough to fit inside the barrels, yet neither seemed to be exhibiting any signs of trauma from being confined in them for days, and even though the twins were being forcefully dragged to the Wolf Tribe’s chieftain, both girls appeared to have the strength and energy to keep up. And if that wasn’t enough, the two girls giggled all the way. They eventually reached Gamm, at which point, the two wolfmen deputies drew their knives and pressed the blades against the girls’ necks in full view of Ellie.

“These girls are our hostages. See?” Gamm sneered. “If you don’t want us to end their lives here and now, you’d better cancel that magic spell! And don’t even *think* of teleporting these girls away either! We can cut their throats faster than you can speak!”

“Kee hee hee! Oh no. Don’t kill me,” one of the girls said, laying it on thick.

“Could someone please save me?”

“Kee hee hee! Don’t hurt me, wolf misters. I don’t like being hurted,” said the other twin.

Ellie scrunched up her face into an exaggerated look of concern, then quickly canceled the Plasma Sundown, just as Gamm had commanded.

“There. I ended my spell,” Ellie said. “Now, please let those innocent girls go.”

Even though just a minute ago, they were preparing to meet their maker, the beastmen smirked with a renewed confidence at the witch who was forced to restrain herself in the presence of hostages. This same rush of confidence surged through Gamm, who started openly mocking his foe.

“Didn’t take you long to submit to my orders, did it, witch?” Gamm jeered. “Guess that ‘absolute autonomy’ nonsense turned out to be the ultimate handicap in the end. If you don’t want us to kill these two runts, you’re going to do *exactly* as we say from now on!”

“You need to let those two girls go right now!” Ellie yelled desperately. “There must be at least one among you who will convince your leader to do what’s right! Some of you must have felt in your heart or hearts that this war was unjust from the start and must sympathize with the plight of these innocent girls. If there is someone like that, speak up! Tell your chief to release these girls! I will spare the lives of anyone brave and thoughtful enough to step up and help me! You have my word as the Wicked Witch of the Tower!”

Despite Ellie’s impassioned plea attempting to appeal to their better angels, none of the beastmen volunteered a single word of compassion in defense of the girls. Instead, all of them took the pleading as an opportunity to heap yet more scorn on Ellie.

“Who the hell’s gonna work for *you*, witch?” one soldier scoffed.

“That bitch is too soft when it comes to those little pukes!” another yelled out. “Let’s use these girls as shields and kill the witch!”

“And her boy toys too!” shouted a third beastman. “We’ll be sure to make ‘em suffer before we slay ‘em!”

Supremely confident that they now had the upper hand, the entire army was soon chanting, “Kill them! Kill them!” as one. They also wanted to torture their foes to death as retribution for making them endure the humiliation of showing fear to lowly inferiors. As for Ellie and her two lieutenants, they regarded the beastmen not with terror but with the indifferent air of the hangman about to execute a bunch of condemned criminals.

“I heard the beastmen were terrible, but I never imagined they’d be *this* horrible,” Orka remarked. “They’re far too evil to write a lighthearted scherzo about.”

“The strong not only refuse to protect the weak, they use them as shields to satisfy their lust for war,” Khaos said. “I never realized such a loathsome group of savages could exist in this world. Don’t they even know the meaning of shame?”

Ellie dropped all pretense of being shaken at the cruelty on display and let an entirely impassive expression settle on her face. “I knew these brutes were irredeemable. Mera, you may now proceed to the next phase.”

“What are you mumbling about?” Gamm yelled. “What’s *meant* to happen now is the three of you all throw away your weapons, get down on your knees, and beg us to spare your lives—”

But before he could finish his sentence, two people behind him screamed at length. Gamm spun around and saw that the two wolfmen who had been holding knives to the throats of the twin girls were doubled over in pain. The arms attached to their hands brandishing the knives had been chomped off, as if vicious monsters had set upon them. For a second, Gamm wondered who—or what—could have done this, but then his eyes landed on the two girls and saw that both their mouths were moving as if they were munching on something. It sounded like they were chewing metal mixed with bone and viscera. In other words, the two supposedly helpless girls were eating the knives and the arms that had been holding them.

“Kee hee hee! This baddie sure tastes icky!” one of the twins said.

“Kee hee hee! Mine tastes yucky too!” the other girl agreed. “Even the knife tastes yummier than *him*!”

The two girls touched hands and fused together, transforming into a tall bombshell of a woman, who proceeded to cackle mercilessly.

“Keh heh heh heh! There really is no hope for you morons, is there?” Mera mocked the beastmen. “I thought at least *one* of you might try to save me, but even that was asking too much!”

“Wha...” Gamm stammered, barely able to string a sentence together. “What in the hell...” None of the other beastmen could believe what they had just witnessed either. While they tried to get over their communal shock, Ellie relayed a message by SR Telepathy.

“We’re all done giving them their last chance at salvation,” Ellie reported. “As I predicted, every single one of them failed the test. We were prepared to show mercy to anyone—even those who had previously committed crimes against humans—if they’d simply stepped forward and showed some compassion for the ‘hostages,’ but alas, not one had the aptitude for performing that simple act of kindness. Consequently, I grant you permission to come in.”

As soon as Ellie had ended her message, an SSR Teleportation seal lit up beside the witch, revealing the person who had been on the other end of the communication: Light. Ellie, Mera, Orka, and Khaos all dropped to their knees to address their lord, while the beastfolk all stood petrified at this sudden turn of events. The Walled-In World normally stopped anyone teleporting in or out of the separation barrier, but the item did allow the user—Ellie, in this case—to grant an exception to this rule, which is what allowed Light to translocate to the battlefield from where he had been in the Great Tower. After hearing Ellie’s update on the situation, Light turned to look at the hapless beastmen and sighed with disappointment.

“We knew from the very beginning that you guys were bringing two little girls along as extra hostages,” Light said in a tone that resembled a parent admonishing some naughty kids. “We rescued the two girls and replaced them with Mera, one of our own who can split and shape-shift into pretty much anything. We got her to wait in the barrels just in case you decided to use those girls to blackmail us. In the event of that happening, I told Ellie to plead with you guys to save the girls, since it’d be a good way to identify if any of you had any sort of decency. I really thought some of you were only participating in this

war to go along with the crowd, and if anyone *had* attempted to save the girls, we would've spared them, but as it is..."

Light paused and sighed heavily, genuinely disillusioned. "I wanted to see the results for myself, so I told Ellie to call me here after the test. Honestly, I was hoping at least one of you might have a conscience, but you guys have completely let me down."

If any beastman had stepped forward to plead for the girls' release, Light would have teleported him away from the battlefield, erased his memories of what he had seen during the battle using a gacha card, then released him to live the rest of his life. But all of the beastmen warriors had been perfectly willing to let the girls have their throats slit for the sake of their evil purposes, and that outcome had made up Light's mind for him.

"Okay, I've seen enough. Kill them all," Light ordered. "Not only do they kidnap humans and force them into fighting, they don't even care what happens to poor, innocent little girls. They must pay with their lives."

"Hold on! I mean, please!" called out a beastman who had finally caught on that there was a way out of this situation he found himself in. "I was against the war from the beginning! I wanted to rescue those poor girls, but everyone was saying how much they wanted to kill you, so I was too nervous!"

"I was about to rescue those girls too!" another shouted out. "But our chief was yelling at us to kill the witch—I mean, the Most *Gracious* Witch!"

"I didn't want any of this to happen! I swear!" another beastman in the crowd cried out. These individuals knew they were going to die if they didn't make a final appeal to Light to spare their lives, but he wasn't having any of it.

"I've made my decision, and I won't be changing it," Light said, fixing them all with a steely gaze. "You guys abducted humans and turned loved ones into hostages so you could force the victims into fighting your stupid war for you. Were their lives really worth less than your own? Well, you people made your bed, so now you get to sleep in it!"

Light suddenly remembered he wasn't supposed to kill all of the beastfolk in front of him. "Oh, yeah. Be sure to capture the two beastmen leaders, Ellie. We'll need them for intelligence."

“As you wish, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said. All of Light’s allies got to their feet again to carry out their master’s orders, including Mera, who was the closest to the beastmen chieftains.

“Well, you chumps heard the master. And whatever he says goes!” Mera declared, laughing her head off. “All that’s left now is for us to carry out the bloodbath!”

“Wh-Who’re you calling chumps? You giant bitch!” a beastman bawled.

“We’ll kill you before you kill us!” another soldier yelled.

“Look around! You’re surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth!” a third beastman followed up. “Not even you can take us all on at once!”

Since there was nowhere for the beastmen to run, they naturally chose to take their chances and fight. Since she was the closest, a swarm of warriors charged at Mera, and even though, individually, beastmen had much lower power levels, their racial traits made them adept at coordination and teamwork that helped them to overcome gaps in levels. However, they were facing a Level 7777 chimera who was way out of their league. Mera casually extended her wide-sleeved arms, and they instantly transformed into flesh-eating monsters that made quick work of gobbling up the heads and torsos of the beastmen as if they had just run into a meat grinder.

“You’d better stay in your lane, beast boys!” Mera cackled. “Sit still while we squash you like the little furry insects you are!”

Their comrades’ slaughter had happened so quickly, the other beastmen looking on had no idea what Mera had actually done to kill their brothers-in-arms. All they saw were headless and torsoless bodies with internal organs strewn across the ground, which drew plenty of screaming as they all started to realize that they too were about to be mercilessly butchered by an adversary so powerful, she could crush them like ants. Gamm glanced in the direction of Ellie, Orka, and Khaos and noted they were also moving in for the kill.

I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna die! I don’t wanna die! Gamm yelled in his head. *This can’t be where I meet my end! I’m Gamm, the chieftain of the Wolf Tribe! I’m not like these other mutts around me!*

Gamm touched the part of his armor concealing the pendant that hung around his neck. Even though he was still in command of a two-thousand-strong army, and they still had several more magic items in their arsenal, Gamm decided he wasn't going to take any more chances.

That merchant said this Teleportation Pendant is powerful enough to get me out of any situation, Gamm thought. I need to get out of here and tell my nation that the Wicked Witch is way, way too dangerous for us to handle alone! That way, we can ask other nations to form a coalition army that will put an end to that damned witch, once and for all! I'm not deserting my men! This is just a change in plans so that I can warn the rest of the world!

Except Gamm really was choosing to abandon his troops—even those who were blood relatives of his—just to save his own hide. Once he had finished rationalizing his next action, he started to reach for the Teleportation Pendant Fayh had given him, when all of a sudden, a voice interrupted him.

“T-Teleportation Pendant! Get me outta here!” Lebad yelled.

“What? Where did you get that pendant?” Gamm shouted, but he immediately realized that Fayh had also secretly been in contact with his rival. As soon as Lebad's final word was spoken, Gamm's pendant started to transform. The pendant exuded a dark-red slime that broke apart Gamm's armor and started stabbing soldiers left and right, then sucked up their blood. The blood from his men began to cover Gamm, but before he could rip the pendant from his neck, the pool of blood enveloped him completely. One of the last things Gamm saw was Lebad's pendant going through the same otherworldly metamorphosis.

Those sons of bitches! thought Gamm. They didn't give me a teleportation item at all! This thing feeds off our blood and turns into a monster! The dragonutes just think we're worthless pawns they can do whatever they like with! I should never have trusted those reptilian bastar—

But before Gamm could finish lamenting his decision to wage war on the Wicked Witch on behalf of the dragonutes, the wolfman lost consciousness inside the gelatinous, bloodred blob.

Chapter 16: The Twinblood Pendants

“Are those from the Twinblood Pendants?” Ellie gasped.

After I’d sentenced the entire beastmen army to death, Mera had approached the two beastmen chieftains in order to capture them. Ellie, Orka, and Khaos had started moving toward the beastmen as well, when the Tiger Tribe’s chieftain, Lebad, shouted something about a teleportation pendant. Almost immediately, slimy tentacles grew out of both of the beastmen chieftains and commenced stabbing beastmen soldiers standing nearby. The tentacles tried to get Mera too, but she quickly backed away to a safe distance. Though, unfortunately for the beastmen, they weren’t fast enough to escape the bloodsucking tentacles.

“No! Nooo!” yelled a wolfman standing next to Gamm. “Help!”

“Hey, unc, why are you—argh!” Gims cried out.

“Did the chief set us up?” another wolfman yelled. “I don’t wanna die like this!”

The tentacles were ending lives as far as the eye could see, and all I could hear was a gruesome cacophony of screaming beastmen loudly begging for their lives or cursing out their chieftains. I kept a close eye on the situation while I threw a question Ellie’s way.

“Do you know what’s making those tentacles?” I asked.

“Yes, Your Blessedness,” Ellie replied. “They’re from the Twinblood Pendants, which are magic items that create those kinds of monsters.”

Ellie went on to explain that the Twinblood Pendants were actually two parts of one larger dark-red pendant. If one of the separated pendants was activated, the other pendant would activate too, and they would produce tentacles that sucked up blood from any living thing within their reach. The blood would then pool up and surround the users of the pendants, placing them in a state of suspended animation while they essentially turned into slime creatures that

wandered around in search of more blood.

The level of the tentacle slimes was dependent on the volume of blood they had consumed. Ten thousand victims would equate to about Level 5000, according to one estimate, so since the two slimes were attacking an army of two thousand beastmen, I doubted either of them would ever make it to Level 2000. It was basically suicide to summon the monsters through those items, but I was confident we'd be able to destroy them in an instant. There was one catch, however.

"The only problem with the Twinblood monsters is you need to destroy both pendants at once, otherwise they keep regenerating," Ellie explained.

"So even if we destroy one of the pendants, it'll restore itself if the other one's still in one piece?" I asked.

"Yes, Blessed Lord," Ellie confirmed. "We need to keep the two Twinblood monsters close together, or they'll be much more difficult to defeat. They're really bothersome creatures in that regard, but they stop functioning entirely if the pendants are too far apart from one another."

"A simultaneous kill will be more trouble than I would prefer, but at least we won't need to worry about either monster getting away while they're caged in the Walled-In World," Khaos said. "We can easily destroy them with our powers, so I would call this a pointless last stand by the beastmen."

"Actually, it won't be that easy," Ellie said, her fingers pressed to her forehead. "If it were just those monsters alone, I'd be able to destroy both myself, but we were given strict instructions to capture the two beastmen chieftains alive. Having them in suspended animation inside those monsters complicates matters somewhat—no, a whole lot."

Ellie was right that I wanted the chieftains captured alive so we could probe their memories for intelligence, and that destroying them along with the monsters would prevent us from getting the chance to do that. The two chieftains also had power levels that were too low to withstand one of Ellie's attacks if it packed too much punch. It was at this point that Mera strolled up to us from the battlefield, chuckling as usual at our dilemma.

"In that case, why don't I split into two and destroy the Twinblood Pendants

myself, master?" Mera suggested.

"That would definitely be helpful, but are you *sure* you can do that without harming the tribe chieftains inside the monsters?" I said.

Mera giggled nervously. "I-I can certainly try!"

Mera could make parts of her body look like any known creature in the world, but she wasn't the kind of person who specialized in pure combat abilities. Since Mera was a shape-shifter and not a skill fighter, she found it difficult to go easy on an opponent (though not *quite* as difficult as Nazuna found it), so there was a fair chance the two chiefs might get killed. If I simply needed Mera to neutralize our adversaries, I wouldn't have thought twice about sending her in to complete the task, since she could simply capture the bad guys inside her body. But here, we were dealing with two dangerous slimes, and while Mera could certainly gobble up and digest the slimes, even when taking Mera's high power level into account, there was a nonzero risk of the slimes sucking up her blood too. I wasn't going to expose Mera to that kind of danger if I could help it.

Neither Ellie nor Orka are best suited for close combat, since she's a sorceress and he's a magical musician, I thought. If we want to destroy the Twinblood slimes and spare the chieftains, we'll need people who specialize in close combat. I only wish I could call up a specialist of that kind from the Abyss...

"You and I will be able to destroy the Twinbloods without harming the high-value targets," Khaos said, as if reading my thoughts. "You don't need to call for any other backup, Light."

"You know what? You're right," I said. "We can just handle it ourselves. Okay, Khaos, let's take those things down."

"I would rather fight those things than engage with the beastfolk miscreants who have no idea how to protect the weak," Khaos replied.

I gripped my Gungnir tight and Khaos brandished his Chaos Scythe as we splintered off from the group.

"Blessed Lord Light, good luck in your battle!" Ellie gushed.

"Hey, new kid! Make sure you don't trip our master up!" Mera said with a sneering laugh. I assumed from this snide remark that she didn't care much for

Khaos's attitude either, *especially* since he was addressing me on a first-name basis. Since I didn't mind what Khaos called me, Mera didn't go any further in giving him a piece of her mind.

"To help the two of you fight the monsters, I shall play a little medley I call 'Fettered By The Chains From Afar,'" Orka stated. He placed his bow on the strings of his fiddle and played his debuff, which succeeded in slowing down the slimes that were slithering toward us after killing all of the beastmen in their immediate vicinity.

"All right, let's move, Khaos!"

"Make sure you don't mess up the timing of your attack and give me more work," Khaos said as we both rushed toward the slimes.

We took a bloodred slime each, and as we neared them, countless tentacles extended toward us. I pulverized the tentacles heading my way with my staff, while Khaos hacked away at the ones bearing down on him with his scythe. We made our way ever closer to the slimes, preparing to shatter the Twinblood Pendants hanging from the two chieftains' necks. But all of a sudden, the monsters took to the air to restore the distance between us.

"Who would ever have thought those things could fly through the air without even preparing to take off?" Khaos remarked. "I suppose only a creature as slippery as this one would be capable of that trick."

Still in midair, the two slimes then pulled another trick neither of us were expecting.

"They're *fusing*?!" I yelled.

The two Twinblood slimes were *actually* melting into each other while floating. I had been under the impression that we were dealing with two completely separate opponents, since one slime had trapped Gamm, while the other held Lebad, but as soon as the slimes finished merging, the super-slime used its extra mass to its advantage, creating a giant hammer to swing at us. Khaos and I went in opposite directions to avoid the slime hammer, which was just as well because it slammed into the ground where we had been standing and felt a big crater behind. For something that was made out of slime, it sure packed a wallop. The monster kept swinging its giant hammer down at us from

up in the air, attempting to beat me and Khaos to a pulp.

“Khaos! We’re splitting it in two once it lands!” I yelled.

“I agree,” Khaos replied. “It would severely inconvenience us if that slime positions our targets in such a way that it prevents us from destroying the monster.”

Although it was hard to make out through the bloodred goop, the slime was currently moving the two chieftains around inside itself so that the two pendants wouldn’t be destroyed in a simultaneous attack. I guessed this showed that the slime was intelligent enough to know how to compensate for its vulnerabilities.

As I mulled this over, Khaos and I charged forward to the likeliest spot where the super-slime would land. The slime kept trying to hit us with its hammer, but we continued to dodge. The slime formed blades next to vary its attacks. In fact, I suspected it was planning to first hit us with the hammer, then dice us up with those blades in a rapid follow-up attack if we attempted to dodge. It would have been a clever gambit if it wasn’t so utterly pointless against us.

“Sorry to break this to you, but that trick isn’t going to kill us,” I said.

“That hammer was never going to injure us anyway,” Khaos told the slime coolly. “The only reason we dodged it was to avoid getting pushed back by its sheer mass.”

I struck one of the blades with the side of my bare hand, breaking it in two, while Khaos used his scythe to slice up another blade. Even though the super-slime didn’t have a face, it was fairly obvious that it was shocked by the ease with which we had crushed its deadliest weapons. Of course, we weren’t about to let this momentary hesitation pass us by without making the most of it.

“Chaos Scythe, cut down my enemy!” Khaos yelled as he used both hands to bring down his weapon on the slime, slicing it cleanly in two in such a way that it left each chieftain intact and in his own regular slime. The two slimes frantically tried to fuse back together again, but they weren’t fast enough.

“SSSR Frosty—release!” I called out, activating two of these cards to release two frozen dogs that immediately sank their teeth deep into their respective

slimes. The bites caused the slimes to freeze up starting from the bite marks, and before the slimes could merge again, they transformed into giant ice sculptures. An SSSR Frosty summon was actually a mass of absolute zero temperature that took the form of a dog. One bite from one of them was enough to turn a bad guy into ice. Using just eye contact alone, Khaos and I identified which slime we would engage and sprinted toward our respective targets.

“You’re finished, slime!” I yelled.

“Return to the chaos from whence you came,” Khaos said.

I whacked the pendant that was my target with the tip of my staff, while Khaos struck his pendant with his scythe. The two pendants shattered at the same time, which caused both of the frozen slimes to disintegrate and explode. The icy flakes that once were slimes fluttered around inside the Walled-In World, resembling unseasonable snowfall. All that was left now was to retrieve the two beastmen chieftains, who were somehow still breathing despite all that they’d been through. My eyes met Khaos’s, and the two of us walked over to each other as the faux snowflakes glittered with reflected light. When we were close enough, we high-fived, then touched arms and elbows in a sequence that was like one of those secret rhythmic handshakes, but it didn’t end there. We went on to bump fists, then kissed our own fists, then punched each other in the knuckles so hard, it caused a shock wave. Lastly, we did fist pumps in the air to signal that we had emerged victorious.

“What was that thing you did at the end? That looked so incredible!” Ellie said as she came rushing up to the two of us. “You must teach me how to touch fists like that too, Blessed Lord!”

Orka soon followed. “Not to repeat what Miss Ellie just said, but I do have to wonder where you two learned how to perform those gestures. It was certainly a dazzling sight to behold.”

“Oh, uh, well...” I laughed and scratched the back of my head as I tried to buy some time so I could come up with something. “It was totally spur of the moment. I didn’t know he was going to match me so perfectly, move for move. I didn’t plan for it, but I couldn’t contain myself after the victory.”

“Like he said, I merely matched his arm movements,” Khaos muttered, looking away moodily. “I don’t know why he did it, so don’t ask me.”

After that back-and-forth had ended, I scanned the battlefield for a few seconds. Or at least, what was left of it.

“So besides the two beastmen chieftains, we have completely massacred everybody,” I observed. “Or well, in this case, they totally ended up destroying themselves.”

The Twinblood slime monsters had killed pretty much all two thousand beastmen soldiers without us having to even lift a finger, for the most part. But thankfully, the two chiefs were still alive to cough up the intelligence we’d need to mete out the most appropriate punishment for the Beastfolk Federation. But as of that moment, we had been successful in rescuing the humans from the beastfolk and destroying the beastmen army that had waged this sickening war in the first place. Since we had done everything we came to do on this battlefield, I activated a teleportation card to whisk the last ones standing—including Gamm and Lebad—to the bottom level of the Abyss.

Chapter 17: A New Strategy

At an undisclosed location in the Dragonute Empire, Hisomi was finishing up his verbal report on the outcome of the war between the Wicked Witch of the Tower and the Beastfolk Federation to Hiro.

“So you weren’t able to gather much information on the Great Tower in the end?” Hiro summarized.

“It is with the greatest regret that I must admit that this is indeed the case,” Hisomi said, his usually affable expression replaced by a chagrined look. “I attempted to monitor the conflict from a remote location, but the entire battleground was encircled by high-level monsters capable of stealth and detecting intruders.”

Hisomi paused and reflected on his bad luck. “I did not wish to expose my position to these monsters, so I decided to observe the battle from afar, but a dome made of swirling black matter formed over the two forces, meaning even if I *had* been able to break through the surveillance web to get a closer look at the action, I would not have been able to piece together developments.”

Hisomi had been assigned the task of ascertaining the military might of the Great Tower, and whether this new faction had any connections to C. The fight between the beastfolk army and the Wicked Witch was intended to serve as a gold mine of useful intelligence for the dragonute Masters, but Aoyuki had deployed tamed creatures around the battlefield who were not only able to sniff out unwanted guests at long range, but were also able to blend in with their surroundings so that any interlopers wouldn’t detect them. On top of that, Ellie had activated the mythical-class weapon known as the Walled-In World to cut off the battleground completely, allowing no one to enter and shielding it from prying eyes.

The dark, cloudy dome concealed the armies within for an hour or so before fading away to reveal piles of bodies, but not much else by way of intelligence. Hisomi had waited a little while to make sure the coast was clear, then

approached the battleground for a closer look, but there were no survivors. All he found were dried-up corpses of beastmen and shattered carriages. Hisomi knew instantly that the Beastfolk Federation army had been destroyed in its entirety.

“The bodies were completely desiccated, which points to the likelihood that they were attacked by the Twinblood Pendants I gave to the beastfolk,” Hisomi continued. “I was unable to find any trace of the Holy Evil Golem whatsoever—no marks on the ground where it had been, nor any fragments of it—and I believe this is due to the black dome itself or perhaps some other power. In all honesty, I had assumed the beastfolk would expose the Great Tower to at least *some* degree if we offered them a feasible war strategy and a few magic items, but this outcome shows our expectations were entirely unwarranted. Perhaps it is because the beastfolk were too feckless and incompetent for the task, or that the Great Tower was more prepared for an attack of this kind than we had anticipated. After all, I never expected them to establish such a tight web of surveillance around the battlefield, nor to enshroud the site using a magic item.”

Hisomi paused again and seethed silently for a moment. “A magic item that powerful can only be used once, yet they went ahead and activated it anyway. They must have known we were involved and what we were after, which means I sacrificed our extensive intelligence network in the Beastfolk Federation with only this disappointing outcome to show for it. I sincerely apologize.”

“No, it’s my fault for suggesting using the beastfolk to smoke out the people in the Great Tower,” Hiro assured him. “You shouldn’t blame yourself at all. Besides, you didn’t come back *entirely* empty-handed.”

“Hm?” Hisomi probed. “May I ask what you are alluding to, Lord Hiro?”

“The Great Tower was able to deploy a surveillance web that kept you at a distance, as well as used a magic item that concealed a whole battlefield and prevented you from seeing anything,” Hiro said. “What’s more, that magic item must have been a single-use phantasma-class item, possibly even a mythical-class item. We could never waste such a valuable magic item for such a dubious and overcautious reason, which means it is clear the tower has more resources than we can lay our hands on. And the only entity with that much in the way of

resources would be C.”

Hisomi gasped softly, while Hiro continued his reasoning. “And another thing worth mentioning is that I don’t believe the tower covered the battlefield with this dome specifically to keep us from viewing their capabilities. The actions they took were more half measures. If they’d had the ability to establish an impenetrable layer of surveillance, why didn’t they seize the initiative by hunting you down and capturing you?”

“Yes, you make a good point,” Hisomi admitted, stroking his chin. “I did not sense any person or creature pursuing me.”

Hiro nodded his approval at Hisomi’s response. “Of course, we can’t rule out the possibility that they *do* in fact know about you and that they are tracking you even as we speak. But this is merely conjecture, and we could spend all night discussing theories like that. In all seriousness, I don’t believe the Great Tower knows about us, nor what we’re doing. Those surveillance monsters were most likely simply an extra layer of security, and if I were to hazard a guess, the dark dome was to make sure that no beastmen could escape from the battlefield.”

“I still cannot fathom how someone could possibly think to use a rare phantasma-class weapon, let alone a mythical-class weapon, just for the purposes of entrapping every beastmen soldier,” Hisomi said. “It hurts my brain just contemplating committing to such a wasteful decision while ignoring every other option available.”

Hiro chuckled. “But there is no denying that they made use of a powerful single-use weapon. It’s natural to assume that either C or C’s acolytes are involved with the Great Tower. We also need to take into account that Naano the dwarf disappeared without a trace.”

When the Great Tower first appeared, Hiro and his faction did some digging and found out that Garou, Sasha, and Sionne had all mysteriously vanished, and the common thread tying them together was their former membership of a party of adventurers tasked with searching for a Master. With this in mind, Hisomi had sent his undercover agent, Cavaur, to establish contact with Naano in a gambit to lure the denizens of the Great Tower out into the open, but even

though Cavaur was in fact a deadly Level 5000 zombie, he also went missing the same time Naano did. This brought the total number of people connected to the “false Master” that had vanished into thin air up to five, which firmly ruled out that these incidents were simply mere coincidences.

“Given the outcome of the war, I strongly believe C or his acolytes are connected to the Great Tower in some way,” Hiro said. “There are myriad possible theories as to *why* people with links to the false Master are being disappeared, but what this does make clear is we must monitor the Great Tower closely. It also appears that the demonkin have grown alarmed over the debacle with the beastfolk, and an emergency summit may be called shortly at the Principality of the Nine.”

“That is not what we want,” Hisomi said. “Not only do we need to investigate the Great Tower further, we now need to converse and coordinate with the dragonutes about this possible summit.”

“Plus, the Great Tower will likely attract the interest of the worshippers,” Hiro added.

“Yes, the religious fanatics who worship C—or the ‘delusional death cult,’ as Kaizer puts it—are another factor in this,” Hisomi muttered. “Will the tower pique their curiosity enough for them to engage with the people there? And if they do, will C and his associates take them under their wings?”

“Either that, or the tower has no connection to C at all and the worshippers end up destroying it and its inhabitants,” Hiro mused, shrugging.

“If that were to happen, it would make things much easier for us,” Hisomi said with a slight chuckle.

“That is certainly true,” Hiro agreed. The two laughed softly to themselves, then sighed in unison.

“If the worshippers intend to make contact with the Great Tower, then we must revise our plan of action,” Hiro said. “I suggest bringing everyone together and holding a strategy meeting.”

“I predict Kaizer will have a fit when he hears my report on the battle,” Hisomi quipped. “Part of me is not looking forward to this meeting, to be frank.”

Hiro chuckled again, then the two men departed to round up their peers in order to thrash out a new strategy.

Chapter 18: Submission

A few days after the Twinblood monsters had massacred the entire beastfolk army, a swarm of dragons a hundred strong descended on the Beastfolk Federation capital, their thunderous roars reverberating around the entire city.

“Wh-Where’d those dragons come from?” a beastman yelled. “Is it the end of the world?”

“Why’re these dragons here?” another onlooker asked in a panic. “Why ain’t the soldiers doin’ something?”

“It’s over!” cried a frantic beastman. “This city’s gonna get wiped off the map!”

The entire federal capital was in uproar, with some believing the apocalypse was at hand, while others blamed the guards for failing to warn the residents about the incoming dragon horde. Plenty of the adults were too seized by fear to talk and collapsed to the ground when their knees finally gave way, but the children excitedly pointed their fingers up at the sky, clearly entertained by the spectacle.

Despite their cacophonous arrival, the dragons refrained from breathing fire over the city, instead circling around in the skies above in what was an intimidating display, for Ellie—the Wicked Witch of the Tower who controlled the dragon army—didn’t intend to destroy the nation’s capital. At least, not at this moment in time. Ellie stood atop one dragon with her deputies, Khaos and Orka, and directed it to swoop down onto the lawn in front of the federation’s conference manor. Ellie, Khaos, and Orka jumped down from the dragon once it had landed, and followed a beastman guide to the meeting hall where the three remaining beastfolk chieftains were waiting for them. Ellie had already performed memory probes on Gamm and Lebad, subjecting the pair to enough pain and torment that death was a vastly preferable alternative. Once all of the information she needed had been extracted from their heads, the two detainees were rewarded by being summarily executed.

Because the war had wiped out nearly every single warrior in the Wolf and Tiger tribes, nobody had been named to replace Gamm and Lebad as chieftains for their tribes, so for that reason, only the leaders of the Avian, Bear, and Bovine tribes were available to meet with Ellie and her entourage. Of course, the three chieftains were scared stiff as soon as the tower witch set foot in the chambers. And who could blame them? For one thing, she had completely obliterated an army of two thousand beastmen, and it wasn't a case of the Beastfolk Federation merely suffering a disastrous defeat that saw them lose a massive chunk of their armed forces. No, the witch had literally wiped out every single able-bodied soldier that had been sent to the front lines. Moreover, the Wicked Witch had teleported out all of the dragooned human conscripts, the hostages, and every single human slave in the nation. Any beastfolk that tried to stand in the way of these rescue attempts had ended up being slain on the spot without exception.

All in all, the Great Tower had liberated six to seven thousand humans from the beastfolk. Even if all of the beastmen in the federation had banded together, they wouldn't have been able to perform the sort of feat the Wicked Witch—who was standing before them on the shag carpeting—had pulled off. It was no wonder the surviving chieftains were gripped with a singular dread of their visitors, though it would soon turn out that even this amount of fear was insufficient for what was to come.

“W-We would like to welcome you to our estate, Great Witch of the Tower, and we extend warm salutations to your two gallant knights as well,” stammered Igor, who was serving as the rotating moderator for this meeting. “Please take a seat and make yourselves comfortable.” The avianman's face was contorted into an ingratiating smile as sweat oozed down from his bald head. But Ellie didn't respond to the invitation, and simply stood there with an air of reproachfulness about her, largely directed at Igor. Khaos and Orka emulated Ellie's reaction, causing the birdman to sweat profusely from every pore.

“As you know, the leaders of the Wolf Tribe and the Tiger Tribe declared war on you fine people. Entirely without our input, I might add,” Igor said quickly. “The rest of us have gathered here today in their place to discuss postwar

arrangements. We had no idea Gamm and Lebad would commit such an outrageous act against the Great Tower, and when we first heard about it, we were as shocked and appalled as anyone. We're prepared to remedy all damages that your side has suffered in that unconscionable war, so we look forward to discussing all pertinent matters with your best interests in mind."

Igor was clearly trying to lay all the blame at the feet of Gamm and Lebad, who weren't around to object since they had likely perished in the battle. Besides, it was a fact that Gamm and Lebad were the ringleaders for the war, so in his mind, it was entirely proper for the two chieftains to take accountability for it. Yet the Wicked Witch of the Tower still said nothing in response to Igor's words. Instead, she silently sauntered up to the avianman, her gait so elegant and naturally swift that people were too dazzled by it to think to stop her, then grabbed the top of his hairless pate with her right hand. She placed her left hand on his shoulder, and started pulling with her right.

"Now why would you act like you had nothing to do with the war?" the witch said as she tugged at Igor's head. "You were the first to side with Gamm and Lebad over their war plans, and you backed the plot from start to finish. Not to mention, you saw the human hostages as an 'insurance policy' against me, correct? As such, not only did your tribe provide the logistical support for the war, but they also made available the warehouses where the hostages were imprisoned. Did you really think you could fool me with your lies?"

"Ow!" Igor screeched. "Ow! Ow! Ow! How do you know what I said?" The Avian Tribe's chieftain suddenly realized that the Wicked Witch was attempting to part his head from his shoulders with her bare hands, and he tried to struggle against her with his winged arms, but it was no good. In answer to Igor's question, the reason Ellie knew he was trying to bamboozle her was due to the conversations surrounding the decision to go to war she had pulled from Gamm and Lebad's memories. The beastmen guards didn't know whether to engage the witch as she yanked at the avianman's head, but well-timed looks from Khaos and Orka quickly discouraged them from trying.

"I vowed I would put to death every single person who was actively involved in waging that war on my tower," Ellie said, straining away. "The other two chieftains I captured begged me to spare their lives, yet they refused to

acknowledge the heinous crimes they had committed against innocent people. You will, of course, receive the same treatment, but from the moment I walked in through that door, you have attempted to deceive me by pleading your innocence. Do you have any *idea* how much that infuriates me?”

“Aaargh! Great Witch, please stop!” Igor cried out in pain. “I can be of use to you! I-I can help you enslave dragonutes! Yes, dragonutes! We can get rich together! They’re strong and fetch a lot of money! I can give you all the riches in the world!”

His brain whirring, Igor had thought desperately about what the Wicked Witch might want, and he had immediately landed on offering up dragonute slaves. Members of that race were much more valuable than others tended to be, since they rarely showed up in the slave markets, unlike inferiors who were weaker than cattle. Igor’s first thought was to give the witch the handful of dragonute slaves he owned, but then he figured they could team up and round up a lot more dragonutes to sell as slaves, especially with the witch’s powers on his side. Of course, he would profit handsomely from the venture, even if he only took a small cut.

“I can be of service to you!” Igor squealed. “We can even enslave demons! Or elves! Dark elves! Onis! Beastfolk! Even centaurs! You can have your pick of beautiful men and women of *any* race, Great Witch of the Tower!”

“I have no need of any of them,” Ellie replied dispassionately over the sound of Igor’s neck tendons snapping.

“Argh! O-Okay, okay! What *do* you want?” Igor yelled with tears in his eyes and snot oozing from his nose. “Everyone has a price! Just tell me what you want and I’ll make it happen! I sweeeaaar!”

Ellie didn’t waste another word on the avianman as she proceeded to rip his head free from his neck, the chamber filling with the gruesome sound of his spine and soft tissue tearing and separating. A fountain of blood spurted upward from Igor’s severed throat, hitting the ceiling and spraying out over a wide area, staining the shag carpet. Curiously, though, not a single drop of blood landed on the Wicked Witch’s clothes. Although Ellie wasn’t known for her skills in hand-to-hand combat by any means, she was still a Level 9999

sorceress and had the brute strength to draw and quarter her foes unassisted.

Ellie tossed Igor's decapitated head indifferently off to one side, his face still a mask of pain and horror. The gruesome act drew a muffled shriek from Beny, while Ozo watched on wordlessly, pale under his fur. Ellie nonchalantly produced a handkerchief and wiped her hands, as if she'd just touched something filthy.

"I know you two collaborated with those other three degenerates to kidnap humans to send to war, but I will grant that you were both initially against the plot in your meetings," Ellie stated. "For that reason, I release you from blame."

Ozo and Beny both breathed a sigh of relief, but Ellie wasn't finished. "The only question that remains is how will your nation pay for waging that inexcusable war against me."

Ozo and Beni briefly exchanged glances, then kowtowed to the witch with their foreheads fully flat on the bloodied carpet.

"We declare unconditional surrender to the Great Witch of the Tower and we submit to all of your demands," Ozo announced, acting as the representative for the two still-living chieftains. "The other tribes not present don't have the military force to oppose you, so they will abide by this declaration."

"Unconditional surrender, you say?" Ellie said in a disinterested tone, causing Ozo and Beny to sweat further. The witch waited for several drops of sweat to stain the carpet before proceeding.

"I *suppose* that's a reasonable compromise," she declared. "But I'm highly disinclined to take on the additional work that comes from ruling your nation or turning it into a colony, so for now, I will allow the two of you to run the Beastfolk Federation on my behalf. As long as you ban slavery, I won't concern myself with any of the particulars. However..."

Ellie unleashed a murderous aura and the sheer force of it was like a giant's palm crushing Beny and Ozo from above. The chieftains' blood ran cold, and it would have made every single cell in their body screech out in terror if such a thing were physically possible. Even the beastmen guards in the chamber couldn't help their teeth from chattering, and it was only Khaos and Orka who remained cool as the dark energy washed over them.

“If you *dare* to turn against the Great Tower again, I *will* rain total destruction on your nation. Are we clear?” Despite the sinister vibes she was giving off, Ellie sounded as unemotional as a weather sage reading out the next day’s forecast.

“O-Of course we won’t, Your Greatness!” Ozo stammered. “We’ll tell everyone under our authority never to mess with the Great Tower *ever* again!”

“I also pledge we will never betray your confidence, Great Witch!” Beny added quickly.

Ellie allowed several wordless seconds to pass as she gazed down at the kowtowing figures of Ozo and Beny, their heads firmly planted on the carpet. In this bone-chilling atmosphere, those seconds seemed like hours to the two subjugated chieftains, and the wait for a response of some kind was so excruciating, the pair wished their hearts would just give out there and then so that their agony would end. Just as Ozo and Beny were on the verge of voluntarily releasing their souls from their bodies, Ellie suddenly caused her dark aura to dissipate.

“Very good. I’ll hold you to your words,” Ellie said simply. “I’ll send envoys in a few days’ time who will bring you documents pertaining to the Absolute Autonomy of All Humans and various other matters. I will expect you to sign all of them. I trust that you will run your nation in line with those accords.”

Ozo and Beny loudly agreed to these terms, and after Ellie had nodded to show she was satisfied with the replies, she waltzed out of the chamber with Khaos and Orka in tow, none of the three having taken a seat once the whole time they were there.

Chapter 19: Towerism

All the slaves rescued from the Beastfolk Federation chose to stay at the Great Tower settlement rather than return to the subjugated nation, as did half of the free humans kidnapped by the beastfolk, although the other half did choose to go back to their former lives instead. All in all, roughly seven thousand people chose to start a new life by the tower, and the expansion to the settlement to accommodate the new arrivals made it the size of a small city. Fortunately, we had plenty of space to take in these new residents, and enough Unlimited Gacha cards to clothe, feed, and shelter them, so settling them all in went smoothly and without any disruptions.

When the former slaves and captives got wind that the Great Tower had won the war against the beastfolk, they all breathed a collective sigh of relief, as did the residents of the settlement who had been there longer. Now that we had put the Beastfolk Federation in its place, I finally had time to sit down and talk with Miya, and we decided to sit outside at a table near Miya's N Prefab home. The sky was clear, and the breeze that brought us the sounds of workers talking while toiling away and children playing felt nice against my skin. I couldn't think of a better setting to sit and have a chat.

Facing each other, the first thing we talked about was how I came to Miya's rescue in the nick of time. Since she still knew me as "Dark," I fed her a made-up story, and thankfully, Miya didn't have any reason or motivation to probe further to get to the real truth. After I was done with my fake explanation, Miya once again offered me her gratitude.

"I can't thank you enough, Dark," Miya said. "I don't even want to imagine what would've happened to us if you hadn't shown up..."

"Oh, but the witch would've done something to save all of you if I hadn't been there," I reasoned. I was attempting to be modest because I wanted to talk up the reputation of the Wicked Witch and the Great Tower, but for some reason, Miya wasn't accepting it.

“That *can’t* be true!” Miya blurted out, her face flushed. “Your Firewall saved not just me but *thousands* of people from getting hurt! And when you showed up, I was so—”

Miya stopped midsentence as if something had gotten caught in her throat, while her mouth continued to open and close soundlessly like a guppy. She ended up deciding that looking down was her best option, her face glowing crimson all the way to her ears. An awkward silence hung over the two of us, so I went ahead and broke the ice again.

“The people who put up missing person notices at the guilds must have heard by now that you and the rest of you guys are safe,” I said.

Adventurers’ Guilds across the land had been flooded with requests by friends and family members looking for victims that had been kidnapped by the beastfolk. One of the first things we did after extracting the abductees was send messages to the guilds that the captives had been found, safe and sound. But some of the former captives had chosen not to go back to their families, and had instead started new lives here at the Great Tower settlement. Others had sent out calls to their relatives, lovers, and friends to join them in the settlement, with both groups figuring that life under the auspices of the Wicked Witch of the Tower would be more secure than going back to their old lives, where they might get kidnapped or attacked again at any moment. Miya wasn’t one of these, however.

“So I hear you’re going back to your village?” I asked.

“Yeah...” Miya said slowly. “I can’t leave my brother by himself. I need to tend my friends’ graves, and I can’t just turn my back on the healer who’s been training me. But...”

Miya paused momentarily before continuing in a rather timid voice. “B-But if you want me to stay here with you, I will!”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t have to worry about me or the tower settlement,” I said. “You should be free to do what *you* want to do.”

“Yeah, I-I guess you’re right,” Miya said, her shoulders slumping as if she was dejected about something.

I was honestly glad Miya had offered to stay and help out with the settlement, but I couldn't in good conscience keep her from Elio, who had been worried sick about her, waiting in his village for news of her return. I could certainly have used her here as "Saint Miya," but a saint could serve as a comforting figure from pretty much anywhere, so that wasn't all that good a reason for her to stick around here either. What was important was that people believed a saint had risen among them, and for her to continue to offer cheer and consolation to any in need of it. In fact, for that, it probably would look better if "Saint Miya" was active in a farming village instead of being holed up here at the Great Tower.

I was about to say something to cheer Miya up, but she snapped out of her funk and treated me to a warm smile.

"No, I will go back to the village after all," Miya said. "You should really come see us soon, Dark. My brother's dying to meet the old gang too."

"Of course we'll come visit you," I replied. "The first opportunity we get, we'll be there."

"Careful now. I might end up believing you," Miya said playfully.

I laughed. "Don't worry, I'll *definitely* come visit. Cross my heart."

"I'm glad to hear it," Miya said, chuckling as well. We both laughed heartily before pausing in our conversation yet again, though unlike the previous time, this silence was less awkward and more of a pleasant hush, as if nothing more needed to be said. But after a minute or two, Miya suddenly sat up straight, as though she really needed to tell me something. Although she was blushing, there was a look of resolve in her eyes, and she had balled both of her hands into fists, like she was about to face a tough challenger.

"So, um, Dark..." Miya started. "I think I should tell you that I-I-I really like—"

"*Here you are, Saint Miya!*" A girl with blonde coils loped over to our table and interrupted Miya midsentence. She was quite pretty and had a large bust—in fact, she had a nice figure in general—but her upturned catlike eyes gave the impression that she was pushy and strong-willed.

I guess this must be Miya's friend, Quornae, I reasoned.

Quornae had elected to stay in the Great Tower settlement and had already informed her parents of her decision via the guilds, as well as of the news that she was alive and well. And because Quornae was so, well, *unique*, she had single-handedly founded a new religion: Towerism.

In Towerism, the Wicked Witch of the Tower essentially played the role of god, the fairy maids were the holy apostles, and Miya was, of course, a saint. I thought a new religion would be a plus in helping to maintain order in what was now a tower city, as well as to provide guiding principles for resolving quarrels among humans, so I gave my tacit approval for this whole Towerism business to go ahead.

Quornae greeted me briefly before turning to her friend, all smiles.

“Saint Miya! I have people who want to hear you speak!” Quornae said cheerily. “So you need to come with me!”

Miya was still blushing and sitting stiffly in her seat. “Q-Quornae, I was trying to tell Dark something. And I’ve told you a million times not to call me a *saint*!”

“Actually, there’s no need to worry about me,” I said. “We were pretty much done talking, anyway. And besides, I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your sacred duties, Miya.”

Miya shot me a look of unmitigated shock, but I wasn’t kidding when I said there was nothing left for us to talk about. This was a great opportunity to spread the word of Towerism to the new arrivals too, so I’d rather not get in the way. As soon as she heard me say that, Quornae’s beam widened and she grabbed Miya by the hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Dark, for allowing me to borrow Saint Miya for a bit,” Quornae said to me. “Now, if you’ll excuse us!”

“H-Hey! Quornae, wait!” Miya protested as she was pulled out of her chair, but she was resigned to being dragged off by her friend, who was a head taller than her. Miya did, however, manage to halt her friend for a few moments so she could turn back to me and say one last thing.

“Dark, can we talk again soon?” she asked.



“Sure thing,” I said. “I will always make time for you.”

I said it with utmost sincerity, and on hearing my reply, Miya flashed me a heartfelt smile. Witnessing this exchange, Quornae tried to suppress a mischievous grin but failed, which didn't escape Miya's notice, and she proceeded to slap her friend's shoulder and side with her free hand. The two girls said their goodbyes and continued to jostle with each other as they staggered off in the direction of their intended destination. I chuckled to myself as I watched them go.

“Those two must be really close,” I mused aloud.

Epilogue: The Impact of the Fall of the Beastfolk Federation

Once the somewhat slapstick scene of Miya being yanked away by Quornae was over, I took out a gacha card and teleported myself to the bottom of the Abyss. I walked into my executive office, where Mei, Aoyuki, and Ellie were all waiting for me. My three SUR warriors bowed in greeting, then lifted their heads once I had acknowledged their ironclad devotion to me.

“Ellie, good work on delivering that warning to the Beastfolk Federation and making them comply with the ‘absolute autonomy’ order,” I said. “It looks like they agree fully that all humans should be free and that the human slave trade must be banned in their nation. Nice to see it all went smoothly.”

“I’m humbled by your words, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie replied. “But if you truly desire it, I will not hesitate to destroy the rest of those beastfolk criminals for you.”

There was no denying that the chieftains of the Bear and Bovine tribes had gotten their hands dirty while helping to organize the war against us, though to a much lesser extent than Igor, the Avian Tribe’s chieftain. What Ellie was suggesting was that she’d go execute the other two beastfolk chieftains *personally*, and possibly scores of others to boot if I gave my consent. But I shook my head at this idea.

“We’ve already gotten rid of pretty much all of the beastfolk who were directly involved in the plot,” I said. “If we eliminate any more, there’ll be nobody left to run the nation. Then *we’d* have to do all the work of governing the Beastfolk Federation, and we don’t owe them even that much.”

Sure, we could easily decapitate the two remaining chieftains and take over the federation, but it’d involve way too much effort and attention to be worthwhile. I wasn’t out for blood anymore, and besides, I couldn’t care less about playing dictator over another nation.

“I’m more interested in the info you managed to glean from Gamm and Lebad’s memories,” I said. “Did Cavour *really* have a twin who spoke with those guys?”

“Yes, Your Blessedness,” Ellie replied. “From what I could retrieve while probing their memories, a human merchant made contact with those two chieftains, and what’s more, the merchant’s face, gestures, and voice were all a match for Mr. Cavour, that awful abomination you fought and defeated in the Dwarf Kingdom. This look-alike goes by the name of ‘Fayh,’ and he purportedly travels between the Dragonute Empire and the Beastfolk Federation as a merchant, but in reality, he appears to be an intelligence agent working for the dragonutes. I was honestly shocked when I first came across these memories, and I had to check and cross-reference Fayh’s facial features multiple times to make sure I wasn’t seeing things.”

Ellie grimaced slightly as she recalled what she had uncovered. After the Twinblood Pendants had completely massacred the beastfolk army, we took Gamm and Lebad down to the Abyss, where Ellie performed her excruciatingly painful memory probe on them. During the process of picking apart their brains, Ellie discovered that the two chieftains had been having multiple secret meetings with someone who looked exactly like Cavour, the shape-shifting monster that had instigated Naano to go on his murderous rampage. I knew we’d captured and killed Cavour, but according to Ellie, someone who was the spitting image of him had been talking to the beastfolk chieftains after this had all taken place. As for Gamm and Lebad’s fates, we had ended up executing them for murdering countless innocents and forcing thousands of others to serve as their toy soldiers. But I digress.

“Cavour referred to himself as a ‘pseudo-Master’ who had been created by a real Master,” I said. “Given that, there are bound to be others like him wandering around out there. Still, you say this Fayh character is a merchant based out of the Dragonute Empire? That’s rather intriguing, if you ask me.”

For all we knew, Fayh might have been a Master, but the odds on that being the case were pretty low, since it didn’t seem likely that the person who created Cavour would go into the trenches themselves to do spy work. I couldn’t totally rule out the possibility, though.

“Aoyuki, when we were fighting the beastfolk, did you notice anyone suspicious—a person or a monster—near the battlefield?” I asked.

“Nyeew,” Aoyuki said, shaking her head. I’d gotten Aoyuki to set up a ring of lookout monsters around the battlefield on the off chance that a Master—or someone resembling one—would decide to watch the action from the sidelines. But here she was telling me no such individual was spotted.

“I can’t think of anyone who would be able to escape the notice of your monsters, so we can only assume there weren’t any suspicious onlookers lurking around at all,” I mused aloud. “Or maybe the bad guy spotted your monsters first and backed off. In any case, I think it’s time you pulled your surveillance monsters out of the Beastfolk Federation where you pooled them all, and redeployed them to their usual locations around the world. We’ll also need you to tap your network to dig up some dirt on this Fayh guy to find out what he’s been getting up to in the Dragonute Empire.”

“Mrrow!” Aoyuki replied enthusiastically. Though if I were being honest, restoring our intelligence network to its previous state was a task that was easier said than done. At the very least, it was going to take quite a bit of time to relocate all of the monsters in question. But to my mind, diverting them all to the Beastfolk Federation in the first place was well worth the effort because it meant we ended up saving all of the human slaves and hostages.

“We also need our intelligence operatives up on the surface to keep an eye out for Fayh,” I continued.

“As you wish, Master Light,” Mei replied firmly. “I will relay your orders promptly.”

As luck would have it, the Mohawks were already heading to the Dragonute Empire for an unrelated purpose. I knew they’d be willing to hunt for clues regarding Fayh if we contacted them about it, though at the same time, I hoped they wouldn’t go overboard with their snooping. After all, the Dragonute Empire wasn’t renowned for being an overly secretive nation for nothing.

“Is there anything else to report?” I asked.

“At this point in time, there are no issues with the internal affairs of the Abyss to report,” Mei stated.

“We’ve finished resettling all the evacuees from the Beastfolk Federation,” Ellie said. “Thanks to your Gift and your unending generosity, Blessed Lord, the supplies for our new arrivals have been more than plentiful, and there have been no problems to report.”

“Mrreow,” Aoyuki said simply, which meant there was no new suspicious activity she needed to relay to me. Since there was nothing left to talk about, I figured it was time to end the meeting, and I was just about to dismiss my deputies when I was suddenly interrupted.

“Huh? A Telepathy call?” I said to no one in particular. “And it’s from Lilith? Hello?”

I’d given Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom several SR Telepathy cards so she could contact me easily, meaning this linkup wasn’t entirely unexpected. The news I heard through it certainly was, though.

“What? The Duchy is holding a summit really soon?” I said to the air around me. “But they aren’t supposed to be holding another one for years—wait, *what?* It’s because we toppled the Beastfolk Federation?”

I guess our victory over the beastfolk was such a shocking development, the rest of the world felt now was the time to act.

Extra Story 1: The Knights' Handshake

Light's sister, Yume, was sitting on a sofa in the lounge of her private chambers and reading a book with her guardian-slash-playmate, Nazuna. The book was about two knights fighting and vanquishing an evil dragon, and when the girls had finished it, they excitedly exchanged views about the story.

"The two knights were so awesome, Auntie Nazuna," Yume said.

"I woulda taken out that dragon *way* faster, y'know!" Nazuna pointed out.

"That's because you're the strongest fighter around," Yume gushed.

A fairy maid quietly prepared some chilled tea in the background, making sure not to disturb her charges, and the conversation between the two friends was calm and easygoing—that is, if you ignored how ridiculously overpowered Nazuna was.

"I really liked the long handshake between those two knights at the end," Yume added.



“Ooh, yeah, that part was so cool!” Nazuna exclaimed, and a moment later, an imaginary light bulb blinked above her head. “Hey, why don’t we give that handshake a try, little sister?”

“Miss Nazuna!” The nearby fairy maid stopped what she was doing and frantically interrupted the conversation as quickly as she could. Once she had drawn the attention of both Nazuna and Yume, the maid voiced her concerns.

“Miss Yume’s power level is still very low, which means if she attempted to reenact that scene from the book with you, Miss Nazuna, there is a very real possibility Miss Yume might get seriously injured,” the maid explained. “So I believe it would be in her best interests if you refrained from carrying out your idea.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right,” Nazuna said before turning to Yume. “My level’s so high, I might accidentally hurt ya, and I’d never wanna do that, little sister.”

“Thanks, Auntie Nazuna!” Yume said with an extra dollop of cheer. “You really *do* care for me!”

“Well, I am your auntie *and* your bodyguard, after all,” Nazuna said, sitting up and sticking out her prominent chest proudly. “I always gotta look out for ya!”

At that moment, another imaginary light bulb lit up above Nazuna’s platinum blonde hair. “If ya can’t do the handshake with me, how about I split into two and take yer place?” Nazuna suggested before she hopped off the sofa and trotted toward an empty space, unsheathing the broadsword from the scabbard on her back as she did so.

“Prometheus! Bend my reality!” Nazuna chanted, and a single doppelgänger appeared beside her. As a mythical-class weapon, the Prometheus was able to reshape the real world and produce phenomena that would otherwise defy the laws of physics and nature, but neither Yume nor the fairy maid showed any sign of being shocked by this unbelievable feat, since both of them knew about Nazuna’s powers.

“Good luck, Auntie Nazuna!” Yume cheered.

“Don’t worry! I got this!” replied one of the Nazunas, waving back at Yume.

“Don’t worry, little sister!” the other Nazuna said, also waving. “We’ll show ya how those knights did that awesome handshake!”

The two Nazunas faced each other and attempted to reenact the secret handshake the two knights in the book had performed after slaying the dragon.

“First, we high-five...” the Nazunas said in unison as they did so.

“Next, we bump elbows,” Nazuna One said.

“Next, we bump fists,” Nazuna Two said at the same time.

Neither of the Nazunas could remember what came next, and they were immediately out of sync with one another and remained that way. At one point, one Nazuna went for a fist bump while the other tried to touch elbows, and the resulting contact was hard enough to cause a shock wave that blew back Yume’s bangs.

“Hey! We’re s’posed to touch elbows after high-fivin’!” Nazuna One protested.

“Nuh-uh! We’re s’posed to be bumpin’ fists!” Nazuna Two argued.

“Auntie Nazuna, neither of you got it right,” Yume said patiently. “After the high five, you’re supposed to turn sideways and bump shoulders, then touch elbows, then bump your fists up and down. After that, you both pull your fists back, kiss them, fist-bump like you’re punching, then do fist pumps high in the air with that same hand.”

The two Nazunas looked at Yume with their heads cocked in utter confusion. Although Nazuna was undeniably the strongest fighter in the Abyss, she wasn’t exactly cut out for tasks that required her to use her head. The Nazunas tried to get the handshake right a few more times, but after failing every attempt, the pair gave up and merged again. The now-singular Nazuna sat back down on the sofa, drank some of her tea, and made excuses for her failure.

“Uh, well, I never was good at rememberin’ details and junk like that,” Nazuna admitted. “It ain’t my fault I couldn’t do it!”

“It’s okay. At least you tried,” Yume said charitably. “But I kinda wanted to see that awesome handshake in real life.”

Yume didn't want to hurt her friend's feelings, but she couldn't help being a little dejected that she wouldn't get to see a well-choreographed reenactment of the victory handshake. But at that moment, a third invisible light bulb flicked on above Nazuna's head.

"Don'tcha worry, little sister!" Nazuna said. "I know two guys who'll be able to act out that handshake way better'n I can. Let's go ask them!"

"You mean it, Auntie Nazuna?" asked Yume.

"Sure do!" Nazuna confirmed. "And the two guys I've got in mind will *definitely* be able to do it!"

Yume squealed with glee, and with book in hand, she and Nazuna rushed out of the private chambers.



I was hard at work in my executive office, tackling all the stuff that needed doing ahead of our big operation against the beastfolk, when Nazuna and Yume strolled in with Khaos in tow.

"Master, can you an' Khaos do the knights' handshake? Can ya? *Please?*" Nazuna asked.

"My brother and Khaos will *definitely* be able to do it!" Yume added. "You're so smart, Auntie Nazuna!"

Luckily for them, I'd just wrapped up one batch of papers and was about to take a breather anyway, but I was more than a little confused about what they wanted me to do exactly.

"The knights' handshake'?" I said quizzically. "And what's that supposed to be?"

"It's the victory handshake the two knights do at the end of this book," Yume explained, holding up the book for me to see. "I thought it was really neat when I read it!"

"We were thinkin' you could do the handshake for us so we could see what it looked like for real, master," Nazuna added.

As I flipped through the book my sister and Nazuna had brought with them, I

noted that it was a low-rarity item produced by my Unlimited Gacha that had been made available as a recreational item stocked at the dungeon shop. It looked like they wanted me to act out part of the book for them.

“Oh, now I get it,” I said, skimming the pages. “The knights bump fists and stuff after defeating a dragon. That’s why you’ve brought Khaos with you.”

Khaos looked away moodily. “The laws of nature dictate that I must accede to Nazuna’s requests, since I lost to her. I am obligated to perform whatever she demands of me.”

That crushing defeat Khaos had suffered in his mock battle with Nazuna had made him as meek as a church mouse in the presence of the SUR warrior. But there was more to his arrival in my office than just that. Khaos was actively going out of his way so as not to disappoint Yume, Nazuna’s charge, without a word of complaint.

Orka was right, I thought, smiling inwardly. *Khaos might well be the rudest guy around, but he really does have a heart of gold when it comes to his allies.* I wasn’t about to disappoint my baby sister or Nazuna either. For full disclosure, Yume had already introduced herself to Orka and Khaos before this scene in my office. Orka was rather fond of my sister due to her being a blood relation of his summoner, while Khaos adopted a relatively agreeable attitude with her too, since she was low-level and in need of his protection.

I reread the relevant pages in the book, but more closely this time. “Yeah, since Khaos is the same height as me, I think we can do this handshake just fine.” Performing the knights’ handshake—which involved high-fiving—would be somewhat more difficult with a taller partner. “Khaos, did you need to read this part too?”

“I already read it on the way over, so it’s already taken care of,” Khaos replied.

“You did?” I said. “Then, let’s try it one time and see how it goes.” I got out of my chair and strolled over to where Khaos was standing. For the sake of their safety, I asked Yume and Nazuna to move back a little to give us some space, and both girls watched on, their eyes shimmering with excitement, as Khaos and I stood facing each other.

“All right, here we go, Khaos,” I said.

“I’m ready for anything,” Khaos replied, making it sound like we were about to battle each other again. I chuckled at his reaction before initiating the first move. Khaos and I high-fived with our right hands, then bumped shoulders and elbows without losing our rhythm. Next, we balled our hands into fists and bumped them, top and bottom. Our arms bent back so that we could momentarily place our lips on our fists, before winding them back even farther and slamming our fists together so hard, it sent a shock wave around the room. Lastly, we fist pumped above our heads in a shared victory pose, just like the knights who had slain the dragon in the book. I was relieved that I’d managed to recreate the scene so flawlessly, though by contrast, Khaos looked nonchalant and unfazed, as if he didn’t think any of it was all that big a deal. As for the reaction of Yume and Nazuna, they were both clapping their hearts out for us.

“Golly! That was so cool, you two!” Yume yelled out.

“Way to go, master!” Nazuna cheered. “Who else but *you* would get it right in one try?”

Feeling slightly bashful about the adulation, I scratched my cheek, while Khaos was his usual moody self, looking off to one side. *Sure glad they liked that little display. But that kind of handshake will never see the outside of this room,* I thought.

In all honesty, you rarely saw two people teaming up to defeat an enemy in the real world. Any strong fighter could defeat a foe by themselves, and if a pair of weak combatants took on a stronger opponent, they’d likely both get crushed unless they *really* knew how to work together. If my allies and I were to ever find ourselves taking on an extremely powerful threat, I wouldn’t attack it with just two people. Instead, I’d throw a whole crowd of fighters at this adversary, and deploy a huge number of magic items to boot.

But I wasn’t going to rain on the girls’ parade by telling them the reality of the situation, I thought. *Only someone totally heartless would do that.* Yume and Nazuna were still excitedly chatting about how awesome it was to see the knights’ handshake in action, so I kept my thoughts to myself and watched the ecstatic pair. As for Khaos, he slipped into the background and went into stealth

mode to make sure he didn't disturb their conversation.

Despite assuring myself that I would never reenact the handshake in real life, Khaos and I *did* in fact pair up to defeat an opponent a few days later, and the situation ended up being so similar to the one described in the book, I unthinkingly performed the same handshake with Khaos following our victory.

Extra Story 2: Big Sis and Big Bro

“Hi there, sweetie-poo! Are you ready to be my new kiddo?” Annelia said.

“So ya gonna be my new bro or what?” Jack asked.

Khaos looked at the pair with a puzzled look on his face. The UR Menace of Mayhem had been walking down the hallway alone when he ran into a pretty woman who was short yet well-endowed, and a buff, shirtless man who was so tall, Khaos had to crane his head back to see all of him. Standing behind these two was a handsome man who closely resembled the woman, though he seemed stressed out for some reason.

“We apologize for the abruptness of our questions,” the stressed, handsome man said. “You must be Khaos, the new summon brought forth by our Creator, yes?”



“Yes, I am,” Khaos said guardedly. “Who are you people?”

The man gave his name as Alth and proceeded to try to allay Khaos’s misgivings by introducing himself and his sister, Annelia, as the UR Level 5000 Card Keepers. He also explained that the tall, shirtless man was the UR Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack. The three of them were Light’s trusted associates, and they posed absolutely no threat to Khaos, Alth affirmed. However, Annelia and Jack shared a bad habit that neither was minded to fix, and this was treating everybody they liked as younger siblings, whether the person involved agreed with it or not. Annelia and Jack had heard there were a pair of new summons in the dungeon, so they had gone looking for Khaos and Orka in order to get better acquainted with them in their own peculiar way, Alth explained. It was simply a coincidence that both Annelia and Jack had found Khaos at the same time, remarked Alth, who seemed to have been following his sister around out of fear that she might go overboard yet again.

“All right, now I understand what’s going on, thanks to your explanation,” Khaos said once Alth had finished. “It appears you have a lot to deal with.”

Alth chuckled dryly at this rare show of sympathy from Khaos. “I am used to it,” Alth said, a distant look in his eyes.

Khaos’s gaze shifted to Annelia and Jack once more. “It seems you wish to treat me as someone who depends on you. If that is what you desire, there is only one way to make that happen, and that is showing me what you’re made of. The strong rule over the weak, because the laws of nature are absolute. If you wish for me to submit to you, the two of you must demonstrate these requisite abilities. A very basic concept, yes?”

Annelia giggled. “Okay, grumpykins. That’s easy enough for me to do. I’ll show you how I take care of my kiddos!”

“Sounds short, simple, and sweet, my bro,” Jack evaluated. “Ya got a good head on ya, I’ll tell ya that much.”

Annelia and Jack had prideful smiles splashed across their faces, and both of them exuded the confident air of two high-class warriors. Khaos didn’t flinch as the weight of their auras bore down on him, and he flashed an imperious smirk at them.

“I get the feeling you both think you’ve already won,” Khaos remarked. “You seem to be getting ahead of yourselves. For your sake, I hope your arrogance isn’t just for show.”

“You’ll learn to love being my kiddo once I’m through with you, mister!” Annelia declared.

“I’m all about bringing my A game, bro,” Jack assured him. “But now ain’t a good time to pop off, so let’s save it for tonight. Deal?”

“I don’t mind if we do this tonight or in the next few days. I’m not going anywhere,” Khaos replied without even a hint of hesitation. “Just know that I am ready to take whatever you can dish out.”

The thought of battling both Annelia and Jack later that very evening caused Khaos’s mouth to curl upward into a grin. Full of bravado, Annelia and Jack smiled back at their short rival. The only person in the group who had realized the two sides weren’t *quite* on the same page was Alth, who pressed a hand to his forehead and looked upon the three with a distant gaze.



“All right, my bros. Have all of ya got yer glasses up?” Jack asked.

“Then, let’s hear it for our new kiddos, Khaos and Orka!” Annelia boomed.

A chorus of “Cheers!” rang out, accompanied by the clinking of glasses, for Jack and Annelia had decided to throw a welcoming party for Khaos and Orka in the Abyss’s cafeteria. In addition to the guests of honor, a bunch of fairy maids had been invited, as had the Mohawks—who happened to be in the Abyss on leave, taking a break from their activities up on the surface—and naturally, Alth was also in attendance. Khaos looked around in utter disbelief at the total lack of the battle for supremacy he had been expecting. Orka, on the other hand, was already enjoying the party to the fullest.

“The food you have prepared is quite delectable, Miss Annelia,” Orka said in his usual genial tone.

“Why, thank you, honey!” Annelia replied. “I poured my heart into whipping up this feast, so you’re really sweet for complimenting me.”

“And I would also like to give my thanks to Mr. Jack, for organizing this lavish party,” Orka continued.

“Don’t sweat it, bro,” Jack said. “Gotta go all out now I got two more bros to take care of. And what better way to do that than by throwing a wicked bash? Everything’s going on my tab, so eat and drink up like it’s your last meal, brahs. If we need more food or booze, we can hit up the dungeon store.”

“Man, we owe you another one, Big Jack!” one of the Mohawks piped up.

“You *must* give me the recipes for these dishes, Miss Annelia!” a fairy maid gushed.

“To me too,” said another fairy maid.

“Yup, sure thing, sweethearts,” Annelia replied. “I’ll come find you later!”

The others at the party took turns chatting to Orka, their voices adding to the growing noise that was turning the cafeteria into a veritable party hall. People who had just come off shift or just happened to be passing by also joined the festivities making it an even bigger shindig. But one person in the group wasn’t in the partying mood at all.

“What’s the meaning of all this?” Khaos blurted out. “Why are you people throwing me a welcoming party? I thought I told you to show me what you’re made of!”

“Huh? But I *am* showing ya what I got,” Jack replied. “If ya can’t throw an epic blowout like this, ya don’t got the game to be top bro.”

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” Annelia asked Khaos. “You did say you’d take whatever I could dish out, didn’t you? So I worked *extra* hard to make all of these yummy dishes for you. Or are you thinking the food tastes icky?”

Jack and Annelia thought about what might be troubling Khaos for a moment before coming to their own conclusions.

“Okay, I getcha, bro,” Jack said. “You think just throwin’ this party ain’t enough for me to call myself your main bro. Well, in that case, once we’re done here, we’re hittin’ the baths! *Real* bros get to know each other by hangin’ together in the buff!”

“That’s a solid idea, Big Jack!” a Mohawk piped up. “Let us get in on that too!”

“The more the merrier, my bros,” Jack said. “Any other bros who wanna come soak with us, the door’s always open!” This statement led to a rabble of men promising to join Jack, Khaos, and the Mohawks in the bathing area later on.

“And after you’re done with your bath, I’ll be sure to come by to tuck you in and sing you a lullaby until you go beddy-bye,” Annelia said to Khaos. “I take pride in my singing voice, you know, sweetie.”

“Oh my gosh! He gets to be sung to sleep by Miss Annelia!” a fairy maid gasped. “Why can’t we have that?”

Annelia giggled. “Don’t worry, honey. I’ll come by every room and sing everyone to sleep. I have to make sure all my kiddos get a good rest and wake up all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, after all!”

Annelia seemed truly thrilled about the prospect of singing bedtime lullabies for everyone in the cafeteria later that evening. Jack was also elated at the idea of holding an afterparty of sorts over in the bathing area. But Khaos could only furrow his brow in frustration at the way things had turned out, believing that Jack and Annelia were deliberately trying to skirt the all-out battle that was needed to establish a hierarchy. It was at this point that Khaos got up from his chair, manifested the Chaos Scythe, and pointed it at his two “adversaries.”

“When I said ‘show me what you’re made of,’ what I meant was you must defeat me in battle and defend your positions as my authority figures,” Khaos said. “Do you really think you can trick me with this foolishness? If so, you are clearly mocking me.”

Incandescent hostility radiated from Khaos toward Jack and Annelia, which had a chilling effect on the celebratory atmosphere, but Jack’s beefy grin remained on his face as he took a good swig of his beer.

“Mellow out, broseph,” Jack said, smirking. “I ain’t tryin’ to fool ya or nothin’. This is how I prove my worth: by throwin’ you and Orka a wild, brotastic rager.” He turned to look Khaos in the eye. “Not sayin’ I ain’t down for some sparring or whaddever, but I ain’t about slappin’ peeps around and forcing ’em to be my bro, ya feel me? That’d just make me some sorry-ass bully on a power trip. ’Sides, being a *real* bro ain’t about how tough you are. It’s all ’bout being there

for your broskis, no matter how strong or weak they are. I always strive to be a bro among bros, and strong-armin' you into being my bro is most definitely not part of it."

"Big Jack..." the Mohawks breathed, moved by his speech on bro philosophy.

"Mr. Jack..." The fairy maids were similarly at a loss for words. Jack's words even partially spoke to Khaos, since he lived by the so-called "laws of nature," where it was the duty of the strong to protect the weak. But the Menace of Mayhem was too proud to walk back his bluster, so he simply stood where he was with his scythe still pointed at the party organizers.

"I'm with Jacky-poo on this one," Annelia said, a lamenting look on her face. "I would absolutely *love* to spar with you too, but..." Annelia swallowed back her emotions, then continued. "I don't want our first days as a family to be filled with violence just because you have your grouchy pants on. But don't worry, honey, I'll smother you with *extra* love until you've grown out of this rebellious phase, however long that takes."

Khaos felt a jolt of electricity surge through him on hearing Annelia's words, and sweat started dripping from the side of his head. Despite using the kind of language usually reserved for addressing a young child, it seemed as though Annelia sincerely cared about Khaos's well-being, to the point where she was almost starting to look like an actual big sister in his eyes. This briefest of fancies had triggered a certain type of dread in Khaos that he had never experienced before, which led to more droplets of sweat forming on his head. Khaos was forced to look away, and when his gaze met Alth's, he silently asked the dashing young man for answers. Alth responded by bowing his head in contrition.

"I apologize for how you must be feeling," he began. "But Mr. Jack and my dear sister mean what they say, unequivocally. My dear sister, in particular, cares deeply about you, as if you were her real little brother. And once she starts to care about you, it is impossible to escape her love, so it would be easier for you and your psyche if you simply relent and accept her *thorough* attentiveness." Alth said all of this with another thousand-yard stare, which proved that he was a very credible witness. Khaos reflexively gulped on hearing this warning.

“Now I understand that there are certain people who can’t be beaten by having a superior power level or outdoing them in terms of combat abilities,” Khaos finally admitted. “I can only imagine the stress you must go through daily.”

“I thank you for noticing,” Alth said. Khaos lowered his scythe as he continued to regard Alth with an empathetic gaze. This oddly maudlin moment the two were having carried on for a few more seconds before Orka decided to intervene.

“Well then. Now that we’ve all made peace, I’d like our welcome party to resume,” he said. “In fact, I’d like to introduce myself properly by playing my favorite medley.”

Orka produced his fiddle and started playing a merry piece, the music inspiring the Mohawks and the fairy maids to sing along and restore the party vibes. Khaos sat down next to Alth and gave him a couple of sympathetic pats on the shoulder.

“You shouldn’t bottle up all that agony,” Khaos said. “If you wish to complain, I’m willing to listen.”

“Thank you, Mr. Khaos,” Alth replied. “But I promise you, my dear sister really does mean well, despite her bad habits. Though I do wish she would refrain from infantilizing everyone she meets, for she does it to our Creator as well as higher-level allies such as yourself, and when she does that, I find my stomach starting to...”

Although Alth hadn’t initially intended to talk about it, all of his frustrations with his sister, Annelia, came pouring out, and by the end of the highly successful party, Alth and Khaos had formed a strangely close bond.

Extra Story 3: Iceheat Complains

Iceheat, the Level 7777 grappler maid, was the deputy head housekeeper of the Abyss, which meant whenever the head housekeeper, Mei, left the dungeon, it would fall to Iceheat to oversee all internal affairs in her absence. This meant if Light needed to head to another part of the Abyss, Iceheat would be right there, leading a security detail. But of late, Iceheat had been feeling anxious about certain things, and it had gotten to the point where she was feeling the need to ask her friend, Mera, for advice.

That evening, the two women sat side by side on a bench in the cafeteria, and even from a distance, the two-meter-tall, Level 7777 Chimera and the maid with the bicolored hair seemed an odd pairing. Iceheat sipped her favorite brand of tea, while Mera awkwardly lifted up her teacup with her extra-long sleeve covering her hand. On a previous occasion where the two of them had been discussing Mera's discontent with how a mission had gone, the two women had shared Mera's drink of choice, whiskey. This time around, it was Mera's turn to drink Iceheat's preferred beverage, and that was exactly what she did, before chuckling and breaking the silence that had spread over them.

"So what was it you wanted to talk about, hun?"

"Well, I for one have been wrestling with some insecurities lately..." Iceheat began.

Mera guffawed. "You of all people are feeling insecure? The honor student and ultimate tight-ass who always has an answer for everything is *doubting* herself?"

"Well, there are times when even I'm insecure, you know," Iceheat protested, puffing out her cheeks and pouting. "And why must you call me things like 'honor student' and 'tight-ass'?"

Mera cackled at Iceheat's reaction. "Sorry. Forget I said that." The two were able to banter like this only because of how well they knew each other.

“So anyway, tell me: what exactly is bothering you?” Mera asked. “Did you find out that the fairy maids are secretly terrified of you? Or is it because people are jealous that you get to stay close to Master all the time as his bodyguard? Or did someone tell you that you have zero personality, despite having red-and-blue hair?”

“Hey, now wait a minute!” Iceheat yelled. “Are people really saying things like that about me behind my back?!”

Mera chuckled nervously. “So I was off the mark *and* you were totally out of the loop, then? Oopsy. Well, you didn’t hear anything from me!”

“I most certainly *did* hear that from you!” Iceheat retorted. “So who is it? Who’s been talking that way about me? Was it those fairy maids?”

“Sorry, no comment.” Mera looked away pointedly and sipped some more of her tea.

“Fine. We’ll discuss that matter later,” Iceheat said before clearing her throat and moving on to the main reason for their chat. “So the thing that has been bothering me recently is that I myself feel that Master Light depends on you and Suzu more than he relies on me.”

Mera hissed with laughter. “Okay, slow down there, babe. What would give you the idea that Master doesn’t rely on you when he so clearly does?”

“The only mission on the surface that Master Light has selected me for was back when we fought the elves,” Iceheat said. “After that, I wasn’t selected for the missions to the Dark Elf Islands, the Dwarf Kingdom, or even for this war with the beastfolk. I’ve been consistently kept on the sidelines in the dungeon during all of these operations.”

While none of the Level 7777s had been selected to go on the Dark Elf Islands quest, Mera, Suzu, and Jack had accompanied Light to explore the ancient ruins underneath the Dwarf Kingdom. For the most recent operation in the Beastfolk Federation, Suzu had been chosen to help free the human prisoners and slaves, since her superior ranger skills made her the perfect choice to locate the captives in order to teleport them out of danger. Mera, of course, had been the one who had rescued the twin girls that had been stuffed inside barrels as insurance, before taking their places in order to spring a trap on the beastmen.

But unlike her peers, Iceheat had been left behind in the Abyss for the duration of the two most recent missions, and here in the cafeteria, she planted both elbows on the table and rested her head on her intertwined fingers.

“It must be because I myself accidentally roasted those elf twins during our fight in the Great Tower,” Iceheat wondered aloud. “We were supposed to battle them normally to gauge our strength, but I went a little overboard, and now Master Light must think I can never be a useful asset up on the surface world.”

“Honey, no,” Mera assured her. “You sure you’re not just overthinking things? If Master thinks you’re too useless for his missions, he’d never choose Miss Nazuna to go on one ever again.”

When Light’s crew fought the Elven Queendom’s elite force, the White Knights, Iceheat and Mera had been assigned to battle the elf twins, Nhia and Khia, on the first floor. Back then, Iceheat had elected to unleash the Ifrit, her superthermal summon attack, which would have basically cremated her elven adversaries if it hadn’t been for Ellie’s immortality spell keeping them alive. On the other hand, Nazuna had damaged the wall of the Great Tower repeatedly during her fight with the White Knight’s commander, Hardy the Silent, causing Ellie to give the vampire warrior a dressing down each time. If going overboard was a contest, Nazuna and her smashed tower walls would’ve won hands down, yet the Vampire Knight was chosen to go on the quest to the Dwarf Kingdom ruins.

“You *always* overthink things, just like back at the tower,” Mera said, sniggering. “If Master really thought you were a useless waste of space, he wouldn’t put you in charge of running the Abyss for him while Mei’s away. It’s only because he trusts you just as much as Miss Mei that he gives you such a huge responsibility. You just happened not to be called up for those other missions because Master needed people with the abilities he was looking for at the time. Even Jack was passed over for the war with the beastfolk, just like you were.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Iceheat admitted reluctantly.

“You *know* I’m right!” Mera pressed. “And if it’s all still eating at you, you can

go ask Master yourself.”

“I can’t do *that*!” Iceheat exclaimed. “Master Light is far too busy for me to go wasting his time by making him listen to me complain! I for one think that’s *very* disrespectful to him!”

Mera chuckled. “You really think so? I think it’d be worse if you kept all your worries to yourself, and Master eventually found out, making him feel awful for hurting you. Master’s a kind, gentle soul, and I think he’d be glad if you came forward and opened up to him.”

“Would it truly work out that way?” Iceheat mused.

“Then, how’s this for an idea? If you’re not prepared to ‘waste Master’s time,’ then why don’t you get Miss Mei to ask him for you? She’s your direct supervisor, after all, so Master’s bound to give her his full attention.”

Iceheat thought about this for a moment. “I suppose telling Miss Mei to pass along my concerns *would* be preferable to asking Master Light directly,” Iceheat admitted before turning to her friend. “Thank you, Mera. I’ll talk to Miss Mei the first opportunity I get. I myself am glad I spoke to you about it first.”

“Don’t sweat it, kid!” Mera said, chortling. “I owed you one anyway for listening to me whine and mope that other time.”

Mera held her empty teacup out toward Iceheat, who showed her sincere gratitude by refilling it with tea. Iceheat also gave her friend some tea cake to go with the hot drink, and the two women spent the rest of the night conversing about whatever idle thoughts came into their heads.

Extra Story 4: Yume and the Fairy Maids

In the Abyss, fairy maids lived four to a suite, and the four fairy maids residing in this one particular suite happened to all have the day off, so they decided to spend the day chatting. Or at least, they *would* have done that if they weren't already committed to punishing one of their own number for a totally unforgivable crime.

"The defendant stands accused of witnessing Master Light meowing with the most adorable hint of embarrassment while wearing cat ears," declared the fairy maid who was so cute, it overshadowed any other personality traits she might have had. "She needs to be penalized *severely* for this offense. All in favor?"

"Aye," said the fairy maid in bookish glasses.

"I'm, like, definitely in favor?" said the fairy maid who looked like a young, fashionable kogal and had a habit of turning nearly everything into a question.

"O-Objection! Objection!" the fairy maid who looked like a cute geek protested as she struggled to break free of the ropes binding her to her chair.

This impromptu kangaroo court had been called into session because one of Geeky's recent duties had been waiting on Yume while she had a magic lesson with Ellie. During the lesson, Light had dropped by to watch Yume do some magic, and she'd successfully conjured up a moving image of a butterfly using her Mirage Illusion spell. But that wasn't all. Yume had further demonstrated her newfound magic skills by causing virtual cat ears to sprout from her own head, as well as from her brother's. She had also convinced Light to join her in making cat noises, resulting in a display of cuteness that bowled over Ellie, Light's bodyguard Iceheat, and all the fairy maids in attendance.

The problem with this, however, was only a handful of people had gotten to see this exceptionally cute side of Light, which had made legions of loyalists extremely jealous that they hadn't been there to witness this rare sight for themselves. That jealousy—which had turned to seething fury in this instance—

was presently being directed at Geeky, one of the few lucky onlookers. Geeky's three roomies surrounded the restrained fairy maid, all of them seeking to pass judgment on her for this perceived act of betrayal. Of course, Geeky believed she was being unjustly pilloried for events that were beyond her control.

"Please c-calm down, you guys!" Geeky cried out. "W-W-We've been through too much together for us to be f-fighting like this!"

"Yes, we *have* been through thick and thin, haven't we?" Supercute agreed with an edge to her voice. "Which is all the more reason why you shouldn't have gazed upon Master Light in cat ears without us being there!"

"We should ask Miss Ellie to mind probe her and transplant those memories into our heads too," Glasses suggested.

"And we won't even care if the process turns her brain to soup, yeah?" Kogal grumbled harshly.

While Ellie's mind probe spell was very practical for retrieving memories from a person, it also served as a harrowingly painful method of torture. But despite this, the fairy maids were perfectly prepared to put their hapless colleague through such agonizing treatment. Geeky could see in the eyes of her supposed sisters that they were deadly serious about ripping those memories out of her head, even if that meant leaving her as a husk of a person. And who could blame them? If Geeky were in their shoes, she would use any means necessary to rob the precious memories of seeing Light in magical cat ears from the offending witness, even if that person was a longtime work colleague of hers. So instead of feeling resentful about the situation she was in, the cogs whirled in Geeky's head in search of a compromise.

"I-I-I know how you feel! But we need to think about this r-r-rationally!" Geeky implored. "In fact, I-I have an even *better* idea of what should be done!"

"Oh? And what might that be?" asked Supercute, who still looked remarkably adorable—if in a stereotypical way—aside from the fact that her eyes were currently more like dead fish eyes, with irises completely devoid of luster. Supercute's cold, glassy stare indicated that if she found Geeky's idea insipid, she would immediately go put in a request for the mind-breaking memory probe. The other two fairy maids fixed Geeky with the same emotionless stare,

sending her self-preservation instincts into overdrive.

“M-M-Master Light is away on a quest up on the surface, and we don’t know when h-he’ll be back,” Geeky pointed out. “A-And when he does come back, I don’t think he’ll be willing to wear cat ears again, a-and I doubt getting Miss Mei to ask him about it for us is going to work either, since she’ll just end up p-punishing us again!”

“Yeah, I could see Miss Mei, like, definitely doing that?” Kogal sighed. The fairy maids could always ask Light directly, of course, but there was very little guarantee that Light would seriously consider embarrassing himself like that again.

Geeky put on the bravest face she could manage under the circumstances. “S-So we should go ask Miss Yume to recreate the scene of Master Light in cat ears using her magnificent Mirage Illusion skills. If she can do that, the dungeon will be a brighter place for all of us!”

The three other fairy maids stiffened at Geeky’s suggestion, as none of them would ever have hit on such a brilliant idea even if it had been *their* lives on the line.

“Yes...” Supercute said, mulling it over. “Yes, we *could* ask Miss Yume instead of Master Light.”

“We have all served Miss Yume at least once, so there is a good chance she will remember who we are,” Glasses pointed out. “If she *does* remember us, she might be more willing to entertain our request.”

All the fairy maids in the Abyss were assigned to serve Yume on rotation, which meant that each of the fairy maids in the room had spent at least one full day with Light’s sister. This level of familiarity would remove much of the tension they would otherwise feel when approaching Yume with such an unusual request.

“Then, like, what are we waiting for?” Kogal said. “Our little date with Miss Yume ain’t gonna make itself, yeah?” Supercute and Glasses joined Kogal in whooping and cheering at this, leaving Geeky to struggle with the ropes binding her to the chair by herself.

“G-Guys, if we’re done talking now, w-would you mind cutting me loose?” Geeky asked, but unfortunately for her, her protestations fell on deaf ears and it was a long time before she was eventually freed.



“Of course I can show you my brother in kitty ears using my illusion magic,” Yume said cheerily.

The four fairy maids were able to score an appointment to see Yume that same day by contacting the fairy maid who was presently assigned to Light’s sister. Since Yume was presently in the lounge part of her private chambers, having cake with her bodyguard, Nazuna, the young girl readily agreed to the meeting. The four fairy maids were ecstatic when they heard Yume’s upbeat answer, and the other fairy maids who were in the chamber on assignment were astonished too.

“Oh, thank you, Miss Yume!” Supercute cried. “You really *are* naturally talented, just like Miss Ellie said!”

“You slay, Yume! You slay!” Kogal praised her.

Yume giggled sheepishly. “Aw, come on. You’re making me blush.”

“I wanna see Master in cat ears too!” Nazuna piped up. “Come on, little sister. Use that magic of yours to show us what he looked like.”

“Okay, Auntie Nazuna. Anything for you!” said Yume.

Thanks to Nazuna’s insistence, the fairy maids were guaranteed the show of their lives without needing to utter another word. Yume put down her fork and focused her mind on her spell.

“Magic power, hear my voice! Manifest these thoughts of choice! Mirage Illusion!” And as soon as Yume had finished her chant, a life-size image of Light in cat ears appeared in front of the watching crowd, who oohed and ahed at the sight.

“Whoa! So that’s what Master looks like in cat ears?” Nazuna gasped. “He looks super-duper cute!”

“He really does, doesn’t he?” Yume remarked. “My brother’s too shy to admit

it, but he looks just as cute as Aoyuki in cat ears!”

Meanwhile, none of the fairy maids in the room—whether on duty or not—breathed a word, as they were too busy committing the image of this cat-eared Light to memory. However, this was just the start.

“I can put bunny ears on my brother too!” Yume said excitedly. “Look!”

Yume manipulated the image to replace Light’s cat ears with rabbit ears, and this simple change was enough to cause the capillaries in the eyes of all the fairy maids to redden.

“I think he’d look really cute in dog ears too,” Yume stated, before transforming the image of Light accordingly.

“Ooh! Master looks *super* cute in whatever ears you put on him!” Nazuna said with genuine admiration.

“He sure does!” Yume gushed. “It doesn’t matter what kind of animal ears I put on him, he still looks so adorbs! You have such a good eye for these things, Auntie Nazuna!”

While Yume and Nazuna shared their thoughts on the image of Light like the two innocent maidens they were, all the fairy maids were either tearing up or suffering nosebleeds as a range of emotions washed over them.

“So precious.”

“So moe.”

“I’m in tears.”

“I’m crying here.”

“He’s totally best boy material.”

The four fairy maids who had come to see Yume turned to each other to discuss the new esteem they had for Light’s sister.

“From now on, I-I’m gonna revere Miss Yume almost as much as M-Master Light,” Geeky stammered.

“Count me in on that, yeah?” Kogal added.

“My devotion for Miss Yume is only surpassed by my devotion to Master

Light,” Supercute declared.

“I concur,” Glasses said. “We must place Miss Yume on a pedestal right next to our lord, Master Light. I do not know what Miss Mei will think about it, nor do I care.”

The fairy maids on duty joined the four visitors in swearing additional allegiance to Yume, but this show of adulation went completely unnoticed by Yume and Nazuna, since they were both too busy discussing which virtual animal ears and accessories would look perfect on the conjured image of Light.

Extra Story 5: Suzu, Lock, and Yume

“You want to know how to bond with Lord Light’s sister?” Lock said, repeating the question Suzu had just asked him. The Level 7777 Double Gunner was sitting on the edge of the bed in her private chambers, clutching the musket, and she gave a few anxious nods to confirm. Suzu was the kind of cute, alluring girl who any man up on the surface would fall for immediately if they witnessed this simple act of her nodding her head, but since Lock was an intelligent weapon, he was completely immune to his partner’s charms. At the time when this conversation took place, it was only a few weeks after Yume had first arrived in the Abyss.

“Well, I can understand wanting to get closer to Miss Yume, since she *is* Lord Light’s little sister, after all,” Lock said, clicking with each word as he wriggled about in Suzu’s grip. “I’ve heard Miss Yume often has tea parties with Miss Nazuna. Maybe you could bake some homemade cakes and have tea with Miss Yume too?”

Suzu shook her head furiously at this suggestion, prompting Lock to admonish her.

“You’re saying you’d be too nervous to sit down and chat with Miss Yume over tea?” Lock said. “Partner, how can you be this much of a shrinking violet? I mean, your manhood seriously can’t have shrunk *that* much.”

This statement brought hot tears to Suzu’s eyes, and she got up from the bed and started repeatedly bashing the barrel of the musket against the wall.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry! I’m sorry, partner!” Lock said hurriedly. “I realize I shouldn’t have said that. Just quit banging me against the wall!”

Lock’s apology calmed Suzu down enough for her to go back to perching on the edge of the bed again, much to the rifle’s relief.

“Seriously, don’t do that to me,” Lock moaned. “In case you forgot, I’m a *precision* weapon. One of these days, you’ll go too far and end up breaking me,

and *then* where will you be?”

Lock started brainstorming another approach Suzu could take, and one that would suit her ultra-shy personality this time. “So you want to bond with Lord Light’s sister without going the extra mile of drinking tea with her, huh? In that case, you could always just play it safe and get her a present.”

Suzu flashed Lock an inquiring look, and the musket correctly guessed what was on her mind.

“You wanna know what you should give her?” Lock said. “How about giving her something any *normal* person would be glad to receive?”

Suzu took the hint and tried to come up with a good present along those lines, but unfortunately, she could only think of gifts *she* would want but others probably wouldn’t.

“Okay, partner,” Lock said, sounding exasperated. “I know *you’d* be thrilled if someone gave you one of Lord Light’s personal items, but those are absolutely out of the question for Miss Yume, understood?”

Suzu flinched, because Lock had accurately identified the kind of gift ideas that were kicking around her head, but in truth, even before her rifle spoke up, she knew Yume wouldn’t want one of her own brother’s items. Even an extreme social misfit like Suzu had the good sense to consign that idea to the bin. Trouble was, that left her with no clue on what else might work as a gift.

Suzu put Lock down on the bed, crossed her arms, and strained every last brain cell to come up with a good gift idea. After a number of seconds had passed, Lock gave in and decided to bail her out again.

“You don’t have to think *that* hard about it,” Lock said. “It really isn’t that complicated. You shouldn’t be giving Miss Yume something that’s too expensive anyway. I know there’s definitely something you can give to her that won’t cost that much but will show that you’ve poured your heart into it.”

Suzu looked at Lock with her head tilted quizzically to one side in a way that would have won over the hearts of most men up on the surface world if they had been here to witness the gesture. But Lock ignored how cute Suzu looked and continued with a knowing, pretentious air.

“What I’m *saying* is you should put your hobby to good use. Get the picture?” Lock said.

It took Suzu another second or two before she *finally* got the hint, her face lighting up. Suzu bowed her head in thanks to Lock, then took out the finest fabrics and materials from a drawer and promptly got down to work.



“Oh, wow! These are so *cute*!” Yume exclaimed. “Can I really have them?”

Suzu nodded twice in response. It was a few days later, and Suzu had secured a meeting with Yume through the fairy maids who served her. Nazuna wasn’t accompanying Yume as her personal bodyguard at this time, as she had gone off on a quest with Light, and because she was absent, the dungeon lord’s sister had a small army of fairy maids attending to her and providing her with protection, though admittedly, even this level of security fell far short of what Nazuna brought to the table.

Ironically, Suzu ended up meeting Yume while she was having afternoon tea. The gunner gave Yume a box containing the gifts, and when the young girl opened it, her eyes instantly landed on a set of superdeformed dolls of Light, Yume, and Suzu. Suzu had harnessed all of her doll-making skills into stitching these creations, and her efforts were rewarded by a full-face smile from Yume.

“Thank you so much for making these adorable little dolls for me, Auntie Suzu!”

Suzu blushed at Yume’s words of thanks, but she was too incredibly shy to respond to them with her own voice, and this reticence caused all the fairy maids nearby to narrow their eyes, displeased by this display. Knowing that Suzu was in danger of becoming labeled as disrespectful to Light’s beloved sister, Lock jumped in and covered for the gunner.

“Please excuse my partner, Miss Yume,” he said. “She doesn’t speak much, but I can assure you she is happy you love the dolls she has made for you. Allow me to extend her regards on her behalf.”

Yume was so astonished that the long tubelike stick Suzu was carrying had suddenly started wriggling about in her hands and talking, she unwittingly

dropped the dolls she was holding.

“Oopsy. Sorry for scaring you like that,” the rifle said. “I’m Lock, Suzu’s partner. I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Auntie Suzu!” Yume exclaimed, her eyes all aglitter with wonder. “You have a *talking* stick?” One of Yume’s attendants stepped forward to fill her in on the details—namely, that Lock was an intelligent weapon with a mind of its own. This explanation made Yume’s eyes widen even further in excitement.

“Oh my gosh! I want an intelligence weapon too!” Yume was so enraptured with Lock, she failed to notice her verbal slip on “intelligent weapon,” and promptly launched into a rapid-fire question and answer session with the musket, such was her overwhelming curiosity for this magical marvel. Meanwhile, Suzu was deeply jealous that Yume was more interested in her weapon than in her, and she gritted her teeth in silence, which put Lock in something of a dilemma. He definitely couldn’t ignore Light’s sister, but he also couldn’t just leave Suzu alone to seethe either.

Why do I always end up taking the heat? Lock asked himself. In the end, Yume spent the entire meeting with Suzu fixated on her magical musket, and even though Lock was an inorganic weapon with no bodily organs, he still somehow managed to develop heartburn.

Afterword

Hello, Meikyou Shisui here. I'd like to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading and/or purchasing the sixth volume of *Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World!*

I'm very glad I was able to have another book published in 2023 too. Thank you all so much for reading this series! I worked hard on this volume, especially when it came to the changes I made from the web novel version. I think the biggest change was giving the Wicked Witch of the Tower two new characters to serve as her deputies.

In the web novel, while Ellie does control an army of dragons, she basically acts alone, and although I originally went ahead and wrote the battle scenes with that in mind, I thought it was somewhat strange that the leader of an organization as large as the Great Tower would show up for battle without bringing a single assistant with her. That little quibble never dislodged itself from my brain, so when it came time to write the sixth volume of the print version, I added some new characters who could serve as Ellie's lieutenants as well as being new allies for Light. I won't say anything about who these new characters are, just in case some of you have decided to read this afterword first, but nothing would please me more than if you all go check them out for yourselves by reading this volume.

And now, on to the acknowledgments!

First, I wish to once again thank tef, not just for providing more wonderful illustrations for this book, but also for designing the two new characters, plus Quornae! The two new characters are absolutely amazing to look at, but I really like how Quornae turned out. When I first laid eyes on her, I thought, "That's really Quornae!" It was a lot of fun imagining the interactions between Quornae and Miya with the illustrations in mind. Once again, thank you, tef, for your

wonderful art and design work.

Next to thank is my supervising editor, plus HJ Novels' editorial team! I also apologize for just barely making the deadline. I'm pretty sure I'll continue to inconvenience you in more ways than one in the future, but I look forward to our continued collaboration!

I also wish to thank Takafumi Oomae for authoring the manga version of *Unlimited Gacha*, new chapters of which come out on the Magazine Pocket app every Tuesday! I can't wait to read each new update to the manga, and I'm excited to see how this sixth volume of the light novel will be depicted in Magazine Pocket!

I must also give some much-deserved credit to the Magazine Pocket editorial team for their work in bringing such a wonderful manga to publication every week. It is thanks to the supervising editors and the editorial staff that a whole lot of fans are reading the manga version of my light novel. Your efforts are very much appreciated!

Last of all, I would like to acknowledge all of you reading this for supporting *Unlimited Gacha*! Thanks to everyone's support, both the light novel series and the manga are still going strong. I cannot thank you all enough. For what it's worth, I wish to return the favor by putting every effort into writing this series, so I look forward to your support right through to the very end!

PS: Just like in the previous volumes, I have written a bonus story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. To access the bonus story, go to my activity updates on the *Shosetsuka ni Naro* website, click on the entry that has a date of or around January 18 or 19, 2023, and you will be directed to the web page containing the bonus story, where you will need to enter a password. (You can also do a web search for “明鏡シスイ 活動報告 (Meikyou Shisui Activity Update)” and that should take you straight to the right web page. Once there, search for the entry that corresponds to the dates above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **miya**. [Please note: As of this English-

language publication, this password has expired.]

Bonus Short Story

Greeting the New Kiddos

“I’ve just heard that we have two new kiddos joining us!” Annelia squealed with delight. “I need to go introduce myself right away!”

“Dear sister, please show some patience,” Alth said wearily, his hand pressed to his forehead. The brother-sister team were chatting away in the Card Repository during one of their regularly scheduled break times. “I *understand* it is in your nature to want to meet any new summons the moment they arrive, but...” Alth pondered on this for a second. “No, in my honest opinion, you really need to work on your bad habits.”

Key among the “bad habits” he was referring to was how Annelia treated everyone she liked as her “kiddo” regardless of age or rank, meaning that almost everyone in the Abyss was given this term of endearment, including Light and the higher-level warriors who’d been summoned before Annelia. And every time his older sister engaged in this infantilizing behavior with people who were supposedly her superiors, Alth would develop a case of indigestion. Alth wished things were different, but he knew in his heart of hearts that his sister was incapable of changing her ways.

Thankfully, Light was graciously accommodating of Annelia’s behavior, even if he did find it a little awkward at times. As for others who were not *quite* as tolerant of the whole “kiddo” treatment, most of them simply brushed it off without directly confronting Annelia about it. Up to this point, Annelia’s behavior hadn’t caused any major altercations, and Alth was hoping to keep it that way.

“Both allies that our Creator has summoned have power levels that are much higher than ours,” Alth pointed out. “Furthermore, I hear that one of the summons challenged our Creator to a duel before he would accept him as his superior. That indicates that this particular summon has a very *difficult*

temperament, so I suggest we avoid contact with this person for the time being.”

“Oh my gosh,” Annelia said. “Sounds like we’re dealing with a real Mr. Grumpypants, huh? But I’ll be fine. Even if he’s in his rebellious phase, he’s still my kiddo and I’ll love the little guy to bits! But thanks for worrying about me, buddy.”

Oh no, Alth thought with a sinking feeling as his sister beamed with pride. *There will be absolutely no stopping her now*. Knowing that he was powerless to change Annelia’s mind at this point, Alth seamlessly switched to plan B.

“In that case, perhaps we should introduce ourselves to the *other* summon first, before the difficult one,” Alth suggested. “That way, he may be able to give us some useful advice on how to interact with the other summon.”

Annelia giggled. “Oh, you’re such a worrywart, Alth. But it’s sweet that you care so much about me. Okay, you win. We’ll greet the other summon first, before going to meet up with our cranky little kiddo.”

Alth breathed a quiet sigh of relief that Annelia had assented to his proposition. He hoped the first summon would be able to convince his sister to postpone her encounter with the second summon, if not talk her out of the idea completely.

“I’ll go introduce myself on our next break,” Annelia said with a smile, completely unaware of Alth’s misgivings.

“I shall come with you,” Alth said quickly. “Otherwise, I will be worried sick.”

“I swear, you’re such a big ol’ fusspot,” Annelia replied, though her bright smile suggested she appreciated her brother’s concern for her.



Annelia and Alth had heard that the more approachable of the pair of new summons was at that moment having lunch in the cafeteria, so the siblings decided to head over there. On arrival, however, they saw that another man was already sitting and chatting to their intended target.

“Mr. Jack, I was not expecting to encounter you here,” Alth said by way of

greeting.

“Sup, Alth and Annelia,” Jack replied. “You two swung by for a good ol’ meet and greet with Orka here too?”

Orka got up from his seat and bowed to the pair with an amiable smile plastered across his face. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you both. I’m the UR Level 8888, Pied Piper, Orka, and I have recently been summoned by our lord and master, Light. I may be new and inexperienced, but I look forward to working alongside you in this dungeon.”

Orka’s most striking feature was his long mane that was white on one side and black on the other, and tied into a single large braid that cascaded down his back. His 175-centimeter-tall frame was draped in clothes that continued this black-and-white motif, right down to the pair of boots on his feet and the fiddle dangling from his hip. His outfit was so finely tailored, in fact, it was safe to say he wouldn’t look out of place at a fancy ball, and his congenial way of speaking added to the overall gallant vibe he exuded.

Alth returned Orka’s smile. “It is a pleasure to meet you too. We are the UR Level 5000, Card Keepers, Annelia and Alth. I am the younger brother, Alth, and this is my—”

“Hiya, sweetie!” Annelia cooed as she rushed over to Orka. “I’m his big sister, Annelia, and you *have* to become my new kiddo!”

Alth felt his bowels tighten as he watched Annelia immediately adopt a well-meaning but highly inappropriate attitude toward someone with a higher power level than herself. But instead of showing even a hint of displeasure at this, Orka responded with a radiant smile, almost as if he had weighed up the situation and taken into account the uncomfortable position Alth had been put in.

“Well, in that case, I’d be delighted to be your kiddo, Miss Annelia,” Orka said.

“Oh my gosh, you’re so *sweet*!” Annelia gushed. “If you ever need *anything*, you come to me, honey!”

“Way to handle her, bro,” Jack piped up. “There ain’t a lotta folks who are so chill with being her kiddo right from the jump.”

Oh, so Orka has already agreed to be Mr. Jack's "bro" too? Alth observed. Like Annelia, The UR, Level 7777, Ironblooded Barricade, Jack treated everyone he liked as his "bro" and took it upon himself to look out for them, regardless of where they stood in the pecking order. But aside from a few exceptions, everyone was willing to be Jack's bro, even Alth. All the same, the younger Card Keeper was honestly surprised that Orka had assented to that kind of relationship with Jack, despite his superior power level.

"I'm very flattered to hear that, Mr. Jack," Orka said before continuing in a more serious tone. "But I imagine the three of you will be hoping to introduce yourselves to Khaos in the same manner, correct?"

The UR Level 8888, Menace of Mayhem, Khaos was the other new ally that had been summoned at the same time as Orka. Both Annelia and Jack nodded, prompting the Pied Fiddler to issue a warning.

"While Khaos cares strongly about his comrades, he often expresses these sentiments using harsh language," Orka explained. "But I guarantee that he means well, so I implore you to keep that in mind when you end up speaking to him." Orka was well aware that Khaos acted like a jerk to those who were yet to best him in a fight and thereby prove they did not need his protection, so the fiddler filled everyone in on what he knew to prevent any misunderstandings from arising. But both Jack and Annelia responded with agreeable smiles.

"Orka, sweetie, you don't need to worry about me," Annelia assured him. "I'd never get angry at one of my kiddos, even if he's going through his cranky phase."

"And I got no beef with any dude who puts his bros first, no matter what kinda attitude he cops," Jack agreed. "I won't be startin' any drama, bro."

"Your words put my mind at ease, Miss Annelia and Mr. Jack," Orka replied with a relaxed smile, though Annelia and Jack had already turned their attention to each other, seeing the general air of affability about the conversation as an opportunity to settle their long-standing differences.

"Seeing how we're both here, Jacky-poo, we still haven't settled that *teensy-weensy* problem between us, have we?" Annelia said, the corners of her lips curving upward into a spirited smile.

“Naw, not that I remember,” Jack admitted with a beefy grin.

“So when will you become my kiddo, hm?”

“What’s stoppin’ ya from being my bro?”

The pair’s penchant for treating everyone else like younger siblings tended to result in a clash of personalities whenever they ran into each other, since neither wanted to relinquish their dominant status to the other.

“I was summoned before you, Jack, so that officially makes you *my* kiddo,” Annelia argued.

“I look older than you and I *am* older, so if anything, *I* should be the alpha bro out of us two,” Jack countered.

The pair weren’t so much quarreling as having a self-moderated debate. This exchange had been repeated so regularly, it had become something of a time-honored ritual whenever the two were in the same room. But as Orka was a newcomer, he was quite taken aback by the verbal repartee, and he turned to Alth with a concerned look on his face. *Should we perhaps put a stop to this?* Alth asked with his eyes.

Alth sighed and shrugged. *There is no use trying to stop them*, Alth replied with a look. *All we can do is wait until they have tired themselves out*. While Jack and Annelia continued their daily discussion on who exactly was the self-styled older sibling of whom, Alth invited Orka to take a seat so they could chat over tea.

Ultimately, Annelia and Jack were unable to square away their differences on this occasion too, and a few days later, the two of them happened to meet Khaos for the first time at the exact same moment and proceeded to shower him with the exact same appeals to be seen as an authority figure for him.



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Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World Volume 6

by Meikyou Shisui

Translated by Gad Onyeneho Edited by SMR

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